

Exhibiting 'Difficult' Heritage: Do UK museums have an ethical and moral duty to honestly present the British empire's dark history?

Elizabeth Bosworth

1500872

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Abstract

The foundation of this dissertation is how I believe museums and other heritage organisations tell the story of the British empire. An account called 'Crimes of Britain'¹ on the media network Twitter regularly presents information about the negative historical events caused or participated in by Britain's empire or government. The majority of these events were previously unknown to me. The infuriation of thinking that people could be unaware of what Britain has done in the past has motivated me to write this dissertation, focusing on the medium of museums and heritage and how they do or do not convey Britain's past and its relationship with the rest of the world. I will identify how negative histories are told in practice in current museums and exhibitions, and explain why telling an unabridged, unedited, truthful version of historical events is vital.

¹ Twitter, Crimes of Britain (2018) [online] Available: https://twitter.com/crimesofbrits?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor.

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Chapter One – Imperialistic remainders in British society today

In society today, one does not have to look far to find ‘iconic representation of Britannia’² that still prevails in everyday imagery. British people can look through their purses and wallets for a fifty pence coin, to find an empowered picture of the Britannia figurehead proudly displaying the Union Jack. The character of Britannia represents a durable sense of patriotism and national strength – but is there a sinister hidden layer to this imagery? Does the seemingly innocent Britannia figure in our currency indirectly uphold a lasting image and ideal of colonial Britain?

The icon of Britannia holds a much deeper meaning than a decorative coin design. It is representative of national pride and ‘resurfaces during particularly challenging times’³. The Royal Mint also describes her as a symbol of strength, pride, and unity – I shall argue that this pride is misplaced. I believe that the public in the UK are not receiving an education on race and culture politics; settling for an ignorance of what really occurred in the past, an ignorance of why things can be offensive. A quick search on social media coughs up swathes of accounts that use the Union Jack and Britannia symbol to represent their, often angry, nationalist views. Another example from recent years is the prevalence of ‘golliwog’ symbolism – a character with black skin and exaggerated cartoon features that grew popular in the UK during the time of empire. A Brighton councillor defended a shop that was under fire for selling drinks mats featuring a ‘golliwog’ on them. Her reasoning for defending the shop was nostalgia, saying “‘I’m 72 years old. My generation

² John Solomos and Les Back, *Racism and Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), p 160.

³ The Royal Mint, *The History of Britannia* (2013) [online] Available: <http://blog.royalmint.com/the-history-of-britannia/>.

grew up with them”⁴. She also admitted that she could ““see no harm in them””, which shows a distinct lack of education around race, as the conflict over ‘golliwog’ imagery has been ongoing for decades. By mentioning her age, she additionally highlights a potential unwillingness to learn about why the imagery is offensive. Age and romantic nostalgia should be outweighed by harmful and upsetting racist themes. I believe that in the same vein, museums ought to educate the public with honesty on the British empire and its crimes against other countries, despite any stubbornness or denial from the public.

An observation from Rodney Harrison sums up the motivation for creating this dissertation: ‘heritage and nationalism are thus fundamentally intertwined’⁵. As inevitable as this may be with national cultures, histories, and traditions all being celebrated under the umbrella marked ‘heritage’, there is evidence that nationalistic approaches are harmful to the pursuit of education. Promoting the achievements and histories of a country is not inherently a negative thing, but deliberately omitting or glorifying adverse narratives is. Rico defines negative heritage as sites and objects that are linked to ‘commemorating conflict, trauma and disaster’⁶: a group of events which the British empire undoubtedly took part in. McDonald acknowledges some social aspects of difficult heritage with her definition: ‘past that is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation’⁷. Nationalistic undertones of promoting a nation’s heritage appears to clash with admitting negative events that that nation has taken part in during the past.

⁴ BBC News, Brighton councillor rapped over golliwog comment (2013) [online] Available: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-25466070>.

⁵ Rodney Harrison, *Heritage – Critical Approaches* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), p. 142.

⁶ Trinidad Rico, ‘Negative Heritage: The Place of Conflict in World Heritage’, *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites*, Vol. 10(4), (2013), pp. 344-352.

⁷ Sharon MacDonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi past in Nuremberg and beyond* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 1.

The end of the British empire did not mean the end of links between formerly colonised countries. Gosden explains that society today is 'still wrestling with the economic, social and intellectual consequences of colonialism'⁸. As a result of the ties forged by colonialism, the UK is home to hundreds of nationalities and heritages⁹. West and Ansell detail the expanse of the empire – 'by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 the British empire was administering the lives of over 400 million people'¹⁰. People from countries that have declared independence from British rule (but remain in the Commonwealth) such as India, Pakistan, Jamaica, and Nigeria¹¹ have all found homes in the United Kingdom, however, the problems of colonialism and empire have not gone away as Britain has become a centre of multiculturalism. Long and Labadi confirm, writing that 'nationalism... has not disappeared as a result of globalisation'¹². Although the UK can now pride itself on being a hub of different cultures, languages and customs, this does not mean that Britain can quietly dispose of its imperial past of trying to assert 'Britishness' around the globe, and stifle other cultures. Tharoor reminds us that 'there are still millions of Indians alive today who remember the iniquities of the British Empire in India'¹³.

Museums have shifted their focus and intentions since their conception – from private showcasing galleries of the exotic to places of education, fun and inspiration. Places of working class alienation, museums began as 'collections of private collectors and semi-

⁸ Chris Gosden, *Archaeology and Colonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 6.

⁹ Office for National Statistics, *Population of the UK by country of birth and nationality: 2016* (2017) [online]

Available: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/ukpopulationbycountryofbirthandnationality/2016#what-is-the-nationality-of-non-uk-born-residents>.

¹⁰ Susie West and Jacqueline Ansell, *A History of Heritage*, ed. Susie West (Manchester: The Open University, 2010), p. 42.

¹¹ Commonwealth Secretariat, *Member countries* (2018) [online] Available: <http://thecommonwealth.org/member-countries>.

¹² Sophia Labadi and Colin Long (eds.), *Heritage and Globalisation* (Routledge: Oxon, 2010), p. 5.

¹³ Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), p. 235.

private societies'¹⁴ but progressed to a stance of equality in which all peoples deserved the opportunity for education. With this development in their audiences, the museum becomes a pillar of the community – therefore the 'duty' in this dissertation title is a duty of honesty towards the British public who belong to all ethnicities and nationalities. West and Ansell assert that education is the key focus of the museum, its purpose to be a 'three-dimensional encyclopaedia of all branches of knowledge of the world'¹⁵. However, the view of art critic and New York museum curator Bryan Robertson, is that the job of the museum curator is not to educate the general public¹⁶. If curators in British museums took a similar stance, it would be very difficult to feature a seemingly radical exhibition on the empire's negative history. Therefore, it is essential that museums actively want to educate their audiences, before they try to introduce exhibitions that may go against histories that people already know.

Kevin Walsh cites an example from Hewison of a British heritage organisation failing to meet the standards I am pushing for with this essay. At a Welsh historical event, the group of heritage consultants used did not include historical accuracy as an important criterion in their codes of practice. He writes that "'historical accuracy' [was] a significant absence from the 'Criteria for Good Practice'"¹⁷. This is a shockingly counter-intuitive action made by the consultants, as history at its basis is a record of past events. To not be strict with sticking to accurate actualities with a historical event allows the event to be falsely represented and misinterpreted, especially if the historical event is told going forward into the future with an inaccurate basis.

¹⁴ Susie West and Jacqueline Ansell, *A History of Heritage*, ed. Susie West (Manchester: The Open University, 2010), p. 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Tim Benton and Nicola J. Watson, *Museum practice and heritage*, ed. Susie West (Manchester: The Open University, 2010), p. 134.

¹⁷ Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 131.

By not adhering to historical accuracy, ‘victims of history’¹⁸ are created. Not only are colonised populations victims of the empire’s inhumane regime, they become victims of history – by being forgotten or not correctly memorialised by museums and heritage organisations. Moira Simpson writes that ‘many museums persist in their failure to represent adequately the presence and contributions of people of minority cultures in social history, and so their histories remain untold’¹⁹. It is a hard notion to swallow that people oppressed in numerous ways by the British empire are still being oppressed in the present day by the omission or inaccuracies in imperialist histories.

Angel David Nieves asks an increasingly relevant question: ‘can these sites of tragedy and ‘dissonant heritage’ be used as models for community-based education and renewed politics and social inclusion?’²⁰. This proposal runs alongside the idea of moral and ethical duty – using sites where terrible things have happened to educate current and future generations to help create a more progressive society. Educating the public on imperialist history in a transparent and truthful manner can help to heal the wounds caused by hundreds of years of colonialist damage – this idea will be explored in more depth in the following chapters.

¹⁸ Joost Coté, *Postcolonial Shame*, eds. William Logan and Keir Reeves (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 129.

¹⁹ Moira G. Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (1996/2001 rev. p. 15

²⁰ Angel David Nieves, *Places of pain as tools for social justice in the ‘new’ South Africa*, eds. William Logan and Keir Reeves (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 199.

Chapter Two - Why is displaying dark histories absent in British museums?

To ascertain whether British museums have an ethical and moral duty to be honest about Britain's imperialist history, it must be explored why these dark histories are not prominently featured. Not only are black and minority ethnic (BAME) cultures under-represented in the heritage sector²¹, there is evidence to suggest that British museums are going as far to deliberately re-tell their stories in order to exaggerate and glorify the reign of the British empire.

This is a phenomenon called 'white saviour mentality' – for example, celebrating the act of white people abolishing slavery, rather than focussing on whites causing the demand for slavery in the first place. White saviourism was a factor in original colonialism – 'saving' overseas cultures and introducing what was considered as civilised society. Kehinde Andrews summarises this mentality in his opinion piece, writing that imperialist figureheads believed that 'native savages were grateful for the civilisation brought by the enlightened British'²².

In addition to what has already been written about the original intentions and functions of museums, the role that colonialism and imperialism played in their creations is too large to be denied. West and Ansell explain that the concept and birth of national museums

²¹ Moira G. Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 15.

²² The Guardian, *Colonial nostalgia is back in fashion, blinding us to the horrors of empire* (2016) [online] Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/24/colonial-nostalgia-horrors-of-empire-britain-olympic>.

rather than private collections 'came at a time of international battles over which European nation would dominate expanding world trade and colonisation.'²³ As a result of such conflicts and exploration across the globe, Britain asserted itself as the 'dominant European power'.²⁴ Through coming into contact with other cultures, Britain found itself in a position to be able to study these cultures through access to their material artefacts. Kevin Walsh confirms this link between colonialism and material cultures – by saying that the empire that was established over time provided Britain with an 'almost limitless resource'²⁵ in regards to museums and their displays. He also adds that even countries that were not officially part of the empire (such as Argentina) were viewed as resources for new and intriguing artefacts. McDonald agrees that 'colonialist expansion... provided materials for display'²⁶. Due to colonialism and imperialism playing such huge roles in the birth of the modern museum, museums owe it to their histories to be honest about the doings of the British empire: without it, the modern concept of the museum would not exist.

The British Museum boasts eight million artefacts, having grown rapidly since its conception in 1753 out of the collection of a naturalist and collector²⁷. Their website does not explain where the items in the museum's collection have come from, but plenty of recent articles from the Independent and the Guardian have referred to the stolen loot

²³ Susie West and Jacqueline Ansell, *A History of Heritage*, ed. Susie West (Manchester: The Open University, 2010), p. 10.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 21.

²⁶ Sharon McDonald, *The Politics of Display* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 9.

²⁷ The British Museum, *History of the British Museum* (2017) [online] Available: http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/the_museums_story/general_history.aspx.

from colonial times²⁸²⁹. There is a big difference between museums celebrating the vibrancy of cultures from all around the world and displaying looted items with no acknowledgment of the journey they have taken to be displayed.

People globally would be outraged if museums did not tell the truthful, horrific stories of the Nazi regime; if the Nazis were celebrated and applauded for wanting expansion of German territory, there would be uproar. An Indonesian museum came under fire and was met with many protests after exhibiting a waxwork of Hitler, which encouraged visitors to take a selfie³⁰. The De Mata Trick Eye Museum labelled the exhibit as 'fun' but swiftly removed it after international anger. The United Nations even created a resolution against the glorification of Nazism in the past year³¹. If it is provocative to glorify or downplay such negative historical events, why don't museums tell the honest stories of the British empire?

It has long been argued, from scholars and survivors alike, that if we do not keep events like the Holocaust in our minds, it could happen again³²³³. Museums run exhibits on the Holocaust (some permanent like at the Imperial War Museum in London) to educate

²⁸ Independent, The British Museum gleams with stolen riches from its colonial past – but Asian names are too 'confusing' for inclusion (2017) [online] Available: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/british-museum-tweet-twitter-row-asian-names-confusing-curator-colonialism-a7946431.html>.

²⁹ The Guardian, The art world's shame: why Britain must give its colonial booty back (2014) [online] Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/nov/04/art-worlds-shame-parthenon-elgin-marbles-british-museums>

³⁰ The Journal, Museum removes 'fun' Hitler display after protests (2017) [online] Available: <http://www.thejournal.ie/hitler-waxwork-indonesia-3693959-Nov2017/>

³¹ United Nations, Third Committee – 43rd Meeting (2012) [online] Available: http://www.un.org/en/ga/third/67/docs/voting_sheets/l.55.Rev.1.pdf

³² Rochelle G. Saidel, 'רחל סיידל. "הפוליטיקה של הזיכרון: ייסוד המוזיאון לזכר השואה בניו-יורק', *The Politics of Memorialization: Creating a Holocaust Memorial Museum in New York City*, *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies*/יא, דברי הקונגרס העולמי למדעי היהדות, (1993), pp. 147–154.

³³ Gov.uk, Holocaust survivors warn society against forgetting lessons of history (2017) [online] Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/holocaust-survivors-warn-society-against-forgetting-against-lessons-of-history>.

visitors and to keep alive the memory of those murdered. In fact, a Holocaust museum and memorial is currently being developed in London³⁴, which has received national acclaim from the government. The British empire still stood at the time of the Second World War, and people died under its reign, but it is not given prominent exhibition space. It seems disrespectful of British museums to want to honour the deceased and those that liberated such terrible camps but turn a blind eye to cruel past events committed by the British. Soon after the Second World War, Britain itself held German captives in internment camps, where victims were starved and tortured³⁵. A spokesperson for the Ministry of Defence dismissed any calls for acknowledgment of these camps, saying it was a matter for the Foreign Office only³⁶. Where is the memorial or official acknowledgment for these crimes?

A potential reason for explaining why British museums do not prominently feature the crimes of the empire is the demographics within the museums themselves. Could it be a direct result of having disproportionate numbers between white and BAME staff members? Simpson writes that 'the museum profession has continued to be dominated by white staff'³⁷. A study from Davis and Shaw on behalf of the Museums Association backs up Simpson's claim with these eye-opening results:

³⁴ Gov.uk, Adjaye Associates and Ron Arad Architects win UK Holocaust Memorial International Design Competition (2017) [online] Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/adjaye-associates-and-ron-arad-architects-win-uk-holocaust-memorial-international-design-competition>.

³⁵ The Guardian, Revealed: victims of UK's cold war torture camp (2006) [online] Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/apr/03/germany.topstories3>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Moira G. Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 11.

‘In the fifteen years from 1993 to 2008, the proportion of minority-ethnic people working in UK museums has almost trebled, from 2.5% to 7%. In national museums the proportion in 2006 was almost 11%. In senior management in national museums in 2006, minority-ethnic staff occupied just 1.3% of posts.’³⁸

1.3% of senior management positions in all British museums is shocking. This statistic means that nearly 99% of all curations, events, and communications from British museums are being managed with a white perspective. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport published a survey in 2017 that black people were significantly less likely to visit a museum than white people³⁹. With notably more white people holding positions in British museum and more white people visiting British museums, museums could be (subconsciously or purposely) choosing to present exhibitions that will appeal to white visitors. It is not actively malicious for people to view things in a way that has been dictated by their culture and upbringing i.e., white people will always have a certain way of viewing things, just like BAME individuals. However, if such a tiny percentage of management positions are being held from BAME backgrounds, it will dictate the presentation of a museum’s exhibits. In March this year, Brooklyn Museum hired two new curators for their African art collection – both appointments are white. This action is a clear link to the damningly small figure of BAME people working in museums. An article by Teju Adisa-Farrar condemns the decision, saying that the white gaze is already over-represented in the world, and Brooklyn Museum did not need to add to it⁴⁰. It continues a legacy of colonialism of white people having an element of control over black culture. The

³⁸ Maurice Davies and Lucy Shaw, The ethnic diversity of the museum workforce (Online: Museums Association, 2010), p. 1. Available: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=171875>.

³⁹ Gov.uk, Adults visiting museums and galleries (2017) [online] Available: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/culture-and-heritage/adults-visiting-museums-and-galleries/latest>.

⁴⁰ The Guardian, Why are white curators still running African art collections? (2018) [online] Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/03/brooklyn-museum-white-curators-african-art-open-letter>.

Brooklyn Museum has since defended the appointment of these two curators⁴¹, which shows that there is a long way to go before museums achieve a basic level of diversity.

A book I have read through for this topic is *Archaeology and Colonialism* by Chris Gosden⁴². I mention it by name because a table that Gosden created on the 'spectrum' of colonialism⁴³ caught my eye as something that might contribute to the presentation of Britain's colonialist history. He details different 'models' of colonialism with varying degrees of cruelty or intention (such as working with indigenous cultures or choosing to stifle them completely). However, through all the examples he gives of different colonialism models, not one example is from the British empire's regime. Given that the British empire colonised one quarter of the world at its peak, why has it been overlooked? What concerns me about this book and the general lack of focus on the British empire (the book repeatedly refers to Greece, Rome, France and Spain) is that Gosden was, for a long time, head curator at the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford and remains linked as a research associate. It is worrying to consider whether or not this eradication of explicitly discussing the British empire and its centuries-long history of colonialism within the book made its way into his tenure at the Pitt-Rivers. The precise focus of the book is about cultural contact, so it is peculiar for the empire to not be mentioned. When talking about the initial meetings between the indigenous peoples of Northern America, Gosden refers to 'Europeans'⁴⁴, rather than giving Britain a specific mention.

⁴¹ The New York Times, Brooklyn Museum Defends Its Hiring of a White Curator of African Art (2018) [online] available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/arts/brooklyn-museum-african-arts.html>.

⁴² Chris Gosden, *Archaeology and Colonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴³ Ibid., p. 26.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 91.

The Pitt-Rivers Museum prides itself on being an ethnographic museum packed to the rafters with artefacts from every corner of the world, but it is not without criticism. An article by Laura Peers informs of a particularly insensitive display from the time of Gosden's curatorship⁴⁵. In 1925, head hair was collected from members of the Ojibwe tribe in the United States and brought back for display at the museum. As odd as this practice sounds on the surface, Peers illustrates a deeper and more harmful consequence of such an act – she summarises this display as 'the history of the cutting and analysis of hair by Whites as part of attempts to control Ojibwe people in various ways'⁴⁶.

Gosden's awareness of cultural contact during his time at the museum is also questionable as a line taken from *Archaeology and Colonialism* seems ignorant. He writes 'rumours of the death of whole cultures can now be seen to have been (mainly exaggerated)'⁴⁷. The British empire and its desire for expansion and to spread British culture across the globe is responsible for the loss or endangerment of thousands of languages. Léglise and Migge highlight how the spread of the English language was 'carefully engineered'⁴⁸. In one case, an indigenous woman called Marie Wilcox is the only woman in the United States speaking her native *Wukchumni* language⁴⁹. The Wukchumni tribe once numbered over 50,000 members, so for her to be the only speaker of the language within the remaining 200 tribe members is a great loss in regard to cultural richness and diversity.

⁴⁵ Laura Peers, 'Strands Which Refuse to be Braided: Hair Samples from Beatrice Blackwood's Ojibwe Collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum', *Journal of Material Culture*, Vol 8(1), (2003), pp. 75 – 96.

⁴⁶ Ibid. page 75.

⁴⁷ Chris Gosden, *Archaeology and Colonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 136.

⁴⁸ Isabelle Légise and Bettina Migge, *Language and colonialism. Applied linguistics in the context of creole communities*, eds. Marlis Hellinger and Anne Pauwels (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007), p. 301.

⁴⁹ National Geographic, Meet the Last Speaker of a Dying Language (n.d.) [online] Available: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/video/shorts/meet-the-last-speaker-of-a-dying-language/>.

A key issue that museums may face if they choose to run an exhibition on the realities of the British empire is competing with other museums that are openly glorifying and celebrating it. Sandringham House, a royal residence in Norfolk⁵⁰, proudly displays a room to the public which is full of presents gifted to the Queen from previously colonised countries and Commonwealth countries. If the narrative here is that countries that Britain have colonised are happy to gift the Queen and by extension Britain stunning cultural gifts, how can other museums present the narrative that the empire was cruel, manipulative and criminal?

Another potential reason to be considered as to why the negative histories of the empire are seemingly absent in British museums is what is being referred to as imperial nostalgia. Kehinde Andrews' article draws attention to Britain's fractured society and divisive politics, what with leaving the European Union and the constant debate over immigration⁵¹. He highlights a nostalgia for the so-called 'golden days', a time when Britain was influential, a time when Britain was self-sufficient and a fierce global power. Museums can choose to celebrate this time and could do so to offset the negativity surrounding British society currently. A possible outcome of museums choosing to display difficult imperial history is negative public feedback – if museum displays are full of negativity about Britain's history as well as present society surrounded by negativity, it appears like there are no positives about Britain whatsoever.

⁵⁰ The Sandringham Estate, House Museum and Gardens (2018) [online] Available:

<https://www.sandringhamestate.co.uk/house-museum-and-gardens/sandringham-museum/>.

⁵¹ The Guardian, Colonial nostalgia is back in fashion, blinding us to the horrors of empire (2016) [online] Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/24/colonial-nostalgia-horrors-of-empire-britain-olympic>.

It is vital to communicate with representatives of a community that a museum wishes to exhibit, otherwise stories will not be told honestly or correctly, and it directly contributes to under-representation. A white curator will not be able to represent an authentic exhibition on negative heritage different cultures, especially where there is an emotional aspect. As an obvious example, a white curator of an exhibition on narratives from the enslavement of black people will be able to sympathise, but never empathise.

Solutions

Scholars throughout the humanities believe that there are active solutions to combatting under-representation and poorly presented histories of various oppressions. The introduction of post-colonial perspectives has paved the way for countless new (read previously silenced) narratives to be heard. Sørensen and Carman praise post-colonialism, writing that it 'made it possible to recognise new voices and increased appreciation of alternative claims about the past'⁵². Museums cannot represent these new voices without reaching out to understand their views and experiences. Nieves underlines the problems faced by oppressed communities, saying: 'communities are struggling with their long ignored and hidden histories'⁵³.

Here, a solution to dealing with internalised pain for both communities and individuals is for museums to work alongside these communities in order to hear their stories and to present them to the world. The power of working together should not be underestimated,

⁵² Marie Sørensen and John Carman, *Heritage Studies: Methods and Approaches* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 17.

⁵³ Angel David Nieves, *Places of pain as tools for social justice in the 'new' South Africa*, eds. William Logan and Keir Reeves (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 199.

as it provides an outlet for the devastating social consequences of these hidden histories. Simpson agrees that 'collaborative work can be undertaken with quite distant communities and can prove immensely valuable'⁵⁴. There are countless stories from oppressed communities that are waiting to be heard. Although racism is not the stand-alone factor in why negative imperial stories are not exhibited, Wilkie attests to the power of community work when fighting social inequalities: 'racism had been an evil that could only be successfully battled when people stood together as a community'⁵⁵.

There are many reasons as to why there is an absence of negative imperial history in British museums, but I believe there is a clear solution. Museums have the tools and experience necessary to work with communities affected by the reign of the British empire, and ought to reach out in the pursuit of education and honesty to the general public to hear marginalised stories and experiences.

Not telling the honest story of the British empire makes museums complicit in the past actions and effects of colonialism and racism that still exist in society today. With glorifying the empire or not holding it accountable for its negative, criminal actions, comes the cost of allowing oppressed communities to continue shouldering the social, emotional, and economic problems that the empire caused.

⁵⁴ Moira G. Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 58.

⁵⁵ Laurie Wilkie, *Black sharecroppers and white frat boys*, eds. Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 111.

Chapter Three – a new era?

This chapter will explore the potential idea that British society is undergoing a revolution of sorts in scholarship and social education, which is calling for museums to re-think the way they are presenting imperialist histories. While searching for criticisms of both the British empire and museums in Britain, I was surprised yet encouraged over the amount of published material calling for historical honesty. In the past few years, the Guardian and Independent newspapers have run a series of opinion pieces highlighting the need for honesty over British colonialism. These articles are valuable even as opinion pieces, as they represent a turning tide of social awareness and the representation of different voices from their authors – not just white British journalists (94% of journalists in the British media⁵⁶ are white).

Kehinde Andrews, Afua Hirsch and Akshat Rathi are three of many columnists who have published material in the British and international media in the past two years. They have all focused on different topics, but all link back to the miseducation of, or unwillingness to learn about the acts committed by the British empire. Andrews' article, already dissected in the previous chapter, highlights an increase in colonial nostalgia felt by the British public⁵⁷. Although his piece provides evidence to the contrary of a social awakening to British colonial rule, the existence of the article in and of itself shows a shift in how the media is presenting opinion pieces that will encourage readers to question what they know about the empire. Hirsch's argument in her Guardian opinion piece urgently calls for a memorial or museum that details the extensive history of the British empire without

⁵⁶ Neil Thurman, Alessio Cornia and Jessica Kunert, *Journalists in the UK*. (UK: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2016), p.12.

⁵⁷ The Guardian, *Colonial nostalgia is back in fashion, blinding us to the horrors of empire* (2016) [online] Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/24/colonial-nostalgia-horrors-of-empire-britain-olympic>.

glorification or omission. She writes ‘that there is not a single museum dedicated to empire, the historical episode with the most profound consequences for modern British identity, is nothing short of remarkable’⁵⁸. Hirsch makes a valid point – that there is no museum solely devoted to telling the long and diverse history of the empire makes me wonder why curators have not spotted a ‘gap in the market’ as it were, even for a museum that would appeal to Andrews’ concept of colonial nostalgia in Britain currently.

The article I have chosen to draw attention to by Akshat Rathi tells the reader a handful of lies that the British public and infrastructure (government, museums, school curriculum) believe about the empire’s rule in India⁵⁹. The article is essentially a very short but powerful summary of a book by Dr Shashi Tharoor, who in 2017, compiled a painstaking body of evidence of the crimes committed by the British during their time and influence in India.

Tharoor is quoted in the article as saying “I honestly did not think I had said anything terribly new”⁶⁰, in reference to a speech he gave about British rule in India, which prompted him to write his book. However, his speech went viral and encouraged conversations about imperialism and historical honesty across the globe. Both the article itself and Tharoor’s book are available to audiences worldwide, and considering that the speech by Tharoor captivated the attention of global audiences, perhaps it is setting the

⁵⁸ The Guardian, Britain’s colonial crimes deserve a lasting memorial. Here’s why (2017) [online] Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/nov/22/british-empire-museum-colonial-crimes-memorial>.

⁵⁹ Quartz India, The lies Brits tell themselves about how they left behind a better India (2017) [online] Available: <https://qz.com/1053297/independence-day-what-good-did-the-british-do-for-india-during-the-raj/>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

wheels in motion for new conversations and perspectives on historical honesty, that will not disappear to the back of people's minds.

There is an argument, which is a favourite of British imperialism apologists, that the British rule in India improved their country incomparably, and that without the rule the country would have suffered⁶¹. The National Archives consider that the British did not treat the population of India as harshly as other European powers did their colonies, and instead brought order to a socially fractured country⁶². A poll conducted by YouGov on members of the British public gave the following results⁶³:

	Thinking about the British Empire, would you say it is more something to be proud or more something to be ashamed of?
PROUD OF	59
ASHAMED OF	19
DON'T KNOW	23

Additionally, 49% of respondents believe that previously colonised countries are better off for having been ruled under the British. Although conducted on a small sample of the public, the results of this survey do not seem to point towards a 'new era' arriving on the way the British people think about the empire. As highlighted in chapter one, Britain is a centre of multiculturalism which is home to descendants of colonised countries; a chunk of the respondents to the survey would be a part of this group. It would be interesting and

⁶¹ Express, The Remarkable Raj: Why Britain should be proud of its rule in India (2013) [online] Available: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/409374/The-Remarkable-Raj-Why-Britain-should-be-proud-of-its-rule-in-India>

⁶² The National Archives, British Empire: Living in the British Empire – India (n.d.) [online] Available: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/empire/g2/cs4/background.htm.

⁶³ YouGov, YouGov Survey Results (2014) [online] Available: http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/6quatmbimd/Internal_Results_140725_Commonwealth_Empire-W.pdf.

perhaps more telling to see a survey of white British members of the public with no familial ties to previously colonised countries to record their current views on the empire.

Shashi Tharoor's book, *Inglorious Empire*, sets the record straight on British imperial rule in India, providing reams of evidence against what he calls 'historical amnesia'⁶⁴. He does not mince words in his damnation of the empire, especially against arguments that apologists use: a main example being the construction of the railways. Tharoor condemns the introduction of the railways in India being under the management of the British, calling them a 'big colonial scam'⁶⁵. British shareholders made obscene amounts of money from the railways, while the Indian workers were paid very little and were banned from being promoted to any higher paid or more 'respected' job roles⁶⁶. Another subject, which is a favourite of enthusiastic British patriots, is the symbol of tea. Often used as a topic of humour, the British public love the stereotypical daily consumption of and culture surrounding a cup of tea. A 2017 Metro article referred to those in Britain who prefer coffee over tea as 'treacherous'⁶⁷. Though what is really treacherous, is the misinformation and maltreatment behind the British tea trade sourced from India. Picked by 'woefully underpaid' Indian workers, the tea plantations established by the British decimated the lands and the local wildlife populations, which in turn 'broke up' the tribes who lived in the jungle⁶⁸. They were displaced and wiped out, all for the sake of the British enjoyment of Darjeeling.

⁶⁴ Independent, 5 of the worst atrocities carried out by British Empire, after 'historical amnesia' claims (2017) [online] Available: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/worst-atrocities-british-empire-amritsar-boer-war-concentration-camp-mau-mau-a7612176.html>.

⁶⁵ Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), p 177.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 177-183.

⁶⁷ Metro, Treasonous British people now prefer coffee to tea (2017) [online] Available: www.metro.co.uk/2017/09/29/treasonous-british-people-now-prefer-coffee-to-tea-6965063/.

⁶⁸ Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), p 206.

There is one criticism in Tharoor's book about the representation of the empire in Britain, which is the repatriation of important cultural items. He criticises the lack of artefact repatriation including the Kohinoor diamond, which resides in the tower of London⁶⁹. It is typical of imperialists to plunder a country for its resources, and to leave them without their most beautiful cultural treasures.

The Crimes of Britain Twitter account⁷⁰, also behind the authorship of a (currently unpublished) book of the same name, was created to tell audiences evidenced facts about British history, under the rule of empire or otherwise. The owner was prompted to make the account due to anger that the media and British schools are misinforming the public about what Britain has done in the past. Steve Martin is cited in *Understanding Heritage in Practice* as saying "'we have a very narrow attitude of history... but then we got an empire. And with that came a model of history that supported the idea of racial purity. What is most shocking is how little is taught in schools'"⁷¹.

A focus on Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery: *The Past is Now*

There is plenty of scholarship regarding how museums can interact with the public in order to include communities and improve how narratives at the museums are presented. However, despite all of the available scholarship and research, there is only one current exhibit that presents the empire from the colonial perspective and provides a neutral exhibition with no glorification visible⁷². I visited the '*The Past Is Now*' exhibition space

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 240.

⁷⁰ Twitter, Crimes of Britain (2018) [online] Available:

https://twitter.com/crimesofbrits?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor.

⁷¹ Rodney Harrison, *Heritage as social action*, ed. Susie West (Manchester: The Open University, 2010), p. 271.

⁷² Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire* (2017) [online] Available: www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/bmag/whats-on/the-past-is-now-birmingham-and-the-british-empire

twice – the items on display did not change, but there are numerous spaces where visitors can add their comments and opinions on the exhibition and on the empire as a whole, which are cleared regularly to allow space for new comments and views. People can add comments privately by folding up their paper and putting them into a sealed box, write freely with a marker on a whiteboard surface, or add their comments onto a post-it note. The latter two options can be placed on a plain surface, or underneath a question about the exhibition posed by the museum.



Fig. 1. (Above) The sealed comment box⁷³.

⁷³ Image taken by Elizabeth Bosworth, 2018.

tells the stories of those affected and traumatised by apartheid is 'part of a larger healing process'⁷⁵ that allows those affected to come to terms with the events of apartheid and can hopefully, eventually, take the weight of their burdens off their shoulders.

At their foundation, museums truthfully displaying negative colonial histories appears as a form of acceptance of dark events and contributes to the healing process. In this case, the comment about 'the sins of our fathers' is contrary to what the museum is aiming to achieve – generations of descendants from those who were previously colonised still feel the negative effects of colonial actions. One example out of many is that India and Pakistan are still very much at odds with each other since the Partition of 1947 after the British abandoned their colonial rule there⁷⁶.

Sara McDowell theorises that 'memories of the event that occasioned the trauma only disappear whenever they become part of the historical consciousness'⁷⁷. As well-meaning as this passage is, I do not believe that the goal is to forget traumatic memories; this is counter-productive to truthfully memorialising negative histories. If people were to forget their upsetting memories, museums would not have as big or accurate a resource pool for which to draw their narratives from. The ideal goal where exhibiting difficult histories honestly in museums is concerned, is for oppressed communities to become unburdened by the pain of their memories and histories, but to recall these accurately so that museums may utilise them to educate the public.

⁷⁵ Angel David Nieves, *Places of pain as tools for social justice in the 'new' South Africa*, eds. William Logan and Keir Reeves (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 198 – 214.

⁷⁶ Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), p. 245.

⁷⁷ Sara McDowell, *Negotiating places of pain in post-conflict Northern Ireland*, eds. William Logan and Keir Reeves (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 215.

Other anonymous comments from a selection around the exhibition room are:

‘It’s not. It is getting smaller and smaller in relevance’ – regarding the relevancy of the empire in 2018 question.

‘Let’s be bolder about what we consider acts of decolonising the institution... would have liked the protagonist of this exhibition to be the indigenous, native voices’.

‘It’s not flogging a dead horse to continually revisit the crimes of empire – especially when there remains so much sanitizing and whitewashing of history’.

‘It is quite liberating as a person of colour to see this’.

‘I don’t know how the pieces in the exhibition show the effects of the British empire’

‘A more deeper conversation is required’.

I read every legible comment left in the exhibition space both times I visited, and it was hard to find any opinions that were strongly in favour of imperialism or had any negative comments that the exhibition was ‘politically correct’ or looked unfavourably on Birmingham. The most conservative comments left there were in the vein that the empire was not all negativity and cruelty. I truly expected there to be more patriotism and pro-imperialism themes in those comments, and I was surprised to see that a sizeable chunk of the comments did not believe that the curators of the exhibition had done enough to portray what happened as a result of Birmingham’s involvement in the slave trade and the city’s contribution to colonialism (for example, the Birmingham-born Francis Galton theorised the eugenics movement, which was used to support controlled breeding and forced sterilisation of indigenous persons⁷⁸). These comments suggesting even more progressive exhibitions on empire and colonialism do suggest that there is a new era, or a

⁷⁸ British Library, Post Darwin: social Darwinism, degeneration, eugenics (2014) [online] Available: <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/post-darwin-social-darwinism-degeneration-eugenics>.

new generation of people that are vocalising their views that the empire deserves to be explained and represented in a way that does not silence the stories of those oppressed by it.

Laurie Wilkie stresses the importance of communication between those telling or exhibiting narratives of those oppressed, and the oppressed communities themselves. Through utilising oral history interviews, she recalled an ‘opportunity to shape the way the past was reconstructed and presented’⁷⁹. Acknowledging that there will be conflicting viewpoints between museum curators, historians and communities affected by colonialism, Wilkie also writes that ‘by creating a dialectical relationship between the past and the present... a richer construction of the past was achieved’⁸⁰. By relying heavily on material cultural representations of the past, the museum’s own interpretation can be placed onto their narratives, which gives opportunity for false and obscured histories – oral histories in addition to material culture helps to ensure that factual and truthful narratives are being told.

The six co-curators of the exhibition (i.e. have been invited to take part in the creation of the exhibition by the museum) are all women, which in itself is a bold and interesting choice made by the museum team. Sumaya Kassim, a writer and researcher who was a part of the team of co-curators, raises a good point about how far this exhibition can actually go to combat the decolonisation of museums⁸¹. Although the exhibition has made steps forward to present the stories of empire in an honest way from multiple diverse

⁷⁹ Laurie Wilkie, *Black sharecroppers and white frat boys*, eds. Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 111.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁸¹ Media Diversified, *The museum will not be decolonised* (2017) [online] Available: <https://mediadiversified.org/2017/11/15/the-museum-will-not-be-decolonised/>.

perspectives, it is being housed in a building that is on Chamberlain Square, named after Joseph Chamberlain who, during his time as British Secretary of the Colonies, believed in white supremacy and expanding British power overseas⁸². The building of the physical museum and the city council house were most likely funded (a little, at least) by money made from the slave trade. The museum has held hundred, if not thousands, of artefacts that are from countries that were once colonised by the British (for example Egypt⁸³ and India⁸⁴).

Part of what I am referring to as a 'new era' is what Rodney Harrison has called 'the new museology'⁸⁵, around which he asserts are numerous debates. He writes that there is an ongoing struggle over what is deemed accessible and tasteful, and what is deliberately exclusive and on a single-perspective narrative, which in this instance is that of the white population and not that of people affected by the British empire. Harrison also stresses the importance of dialogue and democracy within heritage⁸⁶ – with so many cultures and versions of history from different perspectives and experiences, it is vital to discuss exhibitions for accuracy and sharper cultural awareness.

Joost Coté wrote that the 'commemoration of private pain leads to the recognition of public shame'⁸⁷ – meaning that previously colonised communities (or the descendants of such) have to keep telling the stories of the crimes committed against them or their ancestors if they want imperialist countries to begin to acknowledge their pasts. Museums must work

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Ancient Egypt (n.d.) [online] Available: www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/bmag/highlights/ancient-egypt.

⁸⁴ Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Search Results (n.d.) [online] Available: www.bmagic.org.uk/results?s=adv&who=+&what=+&where=+india&when=+&material=+&theme=+&col.

⁸⁵ Rodney Harrison, *Heritage – Critical Approaches* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), p. 109.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 113.

⁸⁷ Joost Coté, *Postcolonial Shame*, eds. William Logan and Keir Reeves (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 130.

alongside these previously colonised communities to assist them in getting their stories and their private community pains out into the open.

In a society where glorification despite the facts occurs regularly (for example, a new film glorifying the heroism of Winston Churchill being released in 2017⁸⁸), there are institutions that are owning up to their racist and imperialist histories and taking responsibility for their past involvement in the upholding of imperialist ideals. The famous and widespread National Geographic magazine has recently published an apology for their decades of racist coverage of communities worldwide⁸⁹. In the museum world, Alice Procter is providing Uncomfortable Art Tours around London institutions⁹⁰ pointing out glaring omissions of colonialist themes, and encouraging debate over repatriation and why indigenous and BAME perspectives are not being represented. She is providing an antidote to centuries of museums being dishonest and inaccurate regarding the empire. Museums have got the tools necessary to go against the grain of glorification and educate the public where they may be being misled, in order to educate the public and provide a service of healing.

⁸⁸ Universal Studios, Darkest Hour (2018) [online] Available: <http://www.universalpictures.co.uk/micro/darkest-hour>.

⁸⁹ National Geographic Magazine, For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist. To Rise Above Our Past, We Must Acknowledge It (2018) [online] Available: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/04/from-the-editor-race-racism-history/>.

⁹⁰ The Guardian, Museums are hiding their imperial pasts – which is why my tours are needed (2018) [online] Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/23/museums-imperialist-pasts-uncomfortable-art-tours-slavery-colonialism>.

Chapter Four – difficult heritage confrontation in action

In this final chapter I wish to examine post-colonialism and historical revisionism in action within the heritage sector. The most relevant example of difficult heritage being exhibited in the present is the history of Nazi Germany and the atrocities committed under Hitler's oppressive fascist regime. As there are still people alive today that were imprisoned in concentration camps and there are members of the older generations who were active members or supporters of the Nazi Socialist party, it can make for uncomfortable listening for people in modern day Germany. Writing for *Der Spiegel*, Michael Sontheimer observes that Germany will never be able to escape its' Nazi past⁹¹. The sense of guilt over what happened during the Second World War is contrary to the comment highlighted in the last chapter, of being held accountable for the sins of ancestors. It seems that people in Germany are held to much stricter standards of accountability than Brits are for what happened during the reign of empire.

In 2015, over one million people visited the Topography of Terror museum and exhibition centre⁹², showing that a keen interest in the events of the war is still prominent. The museum is housed in Berlin what was a documentation centre for those being sent to forced labour camps, and was also the headquarters for the notorious SS and Gestapo. This centre was home to the brutality and oppression undertaken by the SS and Gestapo, and people express a strong desire to see it, making it one of the most visited places in Berlin in relation to the Second World War. In this scenario, being explicitly honest and forthcoming about the actions of the SS and Gestapo is a main motivation for people to

⁹¹ Der Spiegel, Why Germans Can Never Escape Hitler's Shadow (2005) [online] Available: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany-s-nazi-past-why-germans-can-never-escape-hitler-s-shadow-a-345720.html>.

⁹² Museumsportal Berlin, Topography of Terror Documentation Center (n.d.) [online] Available: <https://www.topographie.de/en/>.

visit. There is currently a special exhibition on site entitled 'Repressed Memory. How West Berlin Dealt with Sites of Nazi Perpetrators', which is openly confronting the negative heritage of places after the war. It details how Nazi-associated sites were actively dealt with, which proves to British museums that it could be done with sites associated with the empire in Britain. The evidence put forward in this dissertation so far seems to point towards the British public (not all) are happy to visit difficult heritage sites overseas and be shocked and angry at what conspired there, but cannot yet face up to memorializing the events of the British empire. The curator of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, Efraim Zuroff, summarises this mentality of shifting the focus of difficult histories onto other countries: 'most countries prefer not to focus on their own criminality'⁹³.

The 'Repressed Memory' exhibition also shows individuals and initiatives that played an important role in the city's effort to confront its National Socialist past. Their stories are an essential part of West Germany's culture of remembrance and they make clear that the process of confronting the past is far from over. Germany has been working to confront aspects of the Nazi regime for decades, including the *Wermachtausstellung* exhibition curated by Hannes Heer during the 1990s⁹⁴, exhibiting the crimes of the Germany army. The date of his exhibition alone should force British museums to consider what they have been doing to detail the crimes of empire since its collapse. To combat the notion that the current generations are not responsible for the crimes of the Nazi regime, Heer has said

⁹³ The Telegraph, Germany and its Nazi past: forever seeking closure (2013) [online] Available: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/10286606/Germany-and-its-Nazi-past-forever-seeking-closure.html>.

⁹⁴ Hannes Heer et al., *The Discursive Construction of History: Remembering the Wehrmacht's War of Annihilation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

that ‘while you have no guilt, you must have a view. You must know what happened, and you have a responsibility to make sure this doesn’t happen again’⁹⁵.

Aside from documenting the events that took place under the Nazi regime, Germany has also taken steps to confront its international colonial past. In 2016, the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* held an exhibition called ‘*Deutscher Kolonialismus: Fragmente Seiner Geschichte und Gegenwart*’ (German Colonialism: Fragments Past and Present)⁹⁶. The website states that for the first time, the Museum is dealing with the colonial past of Germany with narratives from both German perspectives and those of people from previously colonised countries. The museum also assures that ‘the exhibition devotes no little room to this controversial memory of the colonial past’⁹⁷, and indeed, they did use a large space for the exhibition as shown below.



Fig. 3. The space dedicated to the *Deutsche Kolonialismus* exhibition⁹⁸.

⁹⁵ The Telegraph, Germany and its Nazi past: forever seeking closure (2013) [online] Available: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/10286606/Germany-and-its-Nazi-past-forever-seeking-closure.html>

⁹⁶ Deutscher Historisches Museum, German Colonialism (2016) [online] Available: <https://www.dhm.de/en/ausstellungen/archive/2016/german-colonialism.html>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Image taken from Deutscher Historisches Museum, German Colonialism (2016) [online] Available: <https://www.dhm.de/en/ausstellungen/archive/2016/german-colonialism.html>



Fig. 4. The space given to the 'The Past is Now' exhibition⁹⁹.

Comparing the exhibition spaces of the two, and even just from what is visible in the photographs, shows the very different approaches taken by the two museums. Bearing in mind some of the comments made about the contents of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery exhibition, if the museum did not have any other choice of room, they could have used their allotted space more efficiently and in a manner that truly represented the links between the city of Birmingham and the horrors of empire.

Katie Young, using the example of Auschwitz-Birkenau camp in Poland, asserts that 'history at the camps may be presented with accuracy, their suffering with honesty and humanity'¹⁰⁰. It may seem obvious to state such a thing considering the awful things that took place there, but why? Why *exactly* is it important to memorialise and tell the explicit

⁹⁹ Image taken from Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire* (2017) [online] Available: www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/bmag/whats-on/the-past-is-now-birmingham-and-the-british-empire.

¹⁰⁰ Katie Young, *Auschwitz-Birkenau*, eds. William Logan and Keir Reeves (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 63.

stories of what happened to people? The argument of remembering the past so that terrible events do not take place again¹⁰¹ is one reason, but that seems more concerned with the future than with the victims of the past. Macdonald writes that 'difficult heritage prompts such ethical reflection'¹⁰². The sheer scale of the victims of both the British empire and the Nazi regime cannot be quantified, as both numbers of their victims runs into the millions. Therefore, museums would have a difficult task to memorialise each and every person beyond simply presenting their name. There is also the problem of victims of the British empire not being strategically killed and meticulously recorded like the methods employed by the Nazis. For example, over one million people died as a result of a 'man-made' famine in India during Churchill's leadership¹⁰³. Tharoor writes that 'between 30 and 35 Indians needlessly died of starvation during the British Raj'¹⁰⁴ but there are no accurate records of each individual that died as a result of these famines.

A focus on Bristol's history with slavery

Edward Colston, a slave trader who brought a lot of money into the city of Bristol, has been memorialised with a statue for over a century with no mention of his connections with the slave trade. The public opinion in the city has been divided this year however, as the city council has proposed adding a plaque to the statue which will 'recognise and acknowledge the people Colston and others in the city enslaved'¹⁰⁵. The debate over Colston does not

¹⁰¹ Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult heritage: Negotiating the Nazi past in Nuremberg and beyond* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 184.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Mark B. Tauger, 'The Indian Famine Crises of World War II', *British Scholar*, Vol. 1(2), (2009), p. 166.

¹⁰⁴ Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), p. 150.

¹⁰⁵ BBC News, Edward Colston: The slave trader dividing Bristol (2018) [online] Available: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-42404825>.

end there – his name is plastered all over building and road names all over the city – a testament to how his trading was honoured. Opposing sides argue that removing such place names and statues would eradicate a significant portion of Bristol’s heritage, while others say that the past of the city can be memorialised without celebrating somebody who totally disregarded the welfare of slaves¹⁰⁶. Another argument of those defending the street names and other mentions of Colston’s name is that he is so far removed from present day Bristol that it is doing no harm¹⁰⁷. Reiterating the third chapter of this dissertation, there may be a new era dawning of people who are questioning racism and the remnants of colonialism in society, but there are certainly those who do not see the same issues.

Discovering Britain is an organisation that is running tours around Bristol to places linked with the slave trade¹⁰⁸. The purpose of the tour is to show how the slave trade is still alive today in the sense that it is commemorated by the existence of certain buildings, street names and areas of towns. The online guide concludes with:

‘We shouldn’t forget or ignore slavery’s influence on Bristol’s success. There are still great balancing acts though to reconcile the city’s dark past with a future of equality, recognition and an ongoing plight for emancipation.’¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ The Guardian, Renamed and shamed: taking on Britain’s slave-trade past, from Colston Hall to Penny Lane (2017) [online] Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/29/renamed-and-shamed-taking-on-britains-slave-trade-past-from-colston-hall-to-penny-lane>.

¹⁰⁸ Discovering Britain, Bright city, dark secrets (n.d.) [online] Available: <https://www.discoveringbritain.org/content/discoveringbritain/trail%20booklets/Bristol%20Slavery%20trail.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

In addition to Alice Procter's Uncomfortable Art Tours, it could be said that tours where people can join if they wish to are a good step towards Britain confronting its colonial past. As the remembrance of the British empire is such a contentious issue, optional attendance looks likely to be the first rung on the ladder towards museums fully taking responsibility for the empire and accurately retelling its histories in their exhibitions. Museums across the country could set up similar tours to explain to people about the colonialist history behind buildings or road names, to show how they can be lost in the bustle of the modern day. Bristol was in the first city to host a museum, let alone a singular exhibition, dedicated to empire. The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum existed until 2008, when it stated that it would be relocating to London¹¹⁰. It has since never been re-installed. Was funding, a shift in public opinion, or a potential overall lack of interest to blame for the museum's disappearance? An article from the Daily Mail suggests that it was 'public antipathy towards the country's colonial past'¹¹¹. It seems that Britain has a long way to go before the public are prepared to hear the crimes of the empire.

¹¹⁰ The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, About Us (2008) [online] Available: <http://www.empiremuseum.co.uk/aboutus/aboutus.htm>.

¹¹¹ Daily Mail, Sun sets on the only museum dedicated to the British Empire because of the nation's dislike of colonial past (2012) [online] Available: www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2143618/Sun-sets-museum-dedicated-British-Empire-nations-dislike-colonial-past.html.

Chapter Five – Conclusions

Taking everything into account, the main conclusion to be drawn is that British museums can and should do better in order to produce exhibitions on the empire that are honest accounts that portray the empire correctly. They have a duty to the memory of those that suffered or died under the hands of the British empire's regime. It is also nonsensical to let the British public delude themselves further about the glory of the empire.

Communication with oppressed communities is vital if museums want to display accurate information, but museums should not leave it to these communities to do all the work. British museums have to make use of the tools they have along with the reams of evidence of the cruelty of the empire. Although coming to terms with the negative histories of the past is a slow and difficult journey for Britain, it is not a wasted journey if it is allowing previously colonised communities to heal. This dissertation has found examples of museums and heritage organisations taking necessary steps to tell the real story of colonialism and imperialism, so there is no reason or excuse as to why other British museums cannot do the same.

In 1995, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up 'with the explicit aim of collecting testimony about the activities of the apartheid regime'¹¹². Something similar could be set up under UNESCO guidelines in order to regain and assert the truth about the British empire, and to give museums a foundation on which they can

¹¹² Anne Laurence, *Heritage as a tool of government*, ed. Rodney Harrison (Manchester: The Open University, 2010), p. 104.

base any future exhibitions regarding it. Even though first-hand witness testimonies may be hard to find, it should not stop museums from wanting to seek the truth. People that have memories of concentration camps during the Second World War are aged at least 75 and were often born into the camps, but their testimonies of their memories are still valued. The same should be done for people who experienced colonialism under the regime of the British empire.

Susie West et al. summarises what should be done by museums going into the future if they want to be increasingly inclusive and progressive: 'we cannot retreat into the immediacy of feeling, but must enter into processes of argument and debate'¹¹³. In the context of British museums displaying honest histories about the empire, it will take time for a lot of the British public to not recoil when the glory and strength of the empire is questioned and criminal histories that they may not be aware of are brought into conversation, but museums should take the time to change the minds of the public, for the sake of previously colonised communities to heal and have their stories heard.

¹¹³ Jorge Otero-Pailos, Jason Gaiger and Susie West, *Heritage values*, ed. Susie West (Manchester: The Open University, 2010), p. 57.

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