



The  
University  
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How have colonial legacies and museum  
interpretation perpetuated systemic racism  
and to what extent can anti-colonial  
approaches to this history enable change?

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2024

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## **Abstract**

This thesis aims to interrogate the impact of colonial legacies on museum interpretation and ways in which the heritage sector has upheld or perpetuated white supremacist, colonial ideologies. Though this research explores the definition of what a museum really is, as well as the historical roots of said institutions, the subject matter is largely examined in relation to Black Lives Matter protests during June 2020.

Focusing on this specific series of events and the ensuing criticism levelled at heritage sector institutions has allowed me to examine the source of pro-colonialism and white supremacy in museums, whilst simultaneously enabling an exploration of anti-colonial approaches which may go some way to halting the proliferation of harmful and discriminatory attitudes. This thesis asks whether the damage done by colonialism and its role in the construction of history in the Global North can ever truly be undone and whether 'decolonisation' is therefore possible.

Arising from the researcher's professional experience working in a large heritage sector organisation for over 4 years provides some contextual understanding and inspires a specific interest in the knowledge and experiences of others working in the sector before, during and after the Black Lives Matter movement's rise to global significance in 2020. Interviews with said professionals therefore provide an insight into the reality of heritage sector responses to legacies of colonial violence, and some of the challenges associated with anti-colonial work.

This research is qualitative and brings interviews together with case studies and a wealth of supporting literature to form recommendations for a sector which no longer perpetuates pro-colonialism and Eurocentrism, prioritising healing.

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## Introduction

### **Positionality**

I have been motivated to conduct this research by my own experiences of working in the heritage sector, exploring the connection between places and collections perceived to be of historical significance, and the exploitation and oppression of indigenous peoples. I was particularly drawn to a conspicuous lack of interpretation at museums and historic houses regarding their links to slavery, despite 'historical data' that 'highlights the quantitative extent of British colonialism and the transatlantic trade in enslaved peoples, as well as qualitative evidence of participation.'<sup>1</sup> My interest in this field of research was most significantly piqued during my four years working for the National Trust as Advisory Groups Coordinator; a role which enabled my involvement in multiple projects related to interpretation and curation. This organisation dedicated to 'looking after nature, beauty, and history for everyone to enjoy' was responsible for the ownership, care and interpretation of a number of properties with significant links to colonial violence.<sup>2</sup> Though this was explicitly acknowledged in a report released by the organisation in 2020, the correlation of the pressure amplified by the Black Lives Matter movement and the apparently sudden decision to take a coordinate approach to addressing colonial legacies felt worthy of note. This is particularly true given my own experiences working in the organisation's headquarters and noting what I felt to be an uncoordinated and heavily censored effort to explore issues around colonialism and white supremacy. At the time of embarking on this piece of research, I had agreed with the National Trust that I would partner with them in order to undertake research at their properties and with their staff in order to develop an understanding of the existing interpretation of places and historical figures with links to colonial violence, and the work the staff would be undertaking to

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<sup>1</sup> A.V Seaton,, 'Sources of Slavery – Destinations of Slavery', *International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Administration* 2 (London, 2001) p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> National Trust, 'Our Cause', *National Trust* < <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/penrhyn-castle#Overview> > [accessed: 02/03/2024].

challenge or develop this. Unfortunately, the National Trust ceased communication with me shortly afterwards.

With the guidance of my PhD supervisors, I made the decision to research the National Trust from an external perspective, using visits to properties as case studies and examining communications and reports the organisation would go on to release in response to public criticism regarding their relative inaction until 2020. Given my previous experiences within the organisation, I had some notion of the work being undertaken internally and therefore where to find examples of efforts to approach colonial legacies in new, less patriotic or triumphalist ways. It is for this reason that I decided to visit Penrhyn Castle and utilise the property's temporary reinterpretation of the visitor journey as a case study into anti-colonial work at country house museums. Such efforts are contextualised within the broader aims of the organisation through the analysis of the National Trust's Report into their properties with connections to slavery and colonialism.<sup>3</sup> In addition, utilising the connections I had made during my time working for the organisation, I was able to make contact with professionals working at institutions which were of particular interest to me and would provide a more varied comparative insight into anti-colonial work currently taking place and the issues faced by those looking to make meaningful progress.

Throughout my research, I have made great efforts to consult a wide range of literature which reflects a variety of perspectives. My academic career began with English Literature, and over time I have progressed towards a deep interest in history and its continued relevance in the present day. My professional career has largely been in the heritage sector, and through this experience I was able to connect concepts around institutional purpose, the interpretation of history and the societal patterns and inequalities such interpretation can either perpetuate or challenge. It is for this reason that my thesis is inherently multidisciplinary, utilising historical, sociological and museological approaches to present a thorough assessment of colonial legacies, museum interpretation and the perpetuation of systemic racism.

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<sup>3</sup> S. Huxtable et al., 'Introduction' in *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* ed. by S. Huxtable et al. (Swindon: National Trust, 2020).

I am aware of my positionality as a white academic and my inherent privilege. In exploring legacies of colonialism and violence against indigenous peoples, I must acknowledge that I aim to understand and help dismantle a system I have benefitted from. In her book on white supremacy, Kalwant Bhopal states that ‘white people are less likely to change systems that benefit and work for them; instead, many work hard to protect their own privileges.’<sup>4</sup> This is something I wanted to wholeheartedly avoid, as I felt that I did not want to be a part of a sector that had welcomed me as a researcher partially on the basis of my whiteness. It was important to me to be honest and open about the present state of the heritage and museums sector, thus acknowledging that all the staff interviewed as part of the primary research were white. I was encouraged to pursue interviews with professionals of colour within the sector, but when plans fell through to interview a member of staff from the Migration Museum, I felt that seeking participants based on the colour of their skin would be tokenistic, particularly when so much important research and writing on the topic by people of colour exists. Throughout this thesis I have made efforts to reiterate the need for an increase in the diversity of heritage sector staff at every level, which must be combined with a change in organisational culture which renders the sector a safe and welcoming place to work.

### Methodology

The content and findings this thesis presents are based upon extensive reading of both historical and contemporary literature, which will be interrogated in the literature review section of this introductory chapter. In addition, a qualitative research approach has been utilised in order to offer insight into the realities of the heritage sector at the time of writing. I concur with Marilyn Lichtman’s assertion that the qualitative approach provides a ‘way of learning about and seeing and understanding the world in which we live and how individuals interact with and between each other.’<sup>5</sup> Such an approach enables the researcher to collate and contrast a multitude of perspectives in order to understand the

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<sup>4</sup> K. Bhopal, *White Privilege: the myth of a post racial society* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2018) p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> M. Lichtman, *Qualitative Research in Education: A User’s Guide* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023) p. 14.

way in which a specific issue manifests itself across an entire sector. This research has consisted of two key areas of investigation: interviews with professionals from a selection of museums and case studies centred on specific exhibitions or areas of interpretation. In some cases, institutions have been represented in both the consideration of their interpretation and the reflections of their staff members. This provides additional context which highlights the possibility that museum displays and interpretation which are visible to the public are not necessarily a reflection of the thoughts, attitudes and work of curatorial staff currently in post. In addition, the Black Lives Matter movement's rise to global prominence during the year this research began presented a clear pivot point which enabled me to examine the impact of collective activism on the issue of colonial legacies in the heritage sector. This context also provided a clear point in history which vastly raised the profile of this subject within public consciousness and applied renewed pressure to the heritage sector to address its role in perpetuating white supremacist and colonial attitudes. I was therefore able to interrogate the sector's position on anti-colonial work both before and after the summer of 2020.

Where case studies of museum exhibitions and interpretation have been conducted, these have been informed by an in-person visit to the institution. During each visit, I, as researcher, followed the intended visitor route so that the impact of the interpretation could be understood as originally intended by the museum and its creative partners. Though notes were taken throughout each visit, photographs were also taken of certain interventions, so that they may be interrogated with precision and accuracy. Though the analysis of museum interpretation is impacted by the subjectivity of the researcher, the use of wide reading and historical context is used to bolster and inform assertions made. The intention behind the provision of detailed case study analyses is to demonstrate the way in which museum interpretation responds to the ever-present legacies left by European colonialism and white supremacy.

The methodology for case selection relates to my own experience and knowledge of the heritage sector prior to undertaking this project. Given the relatively small number of cases selected for this research, it was important they reflected different experiences and interventions within the sector. It was my aim to illustrate the breadth of impact colonial

legacies have on a variety of different museums, covering a range of subject matters and with different audiences or purposes in mind. For example, given the scale of the National Trust's museum properties and consequent influence in arts and heritage, it felt important to include a consideration of their work at a national and regional level. Given my experience working for the organisation, I was privy to the difference between the central organisation and the individual heritage sites in terms of programming and implementation of strategy. I therefore felt it necessary to explore an exhibition at a specific property, which in this case was Penrhyn Castle, in order to understand the way in which colonial legacies are explored in relation to specific properties. In addition, I feel it is of the utmost importance to the aims of this thesis to understand the role and experiences of staff and volunteers working in museum spaces on the ground. These experiences became increasingly significant during the process of conducting interviews with heritage professionals, as it became apparent that, in many cases, there was a disconnection between curatorial staff within museums and the executive teams leading on public responses to Black Lives Matter as well as prioritisation of anti-colonial work within the institutions.

I believe it is essential to acknowledge the pervasive nature of colonial legacies across the sector, and to therefore included a range of museums within my research. From the outset of this thesis, it is made clear that the influences of colonial violence and Eurocentrism are core to the establishment of museums as a concept. This is particularly true of historical institutions which have often been built and developed from collections and methods of categorisation which are intrinsically linked to European conceptions of racial and cultural hierarchy. However, country house museums such as those owned and curated by the National Trust speak to more nuanced colonial legacies and, in many cases, can arguably themselves be viewed as collection items in their own right. In addition to demonstrating the fact that the impact of colonialism was not restricted to any one kind of museum, I felt it was important to showcase an organisation and property that had started work on their reinterpretation prior to the events of June 2020, as well as an institution which had been inextricably involved in the process of reinterpretation as a direct result of Black Lives Matter. In addition to this, the American Museum in Bath provides an example of a museum

which arguably has far more work to do, but is uncertain of its role in tackling colonial history so explicitly.

In addition to case studies, the primary research for this thesis consists of interviews with professionals in the heritage sector. Participants were selected and contacted via my personal networks in accordance with the scope and remit of this research. I was explicitly keen to speak to staff working at the MShed due to their immediate relevance to the Black Lives Matter movement's global campaign during the summer of 2020. Beyond this, I wanted those interviewed to represent the aforementioned variety of museums impacted by colonial legacies and the institutional practices they have shaped. In each case, I also sought to speak to professionals who were actively considering their role and that of their institutions in developing anti-colonial strategies and ways of working. It becomes apparent throughout the first chapter of this thesis that key decision makers within heritage institutions are likely to release statements of advocacy and solidarity without evident tangible plans to address issues raised. I was therefore interested in providing a space where colleagues in the sector could express their thoughts on the realities of driving institutional change and whether certain initiatives set up to address legacies of colonial violence and inequality within the sector had been addressed.

Following initial contact, I obtained informal agreement before proceeding to produce the documentation necessary for University of Sheffield ethics approval. This included the provision of a participation information sheet, which set out the purposes of this research, as well as the nature of the interview process. It was made clear that the purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between the way in which British history is represented by the heritage sector, and understanding or perpetuation of systemic racism. It was also noted that the participants would be at liberty to request the removal of certain information before the thesis is published by the university or the researcher. In one case, an interviewee shared information which they noted was sensitive, and I have therefore omitted identification of the participant where this is used within the thesis.

Participants were asked to sign a consent form which ascertained their willingness to participate in all aspects of the project put forth in the participant information sheet, as well

as establish their understanding of how their information will be used. In addition, prospective interviewees were provided with a copy of the questions I intended to ask. However, interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner in order to allow for organic developments and for participants to give their perspectives in their own words. In order to better understand the experiences of those working in the heritage sector before, during and after the Black Lives Matter protests, I felt it was important to enable interviewees to highlight the issues they felt were most significant, rather than those which I had assumed might be important.

The qualitative data from interviews has been used to enhance information taken from case studies or literature, as it illuminates the processes and challenges occurring internally which frequently cannot be seen or understood by visitors. This information also provided context to the rate at which progress had or had not been made in certain institutions and illuminated the additional complications that restrict the ability of heritage professionals to address and respond to issues as they unfold.

### Key Terms

In addition to providing a clear methodology, it is necessary to clarify a number of terms used throughout this thesis as well as the context of their use. Though Colonialism broadly refers to an extractive and exploitative ‘conquest by settlement’ which often also involves ‘indigenous population displaced from the land and replaced with institutions of authority and government imposed by the imperial power.’<sup>6</sup> However, this thesis will focus on instances of colonisation whereby the process has been underpinned by constructions of racial hierarchy with white Europeans at the top. Such constructions and their systemic impact on present-day society are here defined as white supremacy. Anti-colonial work is therefore defined as efforts to negate the ongoing harmful impact of such legacies and the values they perpetuate. This definition aligns with the Museum Association’s description of ‘decolonisation’ as ‘a long-term process that seeks to recognise the integral role of empire in museums – from their creation to the present day.’<sup>7</sup> I have chosen to use the term ‘anti-

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<sup>6</sup> D.Kirby and C. Coleborne, *Law, History, Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017) p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Museums Association, ‘Decolonising Museums’, *Museums Association*

<<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/#>> [accessed 01/11/24].

colonial’ rather than ‘decolonial’ as I feel colonial legacies will always exist as a significant aspect of shared history between nations and should therefore not be removed or erased. Instead, such histories should be interrogated and their ongoing harmful impact should be neutralised by thorough interrogation, understanding and a vast diversity of perspectives contributing to their interpretation.

### Literature Review

Given the title of this thesis centres on racism and its development both throughout history and in the interpretation of said history in the present day, it is essential that the research is informed by relevant theory. In establishing a summary of heritage sector interpretation prior to 2020, the thesis is informed by J. M. Blaut’s theory of cultural racism which is reflected across museums and historic properties, within interpretation which asserts that Europeans constitute a more advanced race and are implicitly morally superior. This theory corresponds to the broad, popular colonial narrative that non-Europeans are ‘culturally backward [...] because of their history: their lesser cultural evolution. And it is for this reason that they are poor.’<sup>8</sup> In the popular imagination, this is compounded by museums which often interpret colonialism as an exercise in European progress and the betterment of indigenous peoples. Therefore, when critics of anti-colonial work like then Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden, in post February 2020 to September 2021, refer to the role of museums in ‘teaching us about our past’ it is likely he is referring to a portrayal of the past wherein the violent nature of colonial history remains largely unexplored. An acknowledgement of European wrongdoing or morally reprehensible actions that would come naturally with a more complex interpretation of colonial history would challenge an established, white supremacist narrative. It is for this reason that this thesis is also greatly influenced by the work of heritage professionals like Dan Hicks, who provide insight and experience from within the sector, whilst also critiquing its practices. In his book *The Brutish Museums*, published in 2020 amidst the Black Lives Matter protests which had already brought significant attention to the issue of colonialism in museums, Dan Hicks highlighted the ongoing colonial violence implicit in the

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<sup>8</sup> J. M. Blaut, ‘The Theory of Cultural Racism’, *Antipode*, 24.4 (1992), 289 - 299 (p. 293).

acquisition and ownership of indigenous heritage extracted through exploitation and warfare. The book is described by Hicks as ‘trying to perceive the meaning and enduring effects of the public display of royal artworks [...] now dispersed across more than 150 museums and galleries.’<sup>9</sup> This aim is conducive to the purposes of this thesis as an effort to understand the relationship between the present-day reality of museums and their inextricable connections to colonial violence.

The backlash against anti-colonial work in the heritage sector is rooted in the idea that something is being lost. In order for white supremacy to end, it stands to reason that white Europeans must lose some of their power and their influence over the interpretation of history. This loss is therefore exemplified in the aforementioned backlash where the status of museums as white sanctuaries is brought into question and individuals like Dowden ‘feel threatened by the [...] perception that whites are becoming the minority and will soon lose their heritage, culture,’ and most importantly ‘their status in society.’<sup>10</sup> An assessment of negative reactions to anti-colonial progress will also be informed by Robin DiAngelo’s work on white fragility. Here, the actions of right-wing critics and influential figures seeking to discredit attempts to counter white supremacist interpretations of colonial history are categorised as ‘a range of defensive moves’ to alleviate what they experience as ‘racial stress.’<sup>11</sup> Resistance to anti-colonial practice and the reinterpretation of complex histories therefore also takes the form of a ‘whitelash’, as defined by D.G. Embrick et. al, which entails a number of ‘countermeasures against the dismantling of white supremacy’.<sup>12</sup> Though this thesis will highlight some of the critiques of DiAngelo’s work, the idea that whiteness has been constructed in a way that consistently protects and reinforces itself is a useful lens through which to examine white supremacist aggression and resistance to social progress.

Blaut’s theory also outlines the gradual shift away from biological arguments for racism, which this thesis considers when setting the context for the European construction of racial

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<sup>9</sup> D. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> S. Dominguez et al., ‘White Sanctuaries: White Supremacy, Racism, Space and Fine Arts in Two Metropolitan Museums’, *American Behavioural Scientist*, 64.14 (2020), 2028 – 2043 (p. 2029).

<sup>11</sup> R. DiAngelo, ‘White Fragility’, *Counterpoints*, 497 (2016), 245-253 (p. 247).

<sup>12</sup> D. G. Embrick et al., ‘Capitalism, Racism and Trumpism: Whitelash and the Politics of Oppression’, *Fast Capitalism*, 17.1 (2020), 203 – 224, (p. 206).

hierarchy. Blaut argues that racial difference is no longer understood by scholars as a matter of biology and has been substituted with cultural racism, going on to state that ‘cultural racism substitutes the cultural category “European” for the racial category “White”.’<sup>13</sup> This categorisation is essential to the thesis as it underpins the idea that pre-existing interpretation of history and the erasure of colonial violence have perpetuated racist thought. However, the thesis will also argue that, though cultural racism may have usurped biological racism in the minds of scholars, its prevalence in museums, heritage organisations and the education system’s history syllabus has done nothing to negate a deep-rooted belief in biological difference and racial hierarchy. This is informed and supported by the work of scholars such as Stuart Hall, who identifies the role of a reliance on culture and identity to avoid feelings of uncertainty and instability.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is not inherently in the interests of cultural institutions to drive change when they are seen by many as the physical manifestation of cultural superiority and societal privilege. Alongside Blaut’s theory of cultural racism, as Burgard and Boucher state; ‘when discussing race, it is important this is not *confused with* culture,’ and it is also essential one understands that it is not a scientific, but a social construction created by, and for the benefit of, people considered White.’<sup>15</sup>

Though perspectives and categorisations may have shifted, the foundation of a number of European museums and the scholarship underpinning them is rooted in colonial attitudes shaped by a belief in racial hierarchy in a biological sense, as well as religious superiority with Christianity upheld as supreme. This thesis therefore uses Blaut’s theory of cultural racism to assert that, rather than negate biological or religious racism, cultural racism has been used to compound white supremacist attitudes and approaches in the present day. This theory is supported by the historical context this thesis interrogates; in this case, starting with the writings of Zurara and their role in European definitions of ‘Blackness’ as ‘other’. Depictions of the global majority like those provided by the work of Zurara, not only reinforce racism as a fundamental belief in innate racial hierarchies, but also affirm the concept of a civilising mission as being central to white, European identity. This thesis therefore cites a number of

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<sup>13</sup> J.M. Blaut, ‘The Theory of Cultural Racism’, *Antipode* 24.4 (1992) p. 290.

<sup>14</sup> S. Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Los Angeles: Sage, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> K. L. B. Burgard & M. L. Boucher, ‘The Special Responsibility of Public Places to Dismantle White Supremacist Historical Narratives’ in A. M. Labrador & N. A. Silberman (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Public Heritage Theory and Practice* (Oxford, 2018) p. 240.

academic publications which further explore the concept of racial hierarchy and the history which enabled this perspective to shape the concept of the museum. In addition, Chapter 1 features a number of quotations taken from *Collecting the World* by James Delbourgo as this not only details the life of one of the earliest museum collectors and his involvement with the transatlantic trade in enslaved peoples, but also the ways in which such figures are portrayed in contemporary accounts.<sup>16</sup> To consider this presentation critically and to examine the way in which Sloane's early life is presented, provides a basis for further interrogation of museum interpretation of figures and places closely associated with colonial violence.

Hegemonic whiteness and the researcher's own positionality must also be countered through the incorporation of diverse perspectives and experiences as well as an examination of interpretation and critique through the lens of Critical Whiteness Theory. In this way, the thesis can address the way in which whiteness has historically been 'encased in invisibility, privilege and power', with an element of neutrality ascribed to white perspectives.<sup>17</sup> This theory will prove useful in the analysis of existing interpretation at museums and heritage sites in a way that challenges the continued centring of whiteness, even in supposed anti-colonial work.

Critical Whiteness Theory has been preferred here over Critical Race Theory, for example, as white supremacy, which is referenced multiple times in the thesis as the core problem within interpretation of history, 'is an international or global racist system.'<sup>18</sup> Indeed, white supremacy is 'the glue that connects and combines racism to colonialism.'<sup>19</sup> . The continued prioritisation of white perspectives in our telling of colonial history also creates issues around a hierarchy of knowledge within academic spheres. For example, scholarship from the global South is rarely treated with the same level of respect as that which comes from the global North, which consists of a network of predominantly white academics and publishers. If researchers and heritage organisations in Europe and America are stifled by the control of

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<sup>16</sup> J. Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: The Life and Curiosities of Hans Sloane* (London: Penguin, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> J. L. Pennington, 'Deconstructing the white visitor: Autoethnography and Critical White Studies in study abroad programmes', *Theory into Practice* 59.3 (2020) p. 291.

<sup>18</sup> R. Rabaka, 'The Souls of White Folk: W.E.B Dubois's Critique of White Supremacy and Contributions to Critical White Studies', *Journal of African American Studies* 11.1 (2007) p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> R. Rabaka, 'The Souls of White Folk: W.E.B Dubois's Critique of White Supremacy and Contributions to Critical White Studies', *Journal of African American Studies* 11.1 (2007) p. 3.

pro-empire propagandists, and academics in the global South are excluded from this white safe space, it is extremely difficult to enable counter-narratives and complex histories to embed themselves in global understanding of history. The lack of parity between indigenous and Eurocentric knowledge is considered through the work of authors like Robin Wall Kimmerer who highlights the way in which formal scholarship often seeks to separate what it determines to be 'science' from 'the embrace between plants and humans' and a world of knowledge which is inherent and rooted in communities and identity.<sup>20</sup>

The white supremacy which is embedded throughout white perspectives and scholarship on history is also present in newer interpretation which has been written or created since the summer of 2020. Critical whiteness theory is useful in contextualising the way in which a number of museums and heritage organisations continue to centre whiteness or white visitor experiences throughout their work. In developing an answer to the crucial question of 'to what extent can increasingly complex interpretations of this history enable change?' This thesis will use Critical White Theory and Blaut's theory of cultural racism to assert that, in order to provide an historical narrative which is nuanced, inclusive, engaging and more reflective of a complex and diverse history, whiteness must be decentred. It will, however, also acknowledge that an interrogation of colonial history and a shift in the way in which this history is considered is insufficient, and as Blaut asserts: 'even if all the roots are torn out, the vine will not wither: it will grow other roots, a new theory of racism, unless racism is attacked, not as theory but as practice.'<sup>21</sup>

This thesis will therefore acknowledge the limitations of theory if guidance on practice and methodology are not considered alongside it. It is for this reason that primary research will include interviews with heritage sector professionals engaged in anti-colonial work, as well as case-studies of interpretation at museums and heritage sites as seen by visitors. Though this in-person research will also be informed by Critical White Theory, as this is relevant to the process of majority white-led institutions providing a perspective on history which is undoubtedly influenced by 'covert, often unrecognized racism based on unnamed privilege

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<sup>20</sup> R. W. Kimmerer, *Braiding the Sweetgrass* (London: Penguin Random House, 2020) p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> J.M. Blaut, 'The Theory of Cultural Racism', *Antipode* 24.4 (1992) p. 298.

and power.’<sup>22</sup> The thesis will therefore assert that part of the practice, outlined as crucial by Blaut, will be a total, though most likely gradual, restructure of the sector in its entirety. This will naturally include a dismantling of white power structures and a diversification of staff at every level. Though museums and heritage organisations almost always share resources or promotional materials purporting to reflect their commitment to diversity and inclusion, one might question the frequency of their application and prioritisation when contextualised by the reality of representation in the sector. For example, according to the Arts Council’s annual report on diversity and inclusion across the cultural sector, which is analysed in some detail in Chapter 1, there is a considerable lack of diversity in the heritage sector which only intensifies in higher level roles.<sup>23</sup> It will therefore be noted, alongside a reiteration of the researcher’s positionality, that research into diversity within the sector itself remains centred on hegemonic whiteness. Data will be subjected to the same criticism and theoretical contextualisation as primary research and interpretation analyses. Finally, in producing guidance on methods with which to dismantle white supremacy within the heritage sector, the thesis will also be informed throughout by existing and emerging curatorial practice, heritage sector guidance and a diverse range of research and critiques.

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<sup>22</sup> J. L. Pennington, ‘Deconstructing the white visitor: Autoethnography and Critical White Studies in study abroad programmes’, *Theory into Practice* 59.3 (2020) p. 291.

<sup>23</sup> Arts Council England, *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case* (2020) <[https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality\\_Diversity\\_and\\_the\\_Creative\\_Case\\_A\\_Data\\_Report\\_201920.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality_Diversity_and_the_Creative_Case_A_Data_Report_201920.pdf)> [accessed: 16/03/2022].

## Chapter 1: The Colonial Foundations of Museums

This chapter will consider the way in which museums, and our conceptions of their purpose, have been formed and shaped by colonialism and its associated domination and oppression. In addition, this chapter will more explicitly outline the links between colonialism and acclaimed institutions like the British Museum whilst demonstrating a number of colonial legacies and connections which have been noted as inadequately acknowledged or addressed. Country House museums are also of interest given their direct connections to figures and sources of wealth associated with colonial practices and economies, despite their inevitably different methods of collection, display and interpretation from more conventional museums. Though distinct from one another in many ways, both kinds of museum contribute to the formation of national cultural identity and pluralise popular conceptions of history. The historical analysis in this chapter serves as a framework for the museum case studies subsequently used to illustrate both the perpetuation and unravelling of colonial values and narratives by heritage institutions and organisations. In addition, this chapter provides the somewhat accepted historical basis of responses to a rapidly changing cultural landscape considered in Chapter 2.

### History and 'Whiteness'

In claiming to represent 'history' in any objective sense, museums face a particular, ongoing challenge. For each institution, and each intervention carried out therein, a narrative is constructed which may represent a period, event or movement in history. However, such work is inevitably influenced by the privileges, experiences and knowledge of those responsible for its creation. According to H. V. White, the function of narrative itself can represent the difference between 'knowing and telling.'<sup>1</sup> Narrative histories are often associated with stories and story-telling, which are often constructed from a 'beginning, middle and end.'<sup>2</sup> The dramatic elements required to create an engaging 'narrative' imply a

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<sup>1</sup> H. V. White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987) p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> H. V. White, 'The Structure of Historical Narrative', *Clio* 1.3 (1972) 5-20 (p. 5).

necessary selection process which must be undertaken by the writers of the history. However, in White's view, narrative exists as data in itself and is therefore a useful tool with which to gauge processes of translating the human experience of history into 'a form assimilable to structures of meaning.'<sup>3</sup> Museums are often expected to bridge the gap between knowledge and their audiences by conveying information via this shaping of interpretation and narratives. Foucault notes that the development and proliferation of 'knowledge' is a cornerstone of power and influence, given the innate ability to determine popular conceptions of what is 'true'.<sup>4</sup> Such theories are crucial to this thesis, as the power bestowed upon museums by those who perceive them to be purveyors of educational and 'truth'. However, as this chapter will go on to demonstrate, the existing structures of power and knowledge present throughout the founding and development of many museums, have served to ensure power and influence is reserved for those belonging to specific demographics. Thus, the educational role many museums fulfil within society serves to reinforce and proliferate elitism and discrimination within popular consciousness. This chapter will explore the crucial role of white supremacy and elitism in the creation of museums and the extent to which the subsequent interpretations of history across the heritage sector have reinforced and proliferated such attitudes.

History, museums and that which is defined as crucial to our conception of heritage are part of what society considers its culture. According to the work of Stuart Hall, this culture cannot be separated from political power and influence.<sup>5</sup> This thesis, in its consideration of the UK heritage sector after 2020, will demonstrate that Hall's assertions are true; the culture industry, and the arts and heritage sector within it, has played a crucial role in the spread of white supremacist and imperialist ideals, as well as their partial undoing. From the very origin of what one imagines when asked to picture a museum, through to interpretive plaques placed at sites of historical significance or against statues, it is understood by many that discourse around a nation's history forms a fundamental part of people's identities in the present day. One of the core themes encountered throughout this research is the often-

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<sup>3</sup> H. V. White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987) p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> M. Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (1982) 777-795.

<sup>5</sup> H. A. Giroux, 'Public Pedagogy as Cultural Politics: Stuart Hall and the Crisis of Culture', *Cultural Studies* 14.2 (2000) p. 342.

unspoken understanding that white history, told from a white perspective by white academics, is history. There is an implicit neutrality in the examination of history from a white perspective, and this is of course due to the fact that white people have long held a position of authority and privilege, won through oppression and division. It is due to this constructed supremacy that allows white people to believe they are ‘without a meaningful racial identity.’<sup>6</sup> A consequence of this perception is that history and narrative written and interpreted from a white perspective is supposedly neutral and therefore accepted as a ‘tacit norm’ rather than a ‘race’.<sup>7</sup> It is for this reason that Black, Asian and Indigenous history is so often compartmentalised and separated from what white scholarship and white-dominated institutions have long considered to be ‘history’ in its truest form.

This compartmentalisation and racist hierarchy that dominates history education is reinforced and perpetuated within the school system, wherein majority white teachers have a ‘poverty of knowledge’ regarding histories inclusive of Black, Asian, Indigenous and Minority Ethnic peoples. Such imposed hierarchies have served to construct a version of history that positions ‘Black and Minority Ethnic communities and religious communities at the margins of a nation rather than an integral part of ‘our island story.’”<sup>8</sup> As more diverse and inclusive narratives have been othered, conversely, white perspectives have been centred and imbued with such authority that this has fostered an idea that such perspectives are factual, without bias and are academically sound. Stuart Hall states that identity ‘is a name given to the escape sought from [...] uncertainty’ and this adds important context to discourse around cultural backlash and resistance to progressive change in the cultural sector.<sup>9</sup> The false equivalence of white perspectives and true, scholarly history has made it difficult to challenge such biased notion of British or indeed world history.

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<sup>6</sup> N. I. Painter, ‘White identity in America is ideology, no biology. The history of ‘whiteness’ proves it.’, *Think NBC News*, 2020 < <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/white-identity-america-ideology-not-biology-history-whiteness-proves-it-ncna1232200> > [accessed: 29/01/2023].

<sup>7</sup> A. J. Lopez, ‘Introduction: Whiteness After Empire’ in *Postcolonial Whiteness* ed. by A. J. Lopez (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005) 1-30 (p. 2).

<sup>8</sup> N. Doherty, ‘I FELT DEAD’: applying racial microaggressions framework to Black students’ experiences of Black History Month and Black History’, *Race Ethnicity and Education* 22.1 (2019) p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> S. Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Los Angeles: Sage, 1996) p. 19.

## Race in the Museum and Heritage Sector

The extent to which a commitment to education forms part of an institution's strategy or aims varies from museum to museum. This is explored further in Chapter 3, wherein specific institutions like the American Museum in Bath take time to reflect on the scope of their remit, as well as their capacity to fulfil the expectations of a sector increasingly aware of a need to deconstruct pro-colonial narratives. If one looks to the establishment of public museums in their modern form, there has long been an implicit expectation that they fulfil a pedagogical role within a healthy and stable society.<sup>10</sup> According to Eilean Hooper Greenhill, knowledge conveyed via narrative is the 'commodity that museums offer.'<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, as already asserted, this 'commodity' often manifests as a perceived authority over 'knowing'. In an essay on collecting and sustainability, Nick Merriman states that, from their transition away from private collections and exclusive institutions until the present day, the 'raison d'être of museums has been to collect objects and specimens for study and instruction in the present.'<sup>12</sup> It is therefore reasonable to deduce that the purpose of visiting a museum is, at least in part, to become more informed about a certain topic. Whether or not a conscious decision has been made by the institution to provide content which instructs and informs, the long-established notion that museums are purveyors of knowledge somewhat determines their role in society. It is expected that the fulfilment of this role as teachers and explainers, means museums deliver a net benefit to society. Of course, as this thesis will go on to explore, the communities that experience these benefits and are able to best access museums are often somewhat limited. Lack of diversity in museums can be attributed to a number of interdependent factors such as racist and colonial origins, a lack of diversity amongst museum staff members and the deep-rooted structural and systemic racism that has shaped education and access to knowledge and culture.

The notion that museums act as educational bodies in modern society must not be mistaken for pretences to any form of neutrality. As mentioned above, the very fact that interpretation of collections is produced by specific people and organisations, combined

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<sup>10</sup> T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> E. H. Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> N. Merriman, 'Museum collections and sustainability', *Cultural Trends* 17 (2008), 3 – 21 (p. 3).

with an education system that prioritises history from a distinctly white perspective, means inherent biases are likely to impact the nature of museum narratives constructed or interpreted. In addition to the aforementioned factors, these biases are intensified by a distinct lack of diversity amongst museum professionals. Though museums and heritage organisations are often seen to share resources or promotional materials purporting to reflect their commitment to diversity and inclusion, these are arguably somewhat shallow when contextualised by the reality of representation in the sector.<sup>13</sup> According to the Arts Council’s annual report of 2020 on diversity and inclusion across the cultural sector, the job type where Black and Asian people are most represented is the category ‘artists’, where only 43% of professionals in this group are identified as white.<sup>14</sup> Management roles and executive boards are very different in that they are overwhelmingly white, with only 17% of board members identified as ‘Black, Asian or ethnically diverse.’<sup>15</sup> Not only is this percentage of people who are not categorised as white very small, it reflects a huge variety of ethnicities and nationalities which have been collated into one homogenous category. The report therefore makes it difficult to assess which ethnicities are or are not represented within the arts sector and instead is illustrative of different levels of whiteness. In addition, when broken down by disciplines, this report shows that the museums the Arts Council have included are 91% white, with Asian and Black people making up 4% and 1% of the workforce respectively.<sup>16</sup>

In the case of artists, where Asian and Black people appear to be better represented, the assumption that this indicates inclusivity within the sector is flawed. Artists and freelancers, the most diverse of the categories represented, are the group of professionals most likely to be subject to temporary contracts and work on a project basis, with comparatively poor

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<sup>13</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum, ‘Anti-racism’, V&A <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/anti-racism> [accessed 10/10/2023].

<sup>14</sup> Arts Council England, *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case* (2020) <[https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality\\_Diversity\\_and\\_the\\_Creative\\_Case\\_A\\_Data\\_Report\\_201920.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality_Diversity_and_the_Creative_Case_A_Data_Report_201920.pdf)> [accessed: 16/03/2022] p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Arts Council England, *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case* (2020) <[https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality\\_Diversity\\_and\\_the\\_Creative\\_Case\\_A\\_Data\\_Report\\_201920.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality_Diversity_and_the_Creative_Case_A_Data_Report_201920.pdf)> [accessed: 16/03/2022] p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Arts Council England, *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case* (2020) <[https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality\\_Diversity\\_and\\_the\\_Creative\\_Case\\_A\\_Data\\_Report\\_201920.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality_Diversity_and_the_Creative_Case_A_Data_Report_201920.pdf)> [accessed: 16/03/2022] p. 33.

pay.<sup>17</sup> They are therefore often not offered the security of a salary or permanent position within the museum and wield less influence over the organisational culture due to the impermanence and often limited scope of their role. Such statistics might lead one to question why museums seem more willing to hire Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority staff members on a temporary basis. It would appear, a preference for impermanent diversity enables the institution to present as having become more progressive and inclusive, without fundamentally challenging their structural whiteness. In order for museums to reflect any desire for anti-racism, it would be necessary for them to evaluate 'internal operations such as diversity hiring' as a demonstration of commitment to dismantling the white supremacist legacies perpetuated by the entire organisation, rather than external communications alone.<sup>18</sup> A lack of such consideration has been reflected in recent appointments to museum leadership roles, including the role of Chairman of the British Museum being awarded to George Osborne in 2021. Osborne, who 'oversaw sweeping austerity measures during his reign as chancellor of the exchequer' is a white, wealthy man.<sup>19</sup> Though having previously held one of the most senior positions of government, he utilised this power to make cuts to the museums sector and to give tax breaks to companies whose practices are environmentally catastrophic.<sup>20</sup> The British Museum's insistence on preserving influence within the institution for some of society's most privileged demonstrates an unwillingness to commit to the diversity or inclusion referenced in public statements and museum policies.<sup>21</sup> Though the actions of the museum's leadership does little to counter accusations of elitism and discrimination inherent to the practices and structure of the institution, this does not necessarily represent the work and priorities of all staff. This issue is further explored in Chapter 3, where museum professionals who are keen to embrace anti-colonial work and

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<sup>17</sup> M. Ainsley & C. Lister, 'Freelancers are fundamental to sector's recovery', *Museum's Journal*, 11 January 2022 < <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2022/01/freelancers-are-fundamental-to-sectors-recovery/> > [accessed 7/03/2022].

<sup>18</sup> R. Kohl and J. Halter, 'Challenging White Supremacy: A Call for Critical Race Theory in Museums', *Theory and Practice* 4 (2021) 1-20 (p. 5).

<sup>19</sup> R. Atkinson, 'George Osborne appointed chair of the British Museum', *Museums Association*, 24 June 2021 <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/06/george-osborne-appointed-chair-of-british-museum/>> [accessed 21/06/2023].

<sup>20</sup> R. Atkinson, 'George Osborne appointed chair of the British Museum', *Museums Association*, 24 June 2021 <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/06/george-osborne-appointed-chair-of-british-museum/>> [accessed 21/06/2023].

<sup>21</sup> British Museum, *Equality and Diversity Policy 2020* <[https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/Equality\\_Diversity\\_policy\\_2020.pdf](https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/Equality_Diversity_policy_2020.pdf)> [accessed 10/10/2023].

reckon with the harmful legacies associated with the sector felt undermined or unheard by their leadership teams. Such disconnect is also evident in J. P. Sires' accounts of 'a culture of hostility towards employees of colour', whereby the thoughts and opinions of Black, Asian and Indigenous staff members were largely discounted, except in instances where public pressure dictated the need for action and the museum leadership felt ill-equipped to provide an informed statement in response.<sup>22</sup> It is evident that the museums sector remains overwhelmingly white, and this limited perspective has undeniably shaped the nature of the narratives these supposed centres of knowledge construct.

### The Historical Purpose and Function of Museums

In order to best understand the role of racism, white supremacy and elitism in museums, it is essential to consider the history of both the ideas and values reflected in their formation and development. In his work *The Birth of the Museum* Tony Bennett suggests that museums have arguably never been intended as neutral or passive institutions and have the capacity to not only inform public understanding of history and the world, but also to assist in establishing the standard for morality and refinement. Bennet quotes social reformer James Silk Buckingham as having defined museums and other cultural institutions as necessary in keeping the public 'away as much as possible from evil associations, and surrounding them by the best incentives to virtue.'<sup>23</sup> Therefore, according to Bennet, museums function as purveyors of knowledge as well as representing high culture and moral superiority that visitors might aspire to. The influence of museums is therefore included in Bennet's assertion that 'institutions of high culture might be [...] assigned the purpose of civilising the population as a whole.'<sup>24</sup> It is not unusual to suggest that museums have the capacity to shape society far beyond collections and related learning, indeed the self-identified purpose of large institutions such as the British Museum identify 'enlightenment ideals and values, [...] progress and tolerance' as having 'marked the

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<sup>22</sup> J. P. Sires, 'Black Lives Matter and Museums in 2020: A Personal and Professional Perspective', *American Anthropologist* 123.4 (2021) 957-959 (p. 958).

<sup>23</sup> T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 18.

Museum since its foundation.’<sup>25</sup> This therefore means the museum still sees itself as having a role which is beneficial to the public beyond simply sharing knowledge. The institution appears aware of its role in shaping ‘ideals and values’ and understands its inherent responsibilities. Indeed, due to the framing of museums as centres of knowledge and influence, institutions like the British Museum have the capacity to prove ‘vital for interpreting and critiquing society’ in a manner that enables reflection and progress.<sup>26</sup> However, given the aforementioned homogeneity of the sector, particularly in decision-making positions, the influence of the museum is one which is, at present, inevitably rooted in whiteness. In addition, the equivalence of whiteness with authority and correctness has meant any influential pretence towards societal improvement is based on white, European cultural norms. It is therefore whiteness, in this case, that fulfils what Bennet describes as a ‘civilising’ role, and this thesis will go on to explore the problematic and violent repercussions of equating whiteness with civilisation and non-white peoples or cultures with barbarity and inferiority. In examining the history of museums’ supposed purpose as well as the values reflected therein, one can clearly see that museums have never truly been intended as neutral or purely factual if such a thing were possible. Instead, such institutions ‘uphold the processes of colonisation and [...] promote narratives to be observed, understood and reused by the public.’<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the eighteenth and nineteenth century museums, in which modern museums find their roots, are designed to shape perspectives in a way that valorises the white collector and places unquestioning authority in the hands of the institution.

The authority with which museums appear to share knowledge is inevitably shaped by colonial history. In the UK, Europe and US in particular, the global power imbalance established by European colonialism has ensured white, largely European language narratives dominate the scholarship and culture that informs museum interpretation. This form of Eurocentrism, which places particular values identified as quintessentially European

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<sup>25</sup> The British Museum, ‘The British Museum Story’, *The British Museum* <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story> [accessed: 17/03/2022].

<sup>26</sup> M. Griem and D. L. Allen, ‘Challenging Whiteness and Storytelling in Museums: An Examination of Racial Representation in Kansas City Heritage Institutions’, *Southeaster Geographer* 62.1 (2022), 8-24 (p. 9).

<sup>27</sup> M. Griem and D. L. Allen, ‘Challenging Whiteness and Storytelling in Museums: An Examination of Racial Representation in Kansas City Heritage Institutions’, *Southeaster Geographer* 62.1 (2022), 8-24 (p. 9).

at the top of an arbitrary cultural hierarchy, is based in the supposed virtues of whiteness. In many cases, the practices of early collectors are inextricably linked to oppressive colonial endeavours enabled by white supremacist belief and largely underpinned by white interpretations of Christianity. This relationship between whiteness and Christian belief is crucial to our understanding of white supremacy and colonialism, as Christianity and its teachings have, for centuries, been Eurocentric.<sup>28</sup> Religion has therefore acted as the keystone tenet of white supremacy, having provided white Europeans with an apparently divine virtue and authority with which to justify the oppression of those deemed 'other', thus giving 'the colonial agenda spiritual wings to succeed.'<sup>29</sup> It is important, at this point, to acknowledge the experiences of people for whom Christianity is no longer a symbol of whiteness specifically, as this association has been transcended by a variety of communities. Indeed, Robert Beckford reflects on Blackness within UK churches, and the way in which certain Christian spaces have become 'affirming and empowering,' enabling the celebration and perpetuation of Black identities.<sup>30</sup> Beckford also acknowledges the church as an institution as being 'inherently racist' and therefore prioritises an 'essentialist Blackness' in the quest for racial justice and resistance.<sup>31</sup> The continued presence of white supremacist Christian doctrine within historical narratives and its ongoing influence over heritage in much of the Global North serves as a continuation of colonial violence which has the potential to alienate People of Colour not only from the heritage sector, but also from aspects of their faith. Furthermore, a history of racism, as created and spread by colonialism, has ensured a fundamental belief in the superiority of white, European nations in terms of both their intelligence and character. Eurocentrism remains reliant on the construction of race as 'a social categorisation' to 'differentiate the colonizer from the colonized, the modern from the savage and the West from the rest.'<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> M. Munyao and P. K. Tanui, 'Whiteness in Christianity and Decoloniality of the African Experience: Developing a Political Theology for 'Shalom' in Kenya', *Religions* 12.11 (2021), p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> M. Munyao and P. K. Tanui, 'Whiteness in Christianity and Decoloniality of the African Experience: Developing a Political Theology for 'Shalom' in Kenya', *Religions* 12.11 (2021), p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> L. Dixon, 'Tenth Anniversary Reflections on Robert Beckford's *Jesus is Dread: Black Theology and Black Culture in Britain*', *Black Theology* 6.3 (2008) 300-307 (p. 301).

<sup>31</sup> L. Dixon, 'Tenth Anniversary Reflections on Robert Beckford's *Jesus is Dread: Black Theology and Black Culture in Britain*', *Black Theology* 6.3 (2008) 300-307 (p. 303).

<sup>32</sup> C. E. Kenfack, 'the contours of eurocentrism: race, history, and political texts', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40.3 (2017), 551-552 (p. 551).

This emphasis on European advancement and superiority is of particular interest in light of the British Museum's claim to have been marked by 'Enlightenment ideals and values' since the institution's conception. The Enlightenment is largely characterised, not only by its innate Europeanness, but also by the desire for 'human civilisation' as well as the 'improvement of human life, the human condition and human morals.'<sup>33</sup> Given the almost inextricable ties between European definitions of morality, Christianity and whiteness, it is likely that the British Museum's approach to curation and interpretation has, at least for some time, been delivered from a distinctly white perspective. D. Hicks states that little has changed within the institution since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a British Museum catalogue titled *Antiquities from the City of Benin* framed the British sacking of Benin as a successful exhibition [...] to punish the natives [...] for a treacherous massacre of a peaceful English mission.'<sup>34</sup> Thus, it is suggested that the supposed moral superiority of white, European culture and institutions, carefully constructed via narrative, remains an identifiable theme within the history of the museum. This is especially likely given the purpose of museums in society outlined by Tony Bennet and a historical association between morality, civilisation and whiteness. White supremacist Eurocentrism and the colonial violence it underpins has long ensured white, elite men have largely remained responsible for the dissemination of knowledge and curation of cultural institutions. The consequences of these dominant voices across the disciplines that fundamentally shape both society and history have meant that white supremacy therefore continues to be embedded in historical documentation and interpretation of events, figures and practices. The foundations for the pervasive racism that has shaped every aspect of society for centuries were evidently established before the formation of museums as we now understand them. However, as this thesis will seek to address, Eurocentrism and racism are crucial to the history of colonialism which in turn expedited the growth of the collections that went on to form the foundations of institutions like the British Museum. Narratives that spread invented notions of inherent racial difference were formed as part of a colonial endeavour to exploit resources and indigenous populations for profit. This chapter will now go on to present a particularly influential example of such narratives, formed and perpetuated as part of an increasingly coordinated

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<sup>33</sup> R. S. Love, *The Enlightenment* (London: Greenwood Press, 2008) p.14.

<sup>34</sup> D. Hicks, *The British Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p. 5.

effort to provide justifications for the subjugation of peoples according to their place within a constructed racial hierarchy.

### Writing Racism

In 1444, Gomes Eanes de Zurara, writer and biographer for Prince Henry the Navigator, chronicled the auction of enslaved people in Lisbon, taking particular note of their humanity and suffering. This was not because Zurara did not advocate slavery. Indeed, he considered slavery ‘an opportunity for Africans not only to improve their spiritual and material lives, but also to become integrated in European society,’ which he believed superior.<sup>35</sup> Here, we see the earliest stages of whiteness and Christianity entering colonial discourse as a moral justification for the oppression and exploitation of specific groups of people. It was of the utmost importance that this disparity in power was rationalised as somewhat pre-ordained by racial difference and faith. So keen were traders like Prince Henry to enmesh this violent, and now racist, process of enslavement in European Christianity that ‘following his deepest Christian instincts,’ Prince Henry ‘ordered a tithe be given to God through the church.’<sup>36</sup> This offering of human life affirmed the role of white enslavers as having acted on behalf of God for some great or justified purpose. However, any pretence to consider the humanity of Black people and the ‘salvation of the soul of the heathen’ is negated by the quantitative way in which they are considered, as a signifier of material wealth used transactionally to offset moral wrongdoing.<sup>37</sup> According to their self-appointed enslavers and spiritual benefactors, ‘enslaved people are incapable of taking care of themselves thereby justifying their bondage.’<sup>38</sup>

In documenting Portuguese slave trading and attempting to justify the enslavement of his fellow man, Zurara became one of the first writers to define the concept of Blackness from a

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<sup>35</sup> M. Fuentes, “‘Crespo e Nu e Negro’: Gomes Eanes de Zurara and the Racialization of Non-Christians by Portuguese Authors’, *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 34 (2018), 17 – 38 (p. 17).

<sup>36</sup> W. J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, (London: Yale University Press, 2010) p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> W. J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, (London: Yale University Press, 2010) p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> J. B. Daykin, “‘They Themselves Contribute to Their Misery by Their Sloth’: The Justification of Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Travel Narratives’, *European Legacy*, 11.6 (2006), 623-632 (p. 624).

white European perspective and its place in European conceptions of racial hierarchy. He did so by drawing together people from entirely different areas of West Africa, with different cultural beliefs, languages and appearances into one homogenous group and referring to them as having 'lived like beasts, without any custom of reasonable beings.'<sup>39</sup> The absolute faith in white European supremacy left little reason for characters like Zurara to recognise the diversity of the Black African people before them, particularly given the apparent religious impetus to enforce cultural assimilation as part of the 'civilising' process.' Of course, Zurara's writings have survived and have not been without influence, working to establish and compound the myth of the 'white man's burden' as the coloniser and missionary within Africa and the rest of the Global South. This is particularly true with respect to legacies of colonialism, wherein much of a colonising society's wealth and culture is linked to human suffering and exploitation. Though white colonisers have often enslaved, brutalised and slaughtered indigenous peoples, white projection has ensured these actions were almost always recorded as having been for the benefit of the oppressed who themselves are portrayed as violent and uncivilised. According to these early enforcers of systemic racism, 'divine immutability yields Christian character – an unchanging God wills to create Christians out of slaves and slaves out of those Black bodies that will someday, [their oppressors], claim to be Christian.'<sup>40</sup> It would be difficult, given this assertion of God-given authority and racial superiority, to oppose the centuries of systemic racism and violence that followed. As Blaut states, it was the belief of white Europeans that their Christian God would 'take care of matters such as hereditary abilities, thus making it easier for His followers to thrive, multiply, progress and conquer the world.'<sup>41</sup>

Depictions of non-white peoples, like those provided by the work of Zurara, therefore not only reinforce racism as a fundamental belief in innate racial hierarchies, but also affirm the concept of a civilising mission as being central to white, European identity. This idea is frequently portrayed as a major incentive for Imperialism and colonial violence, consequently shaping the development and interpretation of European and American

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<sup>39</sup> M. Fuentes, "'Crespo e Nu e Negro': Gomes Eanes de Zurara and the Racialization of Non-Christians by Portuguese Authors', *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 34 (2018), 17 – 38 (p. 18).

<sup>40</sup> W. J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, (London: Yale University Press, 2010) p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> J. M. Blaut, 'The Theory of Cultural Racism', *Antipode* 24.4 (1992) 289-299 (p. 291).

museum collections linked to colonialism.<sup>42</sup> Racism and the deliberate ‘othering’ of non-white peoples underpins heritage and history as they have hitherto been understood. Given what we know about Zurara’s writing and the subsequent development of white supremacy as justification for colonial violence, it is no surprise that the concept of whiteness as a civilising force has infiltrated the creation of museums and imbued them with the same assumption that it is the responsibility of white Europeans and white, Eurocentric institutions to establish a standard for ideals, values and progress.<sup>43</sup>

### Intellectualising Racism

The perpetuation of white supremacy and the concept of a clear racial hierarchy have both been reinforced and refined over centuries by white European scholars, many of whom continued to study within a society ruled by racist attitudes and structures. Famed Swedish zoologist and physician Carolus Linnaeus invented a taxonomical system of classifying the natural world which would be embraced by scientists across Europe by the end of the eighteenth century. Within this taxonomy, man was listed as a species within the animal kingdom and subdivided into four races: ‘Europaeus albesc (whitish European), Americanus rubesc. (reddish American), Asiaticus fuscus. (dark coloured Asian) and Africanus niger. (black African).’<sup>44</sup> Given Linnaeus’ system was developed around three centuries after Zurara had sought to define Blackness as inherently inferior, it is unsurprising that this new taxonomy served only to reinforce the concept of white supremacy and imply that significant differences between the races were biologically predetermined. For example, Linnaeus defines ‘Africanus’ as ‘sly, sluggish and neglectful’, which certainly correlates with Zurara’s much earlier assertions that African people lived ‘in bestial sloth’ before the arrival of Europeans in the region.<sup>45</sup><sup>46</sup> The work of Linnaeus, and the subsequent scholars who

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<sup>42</sup> T. Pektan, ‘How Important is the Notion of the ‘Civilising Mission’ to Our Understanding of British Imperialism Before 1939?’, *Interstate – Journal of International Affairs*, 3.1 (2015/2016), 1 – 1 (p. 1).

<sup>43</sup> The British Museum, ‘The British Museum Story’, *The British Museum* <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story> [accessed: 17/03/2022].

<sup>44</sup> C. Skott, ‘Human Taxonomies: Carl Linnaeus, Swedish Travel in Asia and the Classification of Man’, *Itinerario*, 43.2 (2019) 218-242 (p. 219).

<sup>45</sup> B. Kenyon-Flatt, ‘How Scientific Taxonomy Constructed the Myth of Race’, *Sapiens*, March 2021 <<https://www.sapiens.org/biology/race-scientific-taxonomy/>> [accessed: 18/03/2022].

<sup>46</sup> I. X Kendi, ‘How Racism Relies on Arbitrary Hierarchies’, *Literary Hub*, August 2019 <<https://lithub.com/ibram-x-kendi-how-racism-relies-on-arbitrary-hierarchies/>> [accessed: 18/03/2022].

worked within the taxonomic categorisations he established, provided a more developed scientific legitimacy to white supremacy, which further established invented racial differences as the principal factors which served to justify colonial violence perpetrated by white Europeans against peoples they deemed inferior. It is therefore unsurprising that the memory of historical moments or events linked to violence against non-white people is skewed towards white benevolence and the erasure of suffering.<sup>47</sup> Naturally, this perception of whiteness as being synonymous with paternalism and benevolence has also impacted the interpretation of history, alongside the aforementioned racist 'othering'. White supremacy would never be restricted to economics and would instead bleed into all aspects of European society.

This chapter will go on to explore the relationship between collectors, whose work founded a number of significant institutions, and the continual othering of Black, Asian and other Indigenous peoples within a racist societal structure. It is important, when considering the influence of racist thought and the codification of racial hierarchy, to emphasise that fact that Linnaeus was working and writing during the Enlightenment. As this thesis has already highlighted; the Enlightenment was considered a pivotal time for learning and the exchange of knowledge across Europe. It is widely perceived as having been a highly significant period of time for museums and the transformation of scholarly collections into institutions like the British Museum which was officially founded in 1753<sup>48</sup>. It is therefore reasonable to assume that, at least in part, the scholarly convention of a widespread belief in racial hierarchy will have influenced the development of museum interpretation, as well as the accumulation and curation of collections. Therefore, despite the recent recognition of racist thinking within museum interpretation and in academia more broadly, the impact of this racism is perhaps considered difficult to undo. This is particularly true when white supremacist thought was not recognised as such or countered during a museum's founding and has therefore, subliminally or otherwise, made its way into the interpretation of objects, cultures and peoples. Though changes to museum interpretation are sometimes made,

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<sup>47</sup> S. Muller-Wille, 'Race and History: Comments from an Epistemological Point of View', *Science, Technology and Human Values*, 39.4 (2014), 597 – 606 (p. 598).

<sup>48</sup> The British Museum, 'History', *The British Museum* < <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/history> > [accessed: 21/03/2022].

often at erratic intervals throughout the institution's history, without a conscious and consistent effort to explore the influence of racist thought, it is likely to retain a presence within such spaces. In addition, where historical interpretation or methods of curation do not overtly promote the idea of white superiority, they may attempt to distance their narratives or collections from violence and colonialism altogether. This is often particularly true of periods, processes or historical figures are implicated in white supremacist violence. For example, as this chapter will go on to investigate further, the transatlantic trade in particular enabled scientists and collectors to access places and peoples that had previously been somewhat out of reach.

Modlin notes that in some parts of the Anglophone West, 'the geography of remembering slavery is a distancing of the person who is remembering slavery from the historical acts of enslavement.'<sup>49</sup> This idea is expanded upon by scholars such as Blakey who have commented on a white predisposition to associate whiteness with neutrality, as defined by 'an imagined sense of subjectivity, rooted in [...] Adamic racial origins, as the standard of complete people.'<sup>50</sup> This attitude has evidently endured and was reflected in responses to increased awareness of pro-colonial narratives in museums following Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020. During conversations around reinterpretation of narratives related to figures and collections linked to slavery, former Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden urged the heritage and museums sector should approach history 'impartially', thus affirming the idea that white-centred narratives are neutral or correct by default.<sup>51</sup> Viewing history through this lens of white superiority and objectivity has largely left the legacy of slavery as more of an historical concept, and something many people are aware of, but that exists separately from the society it helped build. This privilege of distance is unavailable to Black scholars, who conversely are often forced to remember history in the context of slavery and its continued influence on the lives and experiences of Black people. C. Sharpe refers to this as 'living in the wake of slavery,' whereby the history of Blackness is influenced by an

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<sup>49</sup> E. Modlin et al., 'Can Plantation Museums Do Full Justice to the Story of the Enslaved? A Discussion of Problems, Possibilities and Place of Memory', *Geohumanities* 4.2 (2018), 335 – 359 (p. 338).

<sup>50</sup> M. L. Blakey, 'Understanding racism in physical (biological) anthropology', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 175.2 (2020), 316 – 325 (p. 317).

<sup>51</sup> D. Hicks, 'The UK government is trying to draw museums into a fake culture war', *The Guardian*, October 2020 < <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/15/the-uk-government-is-trying-to-draw-museums-into-a-fake-culture-war> > [accessed 12/11/2021].

‘inheritance of a non-status.’<sup>52</sup> Such a strength of impact and systemic legacy of oppression, renders the subject of slavery something which forms a significant part of the history of colonialism, but must also be considered as wholly fundamental to the position of Black people in society, and the ongoing experiences of ‘living the history and present of terror,’ within the systems and structures the practice of enslavement helped establish.<sup>53</sup> Though slavery remains just one aspect of global colonial history, it must be acknowledged as a core factor in the establishment of and invented racial hierarchy which was, and still is, crucial to the spread of white supremacy and colonial violence. Interpretation of such complex and enduring aspects colonial history in particular may be perceived as difficult by heritage sector organisations and museums in a country that ‘mistakes adulation for history, history for heritage and heritage for memory.’<sup>54</sup> This ‘difficulty’ and the concept of discomfort in museum spaces is considered in relation to white fragility in Chapter 4 of this thesis. However, this chapter will now seek to address the influence of colonialism, with particular emphasis on slavery, on the foundations of museum collections and the problematic legacies of their founders, which undoubtedly add an additional layer of complication for institutions looking to acknowledge their place in a decidedly violent history.

### Collections and Colonial Economies

For many institutions, the practice of collecting in order to construct the museum, as it is commonly known, is an inherently colonial process. Naturally, this process begins with collectors, in addition to the structures and economies they operated within. As colonial voyages helped shape the writings of Zurara and thus the definition of what we now refer to as race, such journeys were also pivotal in enabling the gathering of specimens for scientific research as well as art and cultural collections. Indeed, Christopher Columbus, who is widely renowned as having paved the way for the transatlantic slave trade and European colonisation of the Americas, created his own collections. Columbus had collected specimens of “gold, parrots, maize or Indian corn, and other valuable or strange things” to

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<sup>52</sup> C. Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (London: Duke University Press, 2016) p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> C. Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (London: Duke University Press, 2016) p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> G. Younge, ‘Why every single statue should come down’, *The Guardian*, 1 June 2021  
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/jun/01/gary-younge-why-every-single-statue-should-come-down-rhodes-colston> [accessed: 2 June 2021].

impress his patrons back in Spain with the potential wealth of American resources.<sup>55</sup> This early example of active collecting alongside violent colonisation establishes collecting as a means of displaying power and wealth, in addition to motivating further colonisation in order to exploit all possible resources. The accumulation or curation of objects considered 'strange' as described here, or as curiosities, had a significant role in the development of early museums in the form of 'kunstkammer' or 'wunderkammer' which were intended to showcase 'a collector's panoramic education and broad humanist learning.'<sup>56</sup> However, this definition of objects, plants and people as curious, bizarre or monstrous, serves not only to drive the appeal of early museums for European audiences but also to exoticise and fetishise indigenous cultures and peoples. This attitude would go on to dramatically shape the way in which white audiences would come to view European arts and collections, versus arts and collections from indigenous originating communities. Columbus and the collectors who followed would actively participate in the othering of non-white peoples which in turn has shaped the museum as a place where objects and cultures from across the globe are displayed solely for white European consumption. Where objects or 'specimens' were gathered for scientific purposes, they too would enter a system of colonial oppression, this time through methods of Eurocentric categorisation and use which often either erased indigenous knowledge or simply appropriated it. The motivations for collecting from outside Europe were therefore largely rooted in white supremacy, and the methods of obtaining collections would also be intrinsically tied to colonialism. This has been carried forward through history and the development of museums as cultural institutions; from the aforementioned 19<sup>th</sup> century museum as a tool for the enhancement of intellect and virtue, all the way through to contemporary collecting practices.

Many museums are linked to the discipline of anthropology, which is an area of scholarship closely linked to colonialism, often working to 'scientifically classify groups of human beings as different and therefore separate.'<sup>57</sup> As the study of anthropology has developed alongside the designation of collection items as either 'savage' or 'civilised', via their

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<sup>55</sup> J. Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: The Life and Curiosities of Hans Sloane* (London: Penguin, 2018) p. 23.

<sup>56</sup> W. Koepe, 'Collecting for the Kunstkammer', *The Met*, October 2002

<[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kuns/hd\\_kuns.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kuns/hd_kuns.htm)> [accessed: 09/12/2021]

<sup>57</sup> P. Pels, 'What has anthropology learned from the anthropology of colonialism?', *Social Anthropology* 16.3 (2008) 280-299 (p. 281).

relationships to one another, the two factors have further affirmed the role of museums and associated institutions in asserting European whiteness as intrinsically superior. Whiteness is the position from which the 'other' may be categorised and studied. It is only recently that the introduction of anthropology of colonialism itself has been recognised as an area of study within the discipline which identifies 'the ethnographic practices that provided the conditions of possibility for its classification of the colonisers and the colonised.'<sup>58</sup>

### Transatlantic Collectors

In 1695, James Petiver published his first natural history collection titled: *Musei Petiveriani Centuria Prima*, featuring 100 specimens from his collection which included objects from 'the Atlantic world beyond Europe.'<sup>59</sup> Naturally, given the time period in which Petiver was actively collecting, the transatlantic slave trade and dependent economies doubtless played a role in his access to objects from outside Europe. In their essay on Petiver's collaborators and benefactors, Murphy appears to acknowledge this by specifying that 'the Atlantic World' refers to regions bordering the Atlantic Ocean, including West Africa, Western Europe, the Caribbean and the Americas.'<sup>60</sup> During the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the vast majority of ships sailing between each of these geographical points will have been linked to European colonial exploits, if not the trade of enslaved African people. Eric Williams outlined this more explicitly in *Capitalism and Slavery*, claiming the 'discovery of America' was most crucial to Europeans in raising 'the mercantile system to a degree of splendour and glory it could never otherwise have attained to' giving rise to 'an enormous increase in world trade.'<sup>61</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that Petiver benefitted from this surge in international trade by engaging the services of individuals already involved in such voyages to help expand his natural history collection. In 1710, Petiver engaged the services of a ship's surgeon named Robert Barcklay, whose primary duties included the examination

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<sup>58</sup> P. Pels, 'What has anthropology learned from the anthropology of colonialism?', *Social Anthropology* 16.3 (2008) 280-299 (p. 282).

<sup>59</sup> K. S. Murphy, 'James Petiver's 'kind friends' and 'curious persons' in the Atlantic world: commerce, colonialism and collecting', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 74 (2020), 259 – 274 (p. 259).

<sup>60</sup> K. S. Murphy, 'James Petiver's 'kind friends' and 'curious persons' in the Atlantic world: commerce, colonialism and collecting', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 74 (2020), 259 – 274 (p. 260).

<sup>61</sup> E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), p. 51.

and treatment of enslaved people during transport to Jamaica. Petiver provided Barcklay with examples of his existing collections in the hope this would inform his acquisition of objects from West Africa. Petiver's methods of collecting and his decision to approach individuals working on slave ships specifically illustrates the way in which slavery in particular was an inherent part of the collecting of objects from outside Europe during this time period. Despite the fact that Petiver clearly knew and understood the fundamental role of slavery in enabling his academic pursuits, 'only in the last few years have scholars begun to examine the agency of the slave trade in circulating [...] knowledge.'<sup>62</sup> This point is illustrative of the broader problem across, in this case, the heritage and museums sector, as information on objects according to their discipline has often been far more readily available than details of their provenance relating to the methods with which they were acquired.

Another figure pivotal in the development of museums as white, European institutions is Hans Sloane, who is credited with having created a collection which formed the basis of what is now the British Museum. Despite this, the details of his legacy have proven less than clear, despite the fact both his name and image are present in public spaces across London. In his biography on Sloane, James Delbourgo writes 'portraits, statues and busts of Sloane can be found off the King's Road in Chelsea Physic Garden, the British Library, the British Museum and the National Portrait Gallery. Asking people what Sloane did, however, draws a blank.'<sup>63</sup> Delbourgo points to the particularly broad range of subjects and disciplines Sloane involved himself in as an explanation for his somewhat vague presence in heritage and public spaces alike. This appears to be the case, though a lack of clear interpretation makes it difficult for people walking past Sloane's statue, in the Chelsea Physic Garden for example, to understand the extent or nature of his influence. However, as with any historical figure memorialised in public or prominent places, the fact they are commemorated at all carries an implicit reverence that encourages, often subconscious, assumptions that the individual immortalised in grand portraits or statues was wholly great or contributed only positively to society. Therefore, it would not seem unusual for passers-

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<sup>62</sup> K. S. Murphy, 'Collecting Slave Traders: James Petiver, Natural History and the British Slave Trade, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 70.4 (2013), 637 – 670 (p. 638).

<sup>63</sup> J. Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: The Life and Curiosities of Hans Sloane* (London: Penguin, 2018) p. xxi.

by to assume that Sloane's influence begins and ends at his contribution to some form of scholarship. This problem of inherent bias in public memorialisation was remarked upon by historian David Olusoga when reflecting on the toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol, describing the statue itself as 'a mediocre piece of late-Victorian art that said almost nothing truthful or of interest.'<sup>64</sup> Statues and portraits provide very little information, other than the fact someone, at some point deemed their subjects worthy of memorialisation. Indeed, the same could be said of museum collections that are attributed to individual collectors like Sloane, as these are often constructed with the intention of representing not only the power and wealth of the colonising nation, but also the collector themselves. These objects grouped together by the actions of an individual served a function of 'attesting to journeys to far-off places, encounters experienced and crucially the return to home endowed with new knowledge and previously unknown experiences.'<sup>65</sup> There is very little about a collection deemed significant enough for exhibition in a museum alone that stimulates a critical consideration of the methods or systems utilised in its acquisition. Collections can therefore sometimes fulfil similar roles to statues of individuals insofar as their binary interpretation of the figures they represent which often implies a need for reverence and adulation.

We must therefore ask what more there is to know about figures such as Hans Sloane, particularly given his role in establishing a world-renowned museum which is viewed by many audiences as an educational and cultural resource. Sloane is remembered in more detail in James Delbourgo's aforementioned biography, wherein the author assures the reader that 'rather than try to pull Sloane into our world, we must enter his.'<sup>66</sup> However, as already established; by virtue of his presence in public areas, museums, galleries and libraries; Sloane is already in our world. So, whilst it may assist in our understanding of his place in 17th century scholarship to think of him in those historical terms; we must consider every historical figure in light of present-day values and ethics in order to make decisions

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<sup>64</sup> D. Olusoga, 'A potent historical artefact: the statue of Edward Colston's new role', *The Guardian*, 4 June 2021 < <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/04/edward-colston-statue-potent-historical-artefact-david-olusoga> > [accessed: 09/12/2021].

<sup>65</sup> E. Martin, 'Charles Bell's collection of 'curios': Acquisitions and encounters during a Himalayan journey' in S. Dudley et al. (ed.), *Narrating Objects, Collecting Stories* (Abingdon, 2012) p.168.

<sup>66</sup> J. Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: The Life and Curiosities of Hans Sloane* (London: Penguin, 2018) p. xxvi.

about their continuing role in both public and heritage spaces. Later in the biography Delbourgo does acknowledge Sloane's involvement with the transatlantic slave trade, charting his travels from England to the Caribbean, his work as a plantation physician and his income from Jamaican slave plantations. In the biography's introduction, Delbourgo frames this as a 'scientific odyssey as a curiosity collector who ventured into the disturbing world of Atlantic slavery.'<sup>67</sup> The author is no doubt conscious of the way in which his choices of language here might influence the interpretation of the reader, associating terms like 'odyssey' or 'venture' with a very particular image of Sloane as an intrepid and courageous explorer. Not only this, but Sloane's entry into the 'disturbing world of Atlantic slavery' is also framed in a peculiar way, with passive language documenting the travels of an apparently neutral 'curiosity collector' entering a world of colonial violence and cruelty without constituting a part of it.<sup>68</sup> The use of the word 'disturbing' is also of interest, as it is uncertain whether this refers to the perspective of the modern reader or to Sloane himself. Though undeniably violent, racist and exploitative, the world of Atlantic slavery was a system in which Sloane actively participated in and benefitted from. The image Delbourgo creates here is later contradicted in the same biography, when Sloane is described as having 'interrogated' enslaved African people about their physical complaints, claiming 'it was very ordinary for servants [...] to pretend, or dissemble sickness of several sorts' and equating complaints of ill health among the enslaved population of Jamaica to 'typical black dishonesty.' Sloane apparently then goes on to employ treatments that 'mimicked whites' methods for torturing and executing slaves.'<sup>69</sup> It is clear that Sloane was not a neutral visitor to the world of plantation slavery interested only in the pursuit of knowledge, but formed an intrinsic part of a system of racist oppression and colonial exploitation. This attitude that disregarded the suffering of enslaved people or the inhumanity with which they were treated and was not uncommon. Even in the case of European physicians and scientists who did document the cruelty and suffering experienced by African people during, for example, the Middle Passage, they were concerned only with how this informed their research. In 1839, Robert Dundas Thomson recounted the second-hand story of a man dying on a slave ship in his piece on human survival without food in *The Lancet*. However, 'it wasn't the

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<sup>67</sup> J. Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: The Life and Curiosities of Hans Sloane* (London: Penguin, 2018) p. xxiii.

<sup>68</sup> J. Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: The Life and Curiosities of Hans Sloane* (London: Penguin, 2018) p. xxiii.

<sup>69</sup> J. Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: The Life and Curiosities of Hans Sloane* (London: Penguin, 2018) p. 50.

brutality that mattered to [Thomson], though he did detail it. It was that the enslaved African man had survived for over a week without eating – that was what mattered.’<sup>70</sup> This prioritisation of academic recognition over the suffering of human beings was symptomatic of the aforementioned widely-held belief in white supremacy and was often reflected in scholarly outputs. Thus, in many cases the role of colonialism and oppression are erased from narratives around research and collecting. In others, an attitude of disregard for the suffering of oppressed peoples is perpetuated and white, European superiority is affirmed.

A quote from a review selected to appear on the back cover of the 2018 edition of *Collecting the World* describes Sloane as ‘the creator of one of the world’s great civilising resources.’<sup>71</sup> Referring to the British Museum, *The Spectator*’s Jonathan Keates sums up a widely held attitude towards colonial institutions and their role in affirming both white supremacy and Eurocentrism. This idea that the museum somehow ‘civilises’ or improves the cultural objects and people within its collections through a decidedly white, European lens is a reductive and racist stance that has been reinforced over generations. In addition to this, the term ‘civilising’ as applied to museums can be traced back to the supposed purpose of nineteenth century high culture institutions described by Bennett. The museum as a place that reveres white, elite figures encourages visitors to associate these attributes with moral superiority and intellect. Therefore, the museum as a colonial institution not only exerts dominance over the communities and cultures represented in its collections, but also seeks to shape and control the perspectives of its visitors. It’s likely that a consistently reinforced narrative rooted in white supremacy is what led the British Museum and other institutions to commemorate Sloane’s memory in a wholly uncritical way, as a celebration of his contributions to the knowledge and the collections that have benefitted their development. A bust of Sloane was housed on a pedestal in a prominent location within the British Museum until the summer of 2020, when it was removed following the Black Lives Matter protests and the subsequent pressure on the heritage and museums sector to address colonial legacies more fully. In a statement to the press, the museum’s Director Hartwig

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<sup>70</sup> J. Downs, *Maladies of Empire* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021) p. 2.

<sup>71</sup> J. Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: The Life and Curiosities of Hans Sloane* (London: Penguin, 2018).

Fischer said 'we have pushed him off the pedestal. We must not hide anything.'<sup>72</sup> Fischer and his colleagues have determined that the removal of the statue from a pedestal has ended the statue's role in symbolising reverence and unquestioning admiration for Sloane, instead placing him in a cabinet alongside a display which contextualises his work and his involvement in transatlantic slavery. Though this intervention undeniably shifts perspectives on Sloane away from passive assumptions regarding his supposed respectability, there are those who would argue that moving statues of figures who benefitted from and perpetuated white supremacy to such an extent is 'simply outsources a hateful object elsewhere.'<sup>73</sup>

In addition, it is hardly as though Sloane were an unusual figure. Indeed, the creation of collections and museums across Europe was largely driven by men with very similar approaches. Though not all participated in the transatlantic trade in enslaved people as directly as Sloane, many were informed by the same inherently racist ideals and Eurocentric collecting practices. For example, Gustav Klemm, who during the 17<sup>th</sup> century acted as director of Dresden's Royal Library, was an avid collector of 'cultural history'. His methods of organising collections spanning hundreds of countries and cultures typified European attitudes to an assumed process of civilisation and inherent racial hierarchy. Klemm wrote: 'we will set aside the usual geographic, ethnographical, and synchronic arrangements, [...] and divide the races of men into three fundamental classes – the savage, the barbarians, and the enlightened (represented in time, roughly by the stone, the bronze and the iron age).'<sup>74</sup> Instead of identifying distinct cultures within a vast collection and seeking to represent this diversity in a museum, Klemm has grouped countless nations, cultures and peoples into three distinct categories which he feels reflect their place in human progression. According to A. Kuper, Klemm was later cited by the Nazis as a 'forerunner of their racial ideas.' Although Klemm's methods of curation and categorisation were largely abandoned following his death, his efforts to promote an understanding of global history

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<sup>72</sup> PA Media, 'British Museum removes statue of slave-owning founder', *The Guardian*, 25 August 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/aug/25/british-museum-removes-founder-hans-sloane-statue-over-slavery-links>> [accessed 08/01/2021].

<sup>73</sup> T. Armus, 'Charlottesville's Robert E. Lee statue will be melted down by city's African American history museum', *The Washington Post*, 7 December 2021 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/12/07/charlottesville-melt-robert-lee-statue/>> [accessed: 20/12/2021].

<sup>74</sup> A. Kuper, *The Museum of Other People* (London: Profile Books, 2023) p. 74.

that placed Black and indigenous cultures so far in the past, and so low on an invented scale of civilisation had a definite influence on the way such peoples have been viewed since that time. Association with primitivism and the past has rendered indigenous cultures and collections seemingly less relevant to modern audiences, and contributed to the widespread perception that such indigenous cultures are extinct. Furthermore, often when Black and indigenous peoples have experienced contact with Europeans, they are represented in this history, as A. Mbembe writes: 'at best, as the appendix to another history, a citation at the bottom of a page devoted to someone else, to other places, to other things.'<sup>75</sup> Indeed, the organisation of ethnographic collections, such as they were known, could in itself be interpreted as a reflection only of the European collectors and their intended audiences. The manner with which such collections are often classified and curated serves only to provide an arena in which wealthy, white, male academics could postulate their own, often uninformed thoughts on global cultures, civilisation and racial hierarchy.

Even without statues or paintings of those involved in the construction of museums, individuals are still venerated when associated with the donation or assembly of significant collections. The process of attributing admirable characteristics to collectors engaged in unethical or colonial collecting practices is also not limited to figures from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. New York's MET Museum boasts a wing named after the wealthy Rockefeller family which contains a number of objects originally acquired for display in Nelson Rockefeller's Museum of Primitive Art. Of these objects, a great number of pieces from Asmat, Papua New Guinea comprise the Michael C. Rockefeller Collection which is named after Nelson Rockefeller's son, who was supposedly inspired to begin collecting after attending the opening of the now defunct Museum of Primitive Art. The driving force behind Michael's desire to obtain artefacts from the Asmat people appeared to largely stem from a colonial and Eurocentric attitude towards appropriation and the esteem garnered by the accumulation of objects that 'would dwarf anything else in his father's new museum.'<sup>76</sup> In this way, clear parallels can be drawn between the actions of Rockefeller and those of figures like Sloane, Petiver and Thomson; all are primarily concerned with the value of the

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<sup>75</sup> D. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p. 35.

<sup>76</sup> C. Hoffman, *Savage Harvest* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014) p. 5.

outputs of their colonial endeavours than the inherently exploitative processes they participated in.

### Museum Interpretation of Colonial Collections

Museums and heritage sites such as country houses in Europe arguably face a greater challenge when faced with the task of interpreting collections associated with colonialism in a way which does not reinforce colonial or racist attitudes. Of course, anti-colonialism and any conception of neutrality cannot be achieved with an absence of interpretation, as many museum collections 'unsurprisingly bring with them connotations of imperial rule, repression and plunder and an expectation that, collectively, these objects will add to the meta-narratives of colonialism.'<sup>77</sup> In a manner similar to statues of individuals with legacies rooted in colonial violence, the presence of such collections in museums alone implies an element of moral acceptability or approval. The very act of displaying the objects in a manner which is now established as conventional within the white, Eurocentric museum sector of the Global North, away from their communities of origin, is indicative of a power imbalance and a failure to recognise unethical methods of collection or links to colonial Violence, prioritising a very specific, usually white perspective. In addition, many objects are not put on display and are instead stored elsewhere in the institution, away from visitors and somewhat hidden from scrutiny. This means a selection process must be undertaken in order to determine which objects are most representative of the collection and culture they represent. Without collaboration with originating or ancestor communities, and given the aforementioned lack of diversity within the sector, such decisions reflect white perspectives and colonial conceptions of so-called 'value.' In addition, the conditions and security with which museum collections are stored is often called into question. An example of this critique arose following the theft of items from the British Museum which were taken from storage by a former employee.<sup>78</sup> This has led to increased pressure for the return of looted indigenous items to their originating communities. A member of UK Parliament and member

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<sup>77</sup> E. Martin, 'Charles Bell's collection of 'curios': Acquisitions and encounters during a Himalayan journey' in S. Dudley et al. (ed.), *Narrating Objects, Collecting Stories* (Abingdon, 2012) p. 167.

<sup>78</sup> D. Batty and M. Brown, 'Thefts expose British Museum's 'ridiculous' stance on return of artefacts says MP', *The Guardian*, 27 August 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/aug/27/thefts-expose-british-museums-ridiculous-stance-on-return-of-artefacts-says-mp>> [accessed 01/09/2023].

of the all-part parliamentary group on African reparations stated: ‘one of the most insulting reasons’ museums have given against restitution or repatriation ‘is that the other countries that these items belong to would either not be able to take care of them or they are likely to be stolen,’ thus highlighting the colonial hypocrisy in the assertion that museums effectively conserve and safeguard objects and cultures.<sup>79</sup> Though collections themselves were created and imbued with significance far away from their present location, they are now held, controlled and curated by an institution and culture dominated by whiteness. This disparate level of power and control is catalysed by the colonial notion that museums should act as a tool for ‘civilising’ as much as educating.<sup>80</sup> It is therefore implicit that the European or American museum civilises objects from communities within the Global Majority by removing them from their cultural context and utilising them in a way that predominantly benefits white society. In many cases, this process continues to ‘other’ indigenous artists and communities by creating an interest based on purely aesthetic qualities determined by consumers in the Global North, or an inherent cultural difference rooted in perceived inferiority. Museums housing collections from communities in the Global South, whether linked to colonialism or not, must carefully consider their perspectives and approaches in order to avoid participating in colonial practices of erasure and decontextualization. As this chapter will go on to illustrate, anti-colonial work continues to prove difficult where colonial conquest and perceived white superiority is interwoven with the collecting practices and interpretation inherent to the foundations of certain museums and their collections.

The way in which museums in Europe and America operate is often informed by inherently Eurocentric policies which discount the nature of their objects as defined by communities of origin. The typical approach to conservation and curation in the Global North has long been the unmoving preservation and protection of objects in order to prevent their aging, decay or damage. Indeed, the introductory paragraphs of the 1972 Heritage Convention asserts that ‘deterioration or disappearance of any item of the cultural [...] heritage constitutes a

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<sup>79</sup> D. Batty and M. Brown, ‘Thefts expose British Museum’s ‘ridiculous’ stance on return of artefacts says MP’, *The Guardian*, 27 August 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/aug/27/thefts-expose-british-museums-ridiculous-stance-on-return-of-artefacts-says-mp>> [accessed 01/09/2023].

<sup>80</sup> T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 18.

harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all nations of the world.’<sup>81</sup> This is particularly problematic in terms of frequent lack of acknowledgement of the significance of indigenous items as a part of ritual or religious belief, which in some cases, leads to the destruction, burial or abandonment of the object. In many cases, objects in European and American museums are, through Eurocentric methods of conservation, being prevented from completing their predetermined ceremonial roles and thus fulfilling their purposes as outlined by the originating communities. The Asmat bis poles housed in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art provide an example of this enforced stasis. These intricately carved Sago Palm trunks were created as part of ceremonies associated with funeral feasts, both to honour the dead, as well as acting as a reminder that no death is accidental and must be avenged through headhunting raids or religious rituals.<sup>82</sup> Historically, the poles were kept on display by an Asmat village until the perceived imbalance created by a death had been corrected. After this, the process was completed by abandoning the poles in sago palm groves in the hope that their ‘supernatural fertile power’ would be absorbed into the earth, thus creating more sago palms which provide a crucial food source for the Asmat and enable the cycle to begin again.<sup>83</sup> By keeping the bis poles in a state of eternal preservation, the museum removes them from the process which makes them significant, which disrupts the spiritual lifecycle of the objects as well as potentially limiting the educational value of the objects within the institution.

Peter Jones highlights the shortcomings of traditional methods of display and conservation in museums by asserting that the inherent focus on presenting ‘products rather than processes’ and ‘effects rather than causes’ limits the scope of cultural understanding enabled by the institution.<sup>84</sup> Jones argues that, regardless of the amount of research conducted by curators, the removal of objects from the processes and uses they were intended for decontextualises them and only allows for their recontextualization by the museum rather than the community of origin. For example, it could be argued that the only

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<sup>81</sup> F. Lenzerini, ‘Cultural Identity, Human Rights and Repatriation of Cultural Heritage of Indigenous Peoples’, *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 23 (2017), p. 128.

<sup>82</sup> The MET Museum, ‘Bis Pole’, *The MET Museum* <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/313830>> [accessed: 02/08/2022].

<sup>83</sup> The MET Museum, ‘Bis Pole’, *The MET Museum* <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/313830>> [accessed: 02/08/2022].

<sup>84</sup> P. Jones, ‘Museums and the Meaning of their Contents’, *New Literary History* 23.4 (1992) 911-921 (p. 911).

way to fully understand the purpose and significance of a bis pole, one must observe its progress from creation, to celebration, all the way through to decomposition. In removing it from this context, the institution ultimately participates in the colonial process of recontextualization via a system of categorisation, documentation and Eurocentric interpretation. The perspective from which the object is viewed is therefore also removed from its indigenous 'truth' and erases the peoples so fundamental to imbuing the object with meaning. This process also fails to recognise the inalienability of certain objects which are sometimes sacred, royal or particularly powerful and can therefore not be given away. In other cases, such pieces that are considered objects by Museums in the Global North may constitute ancestors for their originating communities. In such cases, these items and collections are of far greater value than that of a singular object. According to Dan Hicks, 'it is only from the privileged position of the museum executive [...] relying on the dark arts of conservation and curation, that these objects can evoke fixity.'<sup>85</sup> The Eurocentric and largely white perspective of the museum in this sense prevents the use and combination of objects which enable their cultural significance or preserve their spiritual value. For example, in *Braiding the Sweetgrass*, Robin W. Kimmerer describes the exchange of 'wiingashk' or sweetgrass among the Potawatomi people, stressing that braids made from the grass can have no ceremonial value if it is bought or sold. Instead, the wiingashk must be given as a gift, and 'when Wally gives the sweetgrass to the fire, it is a gift that has passed from hand to hand, growing richer as it is honored in every exchange.'<sup>86</sup> Therefore, within the economy of European museum procurement and loan systems, the wiingashk becomes a mere object rather than an important part of Potawatomi ceremony and culture. The erasure inherent to an insistence on decontextualization extends to the originating community themselves, as museums often frame their interpretation in a way that reflects their aforementioned origins, portraying said community as though they are 'a thing of the past' or something entirely removed from the society in which the museum and its visitors exist. This undeniably colonial approach to interpretation 'contributes to the dehumanization of Native peoples and renders them both voiceless and invisible within the

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<sup>85</sup> D. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p. 26.

<sup>86</sup> R. W. Kimmerer, *Braiding the Sweetgrass* (London: Penguin, 2020) p. 27.

institution.<sup>87</sup> Museums continuing to withhold inalienable collections from indigenous peoples and the 'misplaced concreteness' of object-oriented histories has 'deepened persistent colonial inequalities – repeated and exacerbated dehumanisations, reproduced and extended dispossessions.'<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, indigenous peoples themselves are present only through panels, often written in European languages and adhering to pre-established museum classifications. This is also usually written from the perspective of white curators and academics who have set the standard for methods of interpretation, which are often universal regardless of cultural origin. Therefore, the agency indigenous people might have over the documentation and experience of their own cultures is removed. Naturally, when an institution saturated in white supremacist doctrine and colonial oppression, 'the very act of observing and classifying others is a power play.'<sup>89</sup>

A. Kuper acknowledges this problem; however, he then asks 'But would you accept a stranger's self-representation on trust? After all, how many English people are able to provide reliable information on their country's history, literature, arts or religions?'<sup>90</sup> This is a reductive and unhelpful statement on a number of levels. First, Kuper appears to have made the paternalistic and racist assumption that experts, historians, scholars and storytellers do not exist within indigenous communities, or perhaps more problematic, that their knowledge is less trustworthy or legitimate. He appears to imply that museums might be asking indigenous peoples at random to represent their entire communities, regardless of their expertise or interest. This limits the scope of indigeneity to include only those who are interested primarily in their status as a member of their indigenous community, rather than intersectional beings. Secondly, Kuper's implication that only certain individuals with authority have value to add value to conversations around culture and history illustrates a sector which is not only racist, but exclusionary in almost every way. Questions like this illustrate the lingering, somewhat insidious belief that white, European scholars and

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<sup>87</sup> L. Mineo, 'Museums of Native culture wrestle with decolonizing', *The Harvard Gazette*, 19 November 2020 <<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/11/museums-of-native-culture-wrestle-with-decolonizing/>> [accessed: 02/08/2022].

<sup>88</sup> D. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p. 26.

<sup>89</sup> A. Kuper, *The Museum of Other People* (London: Profile Books, 2023) p. 27.

<sup>90</sup> A. Kuper, *The Museum of Other People* (London: Profile Books, 2023) p. 27.

museum professionals are more qualified to understand history or culture than the general public, and indeed the originating communities of their collections.

In *Surfacing*, Kathleen Jamie highlights the ways in which indigenous communities can have constructive and collaborative interactions with museums, without the implication that museums hold superior knowledge and authority. In one such case, archaeological digs in Alaska were significantly limited by weather conditions which necessitated the removal of objects, and often the soil they were found in, to more stable conditions in Scotland. This process of cleaning and research was informed by indigenous knowledge and participation, which included 'revitalising traditional skills which had been lost [...] and that meant relearning old techniques.'<sup>91</sup> Therefore, despite accepting that the rightful place of the archaeological discoveries is with the originating community, the availability of temporary storage, research funding and professional archaeologists has enabled indigenous people to feel increasingly connected to a 'whole culture lost to colonialism, to missionary zeal.'<sup>92</sup> This case demonstrated the way in which museums are able to contribute to the knowledge and conservation of indigenous collections whilst maintaining an ethical approach and respect for the agency and knowledge of the originating community. In order to work in a truly anti-colonial way, museums should follow this example of empowering indigenous people to fully engage with heritage previously erased by the kind of colonial attitudes Kuper demonstrates.

### Country House Museums

Country house museums are no exception to this ongoing colonial exploitation of indigenous cultures. They comprise a great deal of the UK's heritage landscape, and as such must be included in the consideration of museum interpretation in the oft overlooked cases where there are strong links between the houses, their inhabitants, sources of wealth and colonial violence. Indeed, as the collections often make up part of a relatively domestic interior space, they are perhaps even further removed from the context and significance

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<sup>91</sup> K. Jamie, *Surfacing* (London: Sort Of Books, 2019) p. 12.

<sup>92</sup> K. Jamie, *Surfacing* (London: Sort Of Books, 2019) p. 12.

attributed by their originating communities. Instead, such heritage is again reduced to its perceived aesthetic qualities, as determined by white, Eurocentric standards. In the context of this thesis, country house museums that have failed to acknowledge and interpret objects linked to colonialism and racist oppression in a way that considers the violence of their acquisition, as well as the spiritual and cultural meanings of the objects, have participated in said oppression. Interpretation that fails to establish indigenous artefacts as anything other than décor passively establishes such collections as testament only to the success or worldliness of the collector or owner. With this, the vast and varied wealth associated with individuals and properties with distinctly colonial legacies contributes to an inarguably positive or reverential view of British or European imperial power which, according to Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 'still hurts, still destroys and is reforming itself constantly.'<sup>93</sup>

A notable example of a British country house museum with extensive colonial collections is Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, currently owned and presented to the public by the National Trust. The property was once home to George Curzon, former Viceroy of India, and as such continues to hold the collections he amassed both before and during his time in this position. Given his role in the colonial occupation and control of India, the method with which Curzon's 'Museum' is displayed is without doubt an expression of ongoing British imperialism. Now referred to by the National Trust as the 'Museum', the space contains over 1000 objects ranging from weaponry to ornate furnishings which are largely displayed in a homogenous manner in glass cabinets that line the room. The room could be likened to a Wunderkammer or Cabinet of Curiosity, as described earlier in this chapter, and as such positions all items in the museum as curios to be consumed from a white perspective and as significant only through their place in a larger collection that exists as testament to an individual. In this case, the individual is George Curzon, who fundamentally believed 'that the British were born to rule and were imbued with the "character" to fulfil this predestined role.'<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> J. V. Beurden, 'Decolonisation and Colonial Collections', *Low Countries Historical Review*, 133.2 (2018) p. 67.

<sup>94</sup> M. Carrington, 'Officers, Gentlemen and Murderers: Lord Curzon's campaign against 'collisions' between Indians and Europeans, 1899 – 1905', *Modern Asian Studies*, 47.3 (2012) p. 781.

In 2019, upon entering the museum, visitors were greeted with a large portrait of Curzon and presented with information regarding his time as Viceroy of India. Thus, as with the Rockefellers, the collection exists as a demonstration of the achievements or interests of the individual. In Curzon's case, the context of his part of the colonial occupation and control of India adds an additional ethical consideration in that a number of objects in the 'museum' have undoubtedly been attained through violent or oppressive means. During the early establishment of British rule in India, long before the Raj when the East India Company gained control of the subcontinent, British forces were looting Indian wealth, artworks and cultural heritage on a mass scale. In descriptions of British tax collectors, a senior official of the Mughal regime wrote in his diary that 'Indians were tortured to disclose their treasure, cities, towns and villages ransacked; jaghires and provinces purloined: these were "delights" and "religions" of the directors and their servants.'<sup>95</sup> This taking of cultural heritage and treasure, both through violent means and manipulation, reached such an extent that Powis Castle in Wales, the former home of Robert Clive, Governor of Bengal, contains 'more Mughal artefacts [...] than are on display at any one place in India – even the National Museum in Delhi.'<sup>96</sup> This colonial process of control and exploitation carried through beyond the end of the East India Company's domination of the Indian people and into the later rule of the British Raj. It is therefore against a backdrop of commodification, looting and oppression that George Curzon amassed his collection. Of course, given the collection remains inside Curzon's former home, which is ostensibly a museum dedicated to the lives of its inhabitants, one might argue that the displays set out by Curzon are appropriate from a curator's perspective. However, this approach would disregard the significance of the objects in the context of their originating communities, including the intended purpose and use of such items. In addition, the violent and oppressive violence associated with the collection's acquisition are neither interrogated, nor challenged.

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<sup>95</sup> W. Dalrymple, 'The East India Company: the original corporate raiders', *The Guardian*, 4 March 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/04/east-india-company-original-corporate-raiders>> [accessed: 06/09/2022].

<sup>96</sup> W. Dalrymple, 'The East India Company: the original corporate raiders', *The Guardian*, 4 March 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/04/east-india-company-original-corporate-raiders>> [accessed: 06/09/2022].

This chapter has illustrated that colonial economies, underpinned by white supremacist thoughts and systems of oppression have shaped the development of museums in the Global North. So deep rooted are these racist methods of understanding global collections that it is not unreasonable to suggest that the museum itself needs to be completely dismantled and rebuilt. This is particularly true if the continued violence of withholding and recontextualising of indigenous cultural collections is to end. Museums must also seek to balance their acknowledgement of colonial legacies and oppression alongside interpretation of indigenous objects that no longer conforms to white supremacist or Eurocentric methods of classification and representation. Though such collections are anthropological in nature, in his development of the 'Museum as Method', N. Thomas highlights that they are simultaneously historical collections that are sometimes 'the products of, the evidence for, and maybe even the memorials to entangled histories.'<sup>97</sup> However, this inextricable link to violent oppression and white supremacist scholarship can cause challenges where 'the method of swapping analytical focus back and forth between the 'agency' of people and things, of 'Indigenous and Western' people and communities, actively omits those moments where a relationship is constituted by separations not entanglements.'<sup>98</sup> It is also therefore essential that museums looking to analyse the links between their institution and colonialism do not do so in a manner that centres whiteness in favour of representing indigenous heritage and objects according to their significance and purpose, as defined by their originating communities.

This museological challenge and the question of decentring whiteness will be considered in more detail in Chapter 3. In Chapter 2 this thesis will move forward in history to the Black Lives Matter Protests of 2020 and the ensuing push for museums and heritage organisations to address the racism and Eurocentrism inherent to their existence, whilst simultaneously looking to commence works to counter harmful colonial narratives and museum practices. If the role of museums is principally the enrichment of society and 'delivering, encouraging and enabling' access to knowledge, as outlined by Tony Bennet, changes are required to make this a reality rooted in accessible practices and inclusion. Alongside the vast challenge

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<sup>97</sup> N. Thomas, 'The Museum as Method', *Museum Anthropology* 33.1 (2010) pp. 6-10 (p. 9).

<sup>98</sup> D. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p. 28.

of dismantling and countering inherently problematic systems and structures, professionals in the sector must also contend with significant backlash from a society which has been steeped in the same racist, colonial and elitist narratives and attitudes as its cultural institutions. For those who value museums as a means of reinforcing such attitudes, and conserving pride in invented racial and cultural hierarchies, 'claims that a museum visit might transform an individuals entrenched and oppositional views and values [may] appear both problematic and naïve.'<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> R. Sandell, *Museums, Society, Inequality* (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 17.

## Chapter 2: Whiteness and Resistance to Anti-Colonialism

The aim of this chapter is to build on the analysis of the historical foundations of a heritage and museums sector steeped in colonialism and white supremacist thought, conducted in Chapter 1, with the purpose of illustrating a rapidly changing arts and heritage landscape. It is this landscape that the case studies and interviews which constitute this thesis' primary research are taken from. The tumultuous and polarising nature of the sector during this period will be considered primarily in relation to the foundations of popular conceptions of history, the affirmation of white supremacy and subsequent responses to discussions regarding anti-colonialism in the heritage sector. There will be a particular focus on the impact of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in 2020 and therefore the more recent calls to action for institutions across the Global North to acknowledge their links to colonial violence whilst perhaps developing and embracing ways of working which serve to unravel the way in which colonial attitudes and practices have shaped the sector. Decolonisation, and whether this is ultimately possible in a structure so thoroughly formed and influenced by imperialism and colonial exploitation, will be explored further in Chapters 3 and 4 which will expound the work specific case study museums are now undertaking as well as the experiences of their staff members. This chapter will focus more on the impetus for change in the heritage sector, and the subsequent backlash against the possibility of actions to redress bias and discrimination within the narratives it has perpetuated. This reactionary stance, created and spread by both government and media, will be examined in the context of several theories, including Blaut's theory of cultural racism and R. DiAngelo's theory of white fragility which attributes resistance rooted in 'racial stress' to 'an interruption to what is racially familiar.'<sup>1</sup>. The chapter will conclude with a case study which illustrates proactive actions taken by The National Trust to begin the process of 'decolonisation', or perhaps more realistically, enabling narratives beyond the hegemonic superiority of European whiteness.

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<sup>1</sup> R. DiAngelo, 'White Fragility', *Counterpoints* 497 (2016) 245-253 (p. 247).

## The Black Lives Matter Movement

In May 2020, a Black man named George Floyd was murdered by American police officers in Minneapolis.<sup>2</sup> Floyd was unarmed and was accused of having used a counterfeit bill in a nearby convenience store. Despite the minor nature of this reported infraction, a police officer named Derek Chauvin pinned him to the ground and pressed his knee to Floyd's neck until he became unresponsive and subsequently died. George Floyd's murder and the events of the weeks that followed shone a spotlight on the systemic and violent racism that permeates almost every aspect of life in the Global North. Criticism was directed at almost every sector, with a particular focus on the injustices and violence levelled at members of the Black community by law enforcement. Though those with more privileged perspectives on global politics may have been surprised by the seemingly sudden eruption of protests across the world, under the Black Lives Matter (BLM) banner, the journey to such a widescale expression of frustration had been a long time coming. Naturally, the history of racism as a tool of oppression and white supremacy discussed in the previous chapter has endured within the systems and structures that comprise modern society in the Global North. It would be disingenuous to suggest that mass protests against racism are without precedent, of course there is a long legacy of Black and allied activists working to dismantle systems of white supremacy, and resisting 'discriminatory and oppressive police agents, court systems and prisons since the days of slavery.'<sup>3</sup> The BLM movement specifically was started by three Black women: Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, in 2013 as a response to a miscarriage of justice related to the murder of Trayvon Martin.<sup>4</sup> This crime formed but one incident in an ongoing series of lethal attacks on Black Americans and highlighted the obvious racism present throughout the United States' criminal justice system. Recent statistics show that Black people in America are twice as likely than white people to be killed by police officers, as was demonstrated by the murder of both Breonna

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<sup>2</sup> E. Hill et al., 'How George Floyd was killed in police custody', *New York Times*, 31 May 2020 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>> [accessed 19/02/2021].

<sup>3</sup> J. Nummi et al., '#BlackLivesMatter: Innovative Black Resistance', *Sociological Forum* 34.1 (2019) 1042-1064 (p. 1043).

<sup>4</sup> L. Gottbrath, 'In 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement shook the world', *Al Jazeera*, 31 Dec 2020 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/12/31/2020-the-year-black-lives-matter-shook-the-world>> [accessed 20/02/2021].

Taylor in March 2020 and George Floyd a few months later.<sup>5</sup> The United States and the systems within it is characterised by a 'broad white racial frame' which positions whiteness as inherently virtuous, as opposed to all 'others', thus said white frame 'generates, legitimates, and reproduces [...] patterns of racial discrimination and racially stratified institutions in society.'<sup>6</sup> Though this thesis has already established that the United States is by no means unique in its widespread veneration of whiteness, the overwhelming police violence against Black Americans and subsequent social action of organisations such as BLM have generated international interest. Such high-profile murders have provided a catalyst for mass demonstrations against racism and violence, not just in the United States, but across the globe.

### The Fall of Colston

Given the confluence of the Covid-19 outbreak and increasing frustration regarding racial injustice, a number of factors converged to make the 2020 BLM protests some of the most impactful and heavily discussed in recent history. With many people staying in their homes during this phase of the pandemic, online social media platforms like Twitter played a significant role in the spread and discussion of BLM and the establishment of an 'impactful online social movement' which would later translate into mass mobilisation<sup>7</sup>. This led a great number of social media users to consider the implications of systemic racism within their own lives and across all sectors and systems, which often led to online criticism of organisations and institutions that were perceived to have either facilitated or reinforced inequality. The heritage sector proved no exception to the pervasive injustices highlighted by the BLM movement and its global rise to unprecedented prominence. However, one event in particular drew attention to the overt way in which the interpretation and memorialisation of history had reinforced racist narratives which positioned colonialism and perpetrators of racism in a favourable light. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 2020, BLM protestors toppled

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<sup>5</sup> The Washington Post, 'Fatal Force', *The Washington Post*, updated 1 March 2023 < <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>> [accessed 08/03/2023].

<sup>6</sup> J. Nummi et al., '#BlackLivesMatter: Innovative Black Resistance', *Sociological Forum* 34.1 (2019) 1042-1064 (p. 1043).

<sup>7</sup> J. Nummi et al., '#BlackLivesMatter: Innovative Black Resistance', *Sociological Forum* 34.1 (2019) 1042-1064 (p. 1045).

a statue of Edward Colston in Bristol City Centre. The statue, which had stood in Bristol since 1895, was torn from its plinth on Colston Avenue and eventually rolled into the city docks by protestors who appeared to be acting on an issue that had been plaguing Bristol for several years. The statue, which was erected alongside a plaque which described its subject as ‘one of the most virtuous and wise sons’ of the city, commemorates the legacy of a figure who spent 12 years of his career in prestigious positions within the Royal African Company, eventually becoming its Deputy Governor.<sup>89</sup> In these roles, Colston was responsible for overseeing the enslavement and transportation of ‘an estimated 84,000 Black African people.’<sup>10</sup> For a figure who had so directly perpetrated acts of violence and oppression towards Black people, and so purposefully upheld British colonialism to be celebrated and memorialised in a public space has been interpreted as a weaponisation of history which encourages a ‘cultural amnesia’ which positions colonisers and racist figures as emblematic of ‘celebratory narratives.’<sup>11</sup> The concept that any figure should be immortalised and held in such esteem, literally looking down on the people of the city from a pedestal, is one which assumes the legacy of such an individual is worthy of celebration. A lack of acknowledgement of the pro-colonial perspectives inherent in the celebration of Colston is an act of ‘erasure and national myth-making’ which serves to reinforce centuries of white supremacist entitlement.<sup>12</sup> Such criticism of Colston’s deification did not first emerge in 2020, on the contrary, the statue has been the subject of controversy for many years. In 2018, David Olusoga described Colston as ‘a killer’ and argued his statue should ‘not be on public display on the streets of Bristol,’ due to its lack of nuance, and instead suggested its removal to a museum where Colston’s legacy might be more thoroughly understood rather than venerated.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that an ongoing failure to adequately

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<sup>8</sup> S. Nasar, ‘Remembering Edward Colston: histories of slavery, memory and black globality’, *Women’s History Review* 29.7 (2020) 1218-1225 (p. 1219).

<sup>9</sup> A. P. Heron, ‘Goodnight Colston. Mourning Slavery: Death Rites and Duppy Conquering in a Circum-Atlantic City’, *Antipode* 54.4 (2022) 1251-1276 (p. 1252).

<sup>10</sup> D. Olusoga, ‘The toppling of Edward Colston’s statue is not an attack on history. It is history.’, *The Guardian*, 08 June 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/08/edward-colston-statue-history-slave-trader-bristol-protest> [accessed 09/06/2020].

<sup>11</sup> S. Nasar, ‘Remembering Edward Colston: histories of slavery, memory and black globality’, *Women’s History Review* 29.7 (2020) 1218-1225 (p.1220).

<sup>12</sup> S. Nasar, ‘Remembering Edward Colston: histories of slavery, memory and black globality’, *Women’s History Review* 29.7 (2020) 1218-1225 (p.1221).

<sup>13</sup> Intelligence Squared, *Revere or Remove? The Battle Over Statues, Heritage and History*, recorded conversation, Youtube, 02 July 2018 < <https://intelligencesquared.com/events/revere-or-remove-the-battle-over-statues-heritage-and-history/> > [accessed 05/05/2020].

address Colston's status within Bristol's heritage landscape and public space culminated in the statue's sudden removal in the summer of 2020. As part of an international rally against racism and anti-Black violence, the diverse peoples of Bristol had repossessed the racial geography of their city as they [...] affirmed the anti-racist communitas of the day and the complex multicultural in which they live.'<sup>14</sup> Following this event appeared to many that, some of the Black Lives Matter movement's focus was now being pulled in the direction of memories of colonialism, and the interpretation of national history in terms of their role in upholding of racism and white supremacy. However, work to address such concerns was not without its complications, particularly in a world also experiencing a pandemic and widespread lockdown. According to Ray Barnett, the city's MShed museum, formerly Bristol Industrial Museum, was hastily selected as the location for the statue, which had been retrieved from the harbour in front of the building. Ray describes the urgency with which this decision was made as having been difficult, both within the context of a global pandemic, but also in the face of pressure to handle a contentious object during a period of protest and change: 'How do you deal with the pandemic where you've got most staff working at home [in addition to] caring for an object with such emotive responsibility?'<sup>15</sup>

### Challenging the Museum Sector

In addition to clear problems highlighted during this period of protest, it must be noted that most museums appear to adhere to the idea that their purpose lies in the enrichment and education of the public. For example, in a document titled *Towards 2020: The British Museum Strategy*, published some time before June 2020, the British Museum outlined its specific purpose as 'to be a place of scholarly inquiry' and contributing 'significantly to the world's understanding of itself.'<sup>16</sup> Though immediately paternalistic and colonial in its approach to a European institution-led understanding of non-European cultures and peoples, the statement is clear, that the museum exists for academic and public benefit, as

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<sup>14</sup> A. P. Heron, 'Goodnight Colston. Mourning Slavery: Death Rites and Duppy Conquering in a Circum-Atlantic City', *Antipode* 54.4 (2022) 1251-1276 (p. 1254).

<sup>15</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

<sup>16</sup> The British Museum, 'Towards 2020: The British Museum Strategy', *The British Museum* <[www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/governance](https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/governance)> [accessed 09/04/2020] p. 2.

an 'enlightenment ideal'.<sup>17</sup> It might therefore be expected that museums like the British Museum, which profess to housing and conserving 'the collection of every Citizen of the Earth' should consider it a responsibility to respond to global movements with significant relevance to a vast number of such citizens. In this case, the need for engagement with the issues reemphasised by Black Lives Matter activists in the wake of Colston's toppling perhaps should have seemed more urgent for The British Museum, particularly given the institution holds so many indigenous objects linked with colonial violence and looting. This is in addition to the museum's association with Hans Sloane, whose legacy is detailed in Chapter 1. At the time of the BLM protests in the United Kingdom, a bust of Sloane was on display prominently at the entrance of the museum, and in the same way that Colston was venerated despite his participation in colonial violence, so too was Sloane put on a pedestal which identified him only by his contribution to the foundation of the museum.

In addition to the way in which European institutions have been founded and formed their collections, the history of white supremacy inherent to colonialism was inevitably present in the way museum practice, process and interpretation have developed. In their theory of cultural racism, Blaut notes Max Weber's approach to racial hierarchies and the gradual way in which racism rooted in invented biological differences had influenced a type of European supremacy which, rather than highlighting the perceived inferiority of People of Colour, emphasised the 'uniqueness of the European mind'.<sup>18</sup> It is on this basis that the role of cultural institutions like museums were thought to have established such a prominent role in European societies, as places of learning and intellectual stimulation. Blaut states that, according to Weber, modernisation was 'grounded in the uniqueness of European mentality and culture, permanent qualities which throughout history gave Europeans a continuously more rapid course towards modernity than non-Europeans'.<sup>19</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that institutions like the British Museum have felt secure in declaring themselves as an 'enlightenment ideal' and perhaps not considered themselves to be inherently racist. It is also likely that many individuals working within the colonial structures of the museum

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<sup>17</sup> The British Museum, 'Towards 2020: The British Museum Strategy', *The British Museum* <[www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/governance](http://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/governance)> [accessed 09/04/2020] p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> J. M. Blaut, 'The Theory of Cultural Racism', *Antipode* 24.4 (1992) 289-299 (p. 293).

<sup>19</sup> J. M. Blaut, 'The Theory of Cultural Racism', *Antipode* 24.4 (1992) 289-299 (p. 294).

remain 'unaware of their practices, and uncritical of the processes they are engaged in every day.'<sup>20</sup> This is not to suggest there are not many people working in the sector who have expressed concern regarding museum practices, but it must be acknowledged that the process of education and career development within a system and sector so evidently influenced by pro-colonial narratives may render the task of driving change more difficult. In addition, Robin DiAngelo notes that many white people who are introduced to their 'racial realities' only encounter this through brief mandatory training offered by their places of work or education which rarely address racism and 'keep the content comfortable and palatable for whites.'<sup>21</sup>

### Statements and Intentions

As pressure to address racism and colonialism in the interpretation and telling of history mounted during the summer of 2020, there appeared to be an expectation that organisations and institutions across the sector would provide some form of statement responding to the many issues simultaneously raised by the Black Lives Matter protests and the subsequent period of reflection. These statements would presumably detail the institutions' intentions to increase the complexity of the histories they portray and to engage in anti-colonial work which might challenge legacies of white supremacy. Crucially, this would also provide an opportunity for institutions constituting collections compiled through acts of colonial violence and oppression to acknowledge themselves as such. Though these statements did appear, it was noted that a number of them were somewhat superficial when scrutinised. Many were shared via social media posts, where a number of institutions had conducted most of their audience engagement throughout their closure during Covid-19 lockdowns.

A particularly polarising example of museum Black Lives Matter statements came from the British Museum, which shared a link to a blog post from former Director Hartwig Fischer that claimed 'The British Museum stands in solidarity with the British Black community, with

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<sup>20</sup> E. H. Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> R. DiAngelo, 'White Fragility', *Counterpoints* 497 (2016) 245-253 (p. 246).

the African American community, with the Black community throughout the world.’<sup>22</sup> The statement goes on to state that ‘Inclusion and diversity are at the heart of our values. We will put our best efforts into making them a reality.’<sup>23</sup> Though this statement may seem relatively unproblematic and constructive on the surface, critics were swift to highlight the hypocrisy of this proclamation, in the context of the British Museum’s legacy and history of inaction on issues around a failure to acknowledge the institution’s function within a landscape of colonial romanticism and looted objects. Other key issues with the museum’s somewhat unsubstantiated claims to prioritise diversity included the absence of Hans Sloane or an acknowledgement of the deeply problematic foundations the museum is built upon. Although acknowledgement of links to colonialism and white supremacist oppression by no means serves as a solution to the problem of racism and imperialist triumphalism in museums, ‘sources of wealth’ and influence must be acknowledged and utilised as a catalyst through which to generate further conversations around not only the wider implications of colonialism. Additionally, this would commence a process of recognising the individuals [and peoples] who suffered’ and were subjected to the commodification of their cultures in the name of European advancement.<sup>24</sup> In the absence of this initial acknowledgement, Fischer adopts a somewhat passive tone when referring to ‘injustices that must be overcome.’<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the role of the museum in the perpetuation of white supremacist narratives and processes remains apparently unclear.

Given this omission from the British Museum’s statement, it appears the institution may have expected the release of said statement itself to suffice as a gesture of solidarity. In addition, Fischer’s comments regarding an aim to ‘diversify our own staff’ appears to be an inadequate, vague and brief reference to the overwhelming whiteness of the museum’s

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<sup>22</sup> H. Fischer, ‘A Message from Director Hartwig Fischer’, *The British Museum*, 5 June 2020 <<https://blog.britishmuseum.org/a-message-from-director-hartwig-fischer/>> [accessed 23/02/2021].

<sup>23</sup> H. Fischer, ‘A Message from Director Hartwig Fischer’, *The British Museum*, 5 June 2020 <<https://blog.britishmuseum.org/a-message-from-director-hartwig-fischer/>> [accessed 23/02/2021].

<sup>24</sup> I. Gilbert, ‘The Colonial Money Trail’, *History Workshop*, 10 January 2022 <<https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/empire-decolonisation/the-colonial-money-trail/>> [accessed 29/03/2023].

<sup>25</sup> H. Fischer, ‘A Message from Director Hartwig Fischer’, *The British Museum*, 5 June 2020 <<https://blog.britishmuseum.org/a-message-from-director-hartwig-fischer/>> [accessed 23/02/2021].

employees, with no Black curators in a curatorial team of around 150.<sup>2627</sup> This is unsurprising given the patterns recognised in Chapter 1, whereby the distribution of employees of colour within arts and heritage institutions remains such that decision-making roles are overwhelmingly white in the vast majority of cases. Sara Wajid, former Head of Engagement at the Museum of London noted that this issue was proving problematic across the sector stating that ‘in most museums the place where you see black staff is in cleaning and security. You won't see them in curatorial departments, you won't see them in management.’<sup>28</sup> Wajid suggested that the only way forwards in this instance is to have People of Colour represented in museum leadership; a pledge not explicitly made by Fischer’s 2020 statement. Again, a passive approach to colonialism and inequality in the museum fails to attribute accountability to the institution for the perpetuation and creation of racist practices and working culture. This atmosphere of inequality and apparent lack of support is reflected in interviews with professionals working in the sector, who may feel disempowered or nervous to promote change in a time of economic precarity. Indeed, in one case, the details of which will be excluded from this thesis for the purposes of privacy, a Black member of staff at a renowned museum “in a very junior position [...] felt like, and definitely was, because of the colour of his skin treated badly and treated in a particular way by very senior people.”<sup>29</sup> This is cited as being one of the reasons for his departure from the museum, thus illustrating the way in which racism within institutions frequently extends far beyond the nature of curation and interpretation.

Historian and curator of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum Dan Hicks referred to the post as ‘hollow’ with particular reference to the Museum’s continued refusal to return looted collections to Nigeria, despite repeated requests for their permanent restitution.<sup>30</sup> Months later, Hicks published a book which firmly establishes museums like the British Museum as

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<sup>26</sup> H. Fischer, ‘A Message from Director Hartwig Fischer’, *The British Museum*, 5 June 2020 <<https://blog.britishmuseum.org/a-message-from-director-hartwig-fischer/>> [accessed 23/02/2021].

<sup>27</sup> BBC, ‘How UK museums are responding to Black Lives Matter’, *BBC News*, 29 June 2020 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-53219869>> [accessed 29/03/2023].

<sup>28</sup> BBC, ‘How UK museums are responding to Black Lives Matter’, *BBC News*, 29 June 2020 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-53219869>> [accessed 29/03/2023].

<sup>29</sup> Interview conducted by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> K. Brown, ‘This Is Performative: Critics Mercilessly Mock The British Museum for Its ‘Hollow’ Statement of Solidarity With the Black Lives Matter Movement’, *artnet*, 9 June 2020 <<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/british-museum-black-lives-matter->> [accessed 20/06/2020].

‘institutions complicit in a prolongation of extreme violence and cultural destruction.’<sup>31</sup> In this case, again Hicks principally discusses the violent acquisition of a collection of items referred to as the ‘Benin Bronzes’ which were looted from a kingdom in a geographical area which is now Nigeria, by British colonial forces in 1897. The continued refusal of European museums, including the British Museum and the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, to consider restitution of these objects is felt by many to perpetuate a legacy of colonial violence in keeping significant cultural objects far away from their originating communities. Though the British Museum, along with other museums withholding objects from indigenous communities, have received a large number of requests for the restitution of certain items, at the time of this research, there appear to have been no indication that the British Museum will permanently return looted heritage to the ownership of their ancestor community and country of origin. This determination to maintain colonial collections is by no means an inevitable consequence of their acquisition and placement in museums. In her recently translated work, *Africa’s Struggle for its Art*, Professor Bénédicte Savoy details the efforts of British civil servants and museum directors to negate African claims on cultural heritage as African nations secured their independence from 1960 onwards.<sup>32</sup> The British Museum continues to be subject to the British Museum Act of 1963, which maintains that the institution may not permanently dispose of or return collections to their originating communities, except in very specific circumstances largely unrelated to the ethics of withholding significant cultural artefacts from indigenous peoples.<sup>33</sup> In the majority of cases the museum is limited to loaning objects within its collection, and though these may be long-term in nature, authority over the object’s care and placement remains with the institution. In maintaining full ownership of colonial collections, despite requests for their return the museum reinforces a white supremacist and paternalistic approach to conservation and curation, ensuring old colonial powers maintain wealth generated by centuries of violence and oppression. The British Museum in particular has been involved in talks regarding the long-term lending of specific objects, including items from the Benin

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<sup>31</sup> D. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> D. Hicks, ‘UK Welcomes Restitution, Just not Anti-Colonialism’, *Hyperallergic*, 26 August 2022 <<https://hyperallergic.com/756241/uk-welcomes-restitution-just-not-anti-colonialism/>> [accessed 1 April 2023].

<sup>33</sup> *The British Museum Act 1963* [online] <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/British-Museum-Act-1963.pdf>> [accessed 22/05/2022].

Bronzes collection.<sup>34</sup> Though this appears to signify some progress in terms of decolonisation of museum practice, in reality the British Museum's desire to retain full 'ownership' of the objects, and its decision to lean on outdated legislation, merely forms a small chapter in the long history of colonial paternalism. This seemingly collaborative project shows an authority, which in this case is the British Museum, exhibiting behaviour 'that results in them making decisions for other people that, although they may be to those people's advantage, prevent them taking responsibility' for their own cultural heritage.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to the Museum sector's history of accumulating indigenous objects and collections, the performativity of statements and responses to Black Lives Matter was highlighted by the lack of representation within the heritage sector. Concerning the direct impact of 2020 on the British Museum's non-executive staff, J. P. Sires reflected that many organisations were 'scrambling to align their mission statements with Black Lives Matter' and in doing so, in her experience, were heavily relying 'on their few Black members of staff to do the unremunerated emotional labour of drafting the statements themselves' or in other cases were shutting them out of all discussions completely.<sup>36</sup> This scenario evidences an approach whereby the inclusion of employees of Colour in institutional decision-making is dependent on the museum or organisation's desire to appear inclusive and responsive to external audiences. This is reflected in the data considered in Chapter 1, where management and director positions within the museums sector are overwhelmingly white, real power is restricted, as it ever was, to a predominantly white establishment. Therefore, the diversity of most museum teams, as well as institutional responses to Black Lives Matter protests could legitimately be described as performative in nature and strictly engineered to rehabilitate or protect the reputation of the museum and its directors. Such an 'outward' focus ignores 'a culture of hostility toward non white employees' as well as the white supremacist colonialism fundamental to the museum's foundation.<sup>37</sup> Thus, performative

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<sup>34</sup> B. Phillips, 'Nigeria's opportunity for return of the Benin Bronzes', *BBC News*, 11 September 2020 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-54117905>> [accessed 22/02/2021].

<sup>35</sup> S. Koot, 'Articulations of inferiority: From pre-colonial to post-colonial paternalism in tourism and development among the indigenous Bushmen of Southern Africa', *History and Anthropology*, (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2020.1830387> p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> J. P. Sires, 'Black Lives Matter and Museums in 2020: A Personal and Professional Perspective', *American Anthropologist* 123.4 (2021) 957-959 (p. 958).

<sup>37</sup> J. P. Sires, 'Black Lives Matter and Museums in 2020: A Personal and Professional Perspective', *American Anthropologist* 123.4 (2021) 957-959 (p. 958).

responses to issues highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement have affirmed the museum's status as a 'racial project.'<sup>38</sup> The experiences of those working within the museums sector during this period will be considered in more detail in Chapter 4, where the impact of sudden efforts to address discrimination experienced by the few employees of colour within curatorial teams proves harmful or ineffective.

### Whitelash

Elsewhere in the UK heritage sector, in 2020 a number of organisations began proactively publishing reports and articles containing new or existing research related to their links to colonialism and slavery. Perhaps most notable of these was the National Trust's publication of an interim report on the organisation's heritage sites and museums which have an identifiable link to colonial history.<sup>39</sup> For a large and undeniably influential heritage body to publicly acknowledge these narratives, which had previously been concealed through omission, was a significant turning point for the rest of the sector and is likely to have influenced the publication of a whole swathe of similar initiatives at other organisations such as English Heritage.<sup>40</sup> Though such reports failed to address the issues in some areas, as further examined in Chapter 3, the perception across the sector appeared to be that the Black Lives Matter movement had not only elicited hurried and apparently performative responses from institutions, but had also catalysed some organisations' existing efforts to collate and understand the extent of their colonial connections and legacies. Indeed, the interventions at Penrhyn Castle presented in this chapter's case study reflect work undertaken by the National Trust and partners shortly before the publication of their report.

The release and publication of such numerous reports and statements contributed to a broader response across almost all sectors in the Global North which attracted attention from both activists and the general public whose responses were predictably polarised given

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<sup>38</sup> S. Dominguez et al., 'White Sanctuaries: White Supremacy, Racism, Space and Fine Arts in Two Metropolitan Museums', *American Behavioural Scientist*, 64.14 (2020), 2028 – 2043 (p. 2031).

<sup>39</sup> S. Huxtable et al., *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* (Swindon: National Trust, 2020).

<sup>40</sup> M. Wills et al., *The Transatlantic Slave Economy and England's Built Environment* (Portsmouth: Historic England, 2020).

the normalisation of white supremacy in such societies. Such resistance to discussing racial inequality or white privilege in any meaningful or anti-colonial way could easily be summarised by the term 'white fragility', originally coined by Robin DiAngelo and often summarised as a 'defensiveness' employed by white people 'when confronted with their racial biases' or the central role of racism 'as a significant structural variable that shapes society's organisation' and fundamentally venerates whiteness.<sup>41</sup> Such concepts may be difficult to process for individuals whose understanding of their place in the world has been shaped by privilege and nationalism. Thus, narratives which celebrated the sovereignty, supremacy and white, cultural authority of European countries such as the United Kingdom have become hegemonic in the minds of the populace. In addition to white fragility, the societal construction of predominantly white 'normalcy' and 'deviant other' leads society to close ranks against anything which challenges or subverts that which is associated with counter-hegemony or advocacy for change.<sup>42</sup> However, it is also important to note here that Robin DiAngelo's writing on whiteness and thus her reasoning for the disconnection between white people and their privileged position within a constructed racial hierarchy is informed, naturally, by her own experiences as a white woman. There are therefore limitations to her assertions regarding racism which largely remain uninformed by the experiences of people of colour and often centre on white 'self-examination.'<sup>43</sup>

A significant backlash emerged against the heritage sector's apparent intention to diverge from narrow and nationalist perspectives on history, initiated not only by members of the public and media, but also from figures within the UK government. Right-wing commentators frequently refer to this ongoing opposition as the 'war on woke' or against cancel culture. For the purpose of this thesis and the discourse considered therein, the term 'woke' when used in this context is principally used to other those 'that actively seek to counter racist, sexist and anti-LGBTQ views, as well as those that struggle for social

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<sup>41</sup> K. T. Resane, 'White fragility, white supremacy and white normativity make theological dialogue on race difficult', *In Die Skriflig*, 55.1 (2021), 1-10 (p. 2).

<sup>42</sup> B. Cammaerts, 'The abnormalisation of social justice: The 'anti-woke culture war discourse in the UK', *Discourse and Society*, 33.6 (2022), 719-846 (p. 732).

<sup>43</sup> J. McWhorter, 'The Dehumanizing Condescension of *White Fragility*', *The Atlantic*, 15 July 2020 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/dehumanizing-condescension-white-fragility/614146/>> [accessed 20/07/2023].

justice.<sup>44</sup> Questioning the white supremacist, inherently racist museum practices and origins addressed in Chapter 1 has been continuously described as ‘woke’ by right-wing commentators and members of the Conservative government. ‘Woke’ therefore weaponised in such cases, made to symbolise disruption to hegemony and therefore perceived as a destructive concept which seeks to dismantle entire societies to the ultimate disadvantage of the white, European majority. These attitudes have strong political links to right-wing US groups who sought to generate fear and resentment towards groups advocating for minority communities. Indeed, significant right-wing bodies funded by US corporate donors such as the Alliance Defending Freedom, which is a group actively working to recriminalize homosexuality in America, have set up branches in the UK.<sup>45</sup> Such efforts to regress the rights and protections available to marginalised communities are therefore clearly not solely a reaction against perceived ‘woke’ culture as a defence against social change, but are instead a movement to take advantage of cultural instability in order to reaffirm and perpetuate Christian fundamentalist and white supremacist values.

Such groups are also, naturally, in possession of the wealth and influence necessary to ‘create an echo chamber large enough to be mistaken for mass mobilisation’ as opposed to the Black Lives Matter movement, which is ‘an actual democratic uprising demanding a fundamental reckoning with racial and economic inequality.’<sup>46</sup> In order to prevent an ultimate loss of carefully constructed supremacy and advantage, the ‘donor class’ have created a ‘whitelash’ or ‘culture war’ in order to convince the portion of society that has been educated and otherwise shaped by a culture that venerates the attributes and privileges of such a class. As this chapter will go on to note, the white fragility and apparently consequential backlash against ‘woke’ agendas in museums and heritage organisations was also made apparent from within the sector itself.

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<sup>44</sup> B. Cammaerts, ‘The abnormalisation of social justice: The ‘anti-woke culture war discourse in the UK’, *Discourse and Society*, 33.6 (2022), 719-846 (p. 734).

<sup>45</sup> L. Fekete, ‘Who is behind the ‘war on woke’: an interview with Ralph Wilson and Isaac Kamola’, *Race & Class*, 64.2 (2022) 38-54 (p. 39).

<sup>46</sup> L. Fekete, ‘Who is behind the ‘war on woke’: an interview with Ralph Wilson and Isaac Kamola’, *Race & Class*, 64.2 (2022) 38-54 (p. 41).

As I have already established, the role of statues or the attribution of prestige to historical figures has been the subject of debate for several years prior to the events of 2020. However, the Black Lives Matter Movement and the fall of Colston catalysed discussions around statues of figures with particularly significant links to colonial violence and oppression of indigenous peoples. In many cases, local communities or interest groups already calling for the removal or reinterpretation of statues depicting colonisers were given a far greater voice by the mass mobilisation the BLM movement sparked. In the months immediately following the heritage sector's initial responses to Black Lives Matter, the Museum of the Home in Hackney, London made a decision to review the display of their founder and prolific slave trader Robert Geffrye who accrued much of his wealth from his involvement in the Royal African Company and later the East India Company. The statue, which was prominently situated at the front of the museum building was therefore dubbed an 'insult' to Black and Asian visitors to the museum.<sup>47</sup> However, when news of the museum's intention to explore this legacy and the role of the Geffrye statue in the future of the institution reached UK Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden, the museum was threatened with a cut to their funding, despite Hackney residents' campaign for the statue's removal and recontextualization. In a letter to the museum, Dowden threatened, 'significant support that you receive from the taxpayer is an acknowledgement of the important cultural role you play for the entire country. It is imperative that you continue to act impartially, in line with your publicly funded status, and not in a way that brings this into question.'<sup>48</sup> Dowden's threats here raise questions regarding the supposed neutrality of museums, which, if possible, would supposedly negate the need to take actions which bring into question the veneration of an enslaver at a museum that presumably wishes to welcome all demographics represented within its local community. In addition, Dowden draws attention to the Conservative government's apparent desire to exert control over the narratives presented by the sector. This brings one back to the idea of hegemony, and the clear association a white cultural hegemony has created between that which exists already and has been embedded in a society, history or culture, and an approach which is presented as

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<sup>47</sup> BBC, 'Museum of the Home: Slave-trader statue not removed despite pledge', *BBC*, 22 November 2023 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-63715074>> [accessed 20/04/2023].

<sup>48</sup> A. Sherwin, 'Robert Geffrye statue: Oliver Dowden threatens to cut museum's funding if slave trader statue is removed', *I*, 6 October 2020 <<https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/robert-geffrye-statue-oliver-dowden-cut-funding-london-679304>> [accessed 23/02/2021].

‘natural, as anti-ideological, as devoid of bias.’<sup>49</sup> It is that which ‘most consider to be common sense and thereby rendered unquestionable,’ which explains Dowden’s empowerment to exert an authoritarian influence over institutions within his governmental remit.<sup>50</sup>

Prior to the letter to the Museum of the Home, Dowden also published a letter detailing the government’s position on ‘contested heritage.’ The determination that there should be a contest as to whether or not the history presented by museums and heritage organisations should be inclusive of colonial and white supremacist violence, become more diverse and cease to venerate perpetrators of oppression is perhaps a reference to the apparent ‘culture war’ that was, by this point, heavily discussed by the government, media and the public. It is clear that the version of history favoured by the government remains one which deifies figures like Geffrye and explores colonial history through a positive lens. This is partly due to the relationship between British establishments and the concept of ‘heritage’ itself. Stuart Hall, in a speech on heritage and diversity in 1999, noted that British notions of heritage are focused on the relationship between conserved artefacts and the past. According to Hall, for such objects, collections and places ‘to be validated, they must take their place alongside what has been authorised as ‘valuable’ on already established grounds in relation to the unfolding of a ‘national story’ whose terms we already know.’<sup>51</sup> Inevitably, a society so overtly formed by ideologies which venerate whiteness and nationalism will seek to apply value to ‘heritage’ which reinforces such preconceptions without question. However, this participation in the perpetration of white supremacy is not rendered inevitable, nor are white people able to ultimately evade accountability by virtue of being born into a system which operates to privilege them. The idea that inequality and racism promote injustice and violence is not a new revelation, and as Chapter 3 will show, there are many museum professionals who have long been passionate about unravelling pro-colonial narratives in order to foster a more inclusive sector.

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<sup>49</sup> B. Cammaerts, ‘The abnormalisation of social justice: The ‘anti-woke culture war discourse in the UK’, *Discourse and Society*, 33.6 (2022), 719-846 (p. 731).

<sup>50</sup> B. Cammaerts, ‘The abnormalisation of social justice: The ‘anti-woke culture war discourse in the UK’, *Discourse and Society*, 33.6 (2022), 719-846 (p. 731).

<sup>51</sup> S. Hall, ‘Whose Heritage? Un-Settling the ‘The Heritage’ Re-Imagining the Post-Nation’ in *Whose Heritage?* Ed. By S.L.T. Ashley & D. Stone (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 13-25 (p. 13).

## Politics and History

Dowden represents the Conservative party and it may be noted that his statements and decisions are therefore somewhat reflective of the party's ideology. Former Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron illustrates the way in which such incomplete and pro-colonial narratives have shaped the education and world-view of so many people existing in British society throughout history when citing *Our Island Story* by H.E. Marshall as one of his favourite books. This work, aimed predominantly at children, is credited by Cameron as the book that 'nurtured [his] interest in this great nation.'<sup>52</sup> A review of said book, in a 2006 issue of *Contemporary Review* stated that the work 'enunciates the older virtues of developing constitutional liberty, toleration, Empire and Monarchy, and accepts the existence of the English race.' As highlighted in Chapter 1 of this thesis, the idea that white Europeans form a race distinct from the Global Majority has long been a key component of white supremacist thought. It is clear from this review that such an ideology, or at least a narrative which supports the concept of racial and cultural hierarchies and therefore enables white supremacist attitudes, is present within this children's history book. The reviewer continues this overtly racist narrative, apparently justifying their admiration for the book by suggesting that 'multi-culturalism' was 'an illness still unheard of in 1905.'<sup>53</sup> This quote effectively summarises the role of nationalist narratives which venerate white colonialism in maintaining cultural hegemony and resisting diversity in both society and the 'national narrative.' Clearly, the role of nationalism in education is not a new concept or a backlash against the concept of decolonisation in museums as Dowden's reactive letters and statements appear to be. Conservatives more broadly appear to have long been preoccupied with the fear of losing what former Education Secretary Michael Gove described as 'cultural markers that glue society together.'<sup>54</sup> In this context, the society is one associated with whiteness and nationalist hegemony that is resistant to diversification, as this is perceived as a weakening of 'the moral and spiritual health of a nation' that relies on

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<sup>52</sup> British Library, 'Our Island Story: A Child's History of England', *British Library: Collection Items* <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/our-island-story-a-childs-history-of-england> [accessed 27/04/2023].

<sup>53</sup> E. Bradbury, 'Our Island Story: A History of Britain for Boys and Girls from the Romans to Queen Victoria', *Contemporary Review*, 288.1681 (2006), p. 269.

<sup>54</sup> D. Talbot, 'From 'Our Island Story' to 'Citizens of Nowhere': Culture, Identity and English Literature', *Changing English*, 29.3 (2022), 285-296 (p. 288).

an 'authoritatively transmitted national culture.'<sup>55</sup> This ideology upheld during this period not only by Conservative politicians, but also by influential historians such as David Starkey who in 2020 publicly denied slavery was a genocide. On a podcast interview he stated: 'slavery was not a genocide, otherwise there wouldn't be so many damn Blacks in Africa or in Britain would there?'<sup>56</sup> It is this vehemently imperial and parochial set of narratives and values that have served to shape the sector, as well as the approaches of those who would seek to steer it.

Evident discomfort around counternarratives and decolonial approaches to heritage not only highlight this history of patriotic and authoritarian education, but inevitably also suggest that Dowden, and those who support his threats to defund museums engaging in anti-colonial practice, would prefer museums in the UK to remain 'white sanctuaries'<sup>57</sup> which reinforce long established narratives that serve to safeguard the public's carefully constructed understanding of British history. In order to reinforce the genetic myth of racial hierarchy, a museum must 'convince all groups [...] that at the top of that hierarchy sits a group that is superior because they excel in intellectual thought, architecture, [...] art and culture.'<sup>58</sup> It therefore stands to reason that the museums complicit in the division of objects into either fine art or 'ethnographic' collections are actively attributing a racial hierarchy to their collections and the communities that created them, thus making a value judgement on objects based on their proximity to whiteness. In order for the museum to uphold this concept of white supremacy, it must conform to Blaut's theory of cultural racism, asserting that Europeans constitute a more advanced race and are implicitly morally superior. This theory corresponds to the broad, popular colonial narrative that non-Europeans are 'culturally backward [...] because of their history: their lesser cultural evolution. And it is for this reason that they are poor.'<sup>59</sup> In the popular imagination, this is

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<sup>55</sup> D. Talbot, 'From 'Our Island Story' to 'Citizens of Nowhere': Culture, Identity and English Literature', *Changing English*, 29.3 (2022), 285-296 (p. 289).

<sup>56</sup> A. Flood, 'David Starkey dropped by publisher and university after racist remarks', *The Guardian*, 3 July 2020 < <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/jul/03/david-starkey-dropped-publisher-racist-remarks-harpercollins> > [accessed 19/04/2024].

<sup>57</sup> S. Dominguez et al., 'White Sanctuaries: White Supremacy, Racism, Space and Fine Arts in Two Metropolitan Museums', *American Behavioural Scientist*, 64.14 (2020), 2028 – 2043 (p. 2031).

<sup>58</sup> S. Dominguez et al., 'White Sanctuaries: White Supremacy, Racism, Space and Fine Arts in Two Metropolitan Museums', *American Behavioural Scientist*, 64.14 (2020), 2028 – 2043 (p. 2031).

<sup>59</sup> J. M. Blaut, 'The Theory of Cultural Racism', *Antipode*, 24.4 (1992), 289 - 299 (p. 293).

compounded by museums which often interpret colonialism as an exercise in European progress and the betterment of indigenous peoples. Therefore, when Dowden refers to the role of museums in ‘teaching us about our past’ it is likely he is referring to a portrayal of the past wherein the problematic and violent nature of colonial history remains largely unexplored. An acknowledgement of European wrongdoing or morally reprehensible actions that would come naturally with a more complex interpretation of colonial history would challenge an established, white supremacist narrative. Resistance to anti-colonial practice and the reinterpretation of complex histories therefore takes the form of a ‘whitelash’ which entails a number of ‘countermeasures against the dismantling of white supremacy’.<sup>60</sup> The Culture Secretary’s threats to cut museum funding are but one example of these ‘whitelash’ countermeasures, which also include a recent ‘heritage summit’ which was called with an aim to ‘defend our culture and history from the noisy minority of activists constantly trying to do Britain down.’<sup>61</sup>

For those working in the heritage and culture sector, it may feel appropriate to compare elements of Dowden’s agenda to maintain the status quo with rather similar efforts made by Enoch Powell just over fifty years earlier. In his ‘River of Blood’ speech of 1968, Powell had declared ‘in this country in fifteen or twenty years the black man will have the whip over the white man.’ Such was his resistance to a more equitable ‘modern multiculturalism’ which threatened to subvert the system of empire and white supremacy.<sup>62</sup> The values Powell held so dear, like ‘national sovereignty, purity of citizenship and a determination to keep out undesirable immigrants are echoed in the politics [...] of far-right politicians’ today.<sup>63</sup> Along with this seems to come a renewed and intensified interest in the legacies of empire, and an opposition to the exploration of the role of European nations like Britain in the oppression and exploitation of indigenous peoples globally. It stands to reason therefore, that for Enoch Powell, the events of 2020 and the subsequent conversations

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<sup>60</sup> D. G. Embrick et al., ‘Capitalism, Racism and Trumpism: Whitelash and the Politics of Oppression’, *Fast Capitalism*, 17.1 (2020), 203 – 224, (p. 206).

<sup>61</sup> G. K. Adams, ‘Fears over editorial freedom as heritage bodies summoned to discuss contested history’, *Museums Association*, 16 February 2021 < <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/02/fears-over-editorial-freedom-as-heritage-bodies-summoned-to-discuss-contested-history/#> > [accessed 24/02/2021].

<sup>62</sup> S. Sanghera, *Empireland* (London: Viking, 2021) p. 29.

<sup>63</sup> S. Tomlinson, ‘Enoch Powell, Empires Immigrants and Education’, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21.1 (2018), 1 – 14 (p. 2).

around anti-colonial narratives would have proven distressing. For Dowden and his peers, this is no different. Having witnessed an increased enthusiasm for anti-colonial research, education and curation, the Culture Secretary countered calls for changes to the curriculum, changes to the heritage sector and repatriation of stolen collections with threats to cut museum budgets as well as an apparently hastily contrived conference' titled 'History Matters'.<sup>64</sup> Though the conference comprised a number of panels, almost all attendees appeared to be broadly opposed to anti-colonial work or material changes to museum displays. Much of this discourse therefore reinforced this concept of the museum as a 'safe white space'.

In a panel discussion at the conference titled, 'Statues and the Public Space' Dr Zareer Masani asserted that slavery could not be compared to mass genocide, thus compounding the idea that the lives of enslaved people hold less value than those of people who are not.<sup>65</sup> Though brief, this statement implies that history, and the history of slavery more broadly, should not include the experiences and lives of the enslaved. Instead, centring and prioritising narratives which focus on the experiences and achievements of white historical figures serves to 'normalise the existing racial and social order' as well as its historical roots, ensuring 'white fantasies of complete dominion over place and space.'<sup>66</sup> Included within this 'place and space' are the millions of Black people who were transported across the Atlantic as part of Britain's participation in the transatlantic slave trade. To acknowledge each of these bodies as having been a human being would force British history to reckon with the nation's role in the deaths and suffering of millions of people, and would presumably 'do Britain down.' When considered in quantitative terms, the human cost of the transatlantic trade in enslaved peoples can be explained as an a purely economic process, whereby the perpetrators of violence are shielded from accountability by an incomplete and carefully curated history. In order to maintain racial superiority, keep museums and heritage sites as safe spaces for elite white people to reflect on the greatness of empire, acknowledgment of

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<sup>64</sup> Policy Exchange, *History Matters Conference*, 2021 < <https://policyexchange.org.uk/history-matters-conference/> > [accessed 2 March 2021].

<sup>65</sup> Policy Exchange, *History Matters Conference*, 2021 < <https://policyexchange.org.uk/history-matters-conference/> > [accessed 2 March 2021].

<sup>66</sup> D. G. Embrick & W. Moore, 'White Space(s) and the Reproduction of White Supremacy', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 64.14 (2020), 1935-1945, (p. 1937).

wrongdoing must be kept to a minimum. The toppling of statues for example, lifts the veil of respectability and veneration that has made a nationalist and superficially proud history possible for so long in both Britain and Europe.

Backlash of the kind described in this chapter was levelled at a number of organisations and institutions which had publicly acknowledged colonial legacies or intention to conduct related work. Perhaps most persistent of these criticisms were those directed at the National Trust, whose report on property links to slavery and colonialism was publicly lambasted by right-wing government critics as a document produced by ‘elitist bourgeois liberals [...] coloured by cultural Marxist dogma colloquially known as the ‘woke agenda.’<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the severity of the response also catalysed the formation a specific pressure group called ‘Restore Trust’ to emerge in 2021, which is described by its members as a ‘forum where supporters and friends of the National Trust’ can push the organisation ‘not to be driven by modish, divisive ideologies but rather by its noble mandate.’<sup>68</sup> From this introductory quote alone it is clear to see that Restore Trust are concerned about ripples of change within the sector which undeniably intensified in 2020, and for this reason they have derisively labelled the movement as ‘modish’ which implies that anti-colonial work exists as a momentary topic of interest for the sector rather than a meaningful progression. Though this assertion is written in an effort to undermine the Trust’s willingness to explore the organisation’s colonial legacies, it does raise poignant questions regarding ongoing commitment to anti-racism and inclusion within museums and the narratives they share or construct. This problem and the experiences of museum professionals working to promote anti-colonial work within their institutions is considered in more detail in Chapter 3. In Restore Trust’s case, the emphasis on the Trust remaining as it always has been is motivated by a desire to maintain status quo and thus not be made to reckon with the role institutions and the histories they safeguard have played in supporting doctrine which affirms an inherently racist society. In this sense, the ‘divisive’ nature of the ideologies Restore Trust refer to are likely those which threaten the perceived all-encompassing white supremacy

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<sup>67</sup> P. Mitchell, ‘The National Trust is under attack because it cares about history, not fantasy’, *The Guardian*, 12 November 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/nov/12/national-trust-history-slavery>> [accessed 28/04/2021].

<sup>68</sup> Restore Trust, ‘About Us’, *Restore Trust* <<https://www.restoretrust.org.uk/about-us>> [accessed 10/09/2023].

which has, until recently, existed as a 'white 'safe' space in which whites can reify their racialised understanding of the world in which they live.'<sup>69</sup> In reality, given the opportunities for inclusion a diversified and progressive heritage sector could present, perhaps 'disruptive' would be a more accurate term than 'divisive'.

The following section of this chapter will be comprised of an analysis of one of the National Trust's interventions to more adequately explore legacies of colonialism at their properties. The reinterpretation of much of Penryhn Castle's visitor route formed part of the Trust's Colonial Countryside project which was undertaken in partnership with Dr. Corinne Fowler from the University of Leicester.<sup>70</sup> Though research and planning for this work began prior to 2020, the subsequent interventions at most National Trust properties fully opened to the public in late 2020 and 2021. Defined as 'sloppy' by members of Restore Trust, much of the work undertaken to interpret the influence of colonialism and slavery at properties like Penryhn was informed by diverse groups of schoolchildren, who led tours, wrote poetry in response to the properties' histories and collections, and held exhibitions.<sup>7172</sup> The following case study is based on a visit to the property and conversation with a curator in September 2021.

### Case Study: Post 2020 Colonial Legacies at Penryhn Castle

Penrhyn Castle is a vast, neo-Norman structure, set on North Wales's Menai Straits. The formidable building boasts views out towards the coastline as well as the Penrhyn Slate Quarry which was once the site of 'the longest-running industrial dispute in British history.'<sup>73</sup> The estate was acquired by the National Trust in 1951, and in an article for *The*

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<sup>69</sup> S. Dominguez et al., 'White Sanctuaries: White Supremacy, Racism, Space and Fine Arts in Two Metropolitan Museums', *American Behavioural Scientist*, 64.14 (2020), 2028 – 2043 (p. 2032).

<sup>70</sup> National Trust, 'Colonial Countryside', *National Trust* <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/research/colonial-countryside-project>> [accessed 01/09/2023].

<sup>71</sup> C. Moore, 'The National Trust is concealing from its members how controversial it has become', *The Telegraph*, 8 September 2023 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/09/08/national-trust-concealing-from-members-controversy/>> [accessed 09/09/2023].

<sup>72</sup> National Trust, 'Colonial Countryside', *National Trust* <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/research/colonial-countryside-project>> [accessed 01/09/2023].

<sup>73</sup> 'Penrhyn Castle and Garden Overview, *National Trust* < <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/penrhyn-castle#Overview>> [accessed: 02/10/2021].

*Manchester Guardian* the National Trust's Chairman Lord Crawford described the property as 'a wonderful and extraordinary monument to the romantic aspirations of the mid-nineteenth century.'<sup>74</sup> Though the style and size of the castle itself could certainly be described as 'aspirational', the property is as much a reflection of aspirations linked to trade and the accumulation of wealth than any notion of romance. The castle in its current form was completed in 1847 under the ownership of George Hay Dawkins-Pennant after inheriting the property from his second cousin Richard Pennant who had generated his vast wealth principally from the ownership of sugar cane plantations in Jamaica, and with them, hundreds of enslaved Black Africans.<sup>75</sup> Though the British Government abolished Britain's participation in the transatlantic slave trade with the Act of 1807, Richard Pennant, and then his heir George Hay Dawkins-Pennant continued to generate vast amounts of income from the enslavement and violent exploitation of the people forced to work on their plantations. This money was then invested in the Penrhyn Slate Mine as well as the political careers of Richard Pennant and his eventual heir, forming part of the 'torrent of colonial gold and corruption' that shaped the political landscape of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>76</sup>

Unlike a number of other properties in the National Trust's care, which were thrust into the national spotlight following the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, colonial connections at Penrhyn appear to have been well known for many years. In his 1995 article for *History Today*, Alistair Hennessy provides ample detail regarding the building, which 'illustrates so graphically the role which slave plantation profits played in the growth of British economic power.'<sup>77</sup> The National Trust's property web pages have historically proven vague when it comes to acknowledgment of colonial connections, and Penrhyn has proven no exception.<sup>78</sup> Examination of archived versions of the Trust's Penrhyn page from 2017 show that the property overview described the site as being 'crammed with fascinating items, such as [...] elaborate carvings, plasterwork and mock-Norman furniture,' with no reference to the generations of inhabitants financially benefitting from the labour and suffering of enslaved

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<sup>74</sup> 'Penrhyn Castle for the Nation: With 40,000 Acres', *The Manchester Guardian*, 13 October 1951, p. 3

<sup>75</sup> A. Hennessy, 'Penrhyn Castle', *History Today*, January 1 1995, p. 40.

<sup>76</sup> E. Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), p. 93.

<sup>77</sup> A. Hennessy, 'Penrhyn Castle', *History Today*, January 1 1995, p. 40.

<sup>78</sup> I. Gilbert, 'How might the UK heritage sector learn from the interpretation of slavery and colonial history at plantation house museums in the southern United States?' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Sheffield, 2020) p. 18.

people. This does appear to have changed in 2019 when the overview was rewritten to include a reference to 'slate and sugar fortunes' which led to a page on 'Penrhyn Castle and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.'<sup>79</sup> This particular National Trust property has therefore evidently been exploring their connections to colonial history prior to the events of 2020 and the consequential pressure exerted on the organisation to provide an overall more thorough account of their property's links to slavery and colonial violence. Penrhyn's own engagement with this topic predates the release of the Trust's interim report, released in September 2020.<sup>80</sup> The same can be said of Penrhyn's current exhibition titled 'What a World!', wherein objects such as taxidermy African birds are interpreted through the medium of poetry written by local school children. This set of interventions was originally scheduled to form part of the core visitor journey in March 2020. However, due to the temporary closure of the museum following the outbreak of Covid-19, as well as the impact of Black Lives Matter, the exhibition was prolonged and remains in place throughout 2021.

The 'What a World!' exhibition originally began to take shape as an output of the National Trust's Colonial Countryside project, run in partnership with Professor Corinne Fowler from the University of Leicester. This project ran at a number of Trust properties, bringing together 'authors, historians, and primary pupils to explore country houses' Caribbean and East India Company connections.'<sup>81</sup> In Penrhyn's case, the project began in 2018 and culminated in children from a nearby school were asked to write short poems in response to some of the items from the castle's collection with identifiable connections to the inhabitants' income from sugar plantations, or to a history of European colonialism more broadly. The duration of this project correlates with the changes to the castle's 'overview' in 2019. The writing produced was then displayed alongside objects which had been removed from their usual locations within the property in order to highlight their significance. This intervention and the decision to make it such a core part of the visitor journey asserts Penrhyn's role as a museum providing educational opportunities as well as filling a 'social

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<sup>79</sup> 'Penrhyn Castle and Garden Overview', *National Trust* <<https://web.archive.org/web/20190726012541/https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/penrhyn-castle#placehomesessionheading6>> [accessed: 02/10/2021].

<sup>80</sup> S. Huxtable et al., *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* (Swindon: National Trust, 2020).

<sup>81</sup> 'Colonial Countryside', *University of Leicester* <<https://le.ac.uk/colonial-countryside/about>> [accessed: 10/10/2021].

role,' supporting 'visitors' interaction with material in social contexts.'<sup>82</sup> Objects are therefore not only given particular emphasis for close consideration but are also contextualised as part of the intervention through interpretive panels and artistic responses to the objects created by members of the local community.

One such object is a book titled *A short account of the African slave trade* by Robert Norris, which is displayed open, in a well-lit glass case in the castle's library. Despite a relatively innocuous title, the contents of the book include multiple justifications for slavery based on perceived racial differences which are all upheld by descriptions of Black people which reinforce pre-existing notions around bestial and violent behaviour. Unsurprisingly, Norris also asserts that enslavement at plantations in America and the Caribbean is ultimately beneficial for African people, stating 'the house of bondage, strictly speaking, may be called a land of freedom to them: where, notwithstanding they do not enjoy pre-eminence, they may be made comfortable; and where, although prevented from exercising cruelty on others, they are always protected themselves.'<sup>83</sup> The inclusion of this work so prominently as part of the visitor journey is symbolic of widespread attitudes regarding race and slavery during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and therefore suggests the sentiments exhibited by Norris were perhaps shared by the inhabitants of Penrhyn as part of the passive justification for their use of enslavement as a source of income. In case there was any doubt regarding the Pennant family's interest in the book, a panel nearby informs visitors that this one contains a handwritten note from the author which suggests it was given as a gift 'from one anti-abolition campaigner to another.'<sup>84</sup> Indeed, by displaying the book within the library, where it will previously have been stored alongside hundreds of other books, the racist and pro-colonial contents are sharply contrasted against the calm domesticity of the room itself. Thus, the proliferation of racist thought and the justification of chattel slavery are contextualised within the country house setting they were so crucial in funding and maintaining. This somewhat jarring contrast between the individual book and the library as

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<sup>82</sup> G. E. Hein, '“The Museum as a Social Instrument”: A Democratic Conception of Museum Education', *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture* ed. By Juliette Fritsch (London: Routledge, 2011) p. 17.

<sup>83</sup> R. Norris, *A short account of the African slave trade* (London: W. Lowndes, 1789), p. 14.

<sup>84</sup> *What a World!*, 2020 – 2021, National Trust, Penrhyn.

a whole illustrates the way in which legacies of violent colonialism have often been neutralised by a lack of interpretive engagement with relevant material evidence.

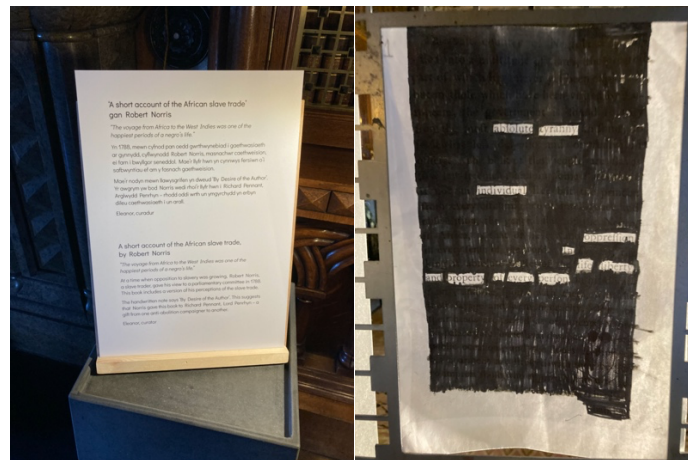


Fig 1.

Fig 2.

In order to explore Norris' work in a way that further interrogates its role in the perpetuation of oppression, the school children involved in the Colonial Countryside project created poetry using pages from the book. Using a blackout poetry technique, certain words were isolated in order to find new meanings within the pages that were relevant to the brutal realities of the transatlantic slave trade and thus subvert the book's original intent. The use of blackout poetry to transform colonial writing into work which illuminates the complexity of this history and empowers lesser-heard voices is not a new idea by any means. Notable works within this subgenre include *Zong* by M. NourbeSe Philip, which utilises documentation associated with a legal trial relating to a Dutch ship which threw enslaved people into the ocean because the vessel had run low on drinking water<sup>85</sup>. The trial was held to determine whether or not an insurance claim for loss of cargo could be made. Though the document attributes no humanity to the enslaved, Philip uses words taken from their original context in order to 'liberate the memory of the African Ancestors from the prison-house of language' and white supremacist commodification of Black people.<sup>86</sup> This form of poetry raises interesting questions around the agency of the subaltern and whether

<sup>85</sup> C. Baksi, 'The story of the Zong slave ship: a mass murder masquerading as an insurance claim', *The Guardian* (19 January 2021) < <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2021/jan/19/the-story-of-the-zong-slave-ship-a-mass-masquerading-as-an-insurance-claim> > [accessed: 29/10/2021].

<sup>86</sup> A. Quéma, 'M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong*!: Metaphors, Laws and Fugues of Justice', *Journal of Law and Society*, 43.1 (2016) p. 87.

or not it's possible to utilise colonial tools to dismantle colonial ideologies. At Penrhyn, one of the pages repurposed by the children erases all words, except those which form this line: 'absolute tyranny, individual oppression in life, liberty and property of every person.'<sup>87</sup> Given the original contents of the page describes Africa as a place of 'slavery and oppression', the poetic reinterpretation offered at Penrhyn reflects and subverts the colonial projection utilised by Norris as a justification for slavery.<sup>88</sup> This intervention encourages visitors to the property to consider historical sources which downplay the violent and oppressive nature of the transatlantic slave trade more critically.

Of all the objects on display as part of 'What a World!', arguably the most poignant is the positioning of a relatively small, unassuming and worn box in the centre of a sumptuously laid dining table, spotlighted for emphasis. The box in question is a 'Jamaica document box' which once contained documentation related to the running of the Pennant's plantations. Though the documents themselves are now held at Bangor University, they included the names of enslaved people as well as information regarding violence used against them in the name of profit. The idea that such detailed accounts of the exploitation and oppression that enabled the upkeep of the property should be kept in such a small and insignificant place, serves as a metaphorical reminder of the way in which the UK heritage sector has largely kept the realities of colonial violence hidden away. This is reflected in the poem displayed on the mantel piece behind the box, which was written by staff and volunteers at the castle and opens with the line 'let's think beyond the box.'<sup>89</sup> This is particularly affecting as it shifts a visitor's understanding away from the box merely as an object and forms from it a symbol of the wealth, violence and the suffering of human beings it represents. The box is no longer a tool of quantitative bureaucracy and is instead a place where the worlds of Penrhyn Castle and the Jamaican plantations meet.

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<sup>87</sup> *What a World!*, 2020 – 2021, National Trust, Penrhyn.

<sup>88</sup> R. Norris, *A short account of the African slave trade* (London: W. Lowndes, 1789), p. 11.

<sup>89</sup> National Trust Interpretation Panel, 'Jamaica Document Box', Penrhyn Castle.



Fig. 3

Drawing together the brutal world of plantation slavery and the relatively serene world of life in a country house is essential so as not to distance the process of wealth accumulation from the recipients and overall orchestrators of colonial cruelty. Making this connection has been seen as important elsewhere in the heritage sector, and a focus on slave owners, absentee landlords and compensation has historically been seen as a crucial way of ‘demonstrating how the slavery business “came home” to Britain and countering the popular understanding that Britons had nothing to do with slavery.’<sup>90</sup> Reconciling the ‘one-dimensional [...] Arcadian retreats that were blissfully isolated from political intrigue and the grubby world of trade’ with the often violent and unscrupulous business that enabled them to exist, is therefore important in shifting not only the narrative of individual country house museums, but of the nation’s understanding of its heritage altogether.<sup>91</sup> Contrasting the worn, shabby appearance of the Jamaican document box against the decadence of a laid dining table, overlooked by portraits of the Pennant family, creates a very clear link between the property, family and plantations in the minds of the visitors and epitomises the way in which certain aspects of British history are consistently celebrated and admired, whilst others are erased, often by omission, from the national narrative.

<sup>90</sup> C. Hall, ‘The Slavery Business and the Making of “Race” in Britain and the Caribbean’, *Current Anthropology* 61.22 (2020) p. 173.

<sup>91</sup> S. Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700 – 1930* (Manchester, 2017) p. 3.

The 'What a World!' exhibition at Penrhyn utilises community collaboration as well as conversations with staff and volunteers to encourage both internal and external reconsiderations of the property's legacy. By highlighting a variety of items from within the existing collection, the exhibition has drawn attention to the physical evidence of colonialism and slavery found in country houses that are so often overlooked or hidden in plain sight. Displaying such objects alongside poetry written in response to their colonial connections dismantles pre-existing interpretations that may have attributed meanings to the objects that rendered them inert, or as symbols of vast wealth which denote either the greatness or respectability of their owners. The fact these objects would previously not have been considered in isolation and had formed such a small part of the overall experience of a room within the castle also highlights the UK heritage sector's historic predisposition towards erasure of violent or brutal histories associated with country houses and museum collections.

Whilst there are a diverse range of interpretive methods used at Penrhyn, it could be argued that the failure to acknowledge the castle itself as a testament to wealth accrued through the enslavement and exploitation of Black people could enable visitors to detach this legacy from the story of the property as a whole. The property overview on the National Trust's web pages for Penrhyn do provide links to more information on the fundamental role of plantation slavery, but the detail provided is limited. The Trust do not make a specific link between the money made through plantation slavery and the development of the Penrhyn estate until moving on to cover 'Pennant the Improver' where the web page states; 'despite his links to slavery, he was known as Richard Pennant the Improver as Richard invested his fortune in his North Wales Estate.' This paragraph, and the use of the word 'despite' in particular serve to somewhat detach Pennant's interests in Jamaica from the property at Penrhyn, when the reality is that the improvements came not despite his links to slavery, but almost entirely because of them. The objects which make up the 'What a World!' exhibition are not isolated in their relationship to slavery and oppression; instead, they are the most overtly tangible signs within a property that was constructed with money mostly made through the ownership of plantations and enslaved people. The current interpretation also fails to provide a consideration of the human cost of this income source, making some mention of slavery, but in a somewhat vague and quantitative way. Enslaved people are

arguably seen as a means with which to tell the story, rather than humans with specific identities and experiences. Current interpretation therefore conforms to the idea that the role of enslaved people within the museum is to further enrich a visitor's understanding of the white, plantation owners rather than the hundreds of people who were tortured, killed and worked to death to generate profit. This type of approach has also been seen at plantation properties in the American South, where E. Modlin noted: "tour guides [...] tended to provide emotionally evocative narratives of the slave owners but largely described slavery through factual, non-emotive accounts", thus reinforcing an affective inequality that suggests the lives of enslaved Black people are somehow inferior or less relevant.<sup>92</sup> As mentioned previously, the documentation previously kept in Penrhyn's 'Jamaica document box' is now held at the nearby University of Bangor and lists some of the names of enslaved people held at properties owned by the Pennant family. This may be an appropriate place to start exploring future interpretation which focuses less on the Pennant family specifically, about whom much is known, and centring the narrative on remembrance of the people who were enslaved by them.

Though this case study offers a number of ways in which the National Trust has progressed its work to publicly explore its relationship with colonial history, though the temporal nature of the Colonial Countryside Project, as well as the resulting exhibitions prevent any assurance that such work will continue. This is especially concerning given the ongoing pressure exerted by groups like Restore Trust who have not ceased in their criticism of the Trust for promoting 'a self-hating conception of history.'<sup>93</sup> Such statements are telling as they associate the version of history the Trust has previously embraced and constructed with the white self, and therefore affirm the white supremacist aims of groups like Restore Trust who have found comfort in a narrative in which privileges and venerates the oppressor. However, this sentiment also somewhat confirms that the opposition now faced

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<sup>92</sup> E. Modlin Jr. et al., 'Can Plantation Museums Do Full Justice to the Story of the Enslaved? A Discussion of Problems, Possibilities, and the Place of Memory', *GeoHumanities* 4 (2018) p. 338.

<sup>93</sup> C. Moore, 'The National Trust is concealing from its members how controversial it has become', *The Telegraph*, 8 September 2023 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/09/08/national-trust-concealing-from-members-controversy/>> [accessed 09/09/2023].

by the Trust is of the organisation's own creation; a situation replicated across the sector and of significant impact to those working to create change.

### Chapter 3: Working in the Post-2020 Heritage Sector

As described in the previous chapter, the months following the most fervent Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, and indeed the immediate responses of some of the heritage sector's largest institutions, public commentary regarding the heritage sector and its complicity with racism and pro-colonial narratives became increasingly polarised. Thus, pressure mounted from different sides of the conversation around racism and its relationship to the interpretation of history by organisations and institutions involved in conservation and curation. This chapter will utilise primary research to provide insight into the experiences of professionals working in the heritage sector both before and after mass Black Lives Matter protests began in 2020. In addition, the chapter will evaluate existing and new interventions at the museums discussed with said professionals as case studies. In doing so, the thesis will provide an analysis of various methods of engaging with colonial legacies and the potential differences in museum and heritage approaches to these both pre and post 2020.

This chapter will begin with a case study of Colston's initial display at Bristol's MShed, before considering the internal considerations undertaken at University College London's Petrie Museum and at the American Museum in Bath. Informed by interviews with professionals at all of these institutions, the conclusion reached will assert that museums as they are presently known, must look outside themselves in order to address the problem of colonial violence. The tools with which to meaningfully unravel the pervasive impact of pre-existing narratives will likely come from a combination of consultation with originating communities, public consultation, collaborative working across the sector, diversification of museum staff and most crucially; a culture shift which favours the acknowledgement of the museum's complicity in pro-colonial ideology.

For those working in such institutions, facing into a disrupted sector, the reality of the anti-colonial movement and its implications on the future of museums had a complexity far beyond allegations regarding an apparent 'culture war' or the concept of what is or is not deemed to be 'woke.' For museum professionals like Ray Barnett, Head of Collections and

Archives at Bristol City Council, the term ‘war’ itself raises significant problems. The word, in relation to political or cultural subject matters ‘has been around for a long time in the states and was adopted really more recently here in the UK. [...] Since it's been adopted, we've now seen a proper war in Europe. And I think that should remind us that war is a challenging word in its own right.’<sup>1</sup> Instead, many working in the sector see their role as having a positive influence on their audiences, local communities and society more broadly. This will become increasingly clear throughout this chapter, whereby professionals working in a variety of museums explain their desire to improve what they accept is a very white and hegemonic sector. Though this intention does not guarantee an inclusive or anti-colonial approach to curation, interpretation or institutional culture, it is clear that many museum professionals view their role as being in line with the purpose of museums defined by Tony Bennet in *The Birth of the Museum*, as referenced in Chapter 1 : to keep people ‘away as much as possible from evil associations, and surrounding them by the best incentives to virtue.’<sup>2</sup> Ray Barnett, for example, ‘would much rather focus upon how culture can bring people who've been polarized in recent years back together to work together [...] and make the world a better place.’<sup>3</sup> This statement positions the museum as a space of activism, rather than the fiction of a neutral sanctuary favoured by Oliver Dowden at the end of 2021. Given museum workers and scholars in the sector have increasingly highlighted ‘the artifice, implausibility and untenability of institutional claims to neutrality,’ then it stands to reason that a decision must be made regarding its aims and whether these are to maintain or expand on an inherently problematic status quo, or to move the narratives they proliferate in a more inclusive and diverse direction.<sup>4</sup> In either case, whether perpetuating an imperialist and pro-colonial version of history which venerates whiteness, or approaching interpretation in an anti-colonial way, the museum is engaging in some form of activism.

The concept of museum activism is defined by Robert Janes and Richard Sandell as ‘museum practice, shaped out of ethically-informed values, that is intended to bring about political,

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<sup>1</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

<sup>2</sup> T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

<sup>4</sup> R. R. Janes & R. Sandell, ‘Nurturing Activism’ in *Museum Activism* ed. By R. R. Janes & R. Sandell (London: Routledge, 2019) 23-136 (p. 23).

social and environmental change.’<sup>5</sup> Though the purpose of this definition appears to emphasise the potential of museums to make ethical decisions which draw society together, it is important to remember that activism is not inherently rooted in ethics or inclusivity. For example, the right-wing groups exerting pressure on the heritage sector to maintain white cultural hegemony, and to perpetuate ‘Eurocentric diffusionism’ might equally be described as activists, though their aims are somewhat different to those outlined by James and Sandell.<sup>6</sup> In this case, the change is one based on the white fragility and ‘whitelash’ discussed in Chapter 2 and appears to centre around the ‘restoration’ of a triumphalist national narrative which affirms the status of white cultural hegemony. Given this clear dichotomy between what one might simplify into two schools of museological thought, it is therefore evident that museums, by their nature, are faced with a distinct quandary when making organisational decisions to implement changes to their methods of acquisition, curation, conservation and interpretation. It is important to note that despite the partly government-led backlash against anti-colonial museum practices seen from 2020 onwards, museums perceived as having supported or endorsed right-wing values or groups have also been subjected to criticism. For example, in 2023, the Natural History Museum in London hosted a gathering of National Conservatives which had been arranged through the institution’s commercial arm and therefore had little relation to the contents of the museum’s collections. Despite this, the concept of museum neutrality has demonstrably been so discredited that museum professionals from across the sector ‘expressed concern that the museum accepted an event booking from an organisation whose aims appear to be inconsistent with the museum’s own ethical values’, particularly concerning climate change and inclusion.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the Natural History Museum’s own web pages regarding diversity and inclusion state that ‘museums are places for society to come together, reflect and discuss,’ though notably only ‘if they are inclusive of the society in which they sit.’<sup>8</sup> Commentators therefore highlighted the disparity between this statement and the National

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<sup>5</sup> R. R. Janes & R. Sandell, ‘Posterity has Arrived’ in *Museum Activism* ed. By R. R. Janes & R. Sandell (London: Routledge, 2019) 1-21 (p. 1).

<sup>6</sup> J.M. Blaut, ‘The Theory of Cultural Racism’, *Antipode*, 24.4 (1992) 247-341 (p. 294).

<sup>7</sup> G. K. Adams, ‘Controversy over rightwing thinktank dinner at Natural History Museum’, *Museums Association*, (16 May 2023) < <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2023/05/controversy-over-rightwing-thinktank-dinner-at-natural-history-museum/#> > [accessed 20/05/2023].

<sup>8</sup> Natural History Museum, ‘Diversity and Inclusion at the Museum’, *Natural History Museum* <<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/about-us/diversity-and-inclusion.html>> [accessed 31/05/2023].

Conservative movement's overt condemnation of members of the LGBTQ community and proliferation of antisemitic conspiracy theories.<sup>9</sup> Though the institution has since published a response which argues that the museum 'champions diversity, equality and inclusion of all people,' the overt and public association with an exclusionary group like the National Conservatives leads some audiences to question the veracity of the Natural History Museum's commitment to ethical conduct and messaging. It appears, as illustrated by this particular example, that the museum defined by Tony Bennet, which influences the society in which it sits, expectations of modern museums are perhaps that they should reflect the society in which they sit. Though museums may be considered as having long been 'stable in time, shaping individual's behaviours and ensuring the experience of common values and the existence of coherent points of reference,' they can also, particularly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, be viewed as a space for 'negotiating cultural values' that are specifically important to the community.<sup>10</sup> Such expectations and responsibilities were evidently catalysed by the Black Lives Matter movement, and the criticisms levelled at a sector that had broadly been perceived as having neglected its social responsibility. The ability to contextualise present-day conversations, events and social movements with art and history is perhaps what renders museums most relevant. Though again, this relevance is often rooted in the museum's desire to communicate information, but also 'the museum's wish to inform visitors of their intention.'<sup>11</sup> Thus, one could argue that activism and a lack of pretence to neutrality is crucial to museums' relevance at all times. In 2013, the Museums Association launched a 'Museums Change Lives' campaign which illustrated the need for cultural institutions to 'deliver a positive social impact in the communities in which they function,' which would naturally exclude any museum which failed to acknowledge and embrace social activism. This activism includes the museum's understanding of its own position, be that as a collective of individuals or as an institution, and an ability to respond to significant societal shifts and conversations when they arise.

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<sup>9</sup> G. K. Adams, 'Controversy over rightwing thinktank dinner at Natural History Museum', *Museums Association*, (16 May 2023) < <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2023/05/controversy-over-rightwing-thinktank-dinner-at-natural-history-museum/#> > [accessed 20/05/2023].

<sup>10</sup> M. Otmianowska, 'Social Responsibility of Museum Education. Research Directions', *Seminare* 41.4, (2020), 81-91 (p. 83).

<sup>11</sup> J. K. Nielsen, 'The relevant museum: defining relevance in museological practices', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 30.5, 364-378 (p.368).

### Colston, the MShed and Community Consultation

This atmosphere of responsibility and representation of community perspectives was felt strongly by members of Bristol City Council's Creative Industries Team, who saw vast and pivotal change take place before a global audience in their own city. In this case, the toppling of a statue of Edward Colston, necessitated a clear expression of ethical consideration and social responsibility from the city's council and museums service. This example also demonstrates the way in which working across multiple community services and organisations can inform a more diverse and inclusive approach to curation, which responds to a dynamic and changing sector. In the case of Colston's statue, the removal of built heritage was driven and enacted by a protest movement and provided a physical and tangible expression of the racism and pro-colonial sentiment inherent to the veneration of colonisers and enslavers. Though there was a backlash against this action for a variety of reasons including legal implications, it was clear that those responsible for the statue's ongoing conservation and interpretation would need to provide a space for members of the local community in particular to reflect. Though the immediate international interest may have been particular to the Colston statue, this question remains a relevant one for many museum professionals and institutions, who, during to this catalysing time of anti-colonial interrogation of heritage, were responsible for the care of numerous places and collections linked to colonialism and white supremacist attitudes. The Colston statue provides a good case study for the purpose of this thesis therefore, as the process of assessing the position and interpretation of objects with such legacies has been expedited by the impact of direct action. In seeking to serve the community of Bristol in this case, the MShed is faced with numerous challenges, including the fact that most population centres, Bristol included, are spaces wherein 'many alternate socio-cultural affinities coexist and contend.'<sup>12</sup> Though, right-wing arguments aside, the concept of making curatorial decisions based on ethical considerations may appear relatively straightforward, there are a number of differing beliefs and perspectives that are not inherently exclusionary, yet may have a preference for different outcomes regarding the Colston statue. Therefore, for the MShed 'it became clear that we were not the people to make that decision,' and that, led by the Mayor of Bristol, it

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<sup>12</sup> K. Coffee, 'Cultural inclusion, exclusion and formative roles of museums', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 23.3, (1990) 261-279 (p. 262).

would be down to the people most affected by the statue's presence in a public space as to what would be done next.<sup>13</sup> Though the decision was made to display the statue within the MShed, the display would be a temporary one designed to enable community input to eventual decisions regarding its permanent home.

An apparently democratic approach to interpretation has a number of benefits for museums unsure of how to progress with complex or problematic legacies, particularly related to acts of colonial violence. Perhaps the most obvious advantage to a museum seeking to address narratives which involve and impact a diverse network of peoples, is that public consultation and an open call for input from the local community provides the museum with a mandate, which negates claims of institutional bias made by right-wing activists and figures like Oliver Dowden. Public consultation and engagement with community stakeholders also provide an opportunity for the sector to review the role of museums, and potentially move away from rigid education and its association with 'prerequisites, [...] lectures to a passive audience,' and an authoritative approach which seems undemocratic and paternalistic.<sup>14</sup> Given the overwhelming whiteness of the museums sector in the UK, discussed in Chapter 1 and irrefutably illustrated by the primary sources referenced in this thesis, such paternalism within the proliferation and interpretation of historical narratives becomes inherently racialised. This is particularly true of museums like the MShed, which serve a multicultural city community with a long history of racist colonial violence. Indeed, historical story-telling devoid of diverse perspectives and narratives has had an undeniably detrimental impact on inclusion and ethical curation, which was cumulatively expressed during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020.

However, this is by no means the first time communities of colour have challenged the white hegemonic approach of the heritage and culture sectors. For example, the museums teams in Bristol witnessed a distinct backlash against cultural events and celebrations centred on maritime history in the 1990s which failed to meaningfully acknowledge the vast

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<sup>13</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

<sup>14</sup> G. F. Macdonald, 'Change and Challenge: Museums in the Information Society' in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* ed. by I. Karp et al. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) 154-176 (p. 155).

role of slavery during Bristol's time as an active port city. Sue Giles, Ethnographic Collection Officer during this period, writes that the 1996 'Festival of the Sea' was 'quiet' regarding the transatlantic trade of enslaved peoples and 'caused some disquiet and resentment.'<sup>15</sup> The use of the term 'quiet' here deeply understates the way in which the absence of certain colonial histories serve to silence Black voices and narratives. In such circumstances, the event and participating heritage organisations have excluded an aspect of the city's history which concerns the mass exploitation and enslavement of Black peoples, and are therefore rendering Black presence invisible, 'thereby deleting [Black people] from the historical narrative.'<sup>16</sup> It is not unreasonable to deduce from this that the groups consulted during the planning of this event were not sufficiently diverse, nor were they invested in ensuring the festival did not celebrate perpetrators and cultures of colonial violence. Having been excluded by the event, a 'local group' that Giles does not identify, put posters up around Bristol which include the legacy of enslavement inherent to the city's maritime history. Giles then laments the fact she was unable to acquire one of the posters for the museum's collection, which on the surface may appear to be a positive step towards inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives, but inevitably perpetuates the long-held museum tradition of acquisition for the benefit of the institution, rather than that of the participants in community research or engagement. Studies in Florida have shown that community groups who did not interact with museums were most reluctant to take part in consultation with institutions due to existing misrepresentation of marginalised groups within museum interpretation, as well as questions regarding the benefit to them as advisors versus the benefits, including monetary gain, for the museum.<sup>17</sup>

Such concerns are not unusual for communities which have been, unconsciously or otherwise, alienated from the majority of museums. As addressed in Chapter 1, from foundation and conception, through to the present day, museums are often regarded as white sanctuaries, based on a white, Eurocentric understanding of history and an inherently

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<sup>15</sup> S. Giles, 'The Great Circuit: Making the Connection Between Bristol's Slaving History and the African-Caribbean Community', *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 13, (2001), 15-21 (p. 15).

<sup>16</sup> A. Burns, *From storefront to monument: tracing the public history of the Black museum movement* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013) p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> I. Gilbert, 'How might the UK heritage sector learn from the interpretation of slavery and colonial history at plantation house museums in the southern United States?' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Sheffield, 2020) p. 49.

colonial system of categorisation and interpretation. The over-representation of white perspectives in museums spills over into the composition of museum executive boards and trustees, who largely continue to represent society's most elite, which 'leaves them poorly positioned to serve as the bridge between the organisation and wide segments of the community who are outside of their class.'<sup>18</sup> The content produced by such institutions is therefore informed by white cultural hegemony, and is made most accessible to audience members who reflect one or more of the demographics members of institutional decision-making groups belong to. This lack of diversity within the upper levels of the institution is one of the most significant reasons why 'contemporary museum curatorial practices, as well as their education systems, remain saturated with colonial and neo-colonial ideologies, expressed in subjugated knowledges and representational practices.'<sup>19</sup> One might suggest that the overwhelming focus on white perspectives and experiences in the telling of global history has also rendered much of the interpretation and exhibitions created by museums as less relevant to those potential audiences who fall outside the binary of white, middle or upper class, heterosexual, cisgender people. However, such an approach must be understood with caution, as it would be reductive to suggest museum visitors are only able to comprehend and take great interest in collections and narratives specifically related to aspects of their own identity. Though there is clearly much to be done in terms of anti-colonial curation, conversations around inclusion and relevance must be understood in the context of the need for a change in organisational culture above all else.

Relevance can also be defined as enabling museums to respond to society's needs, which is a topic this chapter will go on to address in detail. In particular, the museum provides a space that enables 'both social interaction and participative interaction with collections' rather than an authoritative assertion of meaning.<sup>20</sup> According to J. K. Nielsen, 'demonstrating relevance can [...] be described as a process that involves visitor interaction, as 'visitors want to use museums as they want, not as we dictate – and what they want are

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<sup>18</sup> A. Olivares and J. Piatak, 'Exhibiting Inclusion: An Examination of Race, Ethnicity and Museum Participation', *Voluntas* 33.1 (2022), 121-133 (p. 122).

<sup>19</sup> B. Lynch, 'Museums 'tied up in knots': the disabling effect of public engagement in museums', *Practicing Anthropology* 37.3, (2015), 58-59 (p. 58).

<sup>20</sup> J. K. Nielsen, 'The relevant museum: defining relevance in museological practices', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 30.5, 364-378 (p. 366).

experiences they can tailor to their own requirements.’<sup>21</sup> However, in order for any of these suggestions to work in a way which is inclusive and representative of the community the museum serves, there must be an impetus for certain community groups to engage with the museum in the first place. As demonstrated by Sue Giles in her paper on Bristol’s history and its relation to the local Afro-Caribbean population, many museums approach work to promote inclusivity and community buy-in as an extractive process. In this way, the museum often repeatedly positions the community or audiences involved in participation as beneficiaries, despite the fact that such groups often act in an advisory capacity and are therefore providing benefit to the museum. One might refer back to Chapter 2 of this thesis, and the difference between a performative gesture which serves to make institutions appear more inclusive, and a genuine effort to transform an inherently exclusionary and ultimately white supremacist system. B. Lynch found research demonstrated that ‘the language of commitment to collaboration by ethnography curators still situates the institution at the centre, conferring suitability or ‘legitimacy’ on ‘informants’ when working in ‘partnership.’’<sup>22</sup> Again this implies that the museum remains the ultimate authority on information regarding their collections, including those which originate from communities represented within participant or advisory groups. Thus, the erasure of indigenous knowledge is perpetuated despite the pretence of collaborative working. A truly inclusive approach to history can arguably never be achieved with such an evident power imbalance between the museum and the people they perceive as subjects or tools with which to advance the interests of the institution.

In her report on Bristol Museum’s work to acknowledge the city’s significant role in the transatlantic trade in enslaved African people, Sue Giles demonstrates some of the problems associated with positioning power and authority away from groups providing advice to the museum and the expectation that members of marginalised groups inherently wish to assist the institution. In describing an intervention titled ‘the slavery trail’ Giles implies that, before any public or community consultation, it is decided that the trail itself

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<sup>21</sup> J. K. Nielsen, ‘The relevant museum: defining relevance in museological practices’, *Museum Management and Curatorship* 30.5, 364-378 (p. 366).

<sup>22</sup> B. Lynch, ‘Museums ‘tied up in knots’: the disabling effect of public engagement in museums’, *Practicing Anthropology* 37.3, (2015), 58-59 (p. 58).

will be written primarily by Madge Dresser, a history lecturer from the nearby University of the West of England. Without aiming to detract from M. Dresser's expertise on the subject, which is vast, it must be noted that it appears to be made clear from the very conception of the project, that the ultimate power over how this trail and its contents are shaped is located within the museum and an academic institution. This is relevant to the role of exclusion and its links to education as well as the racialised aspects of access to education and educational resources, as 'exclusion from educational and economic systems is mirrored in exclusion from museums.'<sup>23</sup> It is also important to note, without any aims towards essentialism, that both Dresser and Giles are white women. Naturally, given the figures with most seniority in this case, are white and represent somewhat elite institutions, it would be difficult to suggest that the 'slavery trail' project is truly reflective of the diverse communities of Bristol. Giles does note that a public meeting was held, and that comments were invited from the audience at a meeting which was 'advertised as widely as possible', which is also a statement dependent on perspective.<sup>24</sup> This form of engagement can also be categorised as passive rather than active, as it appears to rely on an existing desire within certain communities to engage with the aims of a museum. Therefore, attendance at such events is unlikely to represent the full diversity of the community.

In an interview held with Lisa Graves, Bristol Museums' World Cultures Curator, it appears the city's institutions continue to struggle with engagement when it comes to a diverse spectrum of community groups: 'we spent a lot of time trying to broaden our mailing lists, trying to find new people, trying to invite people and we weren't really successful, I don't think, in broadening out from people who were already interested.'<sup>25</sup> However, Graves goes on to acknowledge that this apparent lack of keen interest in the work of the museum is likely rooted in the fact that certain community groups may have seen us make false promises in the past potentially and felt that, 'actually I've heard all this from you guys

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<sup>23</sup> A. Olivares and J. Piatak, 'Exhibiting Inclusion: An Examination of Race, Ethnicity and Museum Participation', *Voluntas* 33.1 (2022), 121-133 (p. 123).

<sup>24</sup> S. Giles, 'The Great Circuit: Making the Connection Between Bristol's Slaving History and the African-Caribbean Community', *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 13, (2001), 15-21 (p.16).

<sup>25</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

before, but I've not seen anything real change, so I'm not going to bother.'"<sup>26</sup> This assertion certainly correlates with the examples cited previously, given those who have already engaged with museums, either as audiences or as part of community consultations 'convey frustration and dissatisfaction, finding themselves on the receiving end of museum practices that present a profoundly disabling view of the individual as existing in an almost permanent state of vulnerability.'<sup>27</sup> The implication in many cases is that all community groups require the facilitation of the museum, as a seat of authority, in order to convey the narratives best represent their experiences and interests. This is not the case, as demonstrated by the 'local group' from whom Sue Giles sought to obtain a poster and establish a line of communication with Bristol Museums. The group clearly utilised their own knowledge, experiences and resources to establish a narrative which the maritime history festival, and clearly the city's museums, had failed to adequately acknowledge. Rather than creating an asset with which Bristol Museums might enhance their own reputation, the materials produced by the group were 'firmly stuck to their walls.'<sup>28</sup> This effectively symbolises the way in which the history of the transatlantic trade in enslaved peoples is intrinsic to the city's history and indeed its fabric, written in its streets. Such a history, though it should be reflected in Bristol's museums, is not confined to the remit of the institution, and it is reductive to assume that an inherently white supremacist structure is necessary to the dissemination of diverse narratives. This example shows that a number of community groups do not perceive the museum as necessary or beneficial to the histories and causes they perceive as significant, relevant or marginalised. In such cases, the museum needs community input more than the community needs them, and collaboration, rather than resource and information extraction, should be based in a clear power balance and mutual respect. In addition, 'museums need to be open to the idea that resources such as space,

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<sup>26</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>27</sup> B. Lynch, 'Museums 'tied up in knots': the disabling effect of public engagement in museums', *Practicing Anthropology* 37.3, (2015), 58-59 (p. 58).

<sup>28</sup> S. Giles, 'The Great Circuit: Making the Connection Between Bristol's Slaving History and the African-Caribbean Community', *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 13, (2001), 15-21 (p. 16).

staffing, or social media expertise may be more important than interpretive programming for engaging the community and addressing social issues.<sup>29 30</sup>

### Statues in Museums and Community Participation

Much like the erection of posters across the city during the maritime festival, the toppling of Colston was a form of direct action, carried out by the community as a demonstration of Bristol's less celebrated history and the impact of its quiet erasure. Such a globally significant event would necessitate a carefully considered response from the city and its council, of which Bristol Museums is one department. Despite the clear nature of the unrest which resulted in the statue's removal from its plinth, other issues such the statue's listed status, the legal implications of the perceived vandalism and diversity of opinion regarding the statue and its subject would all be considered during the formulation of the city's response. Though Colston's statue carried a damning legacy of slavery and suffering, it was not the desire of the city's mayor, Marvin Rees, to appear biased as a black resident in any direction regarding the statue's removal: 'he's a mayor of the whole of Bristol, and not just those of African heritage' or the Black community more broadly.<sup>31</sup> Though this sentiment is likely designed to illustrate the mayor's neutrality in his approach to the city's heritage, the nature of interpretation itself and the white supremacist implications of Colston's veneration render it difficult to approach such a situation with any pretence to true neutrality in an ethical way. There is a distinct difference between encouraging conversation, education and nuance without enabling the further propagandisation of history in a way that erases any diversity of perspective outside the established white cultural hegemony.

In addition to the difficulty surrounding the desire for a neutral approach, since the toppling of the statue the mayor has also expressed a personal view that damage to the statue

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<sup>29</sup> S. Long, 'Practicing Civic Engagement: Making your Museum into a Community Living Room', *The Journal of Museum Education* 38.2, (2013), 141-153 (p. 150).

<sup>30</sup> 'Colonial Bristol', *Black Bristol* < [https://www.mhra.org.uk/style/chapter7.html#section\\_7\\_5](https://www.mhra.org.uk/style/chapter7.html#section_7_5) > [accessed 20/04/2024].

<sup>31</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

amounts to mere ‘performance activism’ and was ‘less significant’ than some might suggest.<sup>32</sup> However, one could argue that this assertion is somewhat undermined by Rees’ apparent concern that addressing the detrimental impact of the Colston statue’s public position of memorialisation would somehow limit the scope of his political concerns to ‘Black politics.’ Rees went on to state ‘all my political capital to take action on housing, employment, transport, all those policy areas that actually make a substantive difference to people’s lives – it disappears. Because all I do is talk about the statue controversy.’<sup>33</sup> This dismissive attitude towards an issue that has proven significant to a number of Bristolians for several years remains ultimately disproven by the massive global attention the removal of the statue garnered, undeniably prompting conversations around racism and the ongoing presence of white supremacist violence in public spaces. Indeed, in this sense, the toppling of Colston by Bristol’s Black Lives Matters protestors did more to catalyse conversations around racial injustice and colonial history than a city mayor ever could. It is likely that without such direct and decisive action, this thesis would not have been undertaken at this time. It is also important to note that all heritage professionals interviewed as part of the primary research for this thesis expressed that the toppling of Colston had an impact, not only on their desire to focus more heavily on anti-colonial approaches to history and interpretation, but also on their understanding of the systems and structures they worked within. Following the removal of Colston from its plinth in central Bristol, Ray Barnett states ‘the last couple of years have made me look again at what we do and what we tried to do and how we thought we were being fair and equitable. But actually, were we? Were we just peddling part of our own cultural background and the way that we’ve been brought up and influenced? So, I think there’s a sort of personal reawakening to just think again, really seriously from other perspectives as to what it would be like to be in someone else’s shoes growing up in a country like this today.’<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> C. Drury, ‘Performance Activism’: Bristol mayor says downing of Colston has little bearing on fight against racism’, *Independent*, 9 January 2022 < <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/colston-statue-marvin-rees-bristol-mayor-b1988698.html> > [accessed 25/06/2023].

<sup>33</sup> C. Drury, ‘Performance Activism’: Bristol mayor says downing of Colston has little bearing on fight against racism’, *Independent*, 9 January 2022 < <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/colston-statue-marvin-rees-bristol-mayor-b1988698.html> > [accessed 25/06/2023].

<sup>34</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

Therefore, the assertion that such activism might be described as performative in any way is somewhat surprising, particularly when this incident comes as a response to ‘valiant and persistent efforts of campaigners’ to remove or rewrite the plaque at the base of Colston’s statue which were ‘thwarted by Colston’s legion of defenders.’<sup>35</sup> It could therefore be argued that Marvin Rees’ dismissal of the Black Lives Matters Movement’s activity in Bristol as insignificant is in no way neutral, and instead diminishes the concerns of the public that this direct action so overtly illustrated.

It is, however, important to note Marvin Rees own positionality as a Black mayor of Bristol, and the first directly elected Black leader in Europe. Given the inherent racism within all UK structures and institutions, it is likely that right-wing critics of anti-racism and ethical change would perceive a disproportionate focus on race and colonial history to be an example of biased leadership. This is despite that fact that numerous white leaders, as discussed in Chapter 2, have already expressed a reactionary interest in the conservation of history which venerates white perpetrators of violence. Given their white privilege, they have likely engaged in pro-colonial discourse and advocated for the continued propagandisation of history without concern that they might experience racial discrimination or be discredited as a result. Furthermore, despite an apparent condemnation of Colston’s removal, both Marvin Rees and his office were very involved in the events which followed and ultimately led to the statue’s relocation to Bristol’s MShed, where the museum team, together with other council departments created an exhibition which demonstrated creative methods of engagement and community consultation which appeared open and democratic, taking full advantage of the subject’s relevance and heightened public interest. Indeed, part of the exhibition’s popularity and success could be attributed to the multi-departmental approach taken by Bristol council which enabled the museums team to access resources previously less readily available to them. Indeed, it was the decision of the mayor to move the statue to a museum immediately after its toppling: ‘when the statue came down, what it meant for us as an organization was that the mayor, without any reference to us [...] announced that the statue would go to a museum, in the press. So, we knew what was coming and we were

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<sup>35</sup> D. Olusoga, ‘The toppling of Edward Colston’s statue is not an attack on history. It is history.’, *The Guardian*, 08 June 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/08/edward-colston-statue-history-slave-trader-bristol-protest> [accessed 09/06/2020].

going to be charged with looking after it and hoping to decide what happens next.’<sup>36</sup> This decision to place the statue in a museum effectively reduced or limited further damage to the physical heritage without undermining the actions taken by the Black Lives Matter protestors by placing the image of the violent coloniser back in a position of public veneration.

Exhibition of the Colston statue within the confines of a museum arguably removes the debate from a more public space into a private one. However, this move also acknowledges the toppling of the statue itself as being a crucial part of Bristol’s history, and not something that should be undone in order to protect the inanimate object. The approach appears to be that whatever is done should be preserved and the fate of the statue beyond this should form part of a public consultation. Such conversations would not only provide options for the statue’s future, but also contribute to a broader discussion around the role of statues in public places and the importance of interpretation where built heritage or artworks are closely linked to colonial violence. Ray Barnett states that shortly after the statue’s relocation to the MShed, which was not disclosed to the public at the time, the mayor announced his intentions for the decision-making process going further: ‘the mayor was leading this conversation, and that he wanted the whole of Bristol to be involved in deciding what should happen next.’<sup>37</sup> The involvement of the community in advocating for the actions they would like to see the museum take next aligns with the concept of museums as ‘social workers’, as defined by Lois Silverman, whereby museum professionals make the effort to understand the community’s wants and needs. ‘Only by addressing these needs do museums have a measurable impact on their communities.’<sup>38</sup> Due to the high-profile nature of the Colston statue’s toppling, the council, and the MShed more specifically, were presented with the opportunity to engage a greater number of audiences in the city who might have otherwise not interacted with any of their local museums, possibly due to the constructed social exclusion addressed in Chapter 1. In addition, the advantage of a whole

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<sup>36</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

<sup>37</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

<sup>38</sup> S. Long, ‘Practicing Civic Engagement: Making your Museum into a Community Living Room’, *The Journal of Museum Education* 38.2, (2013), 141-153 (p. 146).

council approach to the question of heritage enabled the museum to make use of council departments with more well-established connections to a diverse range of communities within the city. In many cases, a museum's ability to effectively carry out community engagement or consultation is reliant on the capacity of the teams responsible, which in turn is dependent on the museum's investment in this aspect of their operation. This is telling, and the concept of community engagement and participation is arguably therefore often somewhat performative where little investment may be made in its facilitation. It appears clear that museums wishing to be seen as a space for the community are predominantly looking to create exhibitions internally in order to address a perceived need or relevance they feel they have identified without successfully reaching out to the communities they are supposedly designed for beforehand. In other cases, the museum has a group of identified stakeholders, who have presumably already expressed an interest in or have interacted with the institution; 'the challenge is cultivating and reaching out to people who haven't acknowledged they have a stake in the museum.'<sup>39</sup> In the MShed's case, 'we get a lot of people, but not necessarily everybody we wanted. And our participation team, which is only two or three people, didn't have the contacts or the scope and scale to be able to help us with that.'<sup>40</sup> However, in the case of the Colston statue, the MShed team had access to Bristol City Council's neighbourhoods team 'who physically were in, visiting those parts of the city that we were getting poorer representation from and helped us to promote the survey either online or hard copy. So, they've done a great job in giving us a much better representation.'<sup>41</sup> This interaction and the evident value of collaboration with organisations and agencies outside the museum demonstrates the importance of institutions looking beyond their walls, and admitting that, particularly given the oftentimes exclusionary nature of their structures and systems, the museum cannot become more inclusive without external collaboration.

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<sup>39</sup> S. Long, 'Practicing Civic Engagement: Making your Museum into a Community Living Room', *The Journal of Museum Education* 38.2, (2013), 141-153 (p. 146).

<sup>40</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

<sup>41</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

Chapter 1 of this thesis addressed the exploitative and extractive nature of many museum collections, particularly in relation to legacies of white colonialism. However, the presence of Colston in the MShed museum provides a very different example of museum acquisition which has the potential to reduce the continued impact of colonial violence on a multicultural city populace. Preservation of the statue, including the recent addition of paint during Black Lives Matter protests, also correlates with the MShed's primary objective, which is to 'tell the story of the city and its unique place in the world.'<sup>42</sup> The statue is therefore preserved as part a narrative detailing a significant event and as the catalyst for community discussions, rather than the memorialisation of 'a killer.'<sup>43</sup> As alluded to previously, there may be some concern regarding the relocation of public history to museum spaces, as 'there's almost a danger of policing people's responses to them and relocating the culture wars to museums.'<sup>44</sup> However, given the aforementioned relationship between the MShed and the mayor's office, as well as the high profile nature of the statue's removal, relocating the debate to a free museum close to the object's original site provides the opportunity for members of the community to have their thoughts heard by organisations with the capacity to respond. In addition, the exhibition of the Colston statue was rooted in simplicity and the desire to build a plan for the future based on the input of all contributors to the consultation, rather than only those who agreed with the statue's removal. Though this thesis establishes that museums can never truly be neutral in their interpretation of history, the positioning of Colston's statue as an open question, in a semi-recumbent position promotes more diversity of interpretation than his previous location, atop a plinth which defines him as 'a wise and virtuous son', looking downwards at the public from its elevation.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Bristol Museums, MShed < <https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/m-shed/> > [accessed 27/06/2023].

<sup>43</sup> Intelligence Squared, *Revere or Remove? The Battle Over Statues, Heritage and History*, recorded conversation, Youtube, 02 July 2018 < <https://intelligencesquared.com/events/revere-or-remove-the-battle-over-statues-heritage-and-history/> > [accessed 05/05/2020].

<sup>44</sup> Intelligence Squared, *Revere or Remove? The Battle Over Statues, Heritage and History*, recorded conversation, Youtube, 02 July 2018 < <https://intelligencesquared.com/events/revere-or-remove-the-battle-over-statues-heritage-and-history/> > [accessed 05/05/2020].

<sup>45</sup> Intelligence Squared, *Revere or Remove? The Battle Over Statues, Heritage and History*, recorded conversation, Youtube, 02 July 2018 < <https://intelligencesquared.com/events/revere-or-remove-the-battle-over-statues-heritage-and-history/> > [accessed 05/05/2020].

Upon entering the exhibition, which was open from June 2021 until January 2022 both in-person and as an online tour, before visitors see the statue, they are presented with an introductory interpretation panel which, in large text, asks 'what next?' This is reflective of the desire to create an accessible and open space for discussion, but also highlights the museum team's perspective and their challenge in looking to imagine a future for the statue. World Culture's Curator Lisa Graves was heavily involved in the creation of the Colston exhibition and felt such an open and broad question provided an honest place for the heritage sector and the community to meet: we're genuinely asking people 'what next? What do we do now?' This isn't something that we're ever going to put hands up to and go, 'we've got the answers to this.' We absolutely do not have the answers to this.'<sup>46</sup> This assertion also positions the museum on relatively equal footing with the community members from whom they seek comment, as the institution does not approach this intervention with the self-appointed authority highlighted by B. Lynch.<sup>47</sup> Aside from a brief summary of the events of 2020 which have led to the statue's placement in the museum, the interpretive panel appears to hold no assumptions regarding the audience or their positionality, which renders the conversation welcoming to any and all commentators and does not centre any specific perspective. This is reinforced by text at the end of the panel which states 'all voices will be heard,' and a large arrow with a label that says 'shape future plans here.'<sup>48</sup> It is already clear, before the visitor has seen the statue of Colston, that the audience's role in the museum's communicative circle is an active one, rather than one formed from an imagined or assumed response constructed by a curatorial team who are in turn informed by an underfunded, unrepresentative or relatively unsupported participation team.<sup>49</sup>

Given the problems surrounding museum spaces and a distinct lack of audience and staff diversity, one could certainly argue that 'all voices will be heard' is an inaccurate or

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<sup>46</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>47</sup> B. Lynch, 'Museums 'tied up in knots': the disabling effect of public engagement in museums', *Practicing Anthropology* 37.3, (2015), 58-59 (p. 58).

<sup>48</sup> Bristol Museums, 'The Colston Statue: What Next?', *MShed*, <<https://exhibitions.bristolmuseums.org.uk/the-colston-statue/>> [accessed 26/06/2023].

<sup>49</sup> C. Perin, 'The Communicative Circle: Museums as Communities' in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* ed. by I. Karp et al. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) 176-210 (p. 176).

dishonest statement. However, it must be noted that the museum also utilised online engagement to enable commentators from further afield, or who did not wish to visit the museum to have their say. This decision was demonstrably useful in attracting a greater amount of feedback, as the report created by the Mayor's History Commission at the conclusion of this community consultation period states that 'nearly 14,000 people' completed the corresponding survey, with 55% of responders having been from Bristol.<sup>50</sup> In addition to this, it is important to note that the ability to engage with the content, take a virtual tour and complete the survey online is an example of increased museum accessibility. Such extensive digital engagement is often considered a positive outcome of the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw disabled and neurodivergent visitors able to access more museum resources and interventions online.<sup>51</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that the History Commission's Colston survey represented 'a cross-section of the city, with people of every age, gender, ethnicity and deprivation level,' as well as 'every geographic area of the city.'<sup>52</sup> Thus, this exhibition provides an excellent example of the way in which diversity and inclusion in museums enables the institution to craft interpretation and interventions which represent the wishes of their community. This is a reciprocal process whereby increased relevance and successful audience participation ultimately results in a museum which is welcoming and engaging to an increased number of demographics.

As visitors entered the small exhibition space in order to view the Colston statue, a large interpretation panel provides a very brief introduction to the statue's status as a highly debated fixture in Bristol's public space. It is noted that such discussions have been ongoing since long before 2020, when activists finally removed the statue from its plinth during a Black Lives Matter protest. Alongside this, there are examples of protest signs which were taken from the area around the plinth, one of which quotes George Floyd, who minutes before his murder said 'I can't breathe.' This placard in particular grounds the debate around the statue within the wider conversation around the normalisation of racism and violence towards Black people. Thus, the clear link between the interpretation of colonial

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<sup>50</sup> Bristol History Commission, *The Colston Statue: What Next?* (2022) p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> F. Collins, 'Covid has improved disabled people's engagement with museums, study finds', *Museums Association*, 6 August 2021 <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/08/covid-has-improved-disabled-peoples-engagement-with-museums-study-finds/>> [accessed: 28/06/2023].

<sup>52</sup> Bristol History Commission, *The Colston Statue: What Next?* (2022) p. 4.

history and the ongoing impact of systemic racism is established in a very simple, yet impactful way. The history of racial inequality is a long and violent one, which is acknowledged elsewhere in the museum, and Colston forms a particularly potent symbol of the cruelty and disadvantage experienced by people of colour as a result of the white supremacist doctrine perpetuated by Colston and his peers in order to advance their own economic status. However, this is not to say that the initial entry to the exhibition space favours a particular perspective on the issue of statues in public places, as the panel also features the results of a Bristol Live survey, on a large pie chart, which grouped responses from 10,252 people who either believed ‘the protestors were right to pull it down and drop it in the harbour’, or ‘it should not have been taken down by any means’, with a couple of other options which advocated more moderate approaches such as removing the statue but not rolling it into the harbour.<sup>53</sup> Although it is immediately clear that the most popular response by far is the removal of the statue, including its brief resignation to the waters of the harbour, it is clear the aims of the MShed’s intervention is to share existing data, rather than to influence the opinions of visitors. The examples here provide points for visitors to respond to or to consider in formulating their own opinions. This single panel is a particularly clear example of curated museum spaces which address colonial history in an ethical and anti-colonial way without necessitating any single narrative regarding the methods with which these issues are explored in public and institutional spaces. Colston was removed from his plinth, and the protest spoke to a wider history of injustices relating to racism and white supremacy. There is no alternative perspective provided here. MShed clearly acknowledges the reasons behind the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, without casting doubt on the importance and validity of such a movement.

More details regarding Colston and his colonial legacy are provided across the room from his statue. Here, the written interpretation opens with the line ‘Edward Colston’s family had longstanding links with Bristol, though they moved to London when he was only six.’<sup>54</sup> Though it is clear that the purpose of this detail is to perhaps highlight the fact that Colston

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<sup>53</sup> Bristol Museums, ‘The Colston Statue: What Next?’, *MShed*, <<https://exhibitions.bristolmuseums.org.uk/the-colston-statue/>> [accessed 26/06/2023].

<sup>54</sup> Bristol Museums, ‘The Colston Statue: What Next?’, *MShed*, <<https://exhibitions.bristolmuseums.org.uk/the-colston-statue/>> [accessed 26/06/2023].

did not primarily live in Bristol, and his links to the area are slightly more tenuous than the veneration of his image and name throughout the city would suggest. However, given the brief nature of the history provided by this interpretation, as well as the clear links to race and colonial violence outlined by the visitor journey thus far, it would have perhaps been clearer and more impactful to start this written piece with Colston's claim to fame and fortune, which was his influential role in the Royal African Company. It is undeniable that Colston's responsibility for the trading, and inevitable suffering, of 84,000 enslaved Black people acted as the motivation for his statue's removal in June 2020. Colston acted as a continual reminder of suffering; a memorial which valorises the oppressor, rather than a memorial to all the Black people who were enslaved and traded within the economic machine Colston perpetuated. Lara Choksey describes the statue of Colston as a link between topography and history: 'Colston faced the harbour, surveying cargo routes, commemorating the cities passage of wealth. Those watery routes bore the wakes of unmarked mass graves along the Middle Passage, sites for the production of Blackness as abjection.'<sup>55</sup> This sentiment outlines the fact that, for some communities in Bristol, Colston's significance lies entirely in his position as a symbol of racial hatred and the constant reminder of trauma and pain for the Black community. Even if one were to acknowledge Colston's charitable giving in the city, which served to 'whitewash his legacy,' this would in no way negate the violence implicit in the accumulation of such wealth. Therefore, an introduction to Colston, the trader of enslaved people, at the top of this panel in bold text would have provided a more relevant introduction to who Colston really was as a figure, and why his name is widely known, within the context of this exhibition and public consultation. This is not to say Colston's residence in London for much of his life is an insignificant detail, and paired with the fact that his statue was erected 170 years after his death, it becomes clear that Colston's significance to Bristol is overemphasised. This detail could perhaps be included in the paragraph which expands on this point regarding the more recent nature of the statue's erection, as this also illustrates the fact that Colston was not hailed as a 'wise and virtuous' son of the city, until this depiction proved beneficial to a group of rich merchants. The MShed's description of Colston states that he was 'reinvented [...] as a symbol of civic pride, but it was also part of a rivalry between the rich merchants of Bristol.'

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<sup>55</sup> L. Choksey, 'Colston Falling', *Journal of Historical Geography* 74 (2021), 77-83 (p. 81).

The text on this panel then concludes with the fact that ‘Colston’s role in the slave and sugar trade was widely known in some circles’ but that it was downplayed in popular histories and public narratives. Thus, the MShed created in Colston an exemplar of the relationship between triumphalist or patriotic historical narratives and the culture of ‘forgetting’ and erasure regarding the role of such histories in the establishment and perpetuation of racism. In terms of both the MShed exhibition and the broader societal injustices raised by the Black Lives Matter protests, the desire to construct a history that evokes nationalist pride has resulted in the veneration of figures like Colston, who may have generated vast wealth, but participated in the exploitation and oppression of their fellow man. In seeking to avoid ‘doing Britain down’, those responsible for the erection of public monuments, and indeed the writers of history, have proliferated an incomplete version of events and an inaccurate account of colonial endeavours. Not only this, but they created a cultural environment in which the image of an oppressor can act as a permanent reminder of Black subjugation and suffering, without the acknowledgment that such racist acts were morally reprehensible or unjustified. Without overt support for the toppling of Colston’s statue, the MShed have successfully illustrated why this event took place and the relevance of the statue, and the interpretation of history it offers, to the perpetuation of systemic racism. Therefore, visitors arriving to participate in the community consultation regarding the statue arrive informed, regardless of their prior knowledge of either Colston or the Black Lives Matter movement.

Finally, behind a plexi-glass barrier, Colston’s statue lies flat on its back beneath a wall, upon which a continually changing projection shows comments left by visitors who have participated in the consultation. Displayed in such a manner, with the red graffiti sprayed on the statue during its toppling still in place, the statue of Colston appeared to have been disarmed. There had been some concern amongst curatorial staff regarding the placement of the object in a manner reminiscent of a deceased person: ‘we had a long discussion about whether we’re presenting it as it was. We were also making it look a bit like a, you know, medieval knight in a cathedral lying in state.’<sup>56</sup> This interpretation would continue to present problems for the representation of Colston as being memorialised in sympathetic rather

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<sup>56</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

than valorising way. However, the height of the statue meant that an upright display would retain the perception as Colston as a superior and domineering character, so combined with the need to conserve the paint and damage to the statue in order to retain its new significance as symbolic of protest and activism, a horizontal position was agreed upon. The domineering presence Colston's likeness once had was effectively 'neutralized in some respects by putting it in the setting of a museum. And lots of people who had been very cross about it were able to accept it perhaps,' and engage with it as a tool for reflection and debate.<sup>57</sup> Though it could perhaps be argued that both the public space and the museum are equally spaces of 'spectacle for the public gaze' and therefore both grounds for discussion and education regarding the nuances of historical interpretation and the ever-changing definition of what makes a 'great' historical figure.<sup>58</sup> However, as a timeline placed in front of the Colston statue, as the penultimate panel in the MShed exhibition, makes clear the fact that debate and a desire for the diversification of narratives has been centred on the statue for many years prior to 2020, with little to no action taken. As far back as 1998, that statue was defaced with the words 'fuck off slave trader,' and many years prior to this, in 1934, all references to Colston were dropped from *The Guide to Bristol* in the edition published during the centenary year of the implementation of the Slave Emancipation Act.<sup>59</sup> It is therefore clear that the nature of Colston's legacy has been consistently challenged and debated within the city due to the immorality and racism upon which his acclaim was founded, but this has not been reflected in the way Colston has been represented and his figure has remained almost defiantly standing as a painful reminder of white supremacist violence and its apparent ongoing acceptability in society. Whilst the removal of the statue to a museum space does 'relocate the debate', it clearly best enables the facilitation of debate, and in the case of the MShed, goes beyond participation and consultation to create what one could define as informed democratic curation. As outlined above, the interpretation offered at the MShed ensures Colston's racism and profiteering from suffering is acknowledged, whilst avoiding gratuitous or dehumanising details which might render the exhibition traumatic for Black visitors. However, this change to the way in which

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<sup>57</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

<sup>58</sup> R. Drayton, 'Rhodes Must Not Fall?', *Third Text* 33.4, (2019) 651-666 (p. 652).

<sup>59</sup> Bristol Museums, 'The Colston Statue: What Next?', *MShed*, <<https://exhibitions.bristolmuseums.org.uk/the-colston-statue/>> [accessed 26/06/2023].

Colston is 'officially' remembered by the city can in no way be described as the erasure of his achievements, given his charitable giving within Bristol is also documented. Given all of this information, the majority of those who participated in the MShed's consultation agreed with the decision to relocate the statue to a museum, with one respondent making the distinction, 'statues are celebratory and museums are educational.'<sup>60</sup> It is clear from analysing the History Commission's report on the consultation that whilst problems related to diversity and participation remain across both Bristol's Museums as well as the entire sector, there is a genuine appetite for opportunities to understand history from a multitude of perspectives and for transparency regarding the violence and racism inherent to colonial legacies. Future exhibitions should incorporate Colston into a much larger consideration of Bristol's association with the transatlantic trade in enslaved people and with anti-racist activism, so 'it doesn't become a Colston exhibit,' as this would perpetuate the centring of white figures and their perspectives within historical narratives. It is also highly important to the process of anti-racist curation that the interpretation and content created regarding Bristol's colonial history does not further 'other' Black people through a sole focus on abjection and victimhood, or indeed their relation to white people. These issues are further addressed in Chapter 4 of this thesis. However, it is clear from the MShed's initial work to respond quickly to the Black Lives Matter protests and the toppling of Colston, that heritage for the benefit of everyone 'requires a perpetual attention to the most inclusive view of citizenship' and the sentiments of communities seeking change in order to challenge the continued acceptance and valorisation of white supremacy.<sup>61</sup>

#### Ongoing Impact of Black Lives Matter on the Sector

The exhibition of the Colston statue can be considered a pivotal and urgent example of heritage sector responses to Black Lives Matter protests and a subsequent catalysis of conversations regarding anti-colonial approaches to curation and interpretation in museums. However, the need for change within the heritage sector was felt by professionals working in almost all museums with collections or legacies influenced by

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<sup>60</sup> Bristol History Commission, *The Colston Statue: What Next?* (2022) p. 30.

<sup>61</sup> R. Drayton, 'Rhodes Must Not Fall?', *Third Text* 33.4, (2019) 651-666 (p. 666).

colonialism, though, as highlighted in Chapter 2, the institutional responses to this period of increased awareness were inconsistent and uncoordinated. The reasons for such a varied reaction to the issues highlighted by Black Lives Matter are likely the result of the heritage sector's overwhelming whiteness and elitism, as addressed in Chapter 1, and the inherent disconnect between a number of museums and the communities they supposedly serve. In the case of the British Museum's controversial statement detailing the institution's supposed support for the Black Lives Matter movement, the assertion that 'the British Museum stands in solidarity with the [...] Black community throughout the world' and places 'diversity and inclusion at the heart of our values' appeared distinctly out of touch within the context of the museum's vast colonial collections, including objects looted from indigenous peoples.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, it appeared that the British Museum's visitors and critics alike were more aware of the hypocrisy of such a statement than the museum's director was perhaps prepared for. However, the British Museum was in no way the only institution which failed to adequately acknowledge the systemic violence towards Black people which had initiated the period of mass protest, or to accept responsibility for its own shortcomings related to diversity, colonial collections and outdated interpretation. For example, the National Gallery released a comparatively short statement simply acknowledging their inner-city location and a need to 'take this moment to listen, pose important questions and reflect,' which arguably better addresses the need for learning and change, but ultimately fails to address the Black Lives Matter movement, or the death of George Floyd.<sup>63</sup> The brief and unspecific nature of this statement carries an implied passivity, which was perhaps intended to deflect from the active role of museums in the perpetuation of racist or pro-colonial narratives, despite this thesis having already established, the words of Lindsey Chappell remain true; 'the museum is not a neutral container, a passive collection of art and artifacts. [...] The museum is itself a historical argument.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> H. Fischer, 'A Message from Director Hartwig Fischer', *The British Museum*, 5 June 2020 <<https://blog.britishmuseum.org/a-message-from-director-hartwig-fischer/>> [accessed 23/02/2021].

<sup>63</sup> A. Greenberger, 'Controversy Over Museums' Black Lives Matter Statements Continues as Critics Pillory British Institutions', *Artnews*, 8 June 2020 <<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/british-museums-black-lives-matter-statements-controversy-1202690203/>> [accessed 29/06/2023].

<sup>64</sup> L. N. Chappell, 'Reading the Museum', *Literature Compass* (2023) 1-11 (p. 2).

Despite the apparently performative or superficial nature of statements released by large institutions, which were, at least in part, perceived to be ‘definitely for face-saving to some degree,’<sup>65</sup> there was a desire amongst non-executive museum staff to act on the concerns raised by Black Lives Matter. However, for some institutions it appeared there was a disconnect between decision-making executives and the rest of the staff as much as there was between the institution and the wider public. For those wishing to express support for Black communities and activists and expedite anti-colonial discussion or projects already in progress, there appeared to be a number of obstacles in place to prevent this from taking place. For example, the status of the MShed as part of Bristol Museums, which in turn forms part of Bristol City Council, meant the process of writing and releasing statements seemed closed off: ‘the staff again, were clamouring ‘what are we doing? Why are we not responding to this? [...] Why are we not doing the statements?’ But you know, it had all had to come directly through the city council and all that to be approved and PR checked and all that kind of stuff.’<sup>66</sup> A similar situation was experienced by staff at UCL’s Petrie Museum, where, much like the MShed, the museum forms part of a much larger organisation; in this case, the University College London. Here, ‘there was a lot of talk about how important it is and how we must get it right. And lots of hot air was expended.’<sup>67</sup> Both these expressions of frustration highlight the disparity between museum staff working on the ground within the museums to fulfil the aims of the institution, and those who occupy executive roles and thus appear to take responsibility for high-profile communications or strategic decisions. This approach also implies a failure to recognise the status of museum staff as ‘of the community’ despite operating within the structure of the museum.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, given the desire to express support for a fast-developing global movement, and the failure of the institution to officially acknowledge criticisms of the heritage sector said movement had raised, it is clear that the people who comprise the majority of the museum’s staff are underrepresented in external communications and high-level decision making. Though

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<sup>65</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>66</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>67</sup> C. Wilson, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 5 December 2022.

<sup>68</sup> V. Hollows, ‘The Activist Role of Museum Staff’ in *Museum Activism* ed. By R. R. Janes & R. Sandell (London: Routledge, 2019) 80-90 (p. 80).

statements regarding issues such as race and social action should be subject to review before their release in order to ensure such communications have been approached thoughtfully, it is likely that an over-abundance of caution limits the ability of museum staff to express solidarity with causes they wish to support. According to Butcher's model of critical community practice, 'in thinking about activism and ability to create change, every member of staff is an agent with the choice to activate their potential contribution.'<sup>69</sup> In choosing to ignore the values and beliefs held by museum staff at every level, or to restrict expression of such sentiments to internal spaces, the museum can arguably not function as an agent of social justice activism. This can not only be disheartening, but can also result in the release of statements on behalf of the institution that do not benefit from the expertise of staff who work with indigenous collections and objects linked to colonialism, or indeed staff of colour whose lived experience appears to have broadly been ignored by the museum representatives responsible for writing statements and press releases. For example, Hartwig Fischer's statement on behalf of the British Museum states that the institution is 'aligned with the spirit and soul of Black Lives Matter everywhere' and will 'work to diversify [their] own staff.'<sup>70</sup> However, in J. P. Sires' account of their experiences working within the museums sector, and the British Museum specifically, they found that, where statements were released by museums in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, it was 'difficult to reconcile the experience [they] had in the sector - the discrimination, the racism, the isolation - with the ferocity with which certain colleagues rushed to profess their antiracism stance.'<sup>71</sup> Here Sires brings into question the validity of any statements of solidarity from within the museums sector, whether from close colleagues or the executive board, due to the apparent hypocrisy of such declarations. Given institutions like the British Museum profess to supporting Black Lives Matter and the pursuit of increased diversity and inclusion, it is illuminating to discover that this has not been reflected in the experiences of staff of colour, who had now become 'hyper visible at work' with seemingly little consideration for the mental health impact of such a burden.<sup>72</sup> As

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<sup>69</sup> V. Hollows, 'The Activist Role of Museum Staff' in *Museum Activism* ed. By R. R. Janes & R. Sandell (London: Routledge, 2019) 80-90 (p. 81).

<sup>70</sup> H. Fischer, 'A Message from Director Hartwig Fischer', *The British Museum*, 5 June 2020

<sup>71</sup> J. P. Sires, 'Black Lives Matter and Museums in 2020: A Personal and Professional Perspective', *American Anthropologist* 123.4 (2021) 957-959 (p. 958).

<sup>72</sup> J. P. Sires, 'Black Lives Matter and Museums in 2020: A Personal and Professional Perspective', *American Anthropologist* 123.4 (2021) 957-959 (p. 958).

J.P. Sires asserts, it is therefore difficult for any museum in the Global North to make statements regarding a commitment to anti-racism, whilst racist staff members are able to continue to occupy senior positions. The nature of organisational structures within institutions is such that, regardless of whether or not, as Lisa Graves observes: the museum is made up of 'individuals and individual's passions and interests', any institution which enables or protects racism is fundamentally racist.<sup>73</sup> Thus, no such museum can meaningfully write statements of solidarity with anti-racist activists without acknowledging and apologising for overt racism within the organisation and demonstrating moves to address this problem. In this case, when the staff member of colour was forced out of the museum by racist staff members, 'he left a report about how that made him feel, how inappropriate it was.'<sup>74</sup> Though former colleagues acknowledge the significance of such information and its potential use as a tool to address institutional racism, this report and its ultimate usefulness to the museum provides another example of staff members of colour undertaking vast amounts of emotional labour and experiencing trauma in order to enable the apparent self-actualisation of white colleagues.<sup>75 76</sup>

As previously stated, any expression of support or solidarity made by museums in response to the Black Lives Matter movement fall short of moving beyond performativity if no immediate action is taken to alter the organisational culture and embrace anti-colonial working. In many cases, it appears that immediate action on the matter of race in museums has frequently equated to the establishment of internal focus or discussion groups. The purpose of such groups varies and can include the education and training of staff, as well as planning for future work to address institutional perpetuation of racism, both within the organisational structure and culture, and the narratives presented within the museum. In the case of the MShed, which must be considered in the context of the museum's immediate and urgent interventions in relation to the Colston statue, the work to explore

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<sup>73</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Interview conducted by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 2022.

<sup>75</sup> Interview conducted by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Museums Association, 'Collaboration', *Museums Association* <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/supporting-decolonisation-in-museums/collaboration/>> [accessed 08/01/24].

‘decolonisation’ began in 2019 with the creation of a ‘decolonisation work group.’<sup>77</sup> Though this working group was in its infancy, with the first meeting taking place during November 2020, its existence appeared to provide a springboard from which a more organisation-wide approach could launch. Following the toppling of the Colston statue, the working group enabled the facilitation of all staff workshops, where MShed staff ‘worked with various external people to challenge our conceptions of who we are as an organisation and where do we want to move to, and what does decolonisation mean for us.’<sup>78</sup> For these workshops, the museum collaborated with the Black South West Network, which is a Black-led racial justice organisation based in Bristol. Though the perspectives of Black people are entirely necessary in order for the museum to form any kind of inclusive approach to future work, the decision to approach external organisations, even where such organisations have worked with the institution before, for input to staff education and future anti-colonial work does present some problems. For example, this approach is consistent with the aforementioned culture of expecting people of colour to take responsibility for educating and advising white people, ‘to help explain and map a route of the established trammel lines of inequality to both the wider heritage sector and to corporates.’<sup>79</sup> In addition, it is possible to argue that seeking solutions and answers to questions from external organisations allows the museum to appear as though it is meaningfully pursuing a more inclusive and diverse future, without necessitating the diversification of what Chapter 1 of this thesis established to be an overwhelmingly white workforce. In almost all cases, the majority of museum sector staff of colour are employed as artists and freelancers on temporary contracts. It could therefore be argued that this method of seeking advice is another extractive museum process in which collaborations and interventions attributed to diversity and inclusion strategies serve to benefit the museum rather than the communities concerned. However, an alternative perspective on this sudden demand for advisors and consultants of colour is provided by A. Oke, Director of the Black Cultural Archives, who states; ‘we charged corporates to hear our views, and embraced being able to use our

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<sup>77</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>78</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>79</sup> A. Oke, ‘Black Lives Matter: One Year On’, *Museum’s Association*, 25 May 2021

<<https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/analysis/2021/05/black-lives-matter-protests-one-year-on/#>> [accessed 2/07/2023].

platform to influence sector conversations. In this way, we hope to make lemonade from the bitter lemons of 2020.’<sup>80</sup> This perspective offers a view which emphasises the value of compensating professionals for their advice and contributions to work which responds to a culture of racism and pro-colonial discourse in the museums sector. A culture of working and collaborating with a diverse range of professionals and communities in a way which is mutually beneficial and rooted in equality can signal a positive change within the sector, as long as this forms part of an ongoing way of working. This should therefore not be regarded as an alternative to increasing the diversity of the museum’s workforce on every level, but rather an opportunity to access specific expertise when it is required and to support Black-led organisations working outside the museum, towards an aim which is supported or replicated by the museum within its own mission statement or strategy.

At the MShed, the decolonisation working group and subsequent workshops were made mandatory for all staff, which demonstrated a commitment, on the part of the institution, to establish anti-racism and anti-colonialism as a priority for all departments rather than a matter of individual commitment or motivation. The three workshops held in the summer of 2020, in the immediate aftermath of Colston’s toppling ‘really coalesced the idea around making the decolonisation working group a thing that was important and putting time and effort into that.’<sup>81</sup> Participation in workshops which serve to educate members of staff and to provide a space for discussion and exchange of ideas has the potential to encourage greater investment in the pursuit of anti-colonial and anti-racist work, as it promotes an understanding of issues highlighted by Black Lives Matter and the significance of work to address them. This is particularly important given the likelihood that museum staff members have been educated and employed by a system which perpetuated pro-colonial narratives and centres white perspectives. As reflected across public responses to this subject matter, ‘some of those workshops that we held at the Black Southwest Network after Colston were challenging, I think, because you could argue that there were

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<sup>80</sup> A. Oke, ‘Black Lives Matter: One Year On’, *Museum’s Association*, 25 May 2021 < <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/analysis/2021/05/black-lives-matter-protests-one-year-on/#> > [accessed 2/07/2023].

<sup>81</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

stereotypical views put forward from both sort of sides of the argument.’<sup>82</sup> However this remains an important aspect of the process, as workshops which facilitate open discussion enable institutions to establish where their teams are in terms of their attitudes to anti-racism and thus how much work must be done in order to address misconceptions or, in some cases, perspectives shaped by racist attitudes. It therefore appears that the MShed’s decision to convene workshops to contextualise current events and their relevance to the institution has provided an effective basis from which further work might develop. In addition, the workshops ‘kind of galvanized a lot of work [certain teams] were trying to do and it just put it just higher up the agenda.’<sup>83</sup> For those members of the heritage sector already conscious of a need to make changes, of which there were many, the Black Lives Matter movement’s rise to global prominence and the expectation that museums would act in response provided support for work which was perhaps previously not considered a priority. At UCL’s Petrie Museum, ‘all the things that happened that year around Black Lives Matter meant that the directors of the department suddenly decided the EDI was their big focus. And it gave us a reason to say look at these things that we’ve already wanted to do anyway.’<sup>84</sup> It therefore appears that, despite the fact museum leadership are likely to have been motivated primarily by potential reputational damage, in some cases these concerns have resulted in endorsement and support for projects and interventions that were previously pushed back or turned down; ‘it became a bit easier to, to push things over the line, or harder for them to turn any of them down for any of the strategic reasons.’<sup>85</sup> This sentiment illustrates the aforementioned often apparent disparity between the priorities of the museum executives and those of the staff working within the institution who have always worked to increase the diversity of perspectives presented, as well as creating inclusive spaces and narratives. Therefore, though the solidarity expressed by figures like Hartwig Fischer may appear to have been performative activism given the nature of the statements, the desire to appear supportive of anti-colonial interventions enabled the gap

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<sup>82</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>83</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>84</sup> C. Wilson, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 5 December 2022.

<sup>85</sup> C. Wilson, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 5 December 2022.

to close between staff working on the ground, and the apparently detached leadership teams.

The use of focus and working groups has also proven useful for coordinated action on outdated, racist or pro-colonial terminology within museum archives and catalogues. For example, at the MShed, a 'language working group' has begun the process of examining all 'offensive and inappropriate use of language' in the museum's database, labels and galleries.<sup>86</sup> Though apparently straight-forward, such work to erase wording, descriptions and terminology that reinforce problematic perspectives is a deeply involved process which constitutes a great deal of research to establish which terms should be used in the place of those which have been removed. In founding a group to address this work, the museum is presumably not only able to develop a cohesive approach to such changes, but also spreads the responsibility for such updates amongst a group of staff members. This approach is likely to enable swifter progress and increased investment in the project across departments or areas of responsibility. In addition, a range of expertise is convened within the working group and a collaborative working culture is created, thus increasing the readily available resources and enabling information regarding changing terminology to disperse more organically across departments. In this case, the establishment of a working group has actively resulted in efficient change-making within the museum, and resulted in responsive system whereby 'if a member of staff or the public say, 'have you seen that label? That that's really inappropriate.' We can now get it changed quickly.'<sup>87</sup> However, given working groups are often made up of internal members of institution staff, they may be at risk of attempting to solve problems from the same positionality and organisational culture that enabled problems relating to lack of diversity in the first place. This can of course be partially negated by opening working groups up to include external advisors, board members and experts from across the sector, particularly if members are invited to join due to their particular interest or experience related to anti-colonial practice. This is the case for the Museum Association's 'Decolonisation Working Group' which draws together a diverse

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<sup>86</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>87</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

network of professionals from both within the Museum Association and other institutions for whom 'decolonisation' is a relevant and significant topic.<sup>88</sup> Despite this, it must be noted that for the Museums Association, the working group was formed from membership of a pre-existing Ethics Committee, and the organisation therefore had the benefit of drawing from an established group of professionals interested in ethical practice in museums. For institutions elsewhere in the sector, this may not be possible short-term, and it is therefore important such groups embrace a diversity of perspectives where available, and study the outputs of bodies like the Museums Association in order to provide external perspectives.

The Petrie Museum took a similar approach to terminology and written resources, with a particular emphasis on those which were accessible to the public; 'we recently updated our collections online and the curators have, over time, been working to edit and change the wording and remove and record outdated language.'<sup>89</sup> Though this work has primarily been the responsibility of curators, perhaps with a more thorough knowledge of the collections more specifically, the Petrie Museum have also created a less formal collaborative approach to such changes, encouraging input from staff across the institution including front of house. Again, a collaborative approach which enables anyone working in the museum to contribute means the project is likely to progress more quickly and creatively, plus here the value of input outside the curatorial team is affirmed. This increases inclusion internally, which is especially significant given research which suggests 'staff in visitor service roles consistently felt less valued, less motivated and less able to impact on museum practice than those working back-of-house.'<sup>90</sup> It is prudent to also note that the front of house staff at museums often constitute the lowest paid, and are also the most diverse group of museum workers aside from those on temporary contracts.<sup>91</sup> In addition to working internally to edit documentation and interpretation, the Petrie museum made these efforts public by

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<sup>88</sup> Museums Association, 'Decolonising Practice', *Museums Association* <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/decolonising-practice/> [accessed 1/1/2024].

<sup>89</sup> C. Wilson, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 5 December 2022.

<sup>90</sup> G.K. Adams, 'On the Front Line', *Museums Association*, 4 March 2022 <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/analysis/2022/03/on-the-front-line/>> [accessed 2/07/2023].

<sup>91</sup> M. Charr, 'Museums and Employee Diversity', *Museum Next*, 24 February 2022 <<https://www.museumnext.com/article/museums-and-employee-diversity/>> [accessed 03/07/2023].

advertising the work online, thus making it clear to their audiences ‘that that's what we do and that where the language is wrong, we need to be challenged and we will fix it.’<sup>92</sup> This decision to share progress with members of the public is also constructive for museums who, like both the Petrie and the MShed, had been undertaking relevant work before the summer of 2020, as it negates the conception that the relative absence of anti-colonial intervention within visitor-facing areas of the museum is entirely representative of the museum’s approach. To an extent, this public record of progress occurring inside the museum implicitly invites feedback from the public, or from external colleagues elsewhere in the sector. This then has the potential to increase the diversity of perspectives considered when designing interventions or initiating change, thus also increasing buy-in from the local community, and better equips the museum to represent and serve the community in which it sits. It is essential for true museum activism or outreach to take place here, that community members are encouraged to express any and all thoughts regarding the issues the museum’s work addresses. As with the Colston exhibition at the MShed, space needs to be made for exchange of ideas, conversation and collaboration. The museum must not position itself as the authority on such subjects, nor should it dictate the precise structure and agenda of community discussions, rendering the so-called participants ‘subdued passive learners.’<sup>93</sup>

In such scenarios, it is also important that museums acknowledge instances in which they do not know the answers. Given the subjectivity of historical interpretation and the inherent bias addressed in chapter 1 of this thesis, museums arguably never have definite answers regarding the way in which certain histories should be portrayed or interrogated. In some instances, for example, the provenance of certain collections or the material properties of objects, certain facts can be known. However, in others, the museum is but one interested stakeholder expressing opinions on the significance of collections or histories, through the perspectives offered through curation and interpretation, or indeed through the inclusion or exclusion of information and specific narratives. It is a long continuation of such practices

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<sup>92</sup> C. Wilson, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 5 December 2022.

<sup>93</sup> B. Lynch, ‘I’m Gonna Do Something’ in *Museum Activism* ed. By R. R. Janes & R. Sandell (London: Routledge, 2019) 115-126 (p. 115).

and the consistent reinforcement of pro-colonial or white supremacist narratives that has rendered many museums symbolic of colonial violence and its legacy in shaping societal culture. In order to somewhat undo the harm that is done by the perpetuation of white supremacy and associated attitudes towards history, the museum must admit that it has made mistakes, and it therefore is not an all-knowing institution or authority. Though Chapter 1 refers to Tony Bennet's definition of museums as institutions of high culture, which 'might be [...] assigned the purpose of civilising the population as a whole,'<sup>94</sup> this cannot continue to be the case if such institutions are to operate in an ethical and inclusive manner. Putting the colonial undertones of the term 'civilising' to one side, this idea that museums exist for the betterment of the public must now be subverted, as museums increasingly embrace a broad variety of perspectives, including those of activist communities in order for the betterment of the institution. This process might be initiated by the acceptance and acknowledgment by museums and their staff that there are some things they do not know. For example, at the MShed, the museum's loan of three Benin Bronzes from the British Museum was ended in 2021 and the objects were returned. The display that housed the bronzes whilst at the MShed was part of a section of the museum that presented 'precolonial Africa', however the decision was made to return the objects to the British Museum, electing to replace them instead with a statement in the empty case. World Cultures Curator Lisa Graves said: 'I wrote a label in that case saying, we don't know how to exhibit pre-colonial Africa using our colonial collections. It doesn't seem appropriate anymore to try and say 'this is what Africa was like before the slave trade.'"<sup>95</sup> Here, Graves highlights hypocrisy of a museum professing to detail precolonial Africa using objects which were seized and looted during acts of colonial violence. This move would also set a precedent for the critique of museum practices across the sector, and draws attention to questions around whether or not the British Museum should even claim ownership over the Benin Bronzes in order to loan them. In containing and withholding indigenous collections, the museum acts as a 'weapon' of colonial power, whose 'interventions with time [are] like the brute force of field guns.'<sup>96</sup> In his book on the subject of the Benin Bronzes, D. Hicks

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<sup>94</sup> T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 18.

<sup>95</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>96</sup> D. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p. 6.

wonders ‘what do we see when a light is shone into these most hesitant, uncertain of spaces, unresolved and raw?’<sup>97</sup> In this case, we hope to see museums acknowledging that their situation is indeed unresolved and raw, but that the place of looted collections is not in the unwavering ownership of large institutions like the British Museum. Activist museums should indeed set precedents regarding such questions, and in both setting examples and highlighting problematic practices elsewhere in the sector, will generate debate and potentially enable more ethical and anti-colonial approaches to develop and spread. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that museums embracing counter-narratives and anti-colonialism have the capacity to influence other institutions. For example, the Whitney Plantation museum in Louisiana, in focusing their interpretation of the plantation entirely on the experiences of the enslaved inhabitants, has ‘influenced the level of significance attributed to African American history at other, nearby sites’ leading them to provide visitor journeys more inclusive of the lives and histories of enslaved peoples.<sup>98</sup> The Mshed’s own Benin Bronze remains in the ownership of the museum, however the institution has used its website to acknowledge this object as a candidate for repatriation. However, the wording used on Bristol Museums’ repatriation page is somewhat vague regarding specific actions being taken. For example, the museum cites ‘a level of agreement’ for the plans of other museums regarding the return of Benin Bronzes as a necessary step in the formation of the Mshed’s own decisions.<sup>99</sup> Given some museums, including the Horniman in London, have returned some of their Bronzes to Nigeria’s National Commission for Museums and Monuments, with the agreement that those remaining in London are now on loan to the museum, it is perhaps redundant to claim any coherent approach across the sector is necessary for action to be taken by individual institutions or authorities.<sup>100</sup> In this instance, in their decisions regarding the Benin Bronzes, the Mshed exhibits the dichotomy of approaches which advance and stifle the museum sector’s progress towards anti-colonialism.

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<sup>97</sup> D. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p. 6.

<sup>98</sup> I. Gilbert, ‘How might the UK heritage sector learn from the interpretation of slavery and colonial history at plantation house museums in the southern United States?’ (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Sheffield, 2020) p. 65.

<sup>99</sup> Bristol Museums, ‘Repatriation’, *Collections* < <https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/collections/action-on-decolonisation/repatriation/> > [accessed 20/06/2023].

<sup>100</sup> H. Sherwood, ‘London museum returns looted Benin City artefacts to Nigeria’, *The Guardian*, 28 November 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/nov/28/london-museum-returns-looted-benin-city-artefacts-to-nigeria> [accessed 20/06/2023].

Despite the fervour of the Black Lives Matter protests and the subsequent rush to address the museum sector's role in perpetuating racial inequality and white supremacist narratives, it does appear that one of the greatest challenges to meaningful and continued progress is an apparent gradual decrease in pressure and enthusiasm. Following the end of the pandemic, museum professionals returned to work, and as such were faced with the return of all their responsibilities and priorities. It is likely that the requirement to work solely from home made dialogue regarding museum strategies for inclusion and anti-colonialism much easier, and enabled focus on such issues due to a contraction of possible work areas. It is during the earlier stages of these discussions that some of the aforementioned groups, such as the MShed's 'decolonisation working group' appear to have been formed. Though interventions like the ongoing efforts to make changes to terminology and categorisations at both the MShed and the Petrie Museum have been successful thus far, it is apparent that the years post-2020 have resulted in the galvanisation of existing ideas and projects, but in many cases, museum teams have now 'lagged a bit recently in terms of making those things happen.'<sup>101</sup> The difficulty here appears twofold. Firstly, the abundance of dialogue groups and committees have added an additional layer of pseudo-governance to museum processes which are already subject to numerous checks, balances and stakeholders. R. Janes identifies this as one of the key considerations of driving change in 'museums of the future', as 'traditional hierarchical bureaucracies are non-responsive to anything but their own agendas' and meaningful shifts within an arts or heritage institution require 'repositioning the centre, from standing at the top of the organisation [...] to 'the middle of things' to facilitate and mediate.'<sup>102</sup> Therefore, without considerable restructure to the balance of power and authority within museums, the abundance of internal input to certain decisions has the potential to create additional complication; 'we do tend a lot of time spend an awful lot of time talking about things before we actually deliver things.'<sup>103</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that the aforementioned written interpretation designed to replace the Benin Bronzes on loan from the British Museum at the MShed were, at the time of

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<sup>101</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>102</sup> R. R. Janes, *Museums and the Paradox of Change* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2013) p. 6

<sup>103</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

interviews with museum staff, yet to appear in the empty case. 'The label was made. I think it then sat on somebody's desk for very long time and the keys couldn't be found [...]. But I don't think it's actually gone up yet for, for those stupid reasons.'<sup>104</sup> The second problem is the potential for groups and committees to form as an immediate response to critique and to appear as though changes are being made, whilst the only function they truly serve is to signify action when the organisation or institution experience 'leadership panic'.<sup>105</sup> For example, at the Petrie Museum, a committee was hastily established, but curatorial staff lament the fact that it 'seems to have done nothing since then.'<sup>106</sup> For some museum staff, the performative nature of such actions were apparent: 'it only really feels like now, [...] when the optics become complicated that they take these steps.'<sup>107</sup> In such cases where committees serve only to exist as a signal to external activists and critics, they appear to provide only an opportunity for majority white museum staff to self-reflect and use the issue of racism in the sector as a tool with which they might undergo their own self-actualisation rather than engage with meaningful interventions. In some cases, membership of committees and discussion groups performatively engaged in anti-racism or anti-colonialism might provide an enhancement to professional reputations which in turn provides opportunities for career progression, thus perpetuating lack of diversity within the sector. Such scenarios form the antithesis of what activist collectives like Museum Detox claim the sector requires in order to combat racial injustice: 'We need organisations with trustees and directors that are willing to step down because they contribute to a system where different voices are not heard.'<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>105</sup> C. Wilson, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 5 December 2022.

<sup>106</sup> C. Wilson, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 5 December 2022.

<sup>107</sup> A. Garnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 5 December 2022.

<sup>108</sup> J. Knott, 'Museum activists say real change needed to combat racial injustice', *Museums Association*, 8 June 2020 < <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2020/06/museum-activists-real-action-racial-injustice/> > [accessed 02/08/2023].

### Case Study: The American Museum

For other museums, for whom the apparent primary focus is not European colonialism, the situation is perhaps more complex. For example, the American Museum in Bath is an independent institution for whom the priority is 'to showcase American decorative arts and dispel stereotypes of American culture.'<sup>109</sup> The museum is housed in a large manor, built in 1820 on the outskirts of Bath. Here, British-born antiques dealer John Judkyn and American psychologist Dallas Pratt established an American Museum which was opened to the public in 1961.<sup>110</sup> After three years of dedicated collecting during the late 1950s, the purpose of Judkyn and Pratt's Museum was to share America's 'fascinating heritage' of homes 'that inspired pioneers to remember, to adapt, to compromise and then, brilliantly, to meet the challenge of strange conditions with a tough genius for invention.'<sup>111</sup> Therefore, the emphasis of the institution's interpretation was placed entirely on design and craftsmanship from American history, from the European colonisation of the country, through to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, given this description's emphasis of the 'pioneers' and their experiences, it becomes somewhat clear that the aims with which Judkyn and Pratt hastily gathered the museum's collections were to showcase design and history from a somewhat narrow, white perspective. According to the museum's website, the building contains 'over 12,000 objects which showcase the finest examples of American decorative arts along with quilts and American folk art which are recognised as some of the most significant in Europe and the equal of many premier collections in the United States.'<sup>112</sup> The museum's layout is such that much of the experience is akin to the visitor route through an English country house museum, though focused on different people, eras and narratives, many of the rooms are arranged in such a way that the objects are seen in the context of the domestic environment. Given the museum's founders were described by the Royal Society as 'anglophiles' it is likely such domestic dioramas were inspired by the treasure houses of Britain, which too were supposed to contain the very best of English design and colonial

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<sup>109</sup> American Museum and Gardens, 'About', *American Museum and Gardens* <<https://americanmuseum.org/about/>> [accessed 02/08/2023].

<sup>110</sup> G. Kavanagh, 'The American Museum in Britain, Claverton Manor, Bath', *The Journal of American History*, 82.1 (1995) 135-138 (p. 135).

<sup>111</sup> G. B. Hughes and N. Wallis, 'General Notes', *Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts*, 109.5059 (1961) 540-546 (p. 542).

<sup>112</sup> American Museum and Gardens, 'Permanent collection', *American Museum and Gardens* <<https://americanmuseum.org/about/permanent-collection/>> [accessed 02/08/2023].

collections.<sup>113</sup> The atmosphere which is thus created in much of the museum is one of grandeur, and of an historic progression from colonial migration and pastoral functionality, through to the grandeur of large houses with wealthy inhabitants. The similarities to English country houses extend to the museum's large, decorative gardens which the institution likens to the gardens at George Washington's home, Mount Vernon.<sup>114</sup> Of course, Mount Vernon, along with a number of grand American houses that could perhaps be compared to English country estates, were the direct result of the brutal enslavement of Black African peoples. To thoroughly interrogate the relationship between slavery and the foundations of the United States, or indeed the accumulation of vast wealth in the country would go beyond the remit of this thesis. However, it is important to acknowledge the numerous similarities between the interpretation and visitor experience of the American Museum and those of plantation house museums in the American South, for example. Both appear to largely adhere to 'a formula [...] wherein [...] houses were opened to the public as beautiful girls in hoop skirts identified family heirlooms and antiques.'<sup>115</sup> As such, the focus on beauty, design and finery, like that embraced by the founders of the American Museum, has often enabled a collective amnesia, whereby the fundamental role of enslavement of Black peoples in the creation or upkeep of such objects and sites is excluded from the dominant narrative. Although the American Museum is not a site of violence against Black people as a plantation property might be, as with many country houses in the UK, the contents and history represented cannot be severed from legacies of colonial violence without the deliberate erasure of such contexts. In this case, where histories of violence, exploitation and white supremacy have been erased through omission, and collections or places have been remembered only in a way that represents success, wealth and beauty, the American Museum and many aforementioned institutions are not dissimilar.

This is not to say that the American Museum neglects to reference the history of Black enslavement entirely, as at the time of writing this thesis, there is a small section of the

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<sup>113</sup> G. Kavanagh, 'The American Museum in Britain, Claverton Manor, Bath', *The Journal of American History*, 82.1 (1995) 135-138 (p. 135).

<sup>114</sup> American Museum and Gardens, 'Gardens & grounds', *American Museum and Gardens* <<https://americanmuseum.org/about/gardens-grounds/>> [accessed 02/08/2023].

<sup>115</sup> G.T. Eskew, 'From Civil War to Civil Rights: Selling Alabama as Heritage Tourism', in G. Dann & A.V. Seaton (eds), *Slavery, Contested Heritage and Thanatourism* (Oxford, 2002) p. 203.

American Heritage Exhibition in the manor's basement which details some of the nation's history in a chronological sequence. The fact that slavery has been relegated to this part of the museum is problematic for a number of reasons. The separation of the subject matter from the rooms upstairs, which supposedly present a semblance of American daily life, implies that one version of history can exist separately from the other. This interpretation of African American experiences as something other, removed from the history of American colonisation is historically inaccurate as it fails to acknowledge the intrinsic nature of slavery within the American economy, as well as the fact that landscaped gardens like those at Mount Vernon relied on the labour of enslaved peoples. In addition, this separation of such entwined histories, relegating all mention of African Americans to the museum's basement implies that the history of Black people is less significant, which in turn makes such narratives less significant in the minds of the visitor. This curatorial decision also reflects the perception that it does not correspond to the rest of the house's narratives, which predominantly portray the lives of white people. Therefore, the implication is also that Black Americans had very little role in the development of American culture and design. Again, this is not only a form of erasure that reinforces white supremacist narratives, but it is also historically inaccurate, presenting an incomplete and biased version of reality. This is symbolic of the problems associated with founding a museum entirely on the visions and collections of one or two individuals, as this embeds bias within the museum's systems and processes and can limit the scope of the interpretation. The limited perspectives inherent to white, wealthy collectors become increasingly difficult to counter, as methods of display, curation and classification embed a narrow set of values and conventions over time. It is perhaps partly for this reason that the African American section of the American Museum is so small and poorly integrated with the rest of the collections. In order for museums and heritage organisations to adequately begin to address the colonialism and white-centred narratives within their institutions, they must cease to view diverse perspectives and narratives as minor additions to the dominant narrative. This approach of merely making additions to existing white supremacist structures and content implies there can be a separation of histories, when, as already stated, this is not a reflection of reality and encourages visitors to view the history of American colonisation. In addition, the implication is that the experiences and contributions of Black and indigenous peoples are supplementary to a narrative centred on, in this example, white Americans. Thus, even

when the presence of Black and Indigenous American people is acknowledged within the museum, the separation and singularity of such interventions renders the lives of those people are perceived as a footnote in a white-centred history.

Despite largely separating the history of Indigenous Americans and African Americans into specific displays within the basement of the museum, the American Museum's visitor route on this floor follows a vague chronology through post-colonisation American history. One of the first interpretive panels on the route through the galleries details the arrival of European colonists on what has come to be regarded as American soil. At the time this research was conducted, in May 2022, the text on this panel states that 'within a hundred years of Columbus' arrival in the New World in 1492, the native population of America shrank from an estimated 7 million people to about 700,000.'<sup>116</sup> Though this provides some immediate acknowledgement of the decimation wrought on Indigenous American peoples by European colonialism in the aftermath of Columbus' arrival in the Caribbean, it is brief and clearly written using outdated pro-colonial language. The term 'New World' in particular is a term which comes from a Eurocentric attitude associated with this period of colonisation, which reflected a desire to seek idealised worlds, in which white Europeans could 'begin a new life in a fresh green landscape.'<sup>117</sup> The existence of such places was associated with a divine right to exploration and exploitation of supposedly discovered lands, and therefore there was little regard for the existing indigenous peoples inhabiting such lands at the time of first European arrivals. The paragraph goes on to attribute much of the reduction in indigenous population to the spread of European diseases: 'introduced diseases were as ruthless as any of the fortune seekers from Europe.'<sup>118</sup> Though the arrival of European diseases did play a role in the decimation of Indigenous populations, this phrasing constructs a passive narrative whereby the violent actions of European colonisers are diminished, as it suggests non-sentient viruses and diseases are at ethical fault in the same way as violent and exploitative colonial forces. Such assertions conceal the fact that people like Columbus, who arrived in the Caribbean in search of 'the spot of earthly paradise', participated in the

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<sup>116</sup> American Museum interpretation panel, 'A land of change', 5 May 2022, American Museum & Gardens.

<sup>117</sup> W. W. Caldwell, *American Narcissism: The Myth of National Superiority* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2006) p. 30.

<sup>118</sup> American Museum interpretation panel, 'A land of change', 5 May 2022, American Museum & Gardens.

enslavement and brutal treatment of indigenous Taino people.<sup>119</sup> Failing to find gold in the region, Columbus resumed his previous occupation of trading in enslaved peoples, and 'loaded the holds of his ships with [human] cargo headed for the slave market in Seville.'<sup>120</sup> To imply that an incidental transmission of diseases from one population to another was equally at fault for the deaths of millions of indigenous communities is a very large omission of information which shapes an understanding of colonisation that supports the myth of inevitability. The idea that genocides like those that took place across the Caribbean and America were part of a predetermination or fate that did not correspond with the desires of European settlers and is thus disingenuous. This passive wording is particularly jarring when situated next to a quote from a 'newspaperman' in 1845 which states: 'our manifest destiny is to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the development of our yearly multiplying millions.'<sup>121</sup> This myth of manifest destiny and the rights of white Europeans to exploit and colonise the land, the indigenous peoples and its resources exists somewhat unchallenged and without adequate context on the interpretive panel, setting the tone for the history ahead in the visitor journey.

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<sup>119</sup> W. W. Caldwell, *American Narcissism: The Myth of National Superiority* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2006) p. 29.

<sup>120</sup> G. E. Tinker and M. Freeland, 'Thief, Slave Trader, Murderer: Christopher Columbus and Caribbean Population Decline', *Wicazo Sa Review* 23.1 (2008) 25-50 (p. 28).

<sup>121</sup> American Museum interpretation panel, 'A land of change', 5 May 2022, American Museum & Gardens.

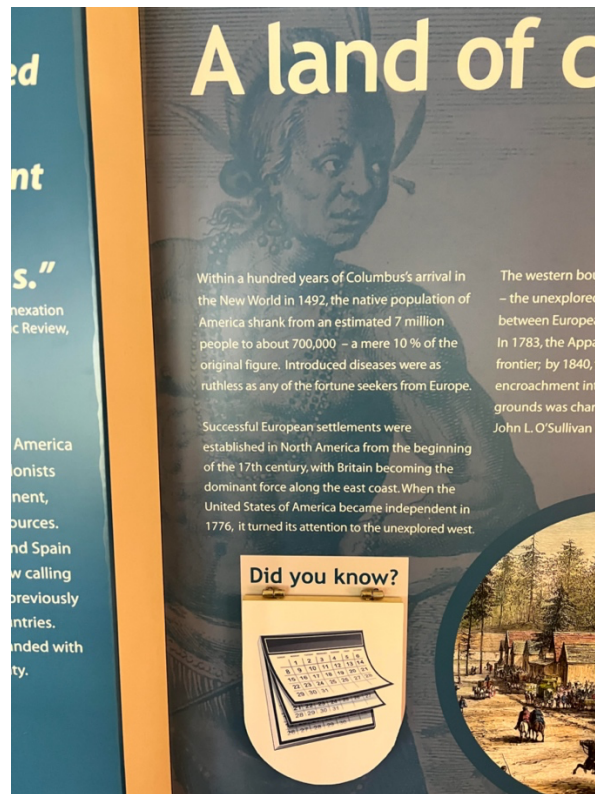


Fig 4.

It must be acknowledged that the basement level of the museum is not without acknowledgment of the role of enslaved Black people and Indigenous Americans within the narrative of this history of colonisation. For example, one interpretive panel addresses the way in which indigenous peoples were viewed and depicted by white settlers. The panel states 'the first European portraits of Native Americans promoted the idea of the Noble Savage.'<sup>122</sup> This idealistic and fetishising portrayal of indigenous peoples feeds into the aforementioned mythology regarding the European discovery of a new paradise in the Americas, and was influenced by enlightenment thinkers who characterised civilisation as being inherently tied to whiteness and education, and who believed 'goodness was best evidenced in 'natural man' or in 'man in the state of nature.'<sup>123</sup> This is not explored as a problematic perception, or one which inherently served to 'other' indigenous peoples from the colonial settlers. Instead, this is contrasted with the way in which 'Native Americans began to be depicted as more 'savage' than 'noble'' due to the desire for 'European land

<sup>122</sup> American Museum interpretation panel, 'Depictions of Native Americans', 5 May 2022, American Museum & Gardens.

<sup>123</sup> W. W. Caldwell, *American Narcissism: The Myth of National Superiority* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2006) p. 33.

seizures to be morally justified.’<sup>124</sup> Though this brief paragraph depicts the way in which European perceptions of Indigenous Americans shifted in line with the expansion of the ‘Manifest Destiny’ ideology and the literal European expansion further into America, there is no acknowledgment provided that both images were designed to maintain an understanding of racial difference and to subjugate the indigenous peoples. Though it must be acknowledged that the interpretation within the museum is designed to be as accessible as possible for a wide range of audiences, the inclusion of the term ‘Noble Savage’ here implies that the Indigenous Americans were revered by white settlers, but fails to acknowledge the way in which such interpretations served to fetishise and control. Any ‘superiority’ to Europeans stems from a mythical simplicity which often suggests an innocence which stems from freedom from the burden of education and civilisation. In addition to this, the term ‘Noble Savage’ is itself disputed by historian like T. Ellingson, who argue that historical figures like Joseph-Francis Lafitau referred to the Huron language as ‘noble, majestic and more regular’ than other dialects and that this ‘trait-ascriptive pattern’ has been conflated with other examples to construct an imagined ‘absolute rather than a relative quality.’<sup>125</sup> This stereotype has been established over time to the extent that the myth of the ‘Noble Savage’ has become an assumed fact which is over-simplified and compounded, which here is a problem perpetuated by the American Museum. Whilst one might assume the decision to acknowledge the control of Indigenous American imagery and its use as propaganda to advance the violent colonisation of their lands, the concept of the Noble Savage is perhaps too complex to detail in such a short interpretive panel without proliferating over-simplified, and thus inaccurate, versions of history. The second and final paragraph of this panel continues to detail an interesting shift in the way in which Indigenous Americans were portrayed when it was decided they were declining in number at such a rate that they ‘were no longer a threat to European expansion.’<sup>126</sup> However, the reasons given for such decline are again very passive, with a predicted extinction attributed to ‘declining birth rates and high levels of mortality.’ As with the emphasis on the role of disease in the interpretive panel discussed previously, the purposeful subjugation,

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<sup>124</sup> American Museum interpretation panel, ‘Depictions of Native Americans’, 5 May 2022, American Museum & Gardens.

<sup>125</sup> T. Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001) p.46.

<sup>126</sup> American Museum interpretation panel, ‘Depictions of Native Americans’, 5 May 2022, American Museum & Gardens.

extermination and enslavement of peoples is veiled by an assertion of occurrences which were directly caused by white supremacist violence and colonialism. The high levels of mortality amongst Indigenous American peoples did not occur independently, nor were they an incidental result of westward expansion and shrinking communities. This passivity or deflection of colonial violence in museum interpretation is perhaps illustrative of a form of 'white shame' which comes as a result of pressure to acknowledge the exploitation and racism inherent to a society and its history. As discussed in Chapter 2, such white fragility and shame can lead to resistance and denial, with shame forming 'a toxic form of splitting and projection'<sup>127</sup> whereby narratives seen as more positive or palatable for a white museum visitor are separated from those which refer to violence or harm perpetuated by those of a similar demographic.

An additional problem with the above inclusions of Black and Indigenous histories and experiences within the museum, is that they are entirely white-centred, and as previously stated, may suggest that such narratives are supplemental to a more significant, white settler story. They also focus predominantly on that which is inflicted on Black and Indigenous peoples rather than, for example, their lives before European colonisation or indeed their agency, culture and achievements. These feel somewhat secondary considerations and contribute to a white-centred understanding of history through limited perspectives. Again, this is perhaps one of the many pitfalls of founding a museum which professes to represent American history on the works and perspectives of a small number of white men. Despite this, there are areas of the museum that celebrate Indigenous creativity and culture, as well as creativity expressed by communities of enslaved people. A small section of the basement is dedicated to 'The Decorative Arts of the Native Americans' with cabinets containing ceremonial objects, clothing and fine bead work. This display makes sense considering the purpose of the Museum is to showcase American design and understand 'the richness and complexity of American Culture.'<sup>128</sup> However, it must be noted that this particular display is than others on the basement level and is seemingly relegated

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<sup>127</sup> S. Grand, 'The Other Within: White Shame, Native American Genocide', *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 54.1 (2018) 84-102 (p. 87).

<sup>128</sup> American Museum interpretation panel, 'The Decorative Arts of the Native Americans', 5 May 2022, American Museum & Gardens.

to a corner, appearing as an afterthought to the original narrative. Furthermore, though this part of the collection focuses on design, it is separated from the rest of the curated rooms upstairs, which feature designs and furnishings from across centuries and regions of America. Whether intentional or not, this separation serves to 'other' the work of Indigenous Americans from that of white European settlers. It also places art created by indigenous communities outside the realm of design and innovation and instead limits them to being seen as part of history, but through an ethnographic lens rather than one of aesthetic appreciation. This corresponds with the issues highlighted in Chapter 1, whereby indigenous art and collections are rarely considered to be the equals of those created and collected by white people, due to a difference defined by perceived racial inferiority. This implication is compounded by the interpretive panel next to the display which states 'no words for 'art' in the European sense existed in the hundreds of Native American languages.' This is again reductive as the assertion relies on a Euro or Anglo-centric perspective which searches for a direct translation of both words and meaning between languages. It is therefore assumed that a concept like 'art' would be perceived by Indigenous Americans in the same rigid manner as Europeans, into a mere one or two words. As J. M. Iseke Barns states: 'in the colonial gaze, which is directed at Indigenous peoples' subjectivity and culture, there is an attempt to [...] determine if the Indigenous peoples approach 'the ascribed sophistication of certain brands of political and social theory.'<sup>129</sup> Thus, language differences provide a convenient barrier which white scholars and curators can rely on to justify the othering of Indigenous peoples and cultures in almost every part of life. It is therefore assumed that Indigenous communities create only for practical or spiritual reasons and therefore presumably lack the sophistication of white Europeans who are enabled through heightened intellect and depth of thought to create thought-provoking or aesthetically pleasing objects for no purpose other than personal enjoyment or reflection. This assumption also fails to recognise the fact that objects created for practical or spiritual uses can also have value as works of art and craftsmanship. In addition, this also, perhaps inadvertently, highlights the problem with Eurocentric museum interpretation and its reliance on the binary of written language. Naturally, European

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<sup>129</sup> J. M. Iseke-Barns, 'Politics and Power of Languages: Indigenous Resistance to Colonizing Experiences of Language Dominance', *Journal of Thought* 39.1 (2004) 45-81 (p. 47).

languages are perhaps not best placed methods of interpretation, and an insistence on written materials only forms part of a long history of colonisation which ‘targeted oral tradition’ and thus decimated tribal languages.<sup>130</sup> Though museums like the American Museum must consider meeting the needs of a largely English-speaking audience, it is worth considering in terms of both anti-colonial curation or interpretation and accessibility, that written interpretation may not provide the best and most universally accessible understanding of certain museum objects and collections. In many cases, a visual demonstration of an object’s use or indeed its creation, or perhaps an interpretation provided through spoken word, song or dance would prove more representative of the object’s significance to a community of origin than a label written in the language of the oppressor, from the perspective of an inherently colonial system. The basement of the American Museum in its current form is overall a dated and highly problematic representation of colonisation, white racial superiority and Black and Indigenous subjectivity.

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<sup>130</sup> J. M. Iseke-Barns, ‘Politics and Power of Languages: Indigenous Resistance to Colonizing Experiences of Language Dominance’, *Journal of Thought* 39.1 (2004) 45-81 (p. 52).



Fig 5.

### The American Museum's Anti-Colonial Future

Despite the ongoing existence of interpretation and narratives that apparently venerate white colonisers, from 'a very narrow perspective'.<sup>131</sup> Staff at the American Museum such as Collections and Engagement Director, Jan English, are aware of the problematic nature of such spaces and are consciously working behind the scenes to drive change. It must be noted that perhaps unlike the interpretation presented at other museums, the basement level of the manor house contains some of the most recent displays: 'in 2007 the museum redid the lower-level galleries, [...] and that was part of the massive project within the UK; the Bicentennial anniversary of the abolition of slavery within the British Empire.'<sup>132</sup> This is interesting as it challenges potential preconceptions that pro-colonial or white supremacist

<sup>131</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

<sup>132</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

attitudes within museums and their interpretation is something firmly limited to the more distant past. Despite the fact that the 2007 bicentennial provoked a number of events and initiatives across the UK, any expectation that these would serve to address the erasure of colonial violence in British history would be decidedly misplaced. The bicentennial appeared to celebrate the act of 1807, which prohibited the traded of enslaved peoples within the British Empire, thus not marking the end of slavery as a British institution. In addition, the occasion centred on the passage of The Slave Trade Act firmly positioned Britain as an abolitionist force, rather than one which profited from, and continued to profit from, the enslavement and suffering of Black, African peoples. Thus, despite the efforts of many in both the museum and educational worlds, the focus of the bicentennial ‘a narrative of white British self-congratulation and pride.’<sup>133</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that museum interpretation written and created during this period did little to challenge the triumphalist and white-centred narratives that had influenced most museums from their very conception. However, Jan, who joined the American Museum in 2021, also attributes the problematic content within the American Heritage gallery to a lack of direction within the institution and states ‘the museum really didn't talk about colonial history. It was just showcasing, ‘oh these people arrived and this is how they lived.’”<sup>134</sup> This perhaps highlights the differences between museum work provoked by celebratory continuations of an existing narrative, and more disruptive and challenging movements like Black Lives Matter, which called for a complete change in the way museums operate and convey history, highlighting racism and erasure, rather than accepting vague and noncommittal acknowledgements of colonial history and its legacy. This was certainly the case for the American Museum, which had apparently done little to consider its role in the proliferation of pro-colonial narratives: ‘I would say there wasn't much [...] conversation or awareness other than that project and feeling at the time it was the right thing to do as it was based with other organizations.’<sup>135</sup> Unlike museums such as the Petrie and the Mshed, the American Museum as a whole had apparently spent little time considering the need to examine their content and

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<sup>133</sup> D. Paton, ‘Interpreting the Bicentenary in Britain’, *Slavery and Abolition* 30.2 (2009) 277-289 (p. 279)

<sup>134</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

<sup>135</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

interpretation prior to 2020, aside from some individual staff members, however the Black Lives Matter movement's global rise to prominence similarly galvanised the institution.

Like the Petrie Museum, the American Museum may initially have experienced some lack of coherence between the Museum's leadership and the rest of the staff and volunteers. Jan English states; 'I'm pretty sure the trustees were kind of not sure what to do' and the senior management similarly felt underprepared to approach the issues raised by Black Lives Matter.<sup>136</sup> Though it was decided that the museum should release a statement in support of the movement, 'and then the wording wasn't quite right.'<sup>137</sup> Thus, as with both the MShed and the Petrie Museum, a lack of cohesion between leadership and the rest of the museum staff, in addition to a lack of diversity and understanding of anti-colonial work led to an apparent period of inaction. However, Jan states that they undertook work to rectify this lack of external acknowledgement and communication, with the addition of a statement, detailing 'our position if you will, and make it a priority that like as an institution we are going to be making some changes.'<sup>138</sup> Despite a perceived lack of interaction with the subject of Black Lives Matter during the immediate aftermath of protests in 2020, the museum instead has established a statement which does not imply a performative agreement with the demands of the Black Lives Matter, but instead outlines the institution's aims and intentions moving forwards. The museum was then able to commence work to address the pro-colonial narratives and Indigenous erasure within, deciding first to better understand the problems with their existing curation and interpretation. This approach arguably negates the paternalism inherent to approaches in which the museum leadership, which Chapter 1 has established is the least diverse team in most institutions, decide unilaterally to solve the problem of pro-colonialism and racism amongst themselves. Naturally, this compounds the problem of white-led museums claiming authority over historical narratives and thus perpetuating problems relating to lack of inclusion, pro-colonial narratives and limited perspectives. The American Museum instead acknowledged

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<sup>136</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

<sup>137</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

<sup>138</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

that the institution was broadly ill-equipped to address such topics and sought external advice from organisations with relevant expertise. The first actions, undertaken in 2021 were to establish a partnership with ‘an organisation in Bath called Be in Bath, which is belonging in Bath.’<sup>139</sup> This organisation, also known as The Belonging Network works to ‘create positive, inclusive change’ through ‘collaboration, integration and community.’<sup>140</sup> The founder and director of the network are both women of colour, and the organisation’s work appears to centre around working with a variety of organisations to support ‘long-term and impactful changes’ to enable, staff, prospective staff and visitors to feel a sense of belonging.<sup>141</sup> The Belonging Network brings together people from ‘minoritised communities’ in order to provide advice to organisations and institutions looking to create more welcoming and inclusive spaces.<sup>142</sup> The American Museum’s decision to approach a collective which specialises diversity and inclusion and is experienced in the provision of advice is a positive first step towards understanding the changes that need to be made within the museum to improve diversity and inclusion, as well as challenging the existing pro-colonial narratives. In addition, the fact that The Belonging Network is an organisation based in Bath is likely to mean that the advice provided is reflective of the wants and needs of the museum’s local community. However, unlike the types of community engagement discussed earlier in this chapter, this consultation does not burden local people from marginalised communities with the responsibility of educating white-led institutions about diversity and inclusion without prior experience, and whilst navigating the trauma associated with structural racism and violence. This approach also ensures that diverse collectives who offer advice and guidance professionally are compensated for their work, rather than overlooked in favour of museum teams attempting to solve problems within a system that perpetuates them. The specific theme of ‘belonging’ is also significant here, as the responsibility to belong or ‘fit in’ should not be the responsibility of the visitor, though their ability to feel as though they do will inevitably be impacted by institutions which ‘carry

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<sup>139</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

<sup>140</sup> The Belonging Network, ‘About’, *The Belonging Network* <<https://belongingnetwork.co.uk/about-us/>> [accessed 17/08/2023].

<sup>141</sup> The Belonging Network, ‘About’, *The Belonging Network* <<https://belongingnetwork.co.uk/about-us/>> [accessed 17/08/2023].

<sup>142</sup> The Belonging Network, ‘Communities’, *The Belonging Network* <<https://belongingnetwork.co.uk/communities/>> [accessed 17/08/2023].

extensive societal capital, expectations and baggage. This manifests in the architecture, layout and messaging of the building, along with the objects and programming within it.’<sup>143</sup> Though certain aspects of these expectations are shaped by factors which are more difficult to change, such as the architecture of listed buildings which often contain museums, feedback such as that from The Belonging Network can help institutions identify that which can be changed. So, in this case, ‘they came and they did an audit on the galleries and just basically came to the list of things that they felt we could adapt, modify, improve upon.’<sup>144</sup> This feedback, which in turn generated a wealth of suggestions, has proven useful to the American Museum and arguably provides the institution with a much more stable mandate with which to create a more inclusive and, in some cases, such as changes to wording and interpretation, anti-colonial museum experience.

In addition to working with a local organisation, the museum also worked with the Audience Agency, which is a national charity which works ‘to provide knowledge, data and insight enabling cultural organisations to increase their relevance, reach and resilience.’<sup>145</sup> In a manner similar to the MShed’s work with teams within Bristol Council to expand their reach, the American Museum was able to rely on the Audience Agency to independently provide focus groups made up of communities who both do and do not choose to visit the museum. Thus, the museum can assume feedback is given with relative neutrality when compared with a scenario in which the institution has conducted its own outreach and undertaken feedback gathering internally. As part of this research, focus group members ‘had to go into the house, they had to go to each room and they had to have an interview with someone from the Audience Agency.’<sup>146</sup> In addition to this, the Audience Agency conducted visitor journey mapping and audience profiling, which generated a report which also provided ‘lots of comments around the narrative and, and, and ways in which they felt we could

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<sup>143</sup> C. A. Price and A. Applebaum, ‘Measuring a Sense of Belonging at Museums and Cultural Centres’, *Curator* 65.1 (2022) 135-160 (p. 136).

<sup>144</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

<sup>145</sup> The Audience Agency, ‘About Us’, *The Audience Agency* <<https://www.theaudienceagency.org/about-us>> [accessed 18/08/2023].

<sup>146</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

modernise and say things in different ways and have a more inclusive offer.’<sup>147</sup> This demonstrates, arguably even more significantly than at the MShed, the importance of sourcing advice from outside the institution when looking to make significant changes to the visitor offer and to narratives and interpretation within the museum. Collated feedback gathered by an independent body provides a picture of existing problems and potential solutions, as well as a clearer idea of who currently does or does not visit the museum and why. This also enables the museum to more easily form a coherent plan and strategy for next steps, as well as provide the basis for internal communication, which the museum recognises as essential to implementation of change. During the process, museum staff have received feedback from some of the American Museum’s many volunteers, ‘some a bit negative and there’s lots of nervousness about being too woke. You know, is this going to change things?’<sup>148</sup>

Prior to 2020 in particular, for some organisations, such discussions may have appeared overwhelming, or a source of irreconcilable tensions. One such incident occurred in 2017 at the National Trust, whereby ‘tensions with volunteer room guides culminated in a refusal to wear rainbow lanyards, were part of an effort to provide a more welcoming atmosphere to LGBTQ+ visitors, which they felt were ‘infringing on their political freedoms.’<sup>149</sup> In many cases, such problems may arise from the fact that ‘guides or volunteers themselves hold discriminatory views or do not value inclusivity; an issue that sometimes does not make itself apparent until [...] museums move to increase the diversity [...] of stories they tell.’<sup>150</sup> However, it must also be acknowledged that, for some volunteers, adequate training and consistent communication can prevent confusion and resistance related to change. It can also provide opportunities for learning, particularly around diversity, inclusion and colonial

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<sup>147</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

<sup>148</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

<sup>149</sup> L. Pasha-Robinson, ‘Hundreds of National Trust members quit in protest over gay pride campaign’, *Independent* (August, 2017) < <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/hundreds-of-national-trust-members-quit-in-protest-over-gay-pride-campaign-a7878131.html> > [accessed 1/10/2020].

<sup>150</sup> I. Gilbert, ‘How might the UK heritage sector learn from the interpretation of slavery and colonial history at plantation house museums in the southern United States?’ (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Sheffield, 2020) p. 39.

history, as both staff and volunteers find themselves 'all on the journey in different ways.'<sup>151</sup> Therefore, the American Museum has utilised all the advice and feedback gathered during its period of research and collaboration to form a task force made up of both staff and volunteers, 'finding volunteers that are very much in supportive and of [the work] and [...] they've been just a great link.'<sup>152</sup> By placing volunteers in positions of influence and enabling them to be partially responsible for the dissemination of information, the museum's leadership have perhaps countered the perception that the process of change is a hierarchical one, and encouraged the volunteers to take ownership over parts of the process. Jan English states, 'it's not just me saying it. It's been kind of a group effort that we're going through, [...] you know, this is us as an institution, it's not one person's decision.'<sup>153</sup>

The American Museum has established a varied and diverse range of sources from which to develop a strategy for looking to address some of the problematic content within the basement gallery in particular, and simultaneously create a more inclusive and welcoming museum experience. In many respects, it is less performative for museums to carry out such work before publicly making statements of support for movements like Black Lives Matter from an entirely contradictory position. In addition, the manner with which this preliminary work has been communicated to both staff and volunteers at the museum has encouraged a cohesive approach whereby all members of museum teams are able to provide feedback and participate in what is a period of great potential and momentum. In addition, at the time of this research, the American Museum had placed signs around some of the galleries that made it clear 'we're updating some of the content, you know, come back and see us kind of thing. To just recognize that we felt some of the content was problematic.'<sup>154</sup> Much like such acknowledgements of work in progress or a lack of answers at both the MShed and the Petrie Museum, this keeps visitors aware that something is being done to address

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<sup>151</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

<sup>152</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

<sup>153</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

<sup>154</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

content which is problematic. From the perspective of museum leadership this is beneficial as it prevents some criticism regarding inaction, whilst providing a means of visitors and members of the public to hold the institution to account if promised changes do not manifest. It is important that the American Museum maintain this momentum and continue to seek advice from organisations like The Belonging Network. However, it is crucial that the museum does not conflate such efforts with actions to change organisational culture, challenge white supremacy within established systems within the institution, and diversify their permanent workforce. In addition, the leadership must work to maintain the momentum with the task force, in order to avoid the aforementioned pitfalls associated with failure to move focus groups and boards beyond the realm of discussion; ‘and we do tend to spend an awful lot of time talking about things before we actually deliver things.’<sup>155</sup> As this chapter has shown, such delays can lead to a lapse in the prioritisation of anti-colonial work and thus render groups established to support such work as little more than opportunities for predominantly white museum teams to self-reflect. At the American Museum, staff at leadership level like Jan English have motivated a relatively rapid period of research and action, and it is their collaborative approach and willingness to learn that have enabled the process to continue: ‘I think we’ve actually done amazing work better together than we would have independently.’<sup>156</sup> Without support and encouragement from all levels of a museum’s leadership, it is unreasonable to expect the passion and drive of individuals within the institution to enact the change needed across the entirety of its teams and directorates.

This assertion has proven itself to be true throughout this chapter, which has highlighted the importance of cohesion, both within museums as well as with external bodies, in the pursuit of a more inclusive and anti-colonial approach. Furthermore, some of the problems associated with attempts to address criticisms pushed forward by Black Lives Matter appear to stem from a lack of communication across institutions, with very little input to planning and discussion outside executive teams, which as Chapter 1 asserts, are likely to be dominated

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<sup>155</sup> R. Barnett, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 19 April 2022.

<sup>156</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

by white members of staff. In all cases, it appears museum teams are largely willing to learn, develop and commit to anti-colonial ways of working, but this is entirely reliant on whether or not they are adequately enabled to do so. The passion of determined individuals is clearly insufficient to carry forward institutional change or change to the sector and much of the work already done in the immediate aftermath of Black Lives Matter protests is at risk of being considered by leadership teams to be an efficient means of safeguarding reputations. In their book on managing change in museums, McGowan and Bienkowski acknowledge that the unwieldy nature of large institutions often means changes 'seem to take so long that everyone involved loses focus.'<sup>157</sup> It is therefore pivotal to the process of anti-colonial change that museum leadership maintain enthusiasm and investment in the process. A strategic vision will need to account for the long-term nature of change, as well as the significant impact a number of small changes across the organisation might have. Measuring and celebrating progress is therefore another important function of leadership. In order to truly challenge and unravel pro-colonial narratives and the reinforcement of white supremacist attitudes within arts and heritage, it is foremost necessary to diversify the perspectives represented in decision-making processes across museums undertaking this work. In addition, it is through the continued efforts to create exhibitions, reinterpret existing collections and make changes to inherently colonial practices that professionals and organisations across the entire sector can learn from one another, and from external partners in order to maintain the momentum Black Lives Matter has undoubtedly increased. The following chapter will consider how museums now move beyond the mere acknowledgement of colonial legacies and racism in order to effectively decentre white perspectives within historical narratives related to colonialism, as well as the interpretation and care of indigenous collections. In addition, Chapter 4 will consider what this form of progress can look like.

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<sup>157</sup> H. McGowan and P. Bienkowski, *Managing Change in Museums and Galleries: A Practical Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2021) p. 2.

#### Chapter 4: Decentring Whiteness and Working for Change

The first three chapters of this thesis have presented the deeply flawed and inherently racist roots from which the present-day heritage sector has grown, the immediate impact of the Black Lives Matter movement and its role in highlighting said racism, as well as the work now being undertaken by professionals in the sector to drive change. It is clear from case studies and primary research that everyone working in museums and heritage has the potential to learn from and influence one another in terms of their approaches to anti-colonial and inclusive work. However, it is also evident there is much more to do in order to increase the diversity of perspectives reflected in said work, and to address the consistent centring of white narratives and experiences within the documenting and interpretation of historical figures, events, places and collections. In addition to changes to organisational culture and the diversification of the sector, where indigenous collections are concerned it is impossible to make ethical or anti-colonial decisions regarding their future without significant input from the source or ancestor communities.

This chapter will expand on the work of museums since 2020, as discussed in Chapter 3, and utilise learnings from this period of change and reaction, alongside examples of selected exhibitions and interventions which showcase anti-colonial approaches to curation and interpretation. Given the depth of influence pro-colonial and white supremacist attitudes have had on the heritage and museums sector, it is inevitable that the process of forming cohesive approaches to challenging and unravelling practices, systems and content which perpetuate these problems will take time. In addition to learning and trying new approaches, museum professionals, academics and activists must grapple with the question as to whether certain institutions, or the sector itself, will ever cease to represent a history and society that has celebrated and perpetuated colonial violence, as well as prioritising white experiences and perspectives. In order for museums to move forwards from the events of 2020 and respond to audiences who expect arts and heritage bodies to reflect their values, there must be space within the discourse to consider the subject of reparations, and the extent to which echoes of racism within the sector can be 'solved' by reinterpretation and restructure. This chapter will therefore also discuss what reparations can and should look like for museums, and whether or not they're possible. In addition,

there will be a consideration of whether there should be space for acknowledgement of ongoing problems with the sector and society as a whole, and expressions of rage, sadness and criticism which do not exist to be 'solved', but instead reflect the experiences of a diverse range of individuals and communities who believe their right to feel angry or sorrowful about histories of violence and discrimination should not be erased by positive changes to the heritage sector.

This chapter will examine case studies to illustrate the position of the heritage sector in a post-Covid-19 world. In the case of the Humboldt Forum, it will be considered whether some institutions have learned anything from the Black Lives Matter Movement and its criticism of colonial narratives. This particular example will also raise questions regarding whether an institution which does not undergo fundamental cultural change or seek the influence of originating communities can avoid perpetuating the idea of European superiority and the commodification of indigenous cultures. Following this, the 'Portable Universe' exhibition will be examined in the context of collaboration with originating communities and how this can enrich institutional understandings of the objects in their care.<sup>1</sup> In addition, this particular case-study will demonstrate the essential nature of learning and knowledge exchange between cultures as an approach to dismantling the ongoing influence of colonialism on interpretation of indigenous collections. Finally, this chapter will address the role of heritage and arts in healing the wounds colonialism has left on the sector and indeed the world.

### Post-2020 Work Across the Sector

As this thesis has made evident, the Black Lives Matter movement's global impact during the summer of 2020 was undoubtedly a turning point for the way in which audiences and professionals alike regarded the history of the United Kingdom and the heritage sector. During this period, an outpouring of critique was, with seemingly renewed vigour, levelled at the UK heritage sector and the vast history of colonialism it often sought to interpret. As

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<sup>1</sup> LACMA, 'The Portable Universe/El Universo en Tus Manos: Thought and Splendor of Indigenous Colombia', LACMA <<https://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/portable-universe>> [accessed 21/11/2022].

is demonstrated by the strength of response to such criticism, discussed in Chapter 2, and the subsequent work carried out by the institutions in Chapter 3, a widespread realisation appeared to have finally been reached within the heritage sector. It was broadly acknowledged that existing interpretations of history in the Global North had omitted or erased the role of colonial violence, oppression, exploitation and white supremacy in the development of many nations, and was present in the telling of such histories as well as in the practices employed by institutions that continued to hold and interpret indigenous ancestors and collections. Despite the counter-protests and far-right arguments in favour of maintaining a triumphalist and incomplete historical narrative, UK heritage organisations and institutions were largely quick to make statements regarding their commitment to anti-colonial work going forwards. Though the apparent performativity of some of these statements has become evident since their publication, it is clear from the examples considered in this thesis that some work has commenced to begin to address the omission or valorisation of colonial violence as well as the romanticising of people and places linked to the exploitation, oppression and genocide of indigenous peoples. However, in many cases, the beginnings of such work have often consisted of acknowledgements of colonial violence when directly related to certain objects, places and figures. Naturally, this is necessary in terms of contextualising the relevance of anti-colonial work, however it does often raise the problem of centring white figures, experiences and narratives in the documentation or acknowledgement of certain histories, which, as this chapter will go on to explore, sets a precedent for continued consideration of colonial and indeed indigenous histories from a white or Eurocentric perspective. In many respects, the actions of largely white-led institutions and organisations to swiftly respond to assertions that they were inherently racist, without significant restructure and change to organisational culture are illustrative of a form of humanitarianism or activism that affirms white supremacy. One must acknowledge that this problem has a long history and has been acknowledged by figures such as W.E.B Du Bois, who believed the supposed efforts white people publicly make to address injustices and suffering serve only to affirm their role in the ultimate control of society and of the narrative.<sup>2</sup> Therefore ‘through seeking to relieve the worst

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<sup>2</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920)

excesses of racist violence, humanitarianism’ and in this case, hasty acknowledgements of colonial pasts, ‘did not challenge whiteness but secured it, [...] helping to soothe the troubled souls of white folk concerned with both the wellbeing of Black and Indigenous populations and their own security at top of racial hierarchies.’<sup>3</sup> Whether consciously protecting their status and structure, or simply working within a long-standing white supremacist system, a number of organisations and institutions have made attempts to acknowledge and go on to interpret their own colonial legacies, whilst continuing to place white figures at the centre of the narrative.<sup>4</sup>

An example of this occurs in the National Trust’s report on their properties’ connections to slavery and colonialism which was introduced in Chapter 2. The opening pages of this report state that subsequent related work undertaken by the National Trust will highlight the ‘central role that the oppression and violence of the slave trade and legacies of colonialism have played in the making of modern Britain.’<sup>5</sup> In addition, the report avoids restricting the presence of marginalised communities, and people of colour specifically to narratives centred on their abjection, as the National Trust also pledges that it will ‘work with individuals and communities in order to share stories that have been forgotten, obscured, overlooked or insufficiently explored at many of our places.’<sup>6</sup> Though this inference that the erasure of marginalised peoples is not limited to inadequate acknowledgement of colonial legacies could be more explicit, it suggests that the completion of this research and this document will provide a springboard from which further work to diversify the narratives explored at National Trust sites may develop. The statement is also somewhat passive in its wording, as the introduction to this report fails to acknowledge the fact that these ‘forgotten’ stories have been erased and ‘overlooked’ by the organisation itself. The National Trust has played a significant role in the cultural identity and heritage of Britain since its conception in 1895, and is therefore responsible, alongside the rest of the sector’s

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<sup>3</sup> P. Pallister-Wilkins, ‘Saving the souls of white folk: Humanitarianism as white supremacy’, *Security Dialogue* 52.1 (2021) 98-106 (p. 101).

<sup>4</sup> K. Bunning, *Negotiating Race and Rights in the Museum* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021)

<sup>5</sup> S. Huxtable et al., ‘Introduction’ in *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* ed. by S. Huxtable et al. (Swindon: National Trust, 2020) 5-6 (p.6).

<sup>6</sup> S. Huxtable et al., ‘Introduction’ in *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* ed. by S. Huxtable et al. (Swindon: National Trust, 2020) 5-6 (p. 5).

most influential institutions, for the proliferation of white supremacist interpretations of history and an incomplete understanding of vast wealth and its sources. In addition, in the report, this statement is immediately followed by what seems to be an attempt to placate those who would oppose the inclusion of histories which no longer focus entirely on the experiences and achievements of white people. This is a somewhat strange inclusion in a report which is intended to ‘do justice to the true complexity of past, present and future,’ by addressing the implicit erasure and imbalance that has characterised the sector until now. The report states; ‘of course, the histories of slavery, legacies of colonialism and the lives of people of colour are not the only stories that we will tell.’<sup>7</sup> It then goes on to reassure the reader that the Trust will ‘continue to highlight the histories of place, architecture, families, estates, staff communities, artisanal practice and our remarkable collections.’<sup>8</sup> This statement is difficult to reconcile with the Trust’s supposed action to acknowledge colonial legacies for a number of reasons; principally because it implies the histories of families, estates, artisanal practice and collections are in any way extricable from the aforementioned legacies of colonialism, as well as the existence of people outside the wealthy, white, patriarchal binary that the National Trust’s presentations of history have previously adhered to. As this thesis has already made clear, this is not true. In order for museums or organisations like the Trust to meaningfully work towards a diverse, inclusive, anti-colonial version of history which does not erase the experiences and contributions of marginalised communities, they must incorporate such values into every part of their organisation and institution in order for this work to prove more than a reactive and performative gesture to protect the reputation of the institution. Indeed, a corporate plan which fosters an understanding across all staff and volunteers can lay the foundation for further planning.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, an assurance that the exploration of diverse narratives and histories would not serve to overwhelm the Trust’s often formulaic explorations of wealthy families and their belongings feels as though it is aimed at individuals or organisations who are resistant to change. Some of these thoughts are reflected in Chapter 2 of this thesis

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<sup>7</sup> S. Huxtable et al., ‘Introduction’ in *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* ed. by S. Huxtable et al. (Swindon: National Trust, 2020) 5-6 (p. 5).

<sup>8</sup> S. Huxtable et al., ‘Introduction’ in *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* ed. by S. Huxtable et al. (Swindon: National Trust, 2020) 5-6 (p. 5).

<sup>9</sup> R. R. Janes, *Museums and the Paradox of Change* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) p. 15.

which considers the role of museums in upholding white supremacy and white safe spaces, as well as their relationship with right wing activists in the aftermath of Black Lives Matter protests. This addition to a report which is supposed to focus on the further inclusion of diverse narratives and the acknowledgment of white colonialism affirms the idea that white fragility has a place in all discussions regarding anti-colonial or anti-racist work. In addition, such sentiments cater to a belief that changes to dominant, white supremacist narratives denote disadvantage for white people. According to Du Bois, ‘when the black man begins to dispute the white man's title to certain alleged bequests of the Fathers in wage and position, authority and training; and when his attitude toward charity is sullen anger rather than humble jollity; [...]— then the spell is suddenly broken’, and a resentment starts to form<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, Du Bois suggests that ‘whiteness comes into being and asserts itself when faced with the apprehension of imminent loss’, which certainly appears to be true, both in the overt opposition to anti-colonialism levied at museums by figures like Oliver Dowden, but also in this more subtle reminder of the National Trust’s pre-existing priorities, and their apparently secure future.<sup>11</sup> This practice of inserting and centring whiteness in every discourse on history, and colonialism in particular, prevents the organisation from redressing the overwhelming dominance of whiteness within the sector and the interpretation of history.

The report is broken down into categories ranging from the transatlantic trade in enslaved peoples to banking and British industrialisation. This variety of historical narratives implies the National Trust are considering colonial history beyond direct colonisation and colonial violence, being sure to acknowledge and explore the impact and spread of wealth associated with exploitation and oppression. However, as noted above, the introduction of the report also specifically refers to ‘the vital role that people of colour have played in our national history,’ and it is this aspect of anti-colonial interpretation and curation that the heritage sector more broadly appears to have been less quick to interrogate.<sup>12</sup> This is

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<sup>10</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920) p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> P. Pallister-Wilkins, ‘Saving the souls of white folk: Humanitarianism as white supremacy’, *Security Dialogue* 52.1 (2021) 98-106 (p. 100).

<sup>12</sup> S. Huxtable et al., ‘Introduction’ in *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* ed. by S. Huxtable et al. (Swindon: National Trust, 2020) 5-6 (p. 6).

demonstrated within the report itself, as the majority of the chapters and their contents refer specifically to processes related to economic success and the generation of wealth amongst wealthy, white individuals, families and businesses. Though this document is intended as an 'interim' report, as a means of summarising current research and outlining a 'commitment to exploring a wide range of histories', it is clear from the scope of the research initially outlined that the experiences of colonial history represented are, at present, rooted in whiteness. There are of course a number of reasons for this predominantly white perspective, not least the centuries of white supremacist and Eurocentric attitudes that have influenced the interpretation of history. In addition to this, white perspectives continue to be regarded as neutral, or default, whether consciously or not. As Burgard and Boucher state: 'Whiteness is seen as normal, continuous, forthright, and mainstream.'<sup>13</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, it is this association between whiteness and neutrality that enables museums to claim authority over the interpretation of history whilst upholding exclusionary and rigid perspectives. Whilst the National Trust claims to have made a commitment 'to research, interpret and share the histories of slavery and legacies of colonialism at the places we care for,' there appears to be no clear suggestion within the report that the organisation has implemented internal changes which might have diversified the perspectives from which the report was written and collated.

Most references to people of colour and their agency within the report occur in a very short section from Dr Christo Kefalas' chapter on abolition where it is stated that 'the role of the enslaved in their future emancipation cannot be overlooked.'<sup>14</sup> In it, they refer to African kings and their resistance to enslavers capturing and kidnapping people from within their respective territories. In addition, Kefalas describes the San Domingo revolution against enslavers and subsequent establishment of what is now Haiti as 'the most significant act of self-liberation by the enslaved.'<sup>15</sup> This acknowledgement of the efforts of Black people in

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<sup>13</sup> K. L. B. Burgard & M. L. Boucher, 'The Special Responsibility of Public Places to Dismantle White Supremacist Historical Narratives' in A. M. Labrador & N. A. Silberman (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Public Heritage Theory and Practice* (Oxford, 2018) p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> C. Kefalas, 'Abolition, Resistance and Protest' in *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* ed. by S. Huxtable et al. (Swindon: National Trust, 2020) 25-30 (p. 26).

<sup>15</sup> C. Kefalas, 'Abolition, Resistance and Protest' in *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* ed. by S. Huxtable et al. (Swindon: National Trust, 2020) 25-30 (p. 25).

their own liberation is highly significant, as it challenges any preconceptions that abolition was purely an act of white, British benevolence. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the UK heritage sector has a propensity towards focusing on abolition when interacting with the subject of slavery and thus simultaneously erasing histories of violence and oppression that necessitated acts of abolition as well as the agency and actions of Black peoples, both enslaved and free, to end centuries of subjugation and suffering. This practice of consistently promoting a pro-colonial version of history was perhaps no more evident than during 2007's bicentenary events, where 'a narrative of white British self-congratulation and pride dominated most visible responses.'<sup>16</sup> The National Trust is clearly aware of the need to move beyond such limiting and inherently white supremacist interpretations of history, though, given the strength of connections between the organisation's properties and the transatlantic trade in enslaved peoples, this should have been greatly expanded upon within the report. Therefore, whilst it is clear from some of the statements within this document that the organisation is conscious of the omission of non-white perspectives on colonial history, this contrasts with the content of this interim document which, in places, serves to reinforce the disparity.

As already stated, the introduction to the report outlines the document's purpose, whilst apparently suggesting that much of the work and research referenced was likely already underway within the organisation. The reason this was unknown outside the organisation is due to the disconnection between organisational or institutional leadership and other teams within the organisation discussed in chapter 2, and demonstrated at multiple museums. Given much of the research and effort into anti-colonialism and diversity of narratives was conducted by 'people who were, kind of, informally doing what they felt they could, from a curatorial perspective,'<sup>17</sup> it would have perhaps been of reputational benefit to the National Trust to collate such efforts and publicise their cohesive approach to this work before Black Lives Matter provoked reactions from across the sector. Though the National Trust fails to acknowledge the organisation's active role in the erasure of certain narratives, figures and events from the version of history portrayed at its historic sites in the opening statements of

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<sup>16</sup> D. Paton, 'Interpreting the Bicentenary in Britain', *Slavery and Abolition* 30.2 (2009) 277-289 (p. 279).

<sup>17</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

the report, this is partially addressed at the very end of the document. In a chapter titled 'Research', Senior Curator Sophie Chessum describes the foundation of the organisation and the stories that 'grew out of a tradition established in eighteenth-century country-house guides, and later, family histories' and continued as properties entered the care and ownership of the trust.<sup>18</sup> This is of little surprise given the process of acquisition often involving interaction with the wealthy families associated with properties, who understood and documented their own histories from distinctly white, privileged perspectives. Chessum goes on to state that, 'histories relating to the sources of wealth, [...] the history of black presence at our places and the wider context of British colonisation were occasionally mentioned, but were largely felt to be less relevant to typical country-house visitors in the past.'<sup>19</sup> Again, this use of the passive voice which fails to attribute responsibility to the National Trust itself, implies that the interests and expectations of country house visitors were in no way shaped by the organisation which significantly contributed to the construction of the image of the British country house as 'one-dimensional [...] Arcadian retreats that were blissfully isolated from political intrigue and the grubby world of trade'.<sup>20</sup> With the National Trust firmly established as a somewhat passive observer during a key period of pro-colonial and patriotic narrative development, Chessum goes on to list research and initiatives the organisation has since been involved in, including the aforementioned 2007 bicentenary. During this year, the National Trust did publish a feature in the organisation's magazine for members and visitors titled 'Addressing the Past', which highlighted the connections between slavery and some of the charity's properties. Despite the factual exploration of such historical events and sources of wealth, the responses from magazine readers were 'extensive and heated', with one correspondent asserting that the attribution of colonial violence to the owners and builders of country houses was 'slanted, racist and offensive.'<sup>21</sup> Such a volatile response to the acknowledgement of economic success driven by racist violence and exploitation affirms the status of the National Trust as

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<sup>18</sup> S. Chessum, 'Research' in *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* ed. by S. Huxtable (Swindon: National Trust, 2020) 59-61 (p. 59).

<sup>19</sup> S. Chessum, 'Research' in *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* ed. by S. Huxtable (Swindon: National Trust, 2020) 59-61 (p. 59).

<sup>20</sup> S. Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700 – 1930* (Manchester, 2017) p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> A. Tibbles, 'Facing Slavery's Past: The Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade', *Slavery and Abolition* 29.2 (2008) 293-303 (p. 294).

a perceived safe space for the assertion of racial hierarchy, in addition to its role in constructing whiteness 'as a cultural force, which to some extent relieves white people of having to negotiate their whiteness, except as defensiveness.'<sup>22</sup> Thus, this event was presumably a strong reminder to the organisation of the incomplete and white supremacist national narrative it had helped to create and would therefore incite strong resistance where challenged. Therefore, in order to shift the reputation of the organisation and engage in work to diversify the narratives present in their country house museums, the National Trust must do far more than merely acknowledge the connections between their collections and colonialism as they did in 2007. In addition, in order to work in an anti-colonial and inclusive way, the organisation must decentre whiteness and white perspectives within their interpretations of history. In order to challenge preconceived patriotic or romanticised versions of such histories, the National Trust must also work to actively acknowledge its pivotal role in their construction, as well as decentring themselves in discussions around progress within the sector, as an acknowledgment that the organisation alone is arguably not best placed to address the issues that are inextricable from its own structure and legacy.

The National Trust's reputation as an organisation predominantly associated with 'the quintessence of Englishness,' epitomizing 'the English love of domesticity, of the countryside, of hierarchy, of continuity and tradition' is of course but a small part of the national discourse on identity.<sup>23</sup> In conversation with Lonnie Bunch, Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, MP David Lammy summarised the UK's history syllabus as being primarily concerned with 'the two H's: Henry VIII and Hitler.'<sup>24</sup> In doing so, he highlighted the average demographic of significant historical figures considered by children throughout compulsory education: they are white, usually wealthy, powerful men. As M. Christian states, this continual reinforcement of a white world view is a 'continued manipulation of minds to the ultimate benefit of white privilege and European cultural hegemony.'<sup>25</sup> These white, male historical figures dominate

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<sup>22</sup> K. T. Resane, 'White fragility, white supremacy and white normativity make theological dialogue on race difficult', *In Die Skriflig* 55.1 (2021) 1-10 (p. 3).

<sup>23</sup> S. Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700 – 1930* (Manchester, 2017) p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> D. Lammy, Museums Association Conference, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> M. Christian, 'An African-Centred Perspective on White Supremacy', *Journal of Black Studies* 33.2 (2002) p. 186.

narratives and are memorialised in portraits, statues and plaques across the UK and beyond. This is certainly true within the National Trust whose ownership of Winston Churchill's home at Chartwell and their participation in the curation of his legacy has led to difficulty for the organisation. The organisation referred to Churchill's role as Prime Minister 'during the devastating Bengal Famine of 1943, the British response to which has been heavily criticised. Again, passive wording has been chosen here, presumably to downplay the role of this often-lauded historical figure in the suffering of indigenous peoples. Churchill was not merely a passive bystander in his role as Prime Minister during this period, and deliberately diverted food away from starving Indian peoples, considering them to be 'of negligible value to the war effort, and in any case, they were 'breeding like rabbits.'"<sup>26</sup> Despite the comparatively mild and undetailed mention of Churchill's association with the famine and Britain's rule over India in the report, the National Trust experienced significant backlash during the organisation's annual general meeting, mere months after the report's publication. At the meeting, 'furious members' apparently 'criticised the organisation's directors for 'pursuing a witch hunt'' in their report.<sup>27</sup> Again, it appears the National Trust are experiencing the consequences of the narrative they have participated in constructing, and therefore must work significantly harder to challenge triumphant reputations of figures such as Churchill in order to end patterns of pro-colonialism and unquestioning patriotism. This circumstance is symptomatic of a UK heritage sector, and society more broadly, where the consideration of historical events is almost exclusively undertaken from a white perspective.<sup>28</sup> This practice has cultivated a perception that accounts of violence or cruelty against indigenous peoples and people of colour are not significant enough in their perceived immorality to alter the way in which historic figures, movements and nations ought to be represented. The idea that white, wealthy men are the writers of history and therefore should be portrayed with a veneration rarely afforded to those existing outside such narrow and privileged demographics has evidently since been regarded as a somewhat default position.

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<sup>26</sup> M. Mukerjee, 'Winston Churchill's Plan for Post-War India', *Economic and Political Weekly* 45.32 (2010) 27-30 (p. 29).

<sup>27</sup> Evening Standard, 'National Trust members accuse board of 'woke agenda' and 'defaming' Winston Churchill', *Evening Standard*, 9 November 2020 < <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/national-trust-agm-woke-defaming-churchill-b59921.html> > [accessed 02/03/2021].

<sup>28</sup> C. McCarthy, 'From histories of museums to museum history: approaches to historicising colonial museums Aotearoa New Zealand', *Museum History* 13.1 (2020) 95-110.

Museum interpretation of colonial legacies has, in many cases, continued to prioritise the experiences and perspectives of white staff and visitors over all others, even as part of so-called anti-colonial work. A clear example of this could be seen at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, which opened to the public in July 2021. The museum is an ‘endeavour in which a considerable large number of very different and [...] changing individuals, institutions and interests are involved,’ and is therefore subject to all the difficulties associated with collaboration and multiple stakeholders, yet somewhat negates the concentration of power and authority that problematises other national museums.<sup>29</sup> As this thesis has already suggested, collaboration with multiple other bodies within and outside the heritage sector are crucial to dismantling problematic practices and systems which have perhaps heretofore been unchallenged or unchanged due to a variety of factors. In addition, the diversification of perspectives has enabled museums to reach communities and audiences that would perhaps otherwise be feel wary, uninterested or unwelcome. Given the Humboldt Forum’s very recent development, it feels appropriate that the institution’s decisions should be made by one fixed authority or interest group. However, as the museum itself opened fully to the public an entire year after the mass Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, and well into a period of heritage sector discussion on the subject of anti-racism and anti-colonialism, one would expect the museum to reject pro-colonial imagery and messaging altogether. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Indeed, the forum itself is named after two white men of privilege: Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, who in 2020 the museum cited as having defined ‘the Humboldt Forum as well as, already, our work on its programme.’<sup>30</sup> Though the attribution of admiration and authority to wealthy white men follows a longstanding pattern established in Chapter 1 of this thesis, it would perhaps be essentialist to suggest this alone is entirely problematic in itself, but rather it is a symptom of problematic historical conventions. However, Alexander von Humboldt in particular is of interest to this research, as a figure who ‘cut his way through the dense vegetation of the Amazon Rainforest,’ famous for viewing the world as a connected whole.<sup>31</sup> This description itself

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<sup>29</sup> H. Dorgerloh, ‘De-colonizing Public History – at the Humboldt Forum’, *Public History Weekly* (2021) p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Humboldt Forum, ‘Our two name-givers’, *Magazine*, 25 May 2020  
<https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/magazine/article/our-two-name-givers/> [accessed 29/08/2023].

<sup>31</sup> Humboldt Forum, ‘Our two name-givers’, *Magazine*, 25 May 2020  
<https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/magazine/article/our-two-name-givers/> [accessed 29/08/2023].

raises a number of questions regarding Alexander's activities in South America and his place in a long history of white 'explorers' being credited with knowledge long held by indigenous peoples, as well as the exploitation and extraction of natural resources. By framing Alexander von Humboldt as an explorer and conqueror of the natural world outside Europe, the Humboldt Forum participates in the perpetuation of the concept of the white patriarchy as the discoverer of knowledge, rather than the appropriator of it. In books documenting Humboldt's travels, he is depicted 'relishing the jungles, mountains and dangerous animals at every turn,' as though places outside Europe are mere intellectual playgrounds for the superior European mind.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Andrea Wulf's book on Humboldt's travelling and collecting is titled 'The Invention of Nature: The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the Lost Hero of Science,' which positions Humboldt as nature's discoverer, having legitimised pre-existing indigenous knowledge and natural resources through the lens of white, European authority.<sup>33</sup> During time home from his travels, Humboldt lends materials on the American languages to Freidrich Schlegel, who uses them to assert that indigenous American languages originate from 'animal dumbness' as opposed to the 'reflexion' of Indo-European languages. This is cited as being one of the major sources of linguistic racism.<sup>34</sup> These observations are of course in no way intended to deny or erase Humboldt's contributions to science or humanities as these are no doubt the factors which influenced the selection of both he and his brother as the namesakes of Berlin's new museum. However, given the complexity of the legacy most historical figures hold, particularly those associated with transatlantic travel and collecting, this does not appear to be a particularly anti-colonial choice. Having witnessed heated discussions at institutions like the British Museum regarding their own founder, Hans Sloane, one would assume the Humboldt Forum might wish to avoid tying complex legacies and the veneration of whiteness to their institution in such a blatant manner. According to J. Bach, in order to render the Humboldts an appealing namesake for a national institution, the Humboldt Forum founders have

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<sup>32</sup> S. Winder, 'The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the Lost Hero of Science by Andrea Wulf – review', *The Guardian*, 13 November 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/13/the-invention-of-nature-the-adventures-of-alexander-von-humboldt-andrea-wulf-review>> [accessed 30/08/2023].

<sup>33</sup> S. Winder, 'The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the Lost Hero of Science by Andrea Wulf – review', *The Guardian*, 13 November 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/13/the-invention-of-nature-the-adventures-of-alexander-von-humboldt-andrea-wulf-review>> [accessed 30/08/2023].

<sup>34</sup> J. Trabant, 'India vs America: the Science of Language in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Germany' in *Doing humanities in nineteenth-century Germany* ed. by E. Podoksik (Leiden: Brill, 2020) 189-213 ( p. 191).

attempted to ‘remove the practices of the great explorers from contamination with colonialism,’ instead focusing on ‘the legacy of great men who travelled the world at great personal risk in the name of science.’<sup>35</sup> Despite such narratives feeding an attitude of European superiority and inherent right to all the world’s resources, Alexander Humboldt’s legacy in particular is considered ‘suitable for children’ and is thus located ‘within ‘innocent’ history under the sign of childlike curiosity.’<sup>36</sup> Thus, in choosing to venerate Alexander von Humboldt, the Humboldt forum denies the violence inherent to colonial travel and collecting and crafts a reputational cleanse for the practice through their commodification and marketing of an historic figure. Furthermore, in a move which solidifies the veneration of Eurocentrism and white colonialism, the Humboldt Forum building has also been physically topped with a large crucifix. In addition, the cupola of the dome below the crucifix, phrases from the Bible state: ‘there is no other salvation, there is no other name given to all men, but the name of Jesus [...] all of them that are in heaven and on earth should bow down on their knees.’<sup>37</sup> Such explicit notions of Christian supremacy, placed atop a building which houses collections from indigenous peoples across the globe are unmistakably pro-colonial in nature and perpetuate the use of Christianity in the subjugation of indigenous peoples outlined in Chapter 1. Whiteness and white supremacy are centred and established as core themes at the Humboldt forum before visitors walk inside the building.

It is also important to note that, although new as a whole, the Humboldt Forum and its contents are formed of pre-existing institutions and collections. Therefore, the idea that the formation of a new museum during and after the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and the ensuing debate regarding racism and colonialism in heritage might provide opportunities to completely unravel systems of oppressive practice and colonial or Eurocentric systems cannot be demonstrated by the Humboldt. Much of the new museum’s collections from the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, which M. von Oswald identifies as one of many ‘ethnological museums’ which were debated and subsequently renamed

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<sup>35</sup> J. Bach, ‘Band of Brothers?’, *German Politics and Society* 39.1 (2021) 100-111 (p. 103).

<sup>36</sup> J. Bach, ‘Band of Brothers?’, *German Politics and Society* 39.1 (2021) 100-111 (p. 103).

<sup>37</sup> K. Brown, ‘Protesters are Taking Down Monuments Across Europe. So, Why is Germany Redoubling its Commitment to Conservative Symbolism?’, *Artnet*, 16 June 2020  
<https://news.artnet.com/opinion/humboldt-forum-cross-issue-1884378> [accessed 02/9/2020].

during the past decade in their search for ‘a place in the museumscape’ as the sector shifted away from comfort with the idea of ‘ethnology’ as a field of study due to its association with the ‘colonial project’ and the othering of indigenous cultures.<sup>38</sup> During this process of discussion and debate, many ethnology collections and museums changed their names, as did job role titles and departments within the institutions, as at the MShed, where ethnography was ‘rebranded’ as World Cultures. Such arbitrary alterations render the museum’s position ‘within the museumscape less legible,’ as they attempt to sever institutions from the disciplines of ethnology and anthropology without making it clear what it is they actually hope to do.<sup>39</sup> Though some believe terms like World Culture ‘helps to explain what the collection looks like,’ they do very little change ways of working and museums remain ethnological in all but name.<sup>40</sup> This is certainly true of the Humboldt, which appeared to have attempted a radical redisplay of indigenous collections that was arguably successful only in providing white visitors with affirmation that the exhibition was designed predominantly with their experiences in mind.

At the entrance to the area of the building which now houses the ‘Ethnological Museum of Berlin’ visitors were required to pass a sign which asked ‘how has colonial history influenced your family history?’<sup>41</sup> This is a difficult intervention to rationalise, because though it invites contemplation, it has been noted by commentators including author and curator Dan Hicks, that the deliberate amnesia related to histories of colonial violence often affects white people most. The rest of the global community are often, far more aware of the damages done by white supremacist colonialism because they continue to experience the racism and systemic inequality that was perpetuated and embedded as a consequence. This sign is therefore most likely designed for white visitors to invite some kind of self-reflective context. Conversely when read by a museum visitor of colour, who perhaps has an ancestry with experience of colonial violence, this intervention may elicit trauma and pain, as well as

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<sup>38</sup> M. von Oswald, *Working Through Colonial Collections: an ethnography of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022) p. 48.

<sup>39</sup> M. von Oswald, *Working Through Colonial Collections: an ethnography of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022) p. 48.

<sup>40</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

<sup>41</sup> R. Cardoso, ‘The Humboldt Forum’s Disappointing Ethnographic Collections’, *Hyperallergic*, December 2021 < <https://hyperallergic.com/699644/humboldt-forum-disappointing-ethnographic-collections/> > [accessed: 09/06/22].

renewing the marked difference in experience for white visitors, for whom the experience is an opportunity for reflection. The intention may have been for visitors to scrutinise their role in colonial oppression, but the phrasing instead highlights the museum and the target visitor's positionality and contributes to the designation of the space as overwhelmingly white. In addition, this attempt to engage with visitors forms much of the interpretation for this part of the museum, and thus implies the Humboldt Forum is somewhat evading culpability for the colonial violence inherent to some of the objects' place in their collections as well as the responsibility of the institution in taking an actively anti-colonial stance. Though acknowledgement of European cruelty and violence as the only efforts to engage with indigenous collections would prove a reductive method of centring whiteness and white figures in the discourse. An explanation of why such a collection exists in Berlin is necessary in preventing individuals and institutions 'who profited from violence and exploitation from the atrocities committed in their names, with their reputations intact.'<sup>42</sup> With a notable absence of informative interpretation which might provide context for visitors with little knowledge of colonialism and its legacies, having been shielded from this by a white supremacist society and education system, upon entering a museum space filled with collections and cultures from across the globe, the white visitor has been encouraged to make the experience about their own perspectives and reflections before arriving at the first exhibit. As one steps into the exhibition space the collection is then framed by a quote from Robin DiAngelo that says 'I have a white frame of reference and a white world view.'<sup>43</sup> In the absence of choosing a quote from a historian or academic who perhaps originates from one of the communities represented in the museum, instead the white visitor, scholar and their perspectives completely dominate. Indeed, the DiAngelo quote reveals the museum's position and the erroneous belief that efforts to approach curation in a way that is conscious of colonial legacies should explicitly target white museum visitors. Indeed, making interpretation most relevant to white people, the museum perpetuates elitism

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<sup>42</sup> I. Gilbert, 'The Colonial Money Trail', *History Workshop*, 10 January 2022

<<https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/empire-decolonisation/the-colonial-money-trail/>> [accessed 30/08/2023].

<sup>43</sup> R. Cardoso, 'The Humboldt Forum's Disappointing Ethnographic Collections', *Hyperallergic*, December 2021 <<https://hyperallergic.com/699644/humboldt-forum-disappointing-ethnographic-collections/>> [accessed: 09/06/22].

within the sector and renders visitors of colour superfluous rather than explicitly unwelcome.

Once inside the exhibition, though the object labels which might previously have been associated with colonial categorisation and Eurocentric definition have been removed, there is no other form of interpretation or description to replace those labels. Therefore, the museum has provided no intervention to serve the function of adequately representing the objects' cultural significance or their purpose as determined by their communities of origin. The room therefore, continues mostly as a space for white self-reflection without the burden of information relating to cultures and communities outside the authority and perceived sanctuary of whiteness. According to the Museum Association's guidance on 'decolonising' museums, it is crucial that, where indigenous collections are present, not only should a 'genuine and respectful treatment of subject [the] matter [...] enable audiences to gain a deeper understanding of the subject,' but it should also be developed as a collaboration with communities of origin or ancestor communities.<sup>44</sup> At the Humboldt Forum, it appears this context and knowledge is omitted in favour of an opportunity for predominantly white visitors to make guesses and assumptions, undoubtedly from a position of privilege and relative ignorance, regarding the indigenous collections and cultures in the exhibition. The implication appears to be that indigenous peoples, history and culture are not interesting unless considered in relation to whiteness or a white worldview. The white narrative is completely central and white visitors participate in a 'looking scenario in which a spectator seems to hold power over an exposed victim' or subject.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, as defined by the colonial attitudes of collectors and museums throughout history, objects with significance outside that which is considered white and European are to be consumed and interpreted by white people without regard for provenance or cultural significance. The collection and enjoyment of such items is symbolic of white intellectual superiority and Western imperialism.

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<sup>44</sup> Museums Association, 'Collections, Part 1', *Decolonising Museums* <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/supporting-decolonisation-in-museums/collections-1/>> [accessed 01/06/2023].

<sup>45</sup> C. R. Baker, *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death* (Champaign IL, 2015) p. 1.

Given the exhibition appears to be centred on the concept of colonial history and white experiences, it is surprising that, despite featuring almost no information regarding indigenous cultures and knowledge, there is also very little information is given about colonialism and what it means. Museum spaces providing increased context around the history and the repercussions of colonial violence are often associated with the term ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘discomfort.’<sup>46</sup> For whom is this specifically uncomfortable? Naturally, as already stated, detailed accounts of colonial violence and racism levelled against people of colour can evoke trauma and sorrow from visitors who see themselves and their own experiences reflected in such narratives. This is something any museum moving to work in a more anti-colonial way should be deeply conscious of and prepared to address. However, inevitably, these terms are often also closely linked to whiteness, as the aforementioned cultural amnesia that disproportionately affects white museum visitors, when challenged, has the capacity to create a range of responses which all arguably fall within this category of ‘uncomfortable.’ As Leonardo explains; “‘When it comes to official history, there is no paucity of representation of whites as its creator. [...] However, when it concerns domination, whites suddenly disappear, as if history were purely a positive sense of contribution.’”<sup>47</sup> When whiteness is decentred or, with the use of critical whiteness theory, reflected upon as more than simply a neutral position or an absence of race, this creates something akin to a culture shock. Therefore, criticism of whiteness via the unravelling of pro-colonial or inherently white supremacist historical narratives, even when ‘reasoned, thoughtful and impersonal [...] is nevertheless experienced by many [white] people as traumatic and hurtful.’<sup>48</sup> Robin DiAngelo, whose words have been used to frame the Humboldt Forum’s Ethnological Museum of Berlin has written on this ‘white fragility’ through which the feelings of white people are consistently prioritised. DiAngelo writes that ‘an insulated environment of racial privilege builds our expectations for racial comfort while at the same time it lowers our tolerance for racial stress.’<sup>49</sup> Though, one could argue that

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<sup>46</sup> Hunterian Museum, ‘Curating Discomfort’, *The Hunterian*

<<https://www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian/about/achangingmuseum/curatingdiscomfort/>> [accessed 30/08/2023].

<sup>47</sup> K. L. B. Burgard & M. L. Boucher, ‘The Special Responsibility of Public Places to Dismantle White Supremacist Historical Narratives’ in A. M. Labrador & N. A. Silberman (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Public Heritage Theory and Practice* (Oxford, 2018) p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> A. Kenjere, ‘Defending race privilege on the internet: how whiteness uses innocence discourse online’, *Information, Communication & Society* 22.14 (2019) p. 2159.

<sup>49</sup> R. DiAngelo, ‘White Fragility’, *Counterpoints* 497 (2016) 245-253 (p. 249).

even this statement subtly absolves white people of blame for their negative reactions to discourse on racism. It is imperative therefore that the heritage sector ensures its use of the term 'discomfort' or 'uncomfortable' in relation to racism and colonialism is done with confidence, informed by inclusivity and diversity rather than an emphasis on white fragility. The discomfort museums and heritage sites should be most sensitive to is that of the non-white visitors for whom this history may invoke trauma. For white visitors to these spaces, the subject matter is approached from a place of privilege, regardless of the content or tone of the interpretation. History cannot be defined as remembrance or as the mere enjoyment of aesthetics, nor can it always create a comfortable experience, as this does not provide the nuance necessary to consider a diverse range of narratives which often highlight the violence and prejudice of celebrated historical periods or figures. Any intervention, even one which forms part of an effort to more thoroughly address colonial legacies within museums, should never seek to avoid the discomfort of white visitors. Doing so perpetuates the role of the museum as a white safe space and thus its role in sustaining white supremacist influence over history. In addition to the necessity of accepting discomfort as a product of colonial violence and exploitation, one must consider whether museums, and indeed the history they proliferate, should be comfortable in all cases. If museums are supposed to represent the histories, experiences and cultures of humanity, so too should they represent experiences such as anger or sorrow. This is relevant to anti-colonial work and anti-racism as it provides space for the expression of sentiments from a variety of perspectives without asserting that the museum could possibly ever 'solve' societal problems caused by centuries of colonialism and white supremacy. In order to provide an historical narrative which is nuanced, inclusive, engaging and more reflective of a complex and diverse history, whiteness must be decentred. It will, however, also acknowledge that an interrogation of colonial history and a shift in the way in which this history is considered is insufficient, and as Blaut asserts: 'even if all the roots are torn out, the vine will not wither: it will grow other roots, a new theory of racism, unless racism is attacked, not as theory but as practice.'<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> J.M. Blaut, 'The Theory of Cultural Racism', *Antipode* 24.4 (1992) p. 298.

### Exhibitions Setting Anti-Colonial Examples

This chapter will now utilise case studies and the findings of previous chapters to explore existing and emerging methods for the care of, display, interpretation and ethical engagement with collections associated with indigenous cultures and colonial violence. Attempts to utilise indigenous cultural collections to specifically highlight narratives which centre white experiences devalue the significance of the objects as outlined by their source communities. They are instead repositioned as tools with little perceivable meaning outside the purpose and significance determined by European or American museums. From the very conception of museums as an idea, as considered in Chapter 1, indigenous knowledge is consistently disregarded or actively undermined. In other cases, it is appropriated by white ‘explorers’, collectors and scholars who disregard the role of indigenous knowledge in informing their understanding of flora and fauna, classifying indigenous peoples as subjects and specimens, to be studied and collected in the same way as a plant, animal or object. In many indigenous cultures, knowledge as a museum might define it is superseded or enhanced by wisdom and understanding, which are rarely determined by codified methods of description or organisation. In many cases, this understanding of objects according to their original use is negated by a ‘visual bias’ which determines the value of a collection or item according to its ‘visual interest’ as determined by the Eurocentrism of the Western institution.<sup>51</sup>

This information is also rarely conveyed by written object labels or rigid categorisations. Regardless of how many objects a museum may hold from a particular culture, or of how much research the museum undertakes, the society in which the institution was formed and exists doubtless shapes the approach and perspective reflected in its curation. This has proven significant for all the museums considered within this thesis thus far, and has in many ways limited the diversity of perspectives from which exhibitions and collections are considered and restricts the manner in which said collections are interpreted. In her book *Braiding the Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer summarises the rigidity of white scholarship and interpretation of the world by stating that ‘in the Western tradition there is a recognised hierarchy of beings, with, of course, the human being on top – the pinnacle of

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<sup>51</sup> D. Rice, ‘The Hidden Theme: Viewing Art Through Western Eyes’, *The Docent Educator* 3.1 (1993) p. 8.

evolution.’<sup>52</sup> This hierarchy itself, broadly based in Christian theology, is of course inextricable from the place of Christianity as a keystone principle of white supremacy and colonialism throughout history. Indeed, religious belief and white supremacy have a significant role to play in the acquisition of collections, driven forward by the notion, as identified by Critical Race Theory, that whiteness imbues the inherent right to own and accumulate property.<sup>53</sup> However, Kimmerer contrasts this Western preoccupation with supremacy and dominance against ‘Native ways of knowing’, wherein ‘human people are referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation.” [...] Humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn.’<sup>54</sup> This perspective alone appears as a kind of antithesis to the paternalistic, authoritative presence of museums in the Global North. Above all, such fundamental differences in the way global cultures view humanity itself make it abundantly clear that there can be no understanding of indigenous objects or cultures without indigenous knowledge and perspectives. Therefore, it is necessary in all museum interactions with indigenous collections should be carried out whilst whiteness and white perspectives are decentred in every respect. This can of course be achieved in a number of ways, some of which will be explored through exhibition case studies discussed in the next section of this chapter.

### Case Study: The Portable Universe

At the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), the development and implementation of an exhibition utilising collections from indigenous Colombia provides an appropriate case-study with which to illustrate and explore the essential role of indigenous perspectives and wisdom in the interpretation and display of indigenous objects. In addition, the process of the exhibition’s planning and design provides insight into the learning, adaptation and collaboration necessary to developing anti-colonial museum spaces. According to the documentary *Unpacking the Universe*, which follows the exhibition from conception to its opening night, the impetus to create an exhibition on Colombian culture came, at least in

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<sup>52</sup> R. W. Kimmerer, *Braiding the Sweetgrass* (London: Penguin Random House, 2013) p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> M. A. Adams, ‘Deconstructing Systems of Bias in the Museum Field Using Critical Race Theory’, *Journal of Museum Education* 42. 3 (2017) p. 291.

<sup>54</sup> R. W. Kimmerer, *Braiding the Sweetgrass* (London: Penguin Random House, 2013) p. 9.

part, from the availability of a Colombian collection.<sup>55</sup> This in itself raises questions around the way in which the museum acquisitions process commodifies indigenous objects and cultures. One might argue that the availability of certain collections and the museum's participation in the taking and holding of said collections reinforces the concept that the items contained within them are mere objects, without a life beyond their immediate physical form. Though many public museum collections arguably become the de facto property of the public, the reality is that the control of and access to those collections remains solely with the museum. Acquisitions within museum collections, as they are typically understood, therefore conform to colonial processes of extraction and consumption of resources. It is therefore essential to an anti-colonial and ethical approach to curation that the museum's relationship with the source or descendant community goes far beyond the mere legal ownership of collections and statements of origin or provenance on written museum labels for example. The mere existence of a cohesive collection and the appointment of a curatorial team from within the institution is insufficient for the purposes of exploring and interpreting indigenous histories and culture and, as this thesis has shown, demonstrates the problematic nature of a sector in which the knowledge, agency and experiences of indigenous peoples are either disregarded, fetishized or appropriated.

At LACMA, once it had been established that the majority of the objects in the collection came from a specific time period in indigenous Colombian history, the curatorial team had the basis for an exhibition. However, early on in the process, LACMA curator Julia Burtenshaw stated that 'there's not that much known about ancient Colombia.'<sup>56</sup> Again, though one can assume Burtenshaw made this comment with reference to what is known within Western scholarship, the statement reaffirms the perception that knowledge outside of Eurocentric, codified resources either does not exist or is difficult to access. During the process of creating the 'Portable Universe' exhibition, the comments made by Burtenshaw are proven entirely erroneous when, along with Program Director Diana Magaloni, she is

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<sup>55</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *How it started | Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*, Documentary Video, Youtube, 25 May 2022, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYr1Utqi4PE>> [accessed 21/11/2022].

<sup>56</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *How it started | Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*, Documentary Video, Youtube, 25 May 2022, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYr1Utqi4PE>> [accessed 21/11/2022].

introduced to members of the Arhuaco peoples: descendants of the ancient Colombian indigenous communities who produced the contents of this new collection. It is from this point that the museum appears to embrace the idea of becoming a place that 'represents living cultures' and accepts that cultures and communities do not remain in stasis as a feature of the past, surpassed by the so-called civilisation of white, European Christianity.<sup>57</sup> To achieve this, LACMA is eventually able to facilitate 'self-representation by the peoples [whose ancestors] originated the collections housed in the museum,' an approach which M. Clavir highlights as having long been fundamental to driving change in the museums sector, moving away from presentation of material culture and erasure of indigenous peoples.<sup>58</sup>

Before meeting with Arhuaco elders, it is clear that the LACMA team's research trip to Colombia was originally intended as a means of collaborating with the Museo Del Oro in Bogotá and enhancing LACMA staff's ability to assess the authenticity of ancient Colombian ceramics. Again, Burtenshaw considers her lack of specific knowledge in this area and attributes this to ongoing conflict in the region rendering archaeological digs difficult. She then describes the area as being 'rediscovered by the West.'<sup>59</sup> The assertion here appears to be that knowledge and experience of cultures and places that exists outside the research methods and processes historically embraced by Western academics is of little value. It is almost as though places and peoples cease to exist when not studied or interpreted specifically by institutions based in the Global North. The concept of discovery or 'rediscovery' by the West is an inherently colonial attitude and highlights and problematic bias within LACMA's approach to the study of indigenous cultural material.

Though the LACMA team do highlight the lack of indigenous voices in their work thus far, upon meeting the Arhuaco, Magaloni states 'we thought the descendants could help us

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<sup>57</sup> M. Clavir, 'Reflections on Changes in Museums and the Conservation of Collections from Indigenous Peoples', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 35.2 (1996) 99-107 (p. 99).

<sup>58</sup> M. Clavir, 'Reflections on Changes in Museums and the Conservation of Collections from Indigenous Peoples', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 35.2 (1996) 99-107 (p. 99).

<sup>59</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *How it started | Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*, Documentary Video, Youtube, 25 May 2022, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYr1Utqi4PE>> [accessed 21/11/2022].

understand the objects.’<sup>60</sup> At this point in the documentary series, engagement with the indigenous community is framed as an action that Magaloni and Burtenshaw hope will serve to improve the breadth of their knowledge and therefore enable them to construct a more detailed exhibition in Los Angeles. This is a purely extractive, and thus colonial, process. However, as interactions between the LACMA team and the Arhuaco progressed, it became clear that the relatively narrow set of classifications and questions museums consider during their interpretation development were almost entirely unimportant to the descendant communities, those who understood the process of creation and the purpose of these items as part of a living ecosystem of thought and meaning. The conventional museum approach to collections, which inevitably utilises established and Eurocentric methods of classification and conservation which has been developed over time and informed by prestigious European and American institutions that supposedly ‘set the standard.’ It is the faith in the supremacy of these standards and methods that perhaps prevent many museums from considering items from their collections as anything other than an object that must ideally be meticulously conserved and catalogued. Within the relative vacuum of a predominantly white-led institution, these methods ‘never occasion or manifest a complete understanding of a collection.’<sup>61</sup> For example, in the case of LACMA’s Colombian ceramics collection, the Arhuaco elders immediately pointed out that, as with the community that made them, the pieces from the collection were regarded as ancestors. They stated ‘those elements you are holding there, you are also imprisoning them.’<sup>62</sup> However, unlike cases considered elsewhere in this thesis, the team from LACMA claim the Arhuaco’s were not concerned with restitution, and instead wanted to ensure their ancestors and cultural heritage were being cared for appropriately and ‘nourished’, according to their beliefs.

The fact that this imprisoning of indigenous ancestors appeared to come as a surprise to the LACMA staff affirms the notion that museums operating without significant input from the

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<sup>60</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Indigenous leaders confront the museum | Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*, Documentary Video, Youtube, 8 June 2022, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8e0Lz2opFQ>> [accessed 21/11/2022].

<sup>61</sup> V. Reyes-Escudero and J. W. Cox, ‘Survey, Understanding, and Ethical Stewardship of Indigenous Collections: A Case Study’, *Collection Management* 42.3-4 (2017) p. 131.

<sup>62</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Indigenous leaders confront the museum | Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*, Documentary Video, Youtube, 8 June 2022, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8e0Lz2opFQ>> [accessed 21/11/2022].

originating communities do not know how to care for indigenous collections in accordance with their significance. Indeed, Joy Holland of UCLA's American Indian Studies Centre asserts that 'unless a collecting institution addresses the needs of [the originating] community, it is not, ethically speaking, in a position to create and manage Indigenous content.'<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, if the purpose of a museum is to educate or foster understanding, this cannot be fulfilled if the collections an institution seeks to interpret are not correctly handled or understood beyond supposed visual quality and Western scholarship.

There is a school of thought that encourages museums to provide very little interpretation of specific objects, instead allowing meaning to be 'comprehended imaginatively by each viewer', positioning the observed object 'as a conceptual opening through which the viewer can pass to apprehend another time or another place.'<sup>64</sup> However, the distinct problem with this approach lies not in the methodology itself, but with context such as the demographics of the average museum visitor. Given that museums, particularly in the Global North, are most frequently accessed and run by white people from higher socio-economic backgrounds, a lack of adequate interpretation can exacerbate poor understanding of indigenous collections and reinforce an inherent power imbalance between the observer and the 'observed.' Rather than contend with misunderstanding regarding the correct and ethical care and interpretation, institutions who offer little information alongside indigenous collections allow an inevitable and deeply ingrained colonial approach to take root. White visitors can make as little claim to neutrality as the institution itself, and the blank slate approach often disconnects objects from their cultural contexts as well as transforming them into a tool with which white visitors are able to centre their own experiences and values. Naturally, due to a history of white supremacy and colonialism, the perspectives of such visitors are skewed towards 'othering' of indigenous collections in a way that positions them as inferior. Though it is arguable that objects can speak for themselves, but this may rely on the unravelling of colonial ways of thinking and observing that are further embedded by what one could refer to as the stereotypical museum experience. It is possible therefore to

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<sup>63</sup> U. Gosart, 'Responsive and Responsible Libraries Promote Ethical Care of Indigenous Collections', *American Libraries* 52 (2021) p. 14.

<sup>64</sup> L. Bolton, 'The Object in View: Aborigines, Melanesians, and Museums' in *Museums and Source Communities* ed. by A. K. Brown & L. Peers (London: Routledge, 2003) pp. 42-54 (p. 43).

contend that interpretation of objects is necessary as museums take steps to challenge preconceived notions of indigenous collections. Methods which utilise non-interrogation and simplistic display could be compared to Posthumanist approaches which R. M. Van Dyke argues turns 'away from people [...] at a time when millions of people critically need help and attention.'<sup>65</sup> Indigenous collections like the Colombian objects at LACMA cannot be interrogated or interpreted in an anti-colonial or ethical way if human culture and practices are considered at all separate. The originating community, or in this case descendant community, are absolutely crucial to the process of curating an indigenous collection or exhibition. In cases where peoples have been oppressed and subjected to violence by white colonial forces, the inextricable bond between human and object is especially significant. Objects examined without the context of their human origins are rid of intention, and the history surrounding their creation, existence and extraction, often entirely orchestrated by human beings, is devoid of accountability, or indeed emotion. According to Bernbeck, reluctance to place heightened significance on the human elements of an object's history renders us without 'logical means by which we can hold perpetrators of violence and suffering to be accountable for their actions.'<sup>66</sup> Though narratives centred on colonial violence ought not dominate conversations around indigenous heritage, the acknowledgment of such violence is essential to an anti-colonial approach.

Furthermore, as noted previously, the LACMA team came to realise, through their early interactions with the Arhuaco, the pieces in their collection were not only intrinsically linked to indigenous ancestors, but were also imbued with a life and a state of existence above that of mere objects. This is likely knowledge that would remain unknown or misrepresented to museum visitors without collaboration with indigenous ancestor communities. In addition, the care for collections comprised of material culture perceived to be objects only is vastly different to the care of collections which included ancestors and objects which are known by the originating communities to be alive. It is for this reason that institutions such as LACMA must move beyond the idea that conservators and curators hold ultimate authority in the conservation, storage, handling, categorisation and display of

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<sup>65</sup> R.M. Van Dyke, 'Ethics not Objects', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 31.3 (2021) p. 489.

<sup>66</sup> R.M. Van Dyke, 'Ethics not Objects', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 31.3 (2021) p. 489.

indigenous objects. This idea naturally challenges entrenched attitudes regarding the dominance of museums in terms of an understanding of global cultures and colonial conventions in terms of conserving material culture for the purpose of education.<sup>67</sup> In addition to this, practices such as loans, inter-museum agreements and contracts are all established within this sector so deeply rooted in colonialism, and to indigenous groups such as the Arhuaco, are immaterial when applied to cultural collections with such significance. During a visit to Colombia, the team from LACMA participate in comparable processes of idea sharing and forging of agreements in a way that is presumably unfamiliar to those working within such rigid structures. Staff were at one point led in a guided meditation that was described by Assistant Curator Julia Burtenshaw as ‘about unlearning our Western way of thinking, and opening ourselves up to a new way of looking at the objects.’<sup>68</sup> In addition to this encouragement to understand the perspectives of the ancestor community, the Arhuaco introduced the LACMA representatives to new methods of communication and connection, which would reinforce the significance of the communication, as well as the expectations of the indigenous people participating in what should clearly be a reciprocal collaboration. Documentary footage shows Burtenshaw and Magaloni led into a clearing populated by stones and surrounded by rock faces. Here, everyone is without footwear and uses the stones as seating. Arhuaco elder and translator Jaison Pérez Villafaña states ‘here at this place, you can see the difference for yourselves. The big difference between your lives in the city and how different it is for us here.’<sup>69</sup> The inherent differences between the experiences, structures and attitudes of museums in the Global North and those of indigenous peoples, already highlighted in this thesis, are asserted within a space of indigenous authority. In bringing the team from LACMA into this space in order to assert difference and to encourage a greater understanding of indigenous perspectives, the Arhuaco have enabled the museum’s representatives to observe the

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<sup>67</sup> M. Clavir, ‘Reflections on Changes in Museums and the Conservation of Collections from Indigenous Peoples’, *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 35.2 (1996) 99-107 (p. 101).

<sup>68</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Where do we go from here? | Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*, Documentary Video, Youtube, 8 June 2022, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EPUHn6UGcU&list=PLJy-HLfC3xxCue9\\_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi\\_aW&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EPUHn6UGcU&list=PLJy-HLfC3xxCue9_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi_aW&index=3)> [accessed 22/11/2022].

<sup>69</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Where do we go from here? | Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*, Documentary Video, Youtube, 8 June 2022, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EPUHn6UGcU&list=PLJy-HLfC3xxCue9\\_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi\\_aW&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EPUHn6UGcU&list=PLJy-HLfC3xxCue9_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi_aW&index=3)> [accessed 22/11/2022].

community and ancestral culture within the context of the whole, which is fundamental to understanding and interpreting the collections that form part of this spiritual and cultural ecosystem. Villafaña goes on to highlight the fact that all the people within the clearing are seated on stones and states; ‘from here we start the connection.’ In the documentary, Magaloni describes this physical connection to the earth as the way in which the Arhuaco ‘connect to the earth, and from there, with the whole cosmos.’<sup>70</sup> The emphasis of this context and interconnectedness, as well as the inextricable connections between collections, communities, nature and the universe, is crucial to the LACMA team in developing a collaborative understanding of and approach to their indigenous Colombian collection. This concept of universality and the completeness of the Arhuaco’s ancestral culture will also therefore be crucial in the creation of an exhibition which can respectfully and wholly represent the history of a living and adapting culture. Later, in the same clearing, the LACMA representatives are given a thread made from cotton which is another natural material through which the Arhuaco communicate their place in the universe. Villafaña describes the thread as ‘what we use to gather the energy of our words. It’s a commitment.’<sup>71</sup> These threads are then tied around the wrists of everyone present as a symbol of the pledge between LACMA and the Arhuaco to maintain balance and continue a relationship which assures to continued care of the collections, in accordance with their cultural and spiritual significance. Villafaña seals this sentiment by saying, ‘what we work on here is meant to be as durable as stone.’<sup>72</sup>

Having experienced the geography, culture and spiritual understanding of the world, the collections and the relationship between the museum and the Arhuaco, it was important that this learning was embedded in the creation of an exhibition. In order to avoid colonial

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<sup>70</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Where do we go from here? | Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*, Documentary Video, Youtube, 8 June 2022, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EPUHn6UGcU&list=PLJy-HLfC3xxCue9\\_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi\\_aW&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EPUHn6UGcU&list=PLJy-HLfC3xxCue9_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi_aW&index=3)> [accessed 22/11/2022].

<sup>71</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Where do we go from here? | Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*, Documentary Video, Youtube, 8 June 2022, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EPUHn6UGcU&list=PLJy-HLfC3xxCue9\\_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi\\_aW&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EPUHn6UGcU&list=PLJy-HLfC3xxCue9_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi_aW&index=3)> [accessed 22/11/2022].

<sup>72</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Where do we go from here? | Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*, Documentary Video, Youtube, 8 June 2022, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EPUHn6UGcU&list=PLJy-HLfC3xxCue9\\_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi\\_aW&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EPUHn6UGcU&list=PLJy-HLfC3xxCue9_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi_aW&index=3)> [accessed 22/11/2022].

approaches to the collection and its interpretation, as well as the centring of white perspectives and experiences, the LACMA team would be required to cast aside many of the rigid practices often associated with exhibitions or displays of indigenous collections. Instead, a collaboration with an ancestor communities would enable the museum to accept their role, not as a source of expertise, but as a facilitator of relationships and of education led by indigenous knowledge. The name of the exhibition, 'The Portable Universe' encapsulates the interconnectedness introduced by the Arhuaco and the museum's subsequent desire to invite visitors 'into a cultural dialogue that spans both space and time.'<sup>73</sup>



Fig. 6

Within the exhibition space, it is immediately clear to the visitor that there is more to see and experience than display cabinets filled with objects from which the curator and visitor might feel detached, separated 'across time and space: another continent, another

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<sup>73</sup> LACMA, 'The Portable Universe/El Universo en Tus Manos: Thought and Splendor of Indigenous Colombia', LACMA <<https://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/portable-universe>> [accessed 21/11/2022].

millennium.’<sup>74</sup> This separation is partly negated by the visitor’s experience of the space, which the museum has designed to be as immersive as possible, in order to contextualise and connect with the collections, as the LACMA team learned to do when speaking with the Arhuaco. Where many museums in the Global North put forth collection items to be consumed visually in a relatively rigid fashion, despite the fact that such collections often embody numerous senses imbued by their creation and use. This is exemplified in a review of the completed exhibition in *Ornament* where emphasis is almost entirely on the objects containing or made from gold: ‘the gold and tumbaga artefacts almost overwhelm the senses, and thus receive most of our attention.’ This is despite the fact the article author acknowledges the fact that ‘to the early explorers, only the gold content of objects was of interest,’ providing ample opportunity for self-awareness and an analogy of colonial values through time, however this is not taken.<sup>75</sup> The typical conservation and curation practices at museums in the Global North reduce indigenous collections predominantly to their aesthetic value and visual interest, and in this sense, ‘within the museum’s empire of sight, objects are colonized by the gaze.’<sup>76</sup> This is affirmed by R. Liu, who concludes their article on the exhibition, having described the objects on display in great detail, with particular focus on gold, with a single sentence referring to ‘transformative powers on the viewers, in how we now view the culture of indigenous Colombian peoples.’<sup>77</sup> Such a failure to look beyond the visual value of the material, aside from one undeveloped acknowledgement of the indigenous presence within the exhibition, exemplified the challenge faced by the institution in working within a sector so systemically obsessed with a colonial concept of value. LACMA consciously moves beyond this practice, embracing indigenous Colombian soundscapes and visuals around the exhibition space, as well as including traditional wooden stools, called banquitos, which were commissioned by the museum from the Arhuaco and facilitated a space which would be familiar to indigenous approaches to reflection and discussion.<sup>78</sup> Magaloni describes the purpose of an exhibition in telling a

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<sup>74</sup> D. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> R. K. Liu, ‘The Portable Universe’, *Ornament* 43.3 (2023) 20-23 (p.20).

<sup>76</sup> C. Classen and D. Howes, ‘The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artefacts’ in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture* ed. by E. Edwards et al (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020) 199-222 (p. 200).

<sup>77</sup> R. K. Liu, ‘The Portable Universe’, *Ornament* 43.3 (2023) 20-23 (p. 23)

<sup>78</sup> J. Burtenshaw, ‘What Happened Next? A Sacred Ceremony After ‘Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition’’, *LACMA Unframed*, 11 December 2022 <<https://unframed.lacma.org/2022/12/11/what-happened-next-sacred-ceremony-after-unpacking-universe-making-exhibition>> [accessed 06/08/2023].

story, and how this narrative is constructed in a '3-dimensional reality.' This concept aligns with the idea that exhibitions should move beyond the visual and, whilst acknowledging the limitations of the museum environment, 'allow for a more dynamic, multisensorial, and culturally aware museum experience.'<sup>79</sup> In addition, LACMA's efforts to provide such experiences and reflect the connectedness between indigenous peoples, nature, spirituality and ultimately, the objects, exhibits a continued interest in collaboration with the Arhuaco throughout the process of putting together the exhibition. When asked what the ancestor community would like visitors with little preconception or prior knowledge of the collection or its history to take away from their visit to LACMA, Villafaña responds: 'it only matters that they find a way to connect, and understand this idea of caring. Caring for humanity, which means caring for nature, and caring for nature means caring for humanity.'<sup>80</sup> Thus, the museum's decision to include imagery and sounds which emphasise the collection's place in a much wider, connected universe are important not only in moving beyond colonial ways of experiencing indigenous cultural heritage, but also in reflecting the vision and perspective of the indigenous community. This ongoing connection between LACMA and the Arhuaco, where the institution seek answers and decisions from the collection's ancestor community also illustrates a relationship which goes beyond the extractive community consultation practices described in Chapter 3, and destabilises the position of the culturally white museum as an authoritative presence.

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<sup>79</sup> C. Classen and D. Howes, 'The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artefacts' in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture* ed. by E. Edwards et al (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020) 199-222 (p. 220).

<sup>80</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Sprint to the exhibition opening/Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*, Documentary Video, Youtube, 31 August 2022  
<[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uRLOGsA0w&list=PLJy-HLfC3xxCue9\\_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi\\_aW&index=9](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uRLOGsA0w&list=PLJy-HLfC3xxCue9_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi_aW&index=9)> [accessed 21/11/2022].

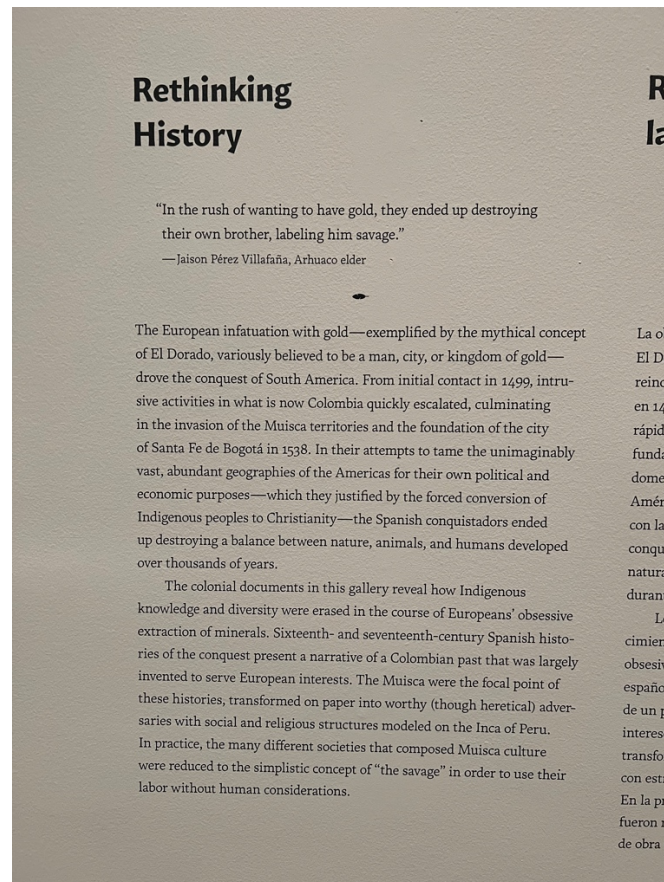


Fig. 7

Despite the multi-sensory experience of the exhibition space, the displayed objects appear to conform to a number of museological conventions, given all are in glass cases and labelled accordingly. The exhibition is also punctuated by larger interpretation panels which provide much of the narrative regarding the context and history of the collection. Therefore, though Burtenshaw states the exhibition will 'go with the indigenous voice' in terms of the perspectives it represents, this is tempered by inherently colonial systems of conservation and methods of interpretation.<sup>81</sup> However, it is important to recognise that a dissection and discussion of such systemic practices and beliefs will take the sector a long time to undertake, and therefore should not stand in the way of progress where it is easily achievable through research, collaboration, creative curation and diversification of perspectives. In addition, LACMA consciously worked within the more rigid elements of the exhibition to make their use as anti-colonial as possible. For example, all of the longer

<sup>81</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Designing the Exhibition/Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*, Documentary Video, Youtube, 8 June 2022, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H\\_6VP-Me9Ws&list=PLJy-HLfc3xxCue9\\_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi\\_aW&index=7](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_6VP-Me9Ws&list=PLJy-HLfc3xxCue9_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi_aW&index=7)> [accessed 21/11/2022].

written interpretation panels were provided in both English and Spanish, which is one of the principal languages spoken in Colombia and is widely spoken by members of the Arhuaco community. In addition, the objects labels are without dates, as the Arhuaco explain that ‘these objects were made with the intention of being the connections between nature and men. Those principles are eternal. They don’t have a date, they don’t expire.’<sup>82</sup> This is a feature of the exhibition that the aforementioned *Ornament* magazine objected to, describing the choice as invoking the feeling that ‘an important attribute is missing.’<sup>83</sup> This statement is then justified by the assertion that ‘while time may have a different meaning for indigenous people, dating of these items gathered at considerable effort should have been part of the historical record of this exhibition.’<sup>84</sup> This overt dismissal of Arhuaco beliefs, here problematically generalised as ‘indigenous people’, and the elevation of colonial practices as being more important to an audience than any acknowledgement of indigenous perspectives is again illustrative of a heritage sector which is resistant to change and continually reinforces colonial oppression in museums. It is for this reason that the work undertaken by LACMA is so significant and influential, as it will hopefully encourage other institutions to reflect on their own practices and to collaborate with originating or ancestor communities on developing interpretation and displays which enable a number of perspectives to exist without invalidation or oppression.

An interpretive panel titled ‘Transformation and Perspective’, is written entirely from the perspective of the Indigenous Arhuaco. Though the quote chosen for the top of the panel is from anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, it is effective in setting the tone for the exhibition and the invitation for visitors to perspectives outside their own, that has perhaps been constructed and reinforced by previous museum experiences. The quote states: ‘the universe is populated with extra-human intentions, endowed with their own perspectives, which you have to take into account.’<sup>85</sup> This text serves as the connection between the preconceptions of the anthropologist and indeed the museum and the indigenous

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<sup>82</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Designing the Exhibition/Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*, Documentary Video, Youtube, 8 June 2022, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H\\_6VP-Me9Ws&list=PLJy-HLfc3xxCue9\\_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi\\_aW&index=7](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_6VP-Me9Ws&list=PLJy-HLfc3xxCue9_kM1GRNcnPEaNvi_aW&index=7)> [accessed 21/11/2022].

<sup>83</sup> R. K. Liu, ‘The Portable Universe’, *Ornament* 43.3 (2023) 20-23 (p. 20).

<sup>84</sup> R. K. Liu, ‘The Portable Universe’, *Ornament* 43.3 (2023) 20-23 (p. 20).

<sup>85</sup> LACMA interpretation panel, ‘Transformation and Perspective’, *The Portable Universe*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

perspective through which the collection has been given life. The main body of text on the panel goes on to assert that ‘plants, animals, rivers, mountains, ancestors, meteorological phenomena, and artifacts are all living beings imbued with spirit and subjectivity.’<sup>86</sup> This statement is presented as fact and is not qualified by any assertion that such perspectives are limited to indigenous peoples or less credible due to their contrast to Eurocentric scholarship and approaches. This reinforces the idea that multiple perspectives can exist at once, and that one must not be understood through another in order for it to become relevant or of interest to specific audiences. This prioritisation of indigenous narrative and perspective outlined by Burtenshaw serves to address the relative imbalance which has been created by centuries of white supremacist and Eurocentric conceptions of global history. This panel also asserts the way in which the collection and exhibition is intended to be experienced; as an interconnected ecosystem in which objects, nature, spirituality and humans are not separate.

Another panel titled ‘Gold Copper and Tumbaga’ demonstrates LACMA’s commitment to the indigenous voice by focusing not on the value to European explorers, but instead contextualising the desirability of the materials according to indigenous beliefs. According to the Arhuaco and their ancestors ‘copper and gold are perfect complements’ as gold is associated with ‘the sun and male essence,’ whereas ‘the red tone of copper [...] is linked to female characteristics and its ability to transform is associated with the changing nature of the moon.’<sup>87</sup> This attribution of significance stands in stark contrast to the focus on gold demonstrated by aforementioned publications which fail to recognise the nuance of precious metal use in societies outside Europe. As this chapter has already asserted, a focus on colonialism and its impact on indigenous cultures can at times cause museums to centre whiteness and thus prioritise white, colonial perspectives. LACMA strike a balance between prioritisation of indigenous perspectives and the acknowledgement of colonial oppression by including reference to the European theft of gold: ‘because the European conquest fragmented communities and robbed them of their gold, Indigenous societies in Colombia

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<sup>86</sup> LACMA interpretation panel, ‘Transformation and Perspective’, *The Portable Universe*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

<sup>87</sup> LACMA interpretation panel, ‘Gold, Copper and Tumbaga’, *The Portable Universe*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

no longer practice [...] the highly sophisticated metalworking technologies of their ancestors.’<sup>88</sup> This comes at the end of the aforementioned passage which firmly positions precious metals in the context of their spiritual and cultural significance, therefore framing the way in which visitors consider the materials, as well as emphasising the long-term impact of colonial looting and violence.

‘The Portable Universe’, provides an excellent example of not only museum collaboration with indigenous communities, but a willingness to learn and adapt accordingly. It is clear from the ongoing interactions, whereby the LACMA team position themselves within the Arhuaco environment and worldview, that a genuine commitment to enabling indigenous expression and co-curation was present throughout the process of putting together the exhibition. In addition, the work of curators to expand beyond the static visual nature of conventional museum exhibitions, into a space which enables collections to exist within the context of their connectedness to the ‘universe’ has shown that there are few existing limitations within the museum and heritage sector that would prevent the centring of indigenous perspectives on indigenous heritage. LACMA have perhaps been constrained by a number of factors and have thus followed curatorial protocol such as the use of written labels and glass cabinets. However, in using said panels to assert indigenous narratives and enabling members of the Arhuaco community to make decision regarding the grouping and display of objects, the museums has gone some way towards transcending the inherently colonial nature of the museum as an institution. In doing so, LACMA have illustrated the fact that there is little reason for other institutions to delay their anti-colonial work and their willingness to meaningfully collaborate with the communities represented within their collections.

### The Healing Pavilion

A common theme within the supposedly post-colonial world, particularly with respect to indigenous peoples and their experiences, is healing and reconciliation. One such method of

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<sup>88</sup> LACMA interpretation panel, ‘Gold, Copper and Tumbaga’, *The Portable Universe*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

reconciliation was illustrated by LACMA's successful collaboration with the Arhuaco people, whereby dialogue and reciprocal opportunities to learn provided opportunities to bring indigenous perspectives to museum audiences in the Global North. This interaction and subsequent pledges to maintain a relationship with the ancestor community fulfil the purposes of dialogue and collaboration which 'serve as a kind of thread that ties together people of goodness in the bond of such solidarity.'<sup>89</sup> In LACMA's case, this thread was physically manifested in a thread of cotton symbolising their pledge to maintain a constructive and collaborative dialogue with the Arhuaco. Whether healing and reconciliation is wholly possible will likely remain a debate within the heritage sector and beyond. However, given the violent nature of colonial history and its associated narratives, it is crucial to the creation of museums which are welcoming to a diverse range of visitors that spaces of healing, reflection and remembrance are present. In addition, mourning and sorrow must be acknowledged as states which are inextricable from centuries of white supremacist violence and oppression. The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests are again significant to conversations regarding colonialism and mourning as the tragic events which led to such widespread social action presented a 'tragedy' which is 'immediate, epic, and unfolding before our eyes.'<sup>90</sup> However, the particular relevance to the museums and heritage sector perhaps comes with the fact that such tragedies are not new, and instead are 'the wreckage of a train that has been careening down the track for years.'<sup>91</sup> Seeking closure or adequate reparation within a sector and a society with such vast systems, practices and attitudes to dismantle is likely a premature and ultimately problematic approach to colonial legacies, as such paternalistic resolutions fail to recognise the eternal nature of such histories, which cannot be undone. Instead, they can be acknowledged, reinterpreted and, in some cases, mourned. Given this thesis has already established the inability of museums to approach any subject matter from a neutral perspective, it follows that institutions that consider themselves responsible for the safeguarding and

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<sup>89</sup> S. Byrne, 'The Legacy of Colonialism Among Indigenous Peoples: Destructive Outcomes, Healing and Reconciliatory Potentials', *Peace Research* 49.2 (2017) 5-13 (p. 9).

<sup>90</sup> M. J. Berry, 'In Mourning: Social Anthropology in 2020', *American Anthropologist* 123.4 (2021) 931-947 (p. 932).

<sup>91</sup> M. J. Berry, 'In Mourning: Social Anthropology in 2020', *American Anthropologist* 123.4 (2021) 931-947 (p. 932).

interpretation of history acknowledge the immorality, violence and subsequent sorrow and loss associated with colonialism and constructed racial hierarchies.

At the Wellcome Collection in London, a space for healing and reflection was created in the form of Grace Ndiritu's 'Healing Pavilion', which was styled on Zen Buddhist temples in Japan.<sup>92</sup> The construction of a room so separate from the rest of the museum, both in appearance and in its literal walled-off layout, symbolically enables visitors to leave the space of the colonial museum with its rigid methods of categorisation and display in favour a space which asks rather than tells, and does so in a way which evokes methods of reflection associated with communities and spaces outside white, Eurocentric institutions. The wooden panels that make up the structure are taken from the museum's now closed 'Medicine Man' gallery, which proliferated colonial, white supremacist attitudes throughout. Its closure and dismantling have been the subject of what the Wellcome Collection identified as a 'turning point' from which the institution will examine its role in reinforcing colonial attitudes via adherence to their colonial collector founder's vision.<sup>93</sup> The 'Healing Pavilion' therefore represents a deconstruction of pre-existing interpretations of the past, in favour of reinvention and transformation of relatively rigid institutions. In addition, the Healing Pavilion does not utilise indigenous collections to interrogate colonial narratives which centre white figures and perspectives. Instead, within the space, it is colonialism itself which is on display, in a way reminiscent of the MShed's Colston exhibition, the 'Healing Pavilion' presents artworks which represent the colonial mindset and its legacy, without asserting a defined way of approaching the subject, rendering the space as one which enables independent thought and reflection for visitors representing a range of communities and perspectives.

It must be said that the two pieces within the 'Healing Pavilion' are tapestries which portray images of white museum workers. The two pictures are copies of photographs from the Ethnological Museum of Berlin: the aforementioned source of the Humboldt Forum's

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<sup>92</sup> Wellcome Collection, 'The Healing Pavilion', *Exhibitions*  
<<https://wellcomecollection.org/exhibitions/Yzv9ChEAABfUrkVp>> [accessed 18/02/2023].

<sup>93</sup> Wellcome Collection, 'Medicine Man', *Exhibitions*  
<https://wellcomecollection.org/exhibitions/Weoe4SQAACKJwjcDC> [accessed 18/02/2023].

‘ethnological’ collection, in 1973, and from the Wellcome Collection in 1915. Though whiteness is centred, the figures in the images become subjects, through which larger questions might be asked and considered, thus the problematic practices of utilising indigenous collections for white self-reflection are somewhat subverted. This is made more obvious within the text on an interpretive panel which accompanies the photograph of Wellcome Historical Medical Museum staff posing with human remains. The panel states that the museum’s gallery titled ‘Hall of Primitive Medicine’ displayed ‘predominantly non-European objects categorised based on theories that othered, exoticised and marginalised the cultures they described.’<sup>94</sup> Not only is Ndiritu highlighting problematic histories of museum practice, but she also places the colonial authority on display in order to disrupt legacies of white supremacy and encourage reflections not on the collections, but instead on the collectors and curators through whom white supremacy has continually taken root in the sector.



Fig 8.

In the image on the other of the two tapestries, a group of white museum workers from the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin pose with the Mandu Yenu throne, with some sitters sitting and leaning on the object. According to the accompanying panel, the throne ‘demanded respect and signified power in its original context’ from which it has clearly been

<sup>94</sup> G. Ndiritu, Wellcome Collection Interpretation Panel, ‘The Twin Tapestries: Repair’, *The Healing Pavilion*, The Wellcome Collection.

removed. The image illustrates the way in which white-led museums and those who learn and work within them remove collections from their originating communities and in doing so commit further acts of violence by disregarding the significance and purpose of objects and indigenous ancestors. In addition, the panel notes that the throne remains in possession of the Humboldt Forum, thus also illustrating the continuation of colonial violence through the withholding of collections from their originating communities, and it is implied that little has changed since the photograph was taken in 1973.<sup>95</sup> In addition, Ndiritu's final act in the writing of this panel is to prevent the centring and memorialisation of the white figures in it, having digitally altered their appearance, however rather than prevent the individuals depicted, Ndiritu's view is that this focuses the viewer's attention on the 'interaction between the staff and the objects.'<sup>96</sup> The brevity of the panels presents only certain details regarding the scenarios depicted and frames each within a theme of either restitution or repair, both of which are anti-colonial ideas which may provide a 'healing process' for indigenous peoples, and people of colour, whose stories and properties have been appropriated by institutions pursuing Eurocentric versions of history. The provision of such a space enables visitors to consider colonialism as what it has become: a process and legacy which permeates every facet of the museums and heritage sector, rather than an unfortunate bullet point in the story of wealthy white families, or an opportunity for white people to self-reflect.

This chapter has demonstrated the necessity of decentring whiteness and white narratives with museum interpretation of history. This is relevant to both country houses and museum collections of indigenous objects and culture. Indeed, the examples described at both Penhryn castle and the Humboldt Forum have illustrated the way in which museums that have become conscious of colonial legacies within the sector have failed to move beyond acknowledgements of white supremacist violence and thus still centre the perpetrator's narrative. In order to address the centuries of imbalance and domination of white perspectives on global histories, museums must follow the example of institutions like

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<sup>95</sup> G. Ndiritu, Wellcome Collection Interpretation Panel, 'The Twin Tapestries: Restitution', *The Healing Pavilion*, The Wellcome Collection.

<sup>96</sup> G. Ndiritu, Wellcome Collection Interpretation Panel, 'The Twin Tapestries: Restitution', *The Healing Pavilion*, The Wellcome Collection.

LACMA, whereby preconceived notions regarding the context and significance of certain objects are allowed to be challenged, unravelled and reinvented through meaningful discourse with indigenous originating and ancestor communities.

At the 'Healing Pavilion' colonialism is centred as a subject matter of its own and thus visitors are confronted with the opportunity to reflect and consider their own positions within the colonial system. Unlike at the Humboldt Forum, this reflection is not framed by any single worldview or approach, and is not encouraged in response to indigenous objects which have been separated from their principal narratives and contexts. Instead, colonialism in museums is specifically acknowledged in a space which is designed to facilitate a variety of perspectives and responses, as well as the emotions one might expect such as sorrow and discomfort. Discomfort in all forms, including discomfort in response to depictions of violence and oppression, to changes within the established narrative which challenge white supremacy, as well as that associated with unlearning must be embraced if museums are to move forwards with anti-colonial work. According to *The Activist Museum* by Richard Sandell and Robert Janes 'allowing this discomfort to limit the vision and purpose of museums at this point in history is tragic.'<sup>97</sup> It is for this reason, that museum interventions linked to colonial legacies should not avoid discomfort, particularly when such discomfort is the result of resistance to change which might alter or challenge the prioritisation of whiteness in museum and heritage spaces. However, this is not to suggest that collections and institutions previously embedded within systems of colonial oppression cannot be subverted in order to celebrate and elevate indigenous ways of knowing and interpreting. It is the ability to both reflect on the impact of colonialism, whilst subverting and unravelling it that can bring any notion of anti-colonial progress and 'healing' to the sector and indeed to communities.

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<sup>97</sup> R. R. Janes & R. Sandell, 'Posterity has arrived' in *Museum Activism* ed. By R. R. Janes & R. Sandell (London: Routledge, 2019) 23-136 (p. 17).

## Conclusion

To conclude this thesis, one must take into account the issues present within the sector and the way in which recent events have amplified or brought attention to them. This has caused backlash and a weaponisation of culture which continues to loom over multiple sectors. It is argued by journalists and political commentators like Owen Jones, largely due to fear of challenges to the status quo, that 'culture wars create new coalitions of identities that encourage those in precarious economic circumstances to align their interests with the powerful.'<sup>1</sup> It is for this reason that museums must clearly identify their purpose, and if that should truly be the benefit of all society, they should amplify diverse and marginalised voices in an effort to represent their communities and repair the damage done by a heritage sector which has broadly fostered safe spaces for white, middle and upper-class people. The conclusion of this thesis therefore looks forward with optimism, having explored examples of institutional accountability as well as examples of collaboration with indigenous peoples and originating communities. Such work, combined with supportive and determined museum staff could move the museums sector, perhaps not towards decolonisation, which is arguably an almost insurmountable task for museums in their current state, but towards a process of healing and progress towards change. In order to drive meaningful change in the sector, this thesis has evaluated a number of the issues or topics which must be acknowledged or addressed in order to move forwards with anti-colonial work. The key recommendations I would make following the conclusion of this thesis and supporting research are as follows:

1. Acknowledge all links to colonial violence and racism where they are present,
2. Institutions must explore diverse methods of display and interpretation.
3. Indigenous voices must be present in discourse on indigenous heritage and histories.

In addition to this, the power imbalance between communities of origin, and the museums which hold their cultural heritage must be addressed in order to prevent the perpetuation of colonial attitudes.

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<sup>1</sup> O. Jones, 'Britons don't like culture wars, but that doesn't mean the woke mob messaging will stop', *The Guardian*, 24 April 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/apr/24/britons-culture-wars-woke-mob-messaging-labour> [accessed 25/05/2024].

4. Discussion should lead to tangible change and action.
5. The diversity of museums and their staff must improve if institutions are to represent a diverse range of cultures, peoples and perspectives.

Despite the years since Black Lives Matter applied a renewed critical focus to the heritage sector's complacency regarding colonial legacies, the response to this call to action has been demonstrably varied. Though 'expanding the scope of anti-colonial work is crucial, but a number of institutions have yet to acknowledge colonial sources of funding, and work to interrogate the vast implications of these connections has yet to begin.'<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the first recommendation I would make on the basis of this thesis and its findings is that the clear acknowledgment of colonialism and its influence on heritage and historical narrative is essential. However, the latter chapters of this thesis also illustrate the necessity of external contribution and collaboration in order to negate the risk of institutions reinforcing centuries old perspectives and attitudes. The idea that the work to understand and account for every link to colonial violence in any given heritage organisation can be undertaken internally is one which undermines the calls to diversify the voices represented in the sector. In addition, it can present the illusion of meaningful progress which may give the impression that meaningful anti-colonial work is being undertaken where it is not. As highlighted by interviewees from the Petrie Museum and the MShed, it is all too easy for drive and commitment to wane without the presence of external partners and public pressure to hold organisations and institutions accountable. In an interview with Jan English, when she stated 'I'm pretty sure the trustees were kind of not sure what to do'<sup>3</sup> this also draws attention to the fact that many museum teams overtly lack the knowledge and skills to address the issues amplified by Black Lives Matter and it is therefore essential that they seek external, expert advice in order to avoid the risk of reinforcing colonial attitudes or mere inaction. A respondent to the Museums Association's Decolonisation Survey stated 'the worst kind of decolonisation project is one where the museum claims that it has all the

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<sup>2</sup> I. Gilbert, 'The Colonial Money Trail', *History Workshop*, 10 January 2022

<<https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/empire-decolonisation/the-colonial-money-trail/>> [accessed 30/08/2023].

<sup>3</sup> J. English, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 03 February 2023.

answers, and that it is going to do all the work.’<sup>4</sup> It is clear from the contents of this thesis that approaches to museum work should be diverse and inclusive.

As illustrated by the relationship between the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Arhuaco people of Colombia, collaboration is integral to anti-colonial work where the collection is formed of objects and cultures with living originating communities and descendants. To understand the cultures and collections arts and heritage institutions hope to interpret and represent, they must accept the necessity of unpicking Eurocentric or colonial attitudes to collecting and cataloguing. LACMA’s ‘Portable Universe’ exhibition enabled the beliefs of the descendant community to inform decisions such as not including dates on object labels in order to reflect the non-linear connectedness of material culture and peoples. The Los Angeles Times asserted that this decision was ‘a conceit’ given objects such as ‘a Chinese Qing Dynasty Scroll painting or a German Baroque bronze [...] live two lives simultaneously – one in the historical nexus that produced it, the other in the experience the viewer has of it.’<sup>5</sup> Such statements illustrate the importance of LACMA’s work with the Arhuaco, for so long as we ascribe significance to objects based on the year of their production and the experience of a viewer in the Global North, we cannot move beyond a colonial approach to arts and heritage and a worldview which homogenises the prescribed ways in which one might understand the world. Indeed, in many cases it must be acknowledged that ‘postcolonial theory which has erased or overlooked native agency in its insistence on all powerful social structures and utterly pervasive discourses — with the result that the indigene cannot speak.’<sup>6</sup> Therefore, even within the museum which is working towards anti-colonial aims, one must cease to think in the way a curator or member of museum staff might previously have been expected to. A possible way in which museums could move beyond their harmful roots, could be to pursue a future as what Adam Kuper defines as something which ‘transcends ethnic and national identities, makes comparisons,

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<sup>4</sup> Museums Association, ‘Collaboration’, *Museums Association* <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/supporting-decolonisation-in-museums/collaboration/#> [accessed 20/03/2024]

<sup>5</sup> C. Knight, ‘Review: An engaging LACMA show delves into how Indigenous Colombian cultures think about gold’, *Los Angeles Times*, 6 June 2022 < <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2022-06-06/the-portable-universe-indigenous-colombia-exhibit-lacma> > [accessed 06/05/2024]

<sup>6</sup> C. McCarthy, ‘From histories of museums to museum history: approaches to historicising colonial museums Aotearoa New Zealand’, *Museum History* 13.1 (2020) 95-110 (p. 102)

draws out connections, tracks exchanges across political frontiers.<sup>7</sup> However, for this imagined museum which transcends an existence shaped by colonial oppression, there must naturally be a redressing of the power imbalance implicit between the coloniser and the colonised.

It is not enough simply to invite indigenous communities to participate in the moral improvement of a museum. Though the Arhuaco did not necessarily wish to have their cultural artefacts returned, there are many communities for whom the possession of their ancestors and cultural heritage by museums is a continued source of pain. Such wounds cannot be healed by mere collaboration in a move which ultimately works in the favour of the institution. This is not to say that museums should see no benefits to themselves from anti-colonial work, but instead to suggest that these benefits are experienced in an at least two-way exchange rooted in collaboration and celebration of indigenous identities. In many cases, this would involve the restitution or repatriation of indigenous heritage and ancestors to their originating communities. In his book *The Brutish Museums*, which is referenced throughout this thesis, Dan Hicks states that the future of the heritage sector lie in the hands of those who, after reading this book, will put it down, stand up from their chair, walk out of the door, and take action to make the 2020s a decade of restitution.<sup>8</sup> This would appear somewhat true given the correlation between museum anti-colonialism and the presence of motivated, supported staff teams. However, as was demonstrated throughout the interviews conducted with museum professionals, museums can demonstrate a proclivity for committing to some forms of action such as the creation of forums or discussion groups, without moving far beyond these initial steps towards anti-colonial practice. As Lisa Graves stated in her interview; 'we're just made up of individuals and our own personal interests and ideas and what we want to put to the top of our to do list has a massive say in how agendas get moved forward.'<sup>9</sup> It therefore becomes ever clearer that strategies and organisational changes regarding anti-colonial approaches to arts and heritage must be clear, consistent and coordinated in order to contribute to his concept of

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<sup>7</sup> A. Kuper, *The Museum of Other People* (London: Profile Books, 2023) p. 355.

<sup>8</sup> D. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p. 242.

<sup>9</sup> L. Graves, interviewed by Isabel Gilbert about experience of anti-colonial work in the heritage sector, 31 March 2022.

healing and progress previously discussed. Indeed, restitution is important, as is the revision of museum interpretation which valorises acts of colonial violence, but such piecemeal efforts fail to make any attempt towards reparation, or a deconstruction of systems and scholarships which have been shaped by white supremacy. In an article by Dan Hicks, published two years after *The Brutish Museums*, he notes that restitution and anti-colonial work more broadly has, in some organisations, become an ‘interminable debate rather than an action-oriented process.’<sup>10</sup>

For other institutions such as the American Museum in Bath, there may be a case for reviewing the purpose and remit of the museum and assessing its capacity to navigate subjects like settler colonialism in an ethical and anti-colonial way. However, if an institution such as this intends to represent and interpret the history of American design, this will certainly be a history which is inextricably linked to colonialism and the exploitation of resources and indigenous lands. In addition, there will be many objects and design styles which are connected to the appropriation of indigenous knowledge. Indeed, the notion of private property and development is rooted in an extractive and exploitative colonial process and are, as Robin Wall Kimmerer states; ‘unacceptable in an economy where land is seen as a gift to us all.’<sup>11</sup> Therefore, to suggest it might be capable to remove any history associated with America and the development of design, property and culture from indigenous peoples and enslaved African peoples is a method of erasing history. Though some institutions found themselves without adequate experience or knowledge with which to respond to Black Lives Matter, or indeed the centuries old problem of pro-colonialism in heritage, the evasion of calls to action perpetuate a cycle of harm. Collaboration with other institutions and with the communities associated with an institution’s collections is a feasible step forward in understanding the breadth of responsibility museums have for presenting and teaching history.

It is evident from the years of sparse action on colonialism in museums that existing institutional leadership has failed to move their individual organisations, and indeed the

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<sup>10</sup> D. Hicks, ‘UK Welcomes Restitution, Just Not Anti-Colonialism’, *Hyperallergic*, 26 August 2022 <<https://hyperallergic.com/756241/uk-welcomes-restitution-just-not-anti-colonialism/>> [accessed 20/04/24].

<sup>11</sup> R. W. Kimmerer, *Braiding the Sweetgrass* (London: Penguin Random House, 2020) p.27.

sector forwards. It is clear from the contents of this thesis that individual members of staff are passionate about anti-colonial work and making museums a better place for their communities and for people around the world. However, widespread coordinated change has not been achieved in many places despite enthusiasm from staff and calls for change from activists. In addition, staff members of colour have experienced discrimination and disproportionate expectations during periods where museums have felt pressured to respond to assertions that they are participating in colonial violence. Following alleged racist incidents involving the family of a curator and staff member of colour at Nottingham Castle, the internal conditions at the museum have apparently worsened: 'staff who remain are too scared to speak to trustees, or senior management who support them, after seeing what happened to our colleagues when they tried.'<sup>12</sup> It is clear from comments like this and breakdowns in communication between senior management and staff working in museums that, in many cases, museum leadership is not equipped to address the need for anti-colonialism and indeed anti-racism in the sector. Such problems cannot merely be solved by commissioning artists and advisors on temporary contracts in order for institutions to demonstrate their commitment to diversity and disruption of pro-colonial narratives. As already addressed, this is an extractive process whereby the structure and the hierarchies it is rooted in does not change. It does little to redress the imbalance regarding the diversity of temporary museum staff as opposed to the largely white leadership teams.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, beyond museum leadership, the influence of funding and its sources loom large. As demonstrated by Oliver Dowden's threats to withdraw government funding for museums and organisations in 2020.<sup>14</sup> This arguably illustrates the importance of museums as activist spaces, in order to better challenge authoritarian efforts to shape interpretation of history in a discriminatory manner. Likewise, institutions must be mindful of sponsorships they

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<sup>12</sup> G. K. Adams, 'Nottingham Castle staff criticise organisational culture', *Museums Association*, 25 March 2022 <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2022/03/nottingham-castle-staff-criticise-organisational-culture/> [accessed 20/04/24].

<sup>13</sup> Arts Council England, *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case* (2020) <[https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality\\_Diversity\\_and\\_the\\_Creative\\_Case\\_A\\_Data\\_Report\\_201920.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality_Diversity_and_the_Creative_Case_A_Data_Report_201920.pdf)> [accessed: 16/03/2022] p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> A. Sherwin, 'Robert Geffrye statue: Oliver Dowden threatens to cut museum's funding if slave trader statue is removed', *I*, 6 October 2020 <<https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/robert-geffrye-statue-oliver-dowden-cut-funding-london-679304>> [accessed 23/02/2021].

accept, as such associations can also signal a lapse in dedication to public good or anti-colonialism.<sup>15</sup>

Meaningful change in museums is likely never to constitute reparation or decolonisation, given the origins of the sector and the consistent integration of racist, colonial values. However, the cycle of harm caused by the perpetuation of colonial violence can be halted. It appears that in order to achieve this, the leadership within our institutions and organisations must be changed in order to better reflect the diversity of local communities and indeed the cultures and peoples represented by their collections. Partnerships must be reciprocal, and decisions regarding indigenous heritage must not be without indigenous voices.

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<sup>15</sup> M. Brown, 'British Museum's BP Sponsorship deal 'Astonishingly out of touch'', *The Guardian*, 19 December 2023 < <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/dec/19/british-museum-bp-sponsorship-deal-astonishingly-out-of-touch> > [accessed 19/06/2024].

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