**MEG 2024 Conference – University of East Anglia, Norwich**

**Living Museums – Looking to the Future**

ABSTRACTS

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Thursday 25 April 2024

**Session 1:** **Community 1**

***Joanne Lai Chia Yin*** (The One Academy, Malaysia)

*Resisting revisionism: exploring former colonial museums as ‘safe spaces’ to address historical negationism movements in ethno-nationalistic post-colonial countries*

This paper explores how ethnographic museums in the UK and other former colonial countries can play a crucial role in helping post-colonial scholars address alarming movements of historical revision and negationism happening in their home countries. Like many former colonies, post-independence museums in Malaysia have been at the forefront of nation-building as the institutional authority on identity formation. However, the cultural diversity and unequal economic distribution of its populace has always been a catalyst for the majority ethnic group in government to assert their dominance and sovereignty. Since the 1980s, this has contributed to the political impetus to rewrite history in promotion of the Ketuanan Melayu (Malay Supremacy) paradigm in all avenues of government-controlled historical narratives, such as school history textbooks and museums. In this hostile climate of internal colonialism, other native scholars expounding more objective viewpoints are often sidelined and negated via professional sanctions. Thus museums overseas with collections of historical artefacts from such countries can help redress the situation. Instead of complying with the impetus for repatriation, it would benefit these scholars far more to have the authentic resources to conduct research in situ and for the museums to be a ‘safe’ platform for more equitable knowledge exchange.

***Alba Ferrandiz-Gaudens*** (Sainsbury Research Unit, UEA)

*Bringing the past into the present at The Effect, a community museum in Guam*

How do community-led museums in the north Pacific interact in unique ways with their communities? How do they operate from and for the community? What are the priorities of these museums? What can museums in the UK learn from these initiatives to make themselves more accessible and inclusive? Using the example of The Effect, a CHamoru community initiative that strives to democratise knowledge about ancient CHamoru culture, this short report will aim to answer the questions posed above. Admission free, The Effect has a collection of ancient CHamoru artefacts, gathered and donated by members of the Guam community through the years. Besides, The Effect offers sling throwing classes, traditional navigation workshops, interactive experiences, sunset yoga, CHamoru fiestas and other cultural events for people of all ages. Ultimately, The Effect exists as a way of linking the stories of the past to the present, as well as of connecting and re-connecting the community to their CHamoru heritage and to each other.

***Danny Zborover, Louise de Mello and Rose Taylor*** (British Museum)

*The social role of museums and their collections: experiences with community museology in the Americas*

The rapidly growing number of community museums in the Americas clearly attest to the empowerment of Indigenous groups who successfully appropriated this largely Western institution to suit their cultural sustainability needs. The displays and associated narratives are deeply embedded in multifaceted environments-- the natural/constructed, ancestral/contemporary, social/political, tangible/intangible, among others. The immediate communal benefits typically range from the pedagogical to the economic and serve the important function of fortifying collective identities and cultural revitalization. By prioritising traditional knowledge systems, community museums thus highlight didactic themes that transcend and often contest monolithic national narratives, touristic discourses, or exclusive academic epistemologies. Concomitantly, the collective creation and curation processes can further expose tensions between communal and federal authorities over stewardship of cultural resources and even highlight competing factions within communities and tribal entities. In this talk we present several case studies of Indigenous and Afrodescendant community museology, that showcases the social role of museums and their collections. We further reflect on the role large institutions such as the British Museum can play in supporting and promoting community museums throughout the Americas.

**Session 2: Repatriation**

***Tamara Price*** (MEG)

*Benin Curios for Sale: How financial value has been negotiated and changed around the Benin Bronzes*

In 2022, the Pitt Rivers Museum, the Horniman Museum and Garden’s and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology began the process of repatriating their Benin collections. In May of 2022, two valuers who specialised in Benin and West Africa, alongside representatives from these museums, came together to value the museums’ collections. This paper uses the valuation meeting to explore how the financial value of the Benin Bronzes has been negotiated. I take a chronological exploration from their initial looting in 1897 by the British, to the present, where publicity surrounding calls for their repatriation has rendered them essentially unsellable. I use different objects valued in the meeting to examine how intersections between museums, auction houses and the art market have worked together to form the economic value of the Benin Bronzes. Following this, I explore ‘connoisserial legitimacy’ - the idea the prior owners of an object can impact its financial value. I examine the power of naming in auction catalogues, looking at how Bini individuals are dismissed in favour of British figures to build a discussion around the ways in which connoisserial ownership, legitimacy, authenticity and expertise have informed and are informed by and continue to inform financial value.

***Ray Ingrey and Quaiden Williams Riley*** (Gujaga Foundation, La Perouse Aboriginal community)

*View from the shore: exploring the return of the Gweagal spears collected on Cook’s First Voyage*

The Aboriginal community at La Perouse, after many years of discussions with the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, have secured the return of four spears taken from the camps of Aboriginal people living at Kamay (Botany Bay) in April 1770 by Joseph Banks and Lieutenant James Cook.

The return of four spears back to the ownership of the traditional owners of Kamay in Australia is as one community member commented a “win-win -win for all”. Traditional owners will have in their possession a tangible and invaluable connection to their forebears, Trinity College, the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the Community now have a committed and on-going relationship and the people of Australia, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous will be able to access material that represents the beginning of a shared history.

The spears will eventually be on display in a purpose built cultural and educational facility at Kurnell, Sydney, where they will be on-Country and stimulate opportunities to deeply consider a history of conflict, understand the story of this first contact through a view from the shore and celebrate and value the ongoing cultural practices of a thriving community.

***Iain G Johnston and Ophelia Rubinich*** (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies)

*People’s things: repatriation practice and collection care, views from Australia*

The work of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies’ (AIATSIS) Return of Cultural Heritage (RoCH) Program is to fosters three-way partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, AIATSIS and overseas museums to collectively discuss where material can be best cared for in the present, and if requested by custodians return it to their care. These partnerships develop through On-Country discussions with custodians where the most asked questions are “who made that one? who’s was it? who had it before?” Objects held in collections were once owned by a person, they were made by a person’s ancestor, and they tell part of the story of a person’s culture – and connect people past and present. Thinking about objects as having specific owners and makers is not unique to repatriation projects, nor is it a new phenomenon, as it is firmly embedded in some practitioner’s museum practice. However, thinking about ownership in this way reflects how Indigenous custodians in Australia regularly make decision about material culture. In this paper, we share how thinking about ownership shapes our work and how it manifests in other aspects of collection care at Australian museums.

***Iain G Johnston*** (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies)

*“Yeah, bring them back. The whole lot”: Using Indigenous Frameworks to bring poorly provenanced international Indigenous collections home*

From the late 19th to the mid-20th century thousands of central Australian men’s sacred objects were collected by researchers and accessioned into overseas museum collections. Many have very little accompanying information and cannot be identified. This presents a major challenge for returning objects and reconnecting them with traditional custodians and Country. Research is therefore urgently needed to document the advice of knowledgeable Elders on the cultural rules that should apply to returning men’s objects with little or no provenance.

Deakin University and the AIATSIS Return of Cultural Heritage (RoCH) program have partnered on a two-year research project designed to understand the challenges of repatriating unprovenanced and poorly provenanced, men’s secret-sacred and ceremonial material. This research attempts to establish, through analysis of available data and consultation with cultural experts, how to best manage the return of these poorly provenanced objects and collections. The primary aim of the project is to seek counsel from Akngerrepate/Tjilpi (senior male cultural experts) regarding the cultural rules that should be employed to care for and engage with these collections into the future. The project will benefit both Aboriginal communities and museums by developing the Indigenous custodial frameworks to return this material in the most culturally appropriate way possible.

In this paper we intend to present our analysis of available provenance data (not the material itself), the key research questions we are exploring with senior central Australian men, the results of our preliminary consultations, and future prospects for the return of unprovenanced men’s ceremonial material.

[1] Alan Drover, Senior Arrernte Man, 24 March 2023.

***Ophelia Rubinich*** (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies)

*Collection Ecologies for Repatriation Practice: networks, relationships, journeys*

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in collaboration with the Australian National University is undertaking extensive applied research and repatriation activity relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material (not Ancestral Remains) located in overseas institutions and private collections. The Return of Cultural Heritage (RoCH) project has already compiled information on over 100,000 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage objects with more information being regularly received. This work has found that most cultural heritage material held in overseas collections has poor or limited documentation which is needed to help identify the community of origin. Due to the historical and significant role of Australian museums and other collecting institutions in the provision of cultural material held internationally, information about cultural heritage objects in overseas collections is found within Australian institutions. This paper presents preliminary findings from the ‘Collection Ecologies for Repatriation’ project (2022-2024) which investigates the overseas provision activity of major collecting institutions within New South Wales and Victoria. This project seeks to locate and assemble information within these Australian institutions which relate to cultural heritage objects overseas, in response to the identified need for a significant corpus of information to be brought together in a centralised resource designed primarily for repatriation practice and community use.

**Session 3: Knowledge Exchange 1**

***Chantal Knowles*** (Auckland War Memorial Museum | Tāmaki Paenga Hira)

*Te Aho Mutunga Kore – the eternal thread*

n 2022 Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland Museum launched Te Aho Mutunga Kore a new textile and fibre knowledge exchange centre. This important kaupapa nurtures creativity, knowledge sharing and knowledge creation by decentring the museum and handing agency back to Māori and Pacific communities. Co-directors Dr Kahutoi Te Kanawa (Pou Arahi Curator Māori), Fuli Pereira (Curator Pacific) and Chantal Knowles (Head of Human History) set up the centre to ensure sustained community-led, engagement with museum collections to strengthen the ties (aho) between community and their material heritage, creating safe pathways for taonga tuku iho (knowledge transmission). The centre has been in place for 18 months, this paper would provide an opportunity to share our reflections on the kaupapa and uara (values) of the centre and early projects, outcomes and experiences. See <https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/discover/kaupapa/te-aho-mutunga-kore>

***Viveca Mellegård*** (University of London)

*How does Kew’s 19th-century archival collection contribute to the revival of indigo dyeing in West Bengal?*

Kew’s 19th century collection from India reflects the colonial interest in indigo as a lucrative commodity which was exported all over the world. Blocks of indigo dye, jars containing seeds and boxes of plant material are vegetal witnesses to Kew’s participation in efforts to make indigo production more efficient and streamlined. The current revival of indigo in West Bengal reflects a different set of interests.

This paper reports on recent PhD fieldwork in the former colonial landscapes of West Bengal where I am collaborating with a local organization whose aim is to revive indigo as an ethnobotanical practice. Although information about dyeing is widely available, the practice itself stopped over 150 years ago and the practical knowledge and skill is scarce in West Bengal.

As part of the collaboration, I tap into Kew’s colonial collection of material and textual archives - recipes and examples of high quality indigo – and connect it to the present day revival. In this way, knowledge produced in an institutional location can be activated in the hands of dyers in West Bengal. Moreover, knowledge flows back as Kew is able to acquirenew materials that fill the gaps in the colonial collection where the dyers themselves and the craft practice of indigo have been absent.

***Njabulo Chipangura*** (University of Manchester)

*The restoration of community and object agency in encyclopaedic museums with African collections*

In this paper, I will address practical aspects of decolonising African ethnographic collections at Manchester museum. A democratised and relational form of curatorship will be presented as I specifically look at the colonial context through which objects from Lesotho were collected and became part of the anthropological collection in this museum. Following Taiwo’s (2022)[1] argument I  will highlight how encyclopaedic museums in Europe can proactively give agency to African communities who lost their cultural objects as result of colonial violence. By being inclusive – I show the work that Manchester museum has been undertaking as we transform to become a contact point for dialogue with African diaspora and originating communities to create new, more equitable forms of relations and co-produced knowledge. I use the example of ‘objects’ from Lesotho that we are working on and the type of collaboration that took us beyond the walls of Manchester museum to Maseru where I am engaging with communities by giving them agency in weaving their stories and meanings of these living cultures.

[1] Taiwo, Olufemi. 2022. *Against Decolonisation; Taking African Agency Seriously*. London:  C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd.

**Session 4:** **Knowledge Exchange 2**

***Rachel Peat Underhill*** (The Royal Collection Trust)

*Knowing the Ancestors: New Meanings of Circulation through Mississauga Baskets*

13 birchbark baskets (makaks) made by Mississauga First Nations women were loaned from Royal Collection Trust to the community in Ontario, Canada, in 2023. This was the first time the baskets had returned to their ancestral lands since they were presented to the British Crown in 1860. Rachel Peat Underhill will show how understanding the makaks as ancestors rather than objects changed the meaning of circulation. Central to the project was out-of-case access by Michi Saagiig communities, many of whom are direct descendants of the makers. This foregrounded Indigenous knowledge and sought to address spiritual and practical challenges faced by the community today. Native speakers were able to recover textile vocabularies in Anishinaabemowin, the language of the Miichi Saagiig, for the first time. Contemporary artists meanwhile identified historic embroidery techniques, and used these to introduce quilling to over 700 Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. This paper will explore the opportunities offered by prioritising cultural and emotional ways of knowing over institutional structures. In the process, it will consider the diverse meanings of repatriation, including its spiritual dimensions – such as smudging, feast offerings and prayer. Together, these unlock new possibilities for collaboration, community redress and exchange.

***Elaine D. Alexie*** (University of Alberta)

*Visiting Relations: Gwich’in Knowledge Repatriation through Museum Collections Research*

After years of Indigenous activism, many museums are changing how they represent Indigenous peoples, allowing communities to rediscover ancestral knowledge contributing to Indigenous revitalization efforts. From this perspective, museums serve as a powerful tool for Indigenous people to reconnect with their ancestors and as a site for knowledge repatriation. This paper explores how visiting with historic Gwich’in cultural belongings in museum ethnographic collections has provided space for knowledge and skill repatriation of Gwich'in sewing traditions. Through engagement with historic Gwich’in cultural belongings, this paper articulates my methodological process: a visiting ethnology. This approach involves reconnecting with Gwich’in caribou hide clothing by engaging in skill repatriation through the close study of beadwork and quilling techniques embedded within them. Navigating museums has helped me uncover the unique Gwich'in social histories and deep kinship connections located in museum collections, evoking memories of land, family, and cultural practices in my Gwich’in homelands. By studying historic museum collections in North America and Europe, this presentation argues that museum spaces, even when problematic, can be utilized as a tool for reconnection, creating pathways for healing through cultural knowledge reclamation and skill repatriation of Gwich’in sewing traditions.

Friday 26 April 2024

**Session 5:** **Community 2**

***Zoe Cormack*** (Submitted on behalf of 4 curators in Sudan and the UK)

*Community museums in conflict: learning from recent experience in Sudan*

This paper explores the role of museums in conflict and displacement crises through the example of the Gezira Museum in Wad Medani, Sudan. At the outbreak of conflict in Sudan (in April 2023), a million people fled from Khartoum (the capital city) to the smaller town of Wad Medani. At this time, the local museum had been closed for several years. With support from a British Council Cultural Protection Fund project, Sudan’s National Commission for Antiquities and Museums and local government, the museum re-opened its galleries, ran community events, art installations and performances for residents and internally displaced people – providing a vital, but short-lived community hub. When fighting spread to Wad Medani in December 2023, people were again displaced, and the museum closed again. We will discuss the experience of the Gezira Museum and its inspiration, the Sheikan Museum in El Obeid. This museum is now occupied by the army, but museum and community volunteers have started inventorying intangible heritage embedded in the town’s markets. These two examples show how museums in Sudan have had to rethink their societal role since April 2023, showing that museums can provide a valuable space for communities during conflict, however precarious and contingent.

***Devina Dimri***

*A ‘Political’ Museum: Curation, Legitimization and Representation in The Tibet Museum, Dharamshala*

The Tibet Museum, Dharamshala (India) is a ‘political’ museum, which aims to represent all Tibetans, in and outside Tibet. This Museum comprises, primarily, an ethnographic collection, and caters to the local Tibetan community’s socio-political needs by propagating a carefully constructed and mandated narrative which challenges the Western and Chinese representations of Tibet and Tibetans. The museum while building a collective national/cultural identity does not paint a picture of a monolithic and homogenous community. On the contrary, it celebrates the regional, sectarian and political diversity present within the community.

This paper aims to understand the manner in which this museum expresses, navigates and responds to the internal politics of such a diverse community. In particular, it explores the three main streams of political positions–middle way approach (or umaylam), complete freedom (or rangzen) and Central Tibetan Administration’s democracy–within the Museum’s display, and the frictions their presence causes. The paper argues that in the attempts to be all inclusive and consolidate a national and political identity, the Museum fails to resolve the frictions within its narrative and leaves the contentious internal politics of the community unacknowledged. It does this by analysing the museum’s displays and physical space of the museum’s permanent exhibition ‘I am Tibetan, this is our story’ as well as building upon the ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author in 2022.

***Rui En Pok*** (University of Cambridge)

*Update on an ongoing community-initiated ‘visual repatriation’ project bridging the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) Cambridge and the Kusu Island, Singapore, community*

This paper presents an update on an ongoing community-initiated ‘visual repatriation’ project bridging the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) Cambridge and the Kusu Island, Singapore community. The project grew from my Social Anthropology undergraduate dissertation fieldwork in 2023 when I used photographs of the Kusu Island pilgrimage festival taken in 1950 by British anthropologist Alan J. A. Elliott to carry out photo-elicitation interviews with pilgrims and caretakers of the island’s places of worship. On the caretakers’ request, I facilitated the transfer of 32 photographs from MAA to them. This project aims to investigate how communities bring new life to anthropological photographs, and what collaborative opportunities might emerge through these new relationships between museums, students, and source communities. As part of the project, I assisted the Kusu Island keramat (Malay shrines) caretaker to put up a physical display of the photographs. I am also currently developing an online exhibition for MAA’s Digital Lab telling the stories shared by the Kusu Island community. In this update, I share some insights gained from the project so far, reflecting on how it has inspired the recovery and discovery of cultural histories and memories on the parts of both the museum and source community.

***Emily Bradfield*** (University of Cambridge)

*Take a Walk in My Shoes: sensory ethnography and walking interviews, exploring how it feels to be ‘in’ the museum*

This research project aims to explore multi-sensory experiences of how it feels to ‘be’ in The Fitzwilliam Museum, and how the experiences of people with lived experience of non-visible disabilities, including physical and mental health challenges, can be used to inform and / or support health and wellbeing in the museum of the future. Phase one of the project involves sensory ethnography observations to explore different spaces in the museum. Phase two will be walking interviews with both museum staff and community participants, including people living with non-visible disabilities, to understand their experiences of moving around and being ‘in’ the museum.

Findings from phases one and two will inform a questionnaire which will be circulated to Fitzwilliam Museum staff, the University of Cambridge Museums and the wider local community. This presentation will share preliminary findings from the research project and thoughts on how they can be used to rethink the Museum’s role in supporting the health and wellbeing of local communities.

**Session 6: Climate/Environment**

***Bridget McKenzie*** (Independent)

*Climate Museum UK, and how we address extractivism and ‘Everyday Ecocide’ in our processes and programmes*

I am an independent researcher and creative curator in response to the Earth crisis. After 30 years working in museums & arts learning, in 2019, I founded Climate Museum UK, an experimental museum supporting non-extractive collecting and Earth crisis conversations. I also co-founded Culture Declares Emergency, an international movement for environmental justice through culture. Although I work in a ‘face-to-place’ way in Norwich, my focus is on strategic advocacy and training. (See some publications here: <https://bridgetmckenzie.uk/writing>). My presentation will discuss the Climate Museum UK, and how we address extractivism and ‘Everyday Ecocide’ in our processes and programmes.

***Erin Messenger*** (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew)

*Queering biocultural, science and natural history collections*

Museums are both shaped and shaping the socio-political landscapes in which they operate and thus should be active participants in evolving, engaging and critiquing ways of being, seeing, knowing and doing in society (Sullivan and Middleton, 2021). While approaches to queer inclusion in many arts and cultural institutions have been well documented, there has been little research conducted within biocultural, science and natural history collections. This paper will examine the roles these institutions have played as spaces of power, learning, leisure and more, and how this may have ‘intentionally and inadvertently, excluded those whose being-in-the-world does not fit with the normative structures and rationalities of such institutions’ (Adair, 2017). Focusing on the Economic Botany Collection, RBG Kew and highlighting other case studies, I will explore approaches in the revitalisation of more LGBTQ+ inclusive museological and ethnographic practices within these institutions. I want to highlight the potential for these institutions as agents of social change to close the gap of queer under representation and recognise the dedication of sector workers who have and continue to implement inclusion strategies.

***Akinsola Adejuwon*** (Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria)

*Curating Climate: The Museum and Sustainable Future*

This paper seeks to answer two important but related questions. How does the museum’s role of preserving biological, cultural and historical heritage intersect with the climate watch? How does the preserved artifacts provide influence or shape people’s imagination and feelings about climate change and greener environment? Drawing on four months of oral interviews with various visitors to the Martin Aworinlewo Odeyemi Museum of Antiquities and Contemporary African Art, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile- Ife, Nigeria in 2023, the paper advances three arguments. First, is the argument that museums stand to provide relevant cultural and artistic representations and frames to imagine and create positive climatic future. Second, through exhibitions of collections, museums communicate historical antecedents of climatic situations and changes to the visitors. Lastly, the paper argues that museums’ collections are useful research data on climate change and understanding environmental conservation issues, particularly in Africa with lasting problems, perhaps only surmountable through new and global engagements.

***Christina Peake*** (University of Westminster & The National Archives)

*Transforming Collections (Artist-In-Residence)*

Christina is Artist-In-Residence for the Transforming Collections project in partnership with UAL Decolonising Arts Institute, Creative Computing Institute and the TATE in addition to national partners such as the World Museum, researching their collections in relation to the Caribbean and originating Indigenous and African descendent cultures. The starting point, informed by marine climate research, was to view national collections as cultural ecosystems, using machine learning applications in conjunction with human interaction to evaluate what can be classified as a healthy and/or degraded ecosystem. Addressing colonial histories that have embedded structural barriers such as race, gender and ecology are central research questions to the project. By connecting cultural ecosystems across cultural institutions there is potential to not only identify stories that have been marginalised, minoritized or erased, collectively illustrating overarching stories and histories but also to highlight the potential to engage in restorative and regenerative practices through speculative acts of critical fabulation and creative intervention. Christina engages collections as living entities or knowledge systems, interviewing the curatorial teams as custodians of these ecosystems, informing contributions to wider discourses and debates surrounding our national collections and their evolving roles and contribution to trans/national critical issues and futures.

***Ali Clark, George Nuku and Jane Miller*** (National Museums Scotland)

*Engaging communities with environmental themes through creativity*

Between 12 August 2023 and 14 April 2024 the temporary exhibition Rising Tide: Art and Environment in Oceania was on display at the National Museum of Scotland. The exhibition considered how life depends on the ocean and presented various ways in which individuals within Oceania are working to protect it through the medium of artistic practice. The exhibitions team wanted to make the global issues of environmental change in Oceania relevant to our local audiences in Scotland, demonstrating how the issues presented in Oceania have relevance to the lives of people ‘here’ – in Edinburgh. Through artworks such as George Nuku’s ‘Bottled Ocean 2123’ we hoped to be able to show visitors how the issues discussed in the artwork were relevant to them, with the intention of inspiring them to become active agents in the next chapter of environmental action.  Using Bottled Ocean 2123 as a case study this paper will discuss how working with communities in the construction of exhibitions can help engage people in environmental issues.

**Session 7: Legacies 1**

***Chrisyl Wong-Hang-Sun*** (The British Museum)

*Museums, ‘Native’ ethnography, and activism*

This paper will present my ethnographic experience with the native Chagossian diaspora that were forcibly and illegally displaced by the British government between 1968 and 1973. My research examines the perceptions that the native diaspora of Mauritius have of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, which has given all Chagossian descendants the right to claim British citizenship. Through my fieldwork, my personal interest in Chagossian cookery and commensality saliently emerged, which was actively and warmly received by the diaspora. It kicked-started a zest to learn more about my ancestors and our material practice, with the goal of working with the Chagossian diaspora to preserve and continue our cultural heritage. I use my unique experience in the field as a Chagossian descendant and my role as a Curator to advocate the need for research conducted by fellow ‘native’ ethnographers, particularly indigenous material practices that are on the brink of extinction due to forced displacement and onward migration. This paper will also explore the prospect of museum ethnography as an integral and revolutionary space for activism. Museums, as guardians of material knowledge, must play an important role in validating, testifying for, and disseminating the lived experiences of forcibly displaced peoples.

***Rohini Sharma*** (UCL)

*Living Museums - Looking to the Future*

This paper studies how the Horniman Museum’s recent efforts to address its colonial history through individual exhibitions and displays creates opportunities to engender long-term, institution-wide decolonial change. This work is rooted in the premise that British museums with colonial collections, like the Horniman, functioned as tools of the Empire to produce Eurocentric knowledge through colonial procedures of collection, documentation, curation, and display. Therefore, decolonising work requires museums to identify and transform these forms of professionalised practice today. The Horniman Museum’s Reset Agenda, released in 2021 as a response to popular mobilisation against institutional racism worldwide, contains the impulse to do so and lays out an action plan for concerted decolonial programming. This work uses insights provided by the Horniman Museum’s curatorial staff involved in delivering decolonial programming to understand how it impacts and transforms three forms of institutionalised practice – collections interpretation, imagining target audiences and public messaging about its ethical stance. It demonstrates that utilising the museum’s colonial collections in decolonial exhibitions, diversifying audiences by partnering with marginalised communities, and challenging false neutrality through public messaging can enable structural decolonial change at the Horniman and similar British colonial institutions.

***Sydney Stewart Rose*** (University of Oxford)

*A Different Type of Ghost in the Museum*

Humanity can be either denied or enforced by the museum. This is a pressing issue for museums as we attempt to confront enduring colonial legacies. Restitution discourse specifically is often centered around the creation of inhumanity in museums (Rousseau, Moosage & Rassool 2018). As museums grapple with returns, it has become clear that many of the human remains in museums are not fully considered as human. Whether through objectification or definitional violence, museums are known as “objectification machines” (Rubio 2014: 620) which create a subclass of humanity. This paper argues that another class of humanity is also created in museums. Instead of a less-than-human category, museums also create a class of humans who are more human. Drawing on examples such as General Pitt Rivers and Jeremy Bentham, this paper investigates how field collectors buy immortality and why we consider anthropologists like Marcel Mauss as a contemporaries. This paper reflects on the wider implications of these more-than-human characters to deepen our understanding of how museums confront the enduring legacies of colonialism in knowledge formation and whether re/humanisation is even possible.

**Session 8: Legacies 2**

***Zachary Kingdon*** (National Museums Scotland)

*Addressing Historical Injustices through Collaborative Re-Interpretation of Liverpool’s Benin Collection*

This paper discusses the role that diasporan African activism and collaboration in Liverpool played in reframing a museum collection from Benin. It covers the collaborative and participatory approach to exhibition making developed for the National Museums Liverpool’s Benin and Liverpool exhibit, which opened in 2021. This project was intended to update interpretation of that museum’s collection from Benin City and address the historical legacies of injustice associated with that collection. It involved a small group from Liverpool’s African diaspora communities being invited to participate in the redisplay process. The African diaspora participants in the project demonstrated a determination to address historical injustices and to help promote a more equitable cultural environment in Britain for their children than the one that they themselves faced while growing up in Liverpool in earlier decades. By bringing the concerns and perspectives of this external group into the exhibition making process, the project succeeded in generating a disruptive curatorial vision that brought new relevance and a more engaging and human perspective to the redisplay. The paper concludes with some broader reflections on the role of African diaspora activism and experience in shaping public discussion of restitution and reparatory representations of Africans and African cultures.

***Kathleen Lawther*** (University of Leicester)

*Work in progress: the history and practice of collections documentation*

Museums have been digitising their collections and information for over 40 years, and documenting their collections for much longer. Digital optimists believe that new technology can support research, reconnect distributed collections, and even enable digital restitution.

Yet many museums still struggle to maintain basic records of their collections. Objects that are not properly documented are invisible in this brave new digital world. Documentation is, to paraphrase the conference call, a lasting problem of the past that must be confronted for museums to address issues of repatriation, circulation, knowledge exchange, and collaboration.

This doctoral project confronts these challenges, by considering how the history and practice of collections documentation has impacted these digital possibilities. Rather than focussing on technology, the research considers how institutional histories, national and local policy, funding landscapes, and the individuals working on documentation have impacted museums’ records. In attempting to work directly with collections practitioners, the project sets out to foreground the voices of those doing the work, and evidence how documentation is practiced at street level. This report on the ongoing research will present some early findings from a survey of museum collections professionals and selected museum case studies.

***Hope Ama Leslie*** (National Museums Liverpool) The Transatlantic Slavery and legacies in Museums forum (10 mins)

The Transatlantic Slavery and legacies in Museums forum is a professional network led by National Museums Liverpool in partnership with Museum of London, Black Cultural Archives, Bristol Culture, Hull Museums and Glasgow Museums. The forum was established as a pressing initiative, with the aim for the sector to review, interrogate and develop the ways that museums handle the legacies of slavery within their organisations. Our approach to the forum was to develop and work within a framework of care, understanding that the discourse of the legacies of slavery is uncomfortable and confronting. With our in-person workshops so far, we have been able to bring together people working in the sector from across the nation to discuss and share best practice on the importance of language in museums, approaching sensitive engagement within schools and creating a safe space for co-production. We are continuing our annual programming of 3 in-person workshops and 1 online sharing event a year. We plan to develop the forum to reach an international scale and aim to continue to facilitate a space of knowledge exchange, resources development and communal progression towards dismantling institutional racism. I believe the ongoing development of the forum is aligned with the conference’s interrogation of museums confrontation with the legacies of the past. Here is a link to our webpage: Transatlantic Slavery and Legacies in Museums Forum | National Museums Liverpool (liverpoolmuseums.org.uk).