Relics of empire? Colonialism and the Culture Wars

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‘Too much Hampstead and not enough Hull’ was how the Labour MP Andy Burnham characterised the cultural identity of the Remain campaign in 2016.[[1]](#footnote-2) The divisions within society which the Brexit result exposed have been attributed to differences in class, age, education, geography, ethnicity and nationalism. Cultural identity has formed a key site of contestation demarcating the so-called metropolitan liberal elites of Hampstead from the common-folk of Hull. The citizens of nowhere, with their embrace of globalisation and multiculturalism, have been pitted against the earthy rootedness of the citizens of somewhere, those native tribes who have been displaced and discarded by a political class which has ‘more in common with international elites than with the people down the road.’[[2]](#footnote-3) The rise of a nativist populism expressed in both the vote for Brexit and across the Atlantic in the election of Donald Trump, has manifested itself culturally in what historian David Olusoga as termed a series of ‘history wars’.[[3]](#footnote-4) Debates over the national narrative and the meaning(s) of its signs and symbols have long been a way of delineating who can stake a claim to belong, and who will be accepted as belonging. The cultural battle lines have been drawn in relation to histories of slavery and empire, highlighting the racial fault lines which have long existed within both societies. In America this issue reached a tragic nadir in the summer of 2017 following a prolonged and vitriolic public debate over the proposed removal of the statue of Confederate leader Robert E. Lee from Emancipation Park (formerly Lee Park) in Virginia. Following a ‘Unite the Right’ rally which took place in Charlottesville on 11-12 August, the anti-racist activist Heather Heyer was murdered by a white supremacist. In the following days, President Trump gave a speech at a rally in Phoenix in which he told the crowds that ‘they are trying to take away our history and our heritage’.[[4]](#footnote-5) The question of whose history and whose heritage forms the collective ‘our’ is central to an understanding of the exclusionary politics of who is inside and outside of the President’s vision of the nation.

As the previous chapter has shown in the case of Cecil Rhodes, public debate in Britain has focused on a variety of figures with links to both slavery and empire – Rhodes himself, but also a range of others including Edward Colston, Admiral Horatio Nelson and Winston Churchill. These iconic figures represent the kind of buccaneering imperial nationalism that Brexiteers have invoked as part of their vision of a reinvigorated ‘global Britain’. There has, however, been a growing move to challenge this interpretation of history. Calls have been made by a variety of groups to remove or re-contextualise the physical legacies – statues, street names, buildings – that shape a public understanding of both these men and the histories that they represent. Campaign groups like Countering Colston in Bristol and Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, have demanded that the brutality of colonialism be re-centred in the stories we tell about the imperial past. These contestations raise uncomfortable questions for contemporary society regarding the ways in which empire benefitted different local communities, and indeed the nation as a whole, both then and now. They pose a challenge to the idea that only those directly involved with the imperial project were enriched by it. These visible markers of British imperialism are a continued source of tension in part because they serve as a tangible reminder of the continuity of privilege, persisting forms of inequality, and the limits of local and national belonging.

Attempts to shift the narrative have met with entrenched resistance from those who view the critique as a frontal assault on British national identity. When the journalist Afua Hirsch wrote an article linking Nelson’s Column to the debates about the removal of white supremacist statues in America, she was met with a barrage of racial and misogynistic abuse.[[5]](#footnote-6) In an article written by Stephen Glover for the *Daily Mail*, he framed her as a thankless immigrant asking ‘Couldn’t she summon a smidgen of gratitude for the institutions that have nurtured her?’[[6]](#footnote-7) The story was picked up by almost every national newspaper. In an echo of Trump’s statement at the rally in Phoenix, *The Daily Express* included a quote from an irate teacher who claimed that ‘This makes me rather angry. These Left-wingers should grow up. They want to do away with our heritage.’[[7]](#footnote-8) The conflation of historical critique with historical destruction is demonstrative of a worrying impulse to shut down discussion – a move to ‘silence the past’ in the words of Michel-Rolph Trouillot.[[8]](#footnote-9)

The removal (or not) of individual statues is perhaps less important than the public dialogue that has emerged around the place of empire in the history of Britain. This is a necessary conversation and one which is long overdue. Brexit has been framed around the notion of imperial nostalgia, but arguably it is also indicative of a deep imperial amnesia. The history of empire is not a mandatory part of the national curriculum in schools, nor are there any public history institutions which deal explicitly with this history. This lacuna has allowed for the geographic distance of empire to be compounded by a distancing of the mind – leading to a mythologisation of Britain as standing alone against the world; a sturdy little ship on the global waters. Britain however, as Gurminder Bhambra reminds us, ‘has not been an independent country, but part of broader political entities; most significantly empire, then the Commonwealth and, from 1973, the European Union. **There has been no independent Britain**, no ‘**Island nation**’.’[[9]](#footnote-10) In an interview during the by-election in Sleaford in 2016, journalist John Harris asked a pro-Brexit voter why she had made that decision. Her reply was that ‘I think it’s better to come out… we’ve stood on our own in the past, and I think we can do it again.’[[10]](#footnote-11) The ability to perceive Britain’s history as one of splendid isolation and ethnic homogeneity, requires the forgetting, or active suppression of the memory of empire.

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Brexiteers have been characterised as harbouring a nostalgic longing for an imagined past, one in which the empire is both recalled and suppressed at different times and in different ways. As Charlotte Riley has noted

The vote to leave the European Union was framed by many as going ‘back’ to some moment of mythical British power. The paradox of plucky little Britain, standing alone against the bureaucratic monolith of Europe, yet backed up by a vast imperial network (now repackaged as a Commonwealth of equals), pervades politics, media and culture.[[11]](#footnote-12)

There are multiple frameworks for understanding the concept of nostalgia but perhaps the most pertinent is Svetlana Boym’s notion of ‘restorative nostalgia’.[[12]](#footnote-13) She argues that ‘restorative nostalgia stresses nóstos (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home … Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition … restorative nostalgia returns and rebuilds one’s homeland with paranoid determination’. This sense of nostalgia can be read clearly in the cultural policies of the European project’s greatest detractor – the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). In 2010 UKIP published a document entitled ‘Restoring Britishness’ which outlined their vision of British cultural identity.[[13]](#footnote-14) The language of threat and loss was threaded through the document – a manifestation of the paranoia that Boym sees as a definitive hallmark of restorative nostalgia. The title immediately indicated to the reader that the nation has somehow been lost and must be restored to its former self. The issue of just when exactly it was lost and to whom it should be restored raises precisely the same questions as Trump’s use of the slogan ‘Make America Great Again’. The opening sentence wasted no time in driving this message home. It stated ‘Britain and Britishness are in trouble. They are being attacked and undermined, both externally and internally.’ British national identity was presented as imperilled and in need of saving from multiple threats including the European Union, cultural Marxism, the liberal elite, political correctness, devolution, globalisation, multiculturalism and in particular Islamicisation.

The relationship between history, culture and the construction of national identity was a central concern of the document. It decried the undermining of patriotism citing ‘an uncharitable reading of British history’ which has ‘led many to conclude that Britain is a country undeserving of affection and loyalty.’ The nation’s history of slavery and colonialism was identified as being ‘deliberately used to undermine Britishness’. Instead emphasis was placed on the need to present an uncritical national narrative, with the text arguing that the teaching of empire in schools would be ‘improved’ if it was done in a way which ‘celebrates its achievements in terms of democracy, freedom and trade’. Unshackled from the burden of grappling with colonial violence and exploitation, the British empire could instead be restored to an understanding of it as fundamentally a civilising mission.

Recognising the importance of public history in shaping a popular understanding of the past, the manifesto asserted that UKIP would establish a national collection to ‘celebrate British and Commonwealth achievements, heritage and legacy’. Suggested sub-sets of the collection included aviation, maritime, transport and manufacturing. In a move which recalled both the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the later Empire Exhibitions of the early twentieth century, UKIP argued for the establishment of a ‘Best of British’ exhibition which would ‘illustrate in an educational matter of fact (not jingoistic) way the contribution inhabitants of the British Isles have made to the world’. The Royal Naval College at Greenwich would be transformed into a new Commonwealth Institute replete with ‘a major exhibition of the Commonwealth and its history, including suitable historic ships’. This maritimisation of the history of commerce and colonisation has been identified by John Beech as a common interpretative strategy for the repackaging of slavery heritage for cultural consumption.[[14]](#footnote-15) Harking back to a sense of British national identity anchored to what historian Kathleen Wilson has described as ‘the empire of the seas’, the proposed exhibition draws on a romantised notion of the island race. [[15]](#footnote-16) The centrality of seafaring within Brexiteers’ construction of national culture and identity could be read in deployment of the ‘Brexit Flotilla’ in 2016, as well as the on-going politicisation of the contestations over Britain’s fishing fleets.

The interventions made by the cultural policy document are based on UKIP’s unabashed desire to instil what they describe as ‘uniculturalism’. It is vital, they have argued, that ‘all UK citizens must learn a common history and draw from a unified heritage’. But who gets to decide what the single interpretive framework is? In a Britain in which the descendants of the formerly colonised live and learn alongside the descendants of the former colonisers, indeed when some peoples’ heritage draws from both sides of the historic divide – what stories are we to tell about empire, and who should have the right to tell them? Britain’s imperial history is a difficult and divisive one which has involved systematic acts of exclusion and silencing. Yet it is also a narrative that binds the nation and creates claims to citizenship and belonging for a whole range of different people who have been made British through the processes of imperialism. As the Labour MP David Lammy pointed out in a speech relating to the deportation of British citizens to the Caribbean in 2018 during the ‘Windrush scandal’

My ancestors were British subjects. But they were not British subjects because they came to Britain. They were British subjects because Britain came to them, took them across the Atlantic, colonised them, sold them into slavery, profited from their labour and made them British subjects..[[16]](#footnote-17)

Despite its claims to uphold the true history, heritage and traditions of Britain, UKIP’s cultural manifesto is an exercise in the control and containment of the uncomfortable realities which underpinned imperialism. These acts of historical suppression chime with Boym’s assertion that ‘The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology.’ The plaintive cries of historical desecration emanating from the far-right conceal the ways in which it is engaged with a process of historical destruction through the closing down of critical debate.

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The controversial relationship between Britain and empire can be read through the nation’s museums and art galleries. The birth of the public museum in the nineteenth century coincided with a period of imperial expansion. When India became a formal part of the empire in 1857, this greatly influenced the collecting practices of the South Kensington Museum which would later to go on to become the Victoria and Albert Museum. The imperial connections of the nation’s cultural heritage have created a series of legacies which Britain’s public history institutions are increasingly being forced to confront. In 2018 the Museum of London in Docklands launched an exhibition *Slavery, Culture and Collecting* which explored both the cultural accumulation enabled by the profits of slavery, as well as the ways in which culture was used to construct racial hierarchies. Many of Britain’s national and regional collections contain objects which tell the history of colonial exploitation and expropriation. Some of these institutions were founded by, and owe a debt to, those whose fortunes and collections were funded through the profits of slavery and empire. Hans Sloane, for example, was married to a Jamaica heiress and drew revenue from her plantations. His collection formed the basis for the British Museum.[[17]](#footnote-18) Museums not only displayed the captive objects of empire, they were also an active site for the production and dissemination of racial hierarchies based on civilizational difference. Housed within glass cases and removed from the cultural context of their production, these objects became totemic of both exotic otherness and primitive inferiority. Informed by practices of ordering and categorisation that were themselves bound up in the project of European imperialism, museums became places which constructed knowledge of the colonial other for the consumption of a metropolitan audience.

In the wake of multiculturalism and with the emergence of post-independence sovereign nations, questions have been asked about the on-going colonialism of the object. Issues of repatriation and demands for different kinds of histories (and historians) have highlighted the complicity of the museum in the structures of imperialism. The Victoria and Albert Museum is currently considering returning (on long loan) the Maqdala treasures which were looted from Ethiopia in 1868 by British troops. Similarly, the British Museum has explored this idea in relation to the Benin Bronzes and their return to Nigeria. A lack of diversity within both visitor demographics and amongst museum staff had led to calls for museums to ‘decolonise’ in order to maintain relevance for their twenty-first century audiences. As with any perceived break with tradition, moves to make the museum a more inclusive space have met with claims that these institutions are pandering to political correctness. In 2015 the far-right website Breitbart published an article by Liam Deacon ‘History rewritten: Museum conducts politically correct purge of art’ in relation to the Rijksmuseum’s decision to change its labelling to remove racial terms like ‘Negro’. The article criticised the International Council of Museums for endorsing the move and suggested that ‘scores of works have already been altered here in the UK.’[[18]](#footnote-19) Despite the claim that the museum was rewriting history, the project entitled ‘Adjustment of Colonial Terminology’ did in fact retain a reference to the original wording on its online catalogue in order to provide additional historical context for the works.[[19]](#footnote-20) The attempt to make the museum a space in which colonial power – whether through language or representation – is challenged and discussed, was rejected outright by Deacon who denounced the initiative as a ‘purge’. This deliberate stoking of anxieties around the destruction of history and heritage is one strand of a cultural strategy which has weaponised restorative nostalgia as part of a wider political project to empower the far right in both Europe and America.

It is not just more extreme websites like Breitbart that fan the flames of cultural tension On the 23 April 2018, the *Daily Mail* published an article about a series of art history tours which have taken place in London across a range of institutions including the Victoria and Albert Museum, the National Maritime Museum, the British Museum, and the National Gallery. The ‘Uncomfortable Art’ tours are run by independent guide Alice Proctor who places her intervention within the context of ‘a country that’s repeatedly failed to come to terms with its colonial past, led by politicians who seem to think the past is the future.’[[20]](#footnote-21) The tours aim to ‘resist triumphalist nostalgia with art history’ in order to ‘unravel the role colonialism played in shaping and funding these collections’ Proctor’s promotional images rebrand some of Britain’s most iconic national figures including Elizabeth I, Admiral Nelson and James Cook as slavers, thieves, invaders and white supremacists. In reference to the controversial provenance of some of the nation’s collections, those attending her tours are encouraged to wear badges emblazoned with the phrase ‘Wear it like you stole it’. Her approach to negotiating the politics of empire within the museum is uncompromising in its critique of both the imperial past and the role that cultural institutions have played, and continue to play, in representing it.

The article, patriotically published on St. George’s Day, took umbrage with what it viewed as the defilement of Britain’s national heroes, institutions, heritage and identity, opining that ‘Britain's museums have traditionally offered visitors the chance to appreciate our national treasures in all their glory.’[[21]](#footnote-22) Setting aside the question of whose national treasures are actually on display, the whole tenor of the piece mourned the demise of the museum as a space of uncritical national celebration.[[22]](#footnote-23) The comments section read like a form of Brexit catchphrase bingo, with Proctor accused variously of being a ‘millennial’, a ‘snowflake’, a ‘privileged metropolitan poppet’, a ‘social justice warrior’, an ‘anti-British lefty’, a ‘virtue signaller’, spouting ‘PC nonsense’ and almost certainly heading for a job at the BBC. Although not directly related to the debates over Brexit, the expose was nonetheless viewed by some readers as being bound up in the wider cultural wars which have intensified within the context of Brexit. One comment decreed that Proctor’s tours were an example of ‘the communist ideology of the EU in action’, adding ‘destroy a country’s history and you destroy their national identity’. Whether one views Proctor’s methods as ‘sensationalist’, in the words of Conservative MP Kwasi Kwarteng, or a necessarily blunt corrective to a dewy-eyed imperial nostalgia, the content of her tours raise important questions about the nature of Britain’s cultural debt to empire In doing so they challenge a celebrational narrative of the empire as the civilising mission, highlighting instead the cultural pillaging which took place under the guise of imperial benevolence.

The issue of who gets to shape the narrative of Britain and empire is particularly resonant for the museum sector. According to Museum Detox – a network of BAME heritage professionals – the percentage of people identifying as BAME who work within the sector is currently around 7 per cent. Current census data puts the overall BAME population for England and Wales at 14 per cent. This figure varies within different institutions, for example, only 4.3 per cent of Historic England’s identified as BAME in 2016-17.[[23]](#footnote-24) The data does not break down how many of those people are in permanent curatorial, education or senior management roles. The lack of diverse voices within Britain’s cultural institutions impacts on the nature of the narratives included within the museum space. In recent years there has been a shift towards engaging more critically with the history of empire, however, change has been slow and uneven. More recently the practice of ‘community co-curation’ has emerged as a possible, if problematic, antidote to criticisms around a lack of representation.

The exhibition ‘The Past Is Now’ was displayed at Birmingham City Art Gallery and Museum between October 2017 and June 2018. It focused on how Birmingham’s historic collections could be used to tell the story of the city’s extensive links to empire. The museum worked with a group of co-curators – Sumaya Kassim, Abeera Kamran, Shaheen Kasmani and Aliyah Hasinah – all of whom identify as women of colour.The exhibition firmly situated the city’s history within the framework of empire, clearly demonstrating the interdependency of the local and the global. Icons of Birmingham, including both the Cadbury family and Joseph Chamberlain, were reinterpreted so that the celebratory narrative of these local heroes was confronted by their more controversial involvement with empire. A quote from a speech by Chamberlain to the Imperial Institute in 1895 featured on the wall of the exhibition. The extract made clear his commitment to ideas of racial superiority. ‘I believe’ he opined ‘that the British race is the greatest of the governing races that the world has ever seen’.. The fact that the museum itself is located on Chamberlain Square connected the institution, the man and the racial ideologies he espoused through the materiality and naming practices of the city space. In doing so the exhibition brought the empire home by insisting that this was not simply something that occurred in distant and disconnected places but rather it is an integrated part of the city’s history and identity.

The exhibition engaged with some of the issues of provenance raised by Proctor’s tours. As Kassim has written, ‘For many people of colour, collections symbolise historic and ongoing trauma and theft. Behind every beautiful object and historically important building or monument is trauma.’[[24]](#footnote-25) This point was made powerfully through the inclusion of a letter from the museum’s own curator dated 23 October 1964. The letter related to a possible new acquisition and read

I was telephoned by a Mr D. Cooper on Thursday who is offering to us, as a gift, one or two relics which he captured personally from members of Mau Mau during all that trouble, I suppose he was in the Army. They include one or two blood-stained knives and a home-made rifle. I thought they might make an amusing addition of a specialised sort to our African collection.[[25]](#footnote-26)

The notion of the captured relic, still stained with the blood shed during colonial violence, as an ‘amusing addition’ to the collection is a devastating reminder of the colonial mind-set and the ways in which it informed museum collecting and as a result public understanding of the imperial past. As Kassim has pointed out, ‘To many white people, the collections are an enjoyable diversion, a nostalgic visit which conjures up a romanticised version of Empire.’

The question of the relevance of empire was posed on the exhibition comments board. Visitors’ replies reflected the deep divisions within British society which have crystallised around Brexit. Written in marker pen beneath the question were two very different responses. The first stated ‘Proud to be British’ and the second ‘Brexit is imperial nostalgia’. As the comments board made clear, the representation and meaning of Britain’s imperial past and its relationship to the present will continue to be contested precisely because there is no single unicultural interpretation that can speak to the many subjectivities of a diverse nation. Birmingham very narrowly voted to leave the European Union but the point the exhibition made clearly was that despite a very strong sense of local identity the city’s history has always been bound up with places and people beyond its boundaries.

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As Brexit is increasingly understood to be a question of culture rather than economics, the role that culture will play in its aftermath will be key. It is no surprise then that Prime Minister Theresa May proposed to earmark £120 million for a nationwide festival to mark Britain’s departure from the European Union in 2022. The suggestion was quickly dubbed the ‘Festival of Brexit’ by cultural commentators. The parallels with UKIP’s ‘Best of Britain’ exhibition demonstrate the degree to which the Conservative Party has drawn on their policies and rhetoric in recent years. Harking back to the Festival of Britain in 1951, the idea is embedded within a nostalgic cultural framework which continues to look to the past for a vision which will unite a divided nation. Similarly, supporters of the Leave campaign have also recognised the necessity of staking their claim to historical representation by announcing that they are collecting material for a Museum of Brexit. According to the website, the museum will tell ‘the history of what we know today as Brexit. It’s the story of how the UK – in official terms – “pooled” (or surrendered), and then reclaimed, our sovereignty’.[[26]](#footnote-27) Both of these interventions underscore the centrality of the exhibitionary space in the configuration of collective memory and identity.

As the nation wrestles with competing versions of both the past and the present, museums can and should function as places in which to think through these questions. As the James Baldwin quote which is emblazoned on the walls of the hard-fought for Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture remind us, ‘The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.’ Both the history of empire and the issue of Brexit are deeply contested and fundamentally intertwined subjects that go to the heart of a sense of personal and national identity. How they are negotiated in the reformulation of the nation which is taking place in the wake of the referendum remains to be seen.

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