



Journal of Natural Science Collections

Title: Nature Read in Black and White: decolonial approaches to interpreting natural history collections

Author(s): Das, S. & Lowe, M.

Source: Das, S. & Lowe, M. (2018). Nature Read in Black and White: decolonial approaches to interpreting natural history collections. *Journal of Natural Science Collections*, Volume 6, 4 - 14.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/2509>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

Nature Read in Black and White: decolonial approaches to interpreting natural history collections

Subhadra Das^{1*} and Miranda Lowe²

Address: ¹UCL Collections (Science), 223 Wilkins Building, UCL, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, UK

² Natural History Museum, Dept of Life Sciences, Invertebrates Division, Cromwell Road, London, SW7 5BD, UK

*Corresponding author: subhadra.das@ucl.ac.uk

Received: 28/08/2018

Accepted: 21/11/2018

Citation: Das, S. and Lowe, M., 2018. Nature Read in Black and White: decolonial approaches to interpreting natural history collections. *Journal of Natural Science Collections*, 6, pp.4-14.

Abstract

Narratives about the history of collecting are commonly absent from the interpretation of natural history collections. In this paper, we argue this absence – particularly in relation to colonial histories – perpetuates structural racism within modern society by whitewashing a history where science, racism, and colonial power were inherently entwined. This misrepresentation of the past is problematic because it alienates non-white audiences. Using examples from a single natural history collection – the Natural History Museum, London (NHM) – we will demonstrate how an existing collection retains these colonial ideologies and narratives, and, as such, can be used at the centre of decolonial approaches to interpreting natural history collections. We propose that publicly acknowledging difficult pasts is an important first step in creating less racist museum interpretation in natural history museums.

Keywords: Structural racism; decolonial approaches; history of science; natural history; curation; museum interpretation; museum ethics; acknowledgement; social justice

Introduction

On December 4, 2016, in a Twitter thread of 100 unpopular opinions about museums, Danny Birchall, Digital Manager at the Wellcome Collection, tweeted, “52/Natural history museums are more racist than anyone will admit” (Birchall, 2016). To the authors of this paper, Birchall’s was an affirming statement, reflecting our own experiences as people of colour working with natural history and historical science collections, in a national museum and at a university. It also posed an intriguing challenge: how can we describe the racism inherent in museum practice

relating to natural history collections and, more importantly, what can we do to change this? The greater part of this paper is dedicated to exploring and answering the first question: how are natural history museums (i.e. cultural institutions which hold, curate and interpret collections of plant, animal, and human remains, and geological specimens and fossils) implicated in perpetuating racism? To do this we will recount the history of natural history – the Enlightenment science which became biology and genetics as we know them today, having previously included what we now call social sciences, such as anthropology and



© by the authors, 2018, except where otherwise attributed. Published by the Natural Sciences Collections Association. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

archaeology. We will then consider decolonial approaches to understanding this history, particularly the role museums played in the colonial project and the implications this has for contemporary museum practice. With this in mind, we will consider how natural history and other science collections communicate with public audiences and how these messages can be perceived. Using examples from a single natural history collection – the Natural History Museum, London (NHM) – we will demonstrate the potential which exists for decolonial approaches to interpreting natural history collections.

Having explored these issues, we will conclude by addressing the second question, and outlining how staff working in contemporary natural history collections can actively counteract racism by considering, embracing and implementing a decolonial approach.

A brief history of scientific racism from the Enlightenment to WWII

Scientific racism has its roots in the Enlightenment, a period of European history when scientific epistemologies began to overtake religious ones for ways of understanding the natural world. According to Fredericksen, "The scientific thought of the Enlightenment was a pre-condition for the growth of modern racism based on physical typology" (Fredericksen, 2002: p.56). Taxonomy was a key aspect of Enlightenment science, particularly when it came to the natural world. (While contemporary definitions draw a distinction between typology and taxonomy, it is important to note this distinction was not apparent in early Enlightenment science. In the context of this paper, it is also worth pointing out that taxonomy is considered a science, with typology limited to the social sciences, arguably a continuation of a colonial approach.) The 'father of modern taxonomy', Carl Linnaeus, included humans amongst the animal species, and also divided them into categories based on physical appearance and behaviour. While these were not ranked, Linnaeus' prejudices are clear: e.g. Europeans were "acute, inventive... Governed by laws", while Africans were "crafty, indolent, negligent... Governed by caprice" (quoted in Fredericksen, 2002: p.56). Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, considered the father of physical anthropology, went further by developing an authoritative classification of humankind in his book *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* in 1776. Blumenbach distinguished five types of human based on the geographical distribution of peoples known at the time: Caucasians, Mongolians, Ethiopians,

Americans, and Malays. While Blumenbach considered these types composed a single species, and that they were abstractions or ideals, with most people falling in between types, he nonetheless considered Caucasians (named for the people he considered to be the most beautiful, Circassian Georgians) to be the source type from which the others had developed or degenerated (Fredericksen, 2002: p.57).

Combined with Johan Caspar Lavater's principle of physiognomy – that physical traits relate directly to what we now consider to be abstract traits such as emotion, character and intelligence – this quantitative approach to measuring human bodies and abilities gained academic traction over the course of the 19th century, with increasing divisions between the 'races' and their (wrongly) ascribed traits. While the work of physical anthropologists like Paul Broca and Samuel Morton – both of whom ranked 'races' according to skull size – are well documented (and discredited; see Gould, 1981), the role of biologists are less commonly spoken about. Like Blumenbach, Thomas Henry Huxley – famously 'Darwin's Bulldog' – also defined five 'races' of human: Australoid, Negroid, Xanthrochoi (light-skinned Europeans), Melanochroi (dark-skinned Europeans and light-skinned Africans and Asians) and Mongoloids. Biologist and Director of the Natural History Departments of the British Museum in South Kensington (later the Natural History Museum) Professor William F. Flower developed callipers to ensure greater accuracy and consistency of skull measurements, as well as highlighting the effects of climate and environment on developing so-called racial traits, including intelligence and morals (Challis, 2016: p.2). By the turn of the 20th century, the idea of physically distinct 'races' with measurable, fixed characteristics was firmly entrenched.

Museums were integral to entrenching these scientifically racist ideas, functioning as repositories for the objects and specimens collected on scientific expeditions carried out around the globe, and, simultaneously, legitimising this collecting in the context of scientific thought.

Towards the end of the 16th century, there was a shift in the paradigm of museum displays from enjoyment to education. This was accompanied by exhibition strategies that used collections as a means to display and advance new theories. These 'encyclopaedic' collections were representative of, and key to, the process of advancing scientific thought (Moser, 2006:

pp.11-12). An important example is the museum of Ole Worm in Copenhagen. Worm was one of the first to collect ethnographic objects. Depending on the type of object, these were often classed as natural objects (rather than objects resulting from human action) (Moser, 2006: p.43). While embodying the growing interest in and study of human culture, this method of display was also a way of objectifying these peoples and defining them as 'other', inherently different and separate from Western civilization (Arnold, 2006: p.239). The 'othering' of non-Western civilizations, combined with a further transformation of collections from private viewing rooms to public galleries, had an influence beyond the academic: it was fundamental to colonial ambition (see Bennett, 2004). Barringer, using the example of the South Kensington Museum (now, aptly, the Victoria and Albert Museum), states, "The acquisition of colonial objects from areas of the world in the which Britain had colonial or proto-colonial political and military interests, and the ordering and displaying of them by a museum which was a department of the British state, formed... a three-dimensional imperial archive" (Barringer, 1998: p.11).

Museums holding national collections, most notably the British Museum, are usually associated with this type of collecting, but scientific collections in general and natural history collections in particular also played an important role in colonial collecting. In his book *Bone Rooms: from Scientific Racism to Human Prehistory*, Redman describes how natural history museums in the United States were repositories for the competitive collecting of Native American human remains, collected to further race science and racial theory (Redman, 2016). In addition to acting as repositories, museums – and other academic institutions, such as universities – were instrumental in legitimising scientific study. Craniological collections in 19th century museums, whereby the superiority of white Europeans over non-white peoples across the rest of the globe was established, not only increased knowledge of craniology, they legitimised the process of scientific thought at the same time (Dias, 1998). Much of this ideological role of natural history museums has yet to be properly explored. The Mobile Museum project, based at The Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, is currently in the process of researching the provenance and purpose of their economic botany collections – plant specimens and the wide range of objects made from plants – which were collected from around the British Empire and then distributed to schools across the British Isles (Cornish and Wilkey, 2018).

Mainstream science and public perceptions of that science changed fundamentally in the middle of the 20th century when the Nazi's application of eugenic (race science) principles in 'The Final Solution' became known to the world. The systematic slaughter of thousands of Roma, communists, Poles, Slavs, the mentally and physically disabled, homosexuals, political dissidents, and six million Jews was enough to discredit scientific essentialist ways of thinking (Fredericksen, 2002: pp.128-9).

Decolonial thinking and natural history collections

It is important to consider the context in which the work of scientific racism was done. To do this, we take a decolonial position, which frames contemporary thought – including scientific thought – in the context of colonialism. We define 'science' following Marks, as "the production of authoritative knowledge in the modern world" (Marks, 2017: p.59). The use of the term 'production' here is important as it is active, as opposed to 'discovery', which has the connotation of being passive.

The history of Enlightenment science, including the natural sciences, is inseparably entwined with the history of European colonialism. One of the most historically important scientific expeditions set out to measure the transit of Venus in 1768. Having accomplished this part of its mission in Tahiti in 1769, the expedition returned to England in 1771, having visited the Pacific Islands, Australia, and New Zealand, and having collected vast quantities of astronomical, geographical, meteorological, botanical, zoological, and anthropological information and specimens. The expedition's commander, Captain James Cook (1728 – 1779), in addition to being a geographer, was also a naval officer. The expedition was funded by the Royal Society and sailed aboard *HMS Endeavour*, a Royal Navy vessel which also carried trained soldiers, marines, gunpowder and other weaponry. Cook was hardly the only one to command such a voyage, the motives of which were as much imperial as they were scientific. When he invaded Egypt in 1798, Napoléon Bonaparte (1769 – 1821) took 165 academics with him. The entanglement of science and Empire continued well into the 19th century. In 1831, when Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882) sailed on *HMS Beagle*, the mission of the expedition he was accompanying was to better map the South American coastline and Falkland and Galápagos Islands so as to enable greater British control of those areas (Desmond and Moore, 2009). Wherever these colonialist scientific expeditions went, subjugation of native people,

slavery, and genocide were the result. The history of Enlightenment science and European colonialism are so inexorably entangled that they may be considered one and the same (Harari, 2014: pp.275-304).

Some of this overt, colonial scientific racism remains on display in contemporary natural history museums and is the focus of much contemporary decolonial critique. For example, the #DecolonizeThisPlace movement is calling for the reinterpretation and representation of the Human Origins and Cultural Halls in the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). These activists maintain that the continued, decontextualised inclusion of anthropological displays (dressed mannequins and dioramas) which do not include white people, in the context of a natural history museum, to be overtly racist. The movement also calls for a statue of Theodore Roosevelt outside the AMNH to be removed. The statue depicts Roosevelt astride a horse with a Native American and enslaved African walking either side of him. There is no room, say #DecolonizeThisPlace, for depictions of the non-white peoples of the United States as subjugates to its white inhabitants and government (#DecolonizeThisPlace, 2016).

While it is vital to confront overt racism in public institutions, it is also important to confront covert, less obvious forms of racism in these institutions using decolonial approaches. The distinctions made historically between white and non-white peoples were not solely based on physical differences, they were extended to aspects of behaviour, character, intelligence, and, by extension, culture. As such, colonial ways of thinking survive in contemporary society. In his pivotal book *Orientalism*, Said examines how European portrayals of 'The Orient' — North Africa, the Middle East and Southern Asia — were consistently reductive. They rendered the peoples of those parts of the world — and, crucially, their ways of thinking — as other, inferior and stereotypical (Said, 1978). Decolonial student movements, such as Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (Rhodes Must Fall Oxford, 2019) and #WhylsMyCurriculumWhite, are critical of the overarching structures of knowledge which frame Western thought as objective and apolitical. A white curriculum, they say, denies the existence and importance of other peoples and cultures from other parts of the world and serves to keep a colonialist ideology of knowledge in place (UCL, 2014). With these approaches to literature and university syllabi in mind, what can people working in natural history museums do to change the existing colonial frame?

Racism in the gaps

In light of its colonialist history, there is a need to critique Western science and the ways in which it is presented, including natural sciences like biology and genetics, with a decolonial framework in mind. (This is not a critique of rationalist approaches to studying and understanding the world, but a deconstruction of the uncritical production of scientific knowledge which is then presented as objective fact.) In the scientific context, a key expression of continuing colonial thought is the denial of the colonialist history of science described above. "After World War II", according to Marks, "the scientific study of human heredity had to be thoroughly reinvented... That reinvention partly involved writing the eugenics movement [historically the most recent branch of scientific racism] out of its history" (Marks, 2017: p.97). Science museums, including museums with natural history collections, have positioned themselves at the 'hard science' end of the spectrum (as opposed to 'social' sciences like anthropology and archaeology. Historically these subjects were part of the natural sciences, along with biological sciences like comparative anatomy). A key part of this positioning involves distancing the practice of science from its history, focussing solely on the delight in discovering more and more about the natural world, and also advocating what we as humans can do to protect it.

The concept of 'race' is rarely discussed in a natural history museum context today (an exception being the exhibition *RACE: Are we so different?* funded by the American Anthropological Association (2016)). Nowadays, many mainstream scientists, particularly biologists and geneticists, are quick to point out that there is no scientific basis for understanding 'race' as defined by historical biologists. Public scientists and science communicators explain in detail how, in the last few decades, the science of genetics has disproved the scientific theory of 'race' (for example, see Rutherford, 2016). While their work is commendable in the context of combatting overt racism, we maintain that a blanket statement by scientists that there is no scientific basis for 'race' *in the consistent absence of any historical context about the scientific history of racism*, is problematic and has the potential to perpetuate covert, structural racism. If there is no such thing as 'race', why are we talking about it in the first place?

It is clear that the absence of the story of 'race', particularly the history of scientific racism, is not lost

on audiences visiting natural history museums. While a NatSCA-commissioned survey in 2013 showed that natural science galleries are an established favourite among museum visitors (Jenkins, Lisk, and Broadley, 2013), these numbers alone do not tell the whole story. In an anthropological study, Dawson has demonstrated that the consistent ignoring of the history of scientific racism is obvious to people of colour who visit natural history museums (Dawson, 2018). Dawson interviewed groups of people whose backgrounds are under-represented in science communication, i.e. UK residents from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and from minority ethnic backgrounds, and concludes that they are excluded by current museum interpretation practices. One reason for this, she says, is “cultural imperialism — when the culture, views and practices of the socially dominant appear universal” (Dawson, 2018: p.10). Dawson goes on to give examples, including how “participants in the Somali and Sierra Leonean groups described how they resented the perception of Africa as burdened by disease and ‘saved’ by the West in stories about medicine” (Dawson, 2018: p.10). She includes an example from a natural history museum context, saying “...Maria from the Latin American group remarked that even in an exhibition about Colombian butterflies, the rich science-related cultural history of Colombians was erased” (Dawson, 2018: p.11).

In the case of natural history museums, we posit that covert racism exists in the gaps between the displays.

Referencing Mason and Sayner’s (2019) delineation of museal silences, we argue that museums collude in society’s silences about racism and colonialism (see also Fletcher, 2012, on ‘imperialist amnesia’) and produce silence through structures of knowledge. “Museums”, say Mason and Saynor, “may consider they simply do not possess the material culture about a given topic because they are used to looking at their collections through a specific disciplinary lens” (Mason and Saynor, 2019: p.9). We argue that for natural history museums, this is the lens of decontextualized, ahistorical ‘hard science’. Beyond unambiguous flagships like the statue of Theodore Roosevelt outside the AMNH, there are stories which are not being told in natural history museums because of the limitations of the ‘hard science’ lens, and audiences are capable of seeing through the silence.

Mason and Saynor go on to emphasise, “This situation comes about not through a deliberate

suppression but because ways of seeing and classifying the world are culturally constructed and because cultural practices tend to reproduce the dominant narratives and silences of wider society” (Mason and Saynor, 2019: p.9). We argue that these dominant narratives can be changed. While it is understandable that addressing the racist past of a discipline is difficult and upsetting work, we argue that the absence of this work perpetuates racism – particularly by perpetuating stereotypes – in Western society today. This is very clear when looking at natural history museums from a decolonial point of view, and considering the experiences of non-white people who visit them. Museums were put in place to legitimise a racist ideology. By ignoring this history, they are continuing to do so.

Hidden figures

In spite of their colonial history, natural history museums are well-placed to relate decolonial narratives because the stories, work, and knowledge of non-white peoples remain manifest in natural history collections and museum spaces. Many naturalists, such as Sir Hans Sloane (1660 – 1753), travelled throughout the colonies to discover more about the natural world. In addition to describing the plants, animals, and geology of the Americas, their accounts included observations of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Many enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples of the Americas were also mentioned in these documents, but often not fully acknowledged for their input of skills and knowledge about local flora and fauna. These people were mainly unnamed, and the consistent omission of the scientific contributions of people of colour was central to the colonial project. The following examples, all from London’s Natural History Museum (NHM), demonstrate the quantity and breadth of these publicly untold stories.

In their rush to see the displays at the NHM, most visitors moving through the grand Hintze Hall may not notice the ceiling is a work of art. Known as the ‘Gilded Canopy’ (Knapp and Press, 2005), the soaring vault is a golden cover adorned with 162 illustrated botanical panels showing plants from across the world. Many of the plants portrayed have medicinal uses, some are ornamental, and others – like cotton, tea and tobacco – were the plants that fuelled the British Empire’s economy.

One of these is the plant *Quassia amara* (Figure 1a), which Carl Linnaeus named after an enslaved Ghanaian, Kwasi Mukamba, or Graman Quassi (other

spellings: Quacy, Kwasi and Quasi) (1692 – 1787) (Figure 1b), who was a healer and botanist. He was enslaved as a child and taken to Suriname, which was then a Dutch colony. Working as a scout and negotiator for the Dutch, he lost his right ear during the fighting against the Saramaka maroons, who branded him a traitor. The illustration reproduced here originally appeared in Captain John Gabriel Stedman's *The Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796). In 1774, Stedman witnessed the brutal oppression of slaves during a campaign against the maroons, which he described in his narrative. This illustration, by William Blake, was adopted by those who advocated the abolition of the slave trade.

Kwasi worked as a healer of some renown, eventually becoming so financially successful that he was able to buy his freedom. His success was due in part to his discovery, around 1730, that *Quassia amara* could be used to treat infections caused by intestinal parasites if drunk as a bitter tea. Kwasi's secret formula for this tea was purchased for a considerable sum by Daniel Rolander (1722/3 – 1793), one of the Linnaeus' students, who took it back with him to Europe in

1756. A specimen of the tree was later presented to Linnaeus in 1761 by Carl Gustaf Dahlberg (1721–1781), a Swedish plantation owner in Suriname. Linnaeus publicly named and described the genus, thus establishing it within European botany. Examples of those specimens can be seen within his collections at the Linnean Society, London (Linnean Society of London, n.d.). *Quassia* became a popular 'bitter', praised for its effectiveness in suppressing vomiting and removing fever, both in the Caribbean and in the whole of Europe. Experiments by European physicians showed it to be as potent as Peruvian bark but without the side effects, such as diarrhoea. Deemed safe and effective, *Quassia* – used in infusion, extract, or pills – was included in various European Pharmacopoeia. It continues to be used today in industrially-produced medicines for treating intestinal parasites.

Kwasi served during the next six decades as the colony's leading medicine man, with vast influence over all the inhabitants – black, white, and indigenous peoples – of Suriname. In other accounts from the period he is described as "one of the most



Figure 1. (a) *Quassia amara*, an image of the ceiling panel from the Hintze Hall at the Natural History Museum London and (b) 'The celebrated Graman Quacy,' an engraving by William Blake from John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*.

extraordinary black men in Suriname, and perhaps the world" (Price and Price, 1988).

Unhappily for this notable case, there is no mention of Kwasi or his plant namesake in the new 2017 gallery interpretation of the Hintze Hall ceiling at the NHM. One story which does appear there is that of a Malay teenager called Ali, through his connection to Alfred Russel Wallace, the explorer, naturalist and biologist, and – along with Charles Darwin – the co-discoverer of evolution. In 1855, at the age of 15, Ali encountered Wallace in Sarawak and worked as his servant before becoming his local guide. Ali was also Wallace's specimen collector, and hunted and skinned birds which would eventually go on to be part of the NHM's collections. Wallace describes Ali's character in his autobiography, *My Life A record of events and opinions*, and how they cared for one another during periods of illness (Wallace, 1905). Ali contributed substantially to collecting a large proportion of the 125,600 specimens which were foundational to Wallace's work. Wallace could not have done this without his 'faithful companion' (van Wyhe and Drawhorn, 2015; van Wyhe and Rookmaaker, 2013).

Another example of the role of indigenous peoples and knowledge in European science is that of the

work of Henry Smeathman (1742–1786), an entomologist who spent years working in Sierra Leone. Natural historians such as Daniel Solander, Joseph Banks, and John Fothergill sponsored Smeathman to go to Africa to collect natural history specimens in 1781. He was most successful at collecting insects, which his sponsors used in their own collections. Indigenous Africans helped Smeathman excavate termite mounds for his studies, and collected insects which contributed to financing Smeathman and many other scientists' following fieldwork trips (Douglas, 2009). The sole acknowledgement of these indigenous Africans seems to be in a painting from 1781 (see Figure 2).

Even the English naturalist Charles Darwin, who is universally famed for his contributions to the natural sciences, was taught taxidermy and how to preserve birds by a Guyanese freed slave named John Edmonstone. Edmonstone was an unsung early mentor to Darwin in 1826, when Darwin was at Edinburgh University. Edmonstone's training enabled Darwin to perform taxidermy during his voyage on the *Beagle* from 1831 to 1836. Although Edmonstone is one of Patrick Vernon's '100 Great Black Britons' (Veron, n.d.), it was only in 2009 that this hidden figure emerged and was acknowledged, during the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin's

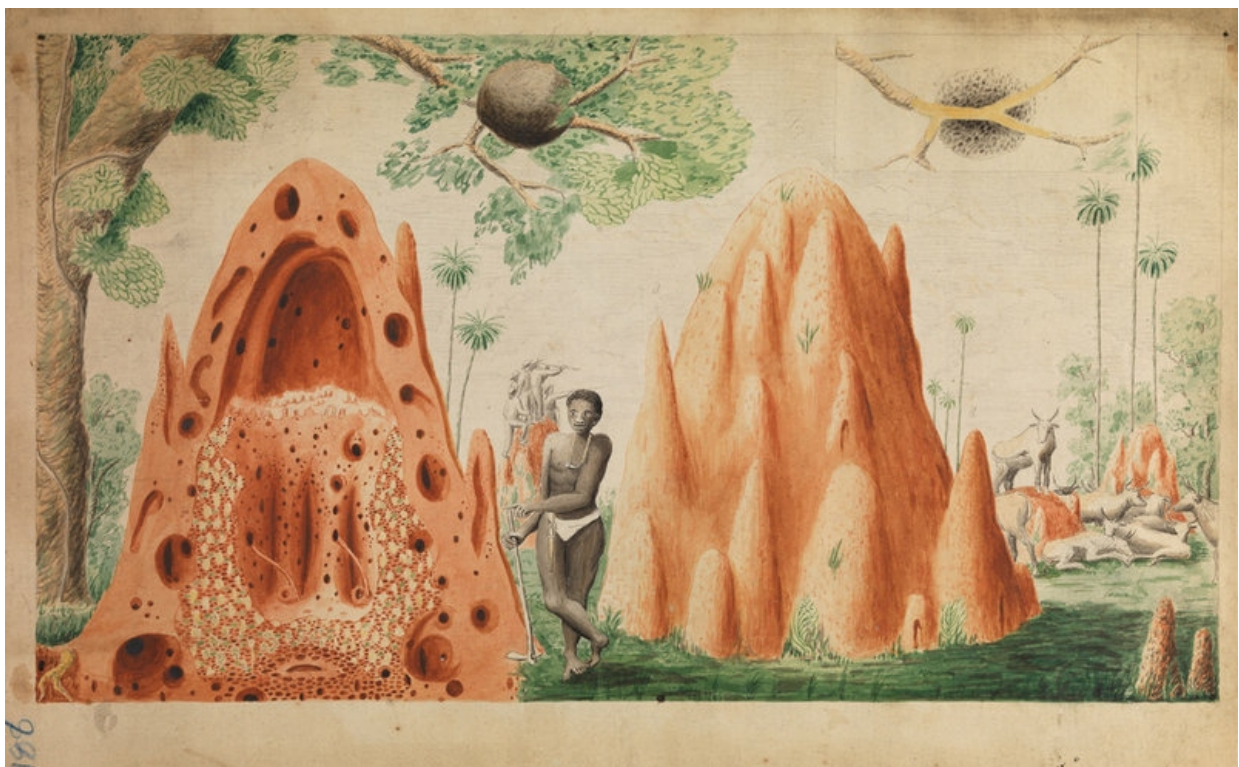


Figure 2. African who helped excavate termite mounds, Smeathman 1781.

Origin of Species. Wedgwood porcelain works produced a plaque in honour of Edmonstone, which is affixed to a bar in Edinburgh (Figure 3).



Figure 3. John Edmonstone, the freed Guyana slave who taught Charles Darwin how to preserve bird specimens.

For the NHM, arguably the most important colonial story of the collections is of those specimens collected by Sir Hans Sloane (1660 – 1753), which form the core collections of the museum. At the age of 27, Hans Sloane set off on his travels, eventually settling in Jamaica where he collected over 800 plant specimens, as well as live animals, shells, and rocks. He also wrote notes on local plants, animals, and people's customs. These documents and specimens became the founding collections of the British Museum, with many of the natural history specimens subsequently housed at the NHM from 1881. As Delbourgo makes clear in his biography, Sloane's medical and scientific careers, including the eventual formation of the British and Natural History Museum collections, were directly funded by profits from slavery (Delbourgo, 2017: p.187). Working as a plantation doctor in Jamaica, Sloane was complicit in slavery, as well as the transfer of plants by slave traders from West Africa to the Caribbean. His writings described many aspects of enslaved Africans' lives in detail, and he also collected a number of their cultural artefacts, including musical instruments. While his personal views on slavery and the slave trade are not clear, Sloane wrote in detail about the knowledge enslaved Africans had of plants, though he did not seem to value their medical traditions and interpretations. He wrote that local people were helpful in locating plants, but he thought they could not use them beneficially without wider knowledge, and indeed may have done harm with them. Sloane also wrongly thought no diseases or medical

conditions existed in the Caribbean that he had not seen in Europe, and therefore preferred treatments used by Europeans, such as bloodletting and purging, to traditional local cures (Delbourgo, 2017: p.52).

Forward together: decolonising the natural history museum

The examples above demonstrate that the current absence of decolonial interpretation in contemporary natural history museums is problematic. At best, it misrepresents historical fact; at worst, it alienates audiences. This resonates with other research, including Garibay and Gynlenhall (2015), in science and natural history museum contexts, and also research from further afield in art galleries and social history museums (Dixon, 2012; Dixon, 2016; Hahn, 2016; Jennings and Jones-Rizzi, 2017). As such, there is clearly an exciting opportunity for us to change the interpretation of natural history collections to better reflect their histories, exploring them through the lens of colonial history. As Dawson puts it, "Inviting people from minority ethnic and/or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds into spaces or practices that reflect dominant values of Whiteness and class privilege, without fundamentally reimagining the practices involved, is clearly insufficient. Instead", she proposes, "...museums that reimagine collections with marginalised groups in ways that surface their assets (rather than deficits) and do justice to their histories, practices and values may be able to disrupt their role in social production by developing more equitable experiences" (Dawson, 2018: p.13).

If visitors feel alienated from museums because their own histories and stories are being misrepresented, the solution is simple: we, collectively as museum professionals, need to do better at acknowledging past wrongs for what they are, and telling the whole of the story of science. We propose that the first step to redressing these potentially racist misrepresentations is to acknowledge the colonial past of natural history collections and to present the stories about the history of these collections alongside existing interpretation about the specimens and their role in the natural world. An example of this is through the first NHM black history public tours of Hintze Hall held in October 2018, developed and led by Principal Curator Miranda Lowe. These tours recognise contributions of indigenous people to the world of science and natural history. We agree with Marks that there is a moral imperative for scientists to acknowledge that they are not apart from society, but in fact play a

fundamental and potentially positive role within it (Marks, 2017). We extend this position to individuals and institutions whose role is to engage public audiences with science, particularly those who work in natural history museums.

The depiction of *Quassia amara* in the ceiling of the Hintze Hall bears witness to the connections between European scientists and enslaved and indigenous experts like Kwasi and Ali. The same is true for the specimens which compose the NHM's collections, particularly those which came from Sloane's collections at the British Museum in 1881. These and other historical specimens collected during the period of slavery and from countries which were being explored through colonial encounters, are testimony to the contributions of non-white people to Western science. As such, they contain and have the potential to relate decolonial stories to the public. Museums, originally established as colonial tools, are well-situated to do the work of public acknowledgement because their collections include objects and specimens which relate directly to that colonial history.

Govier outlines the benefits of such public acknowledgement of past wrongs as fundamental to future progress. "To receive acknowledgement that these things did happen, that they were wrong and should not have happened, and that those to whom they happened were human beings with human rights, persons possessing the same dignity and worth that belong to other human beings", she says, "is to receive confirmation, validation of one's dignity and status as a human being, and a moral being of equal worth" (Govier, 2000: p.18). She goes on to say, "Most of us do not do well preserving a sense of who we are and what we do in a context that denies or ignores the value of these things. Where they have been denied or ignored, acknowledgment removes a barrier between self and others, a confirmation of who one is and what one has lived through..." (Govier, 2000: p.19). In the context of interpreting natural history collections, we argue that acknowledging the origins of these collections is a critical step in bridging an existing gap between natural history collections and non-white audiences. By telling the stories of where the specimens came from, and, more importantly, relating the context of why they were collected and being honest about how this furthered the colonial project, we will remove an obstacle that is actively blocking wider participation. This acknowledgement will show that we as museum professionals are aware of the stories

of people who come from the same parts of the world as our museum specimens, and that we are not trying to deny their history or contribution. It is a crucial step towards ensuring we are all involved in our collective project of learning about the natural world.

The fact that our work as natural history curators is scientific does not mean we should close our eyes and ears to the difficult origins of the specimens in our collections. The natural history knowledge from indigenous people from around the world, captured through colonial encounters, needs to be more widely acknowledged for their impact on society, with their narratives sitting proudly alongside those specimens and artefacts within natural history museums.

References

- Arnold, K., 2006. *Cabinets for the curious: looking back at early English museums*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Barringer, T.J., 1998. South Kensington Museum and the colonial project. In: Barringer, T.J. and Flynn, T. (eds). *Colonialism and the object: empire, material culture and the museum*. pp.11-27. London: Routledge.
- Bennett, T., 2004. *Pasts Beyond Memory. Evolution, Museums, Colonialism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Birchall, D., 2016. *Twitter update, 11 December*. [online] Available at: <<https://twitter.com/dannybirchall/status/805367870930685952>> [Accessed 11 December 2016].
- Challis, D., 2016. Skull Triangles: Flinders Petrie, Race Theory and Biometrics. *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology*, 26(1), 5, pp.1-8.
- Cornish, C. and Wilkey, B., 2018. "Specimens Distributed": The Circulation of Objects from Kew's Economic Botany Collection. *Outputs of the Mobile Museum*. [online] Available at: <<https://intranet.royalholloway.ac.uk/geography/research/mobile-museum/outputs.aspx>> [Accessed 27 July 2018].
- Dawson, E., 2018. Reimagining publics and (non) participation: Exploring exclusion from science communication through experiences of low-income, minority ethnic groups. *Public Understanding of Science*, 00(0), pp.1-15.
- #DecolonizeThisPlace, 2016. *Rename The Day – Remove The Statue – Decolonize This Museum*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.decolonizethisplace.org/post/rena>>

- me-the-day-remove-the-statue-decolonize-this-museum> [Accessed October 2017].
- Delbourgo, J., 2017. *Collecting the World: The Life and Curiosity of Hans Sloane*. Allen Lane.
- Desmond, A. and Moore, J., 2009. *Darwin's Sacred Cause: Race, Slavery and the Quest for Human Origins*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Dias, N., 1998. Chapter 3. The visibility of difference: nineteenth century French anthropological collections. In: McDonald, S. (ed.), *The Politics of Display, Museums, Science, Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Dixon, C.A., 2012. Decolonising the museum: Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration. *Race & Class*, 53(4), pp.78-86.
- Dixon, C.A., 2016. The 'othering' of Africa and its diasporas in Western museum practices. Ph.D. University of Sheffield.
- Douglas, S., 2009. The making of scientific knowledge in an age of slavery: Henry Smeathman, Sierra Leone and natural history. *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 9(3). DOI: [10.1353/cch.0.0029](https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.0.0029)
- Fletcher, R., 2012. The Art of Forgetting: imperialist amnesia and public secrecy. *Third World Quarterly*, 33(3), pp.423-439.
- Fredericksen, G.M., 2002. *Racism - A Short History*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Garibay, C. and Gyllenhaal, E., 2015. Habitat Dioramas and Sense of Place: Factors Linked to Visitors' Feelings About the Natural Places Portrayed in Dioramas. In: Tunnicliffe, S.D. and Scheersoi, A. (eds.), *Natural History Dioramas; history, construction and educational role*. Dordrecht, London: Springer. pp.209-225.
- Gould, S.J., 1981. *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Govier, T., 2000. *What is Acknowledgement and Why is it Important?* OSSA Conference Archive, 1, 15 May 1999. [online] Available at: <http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA3/keynotes/1> [Accessed 14 August 2017].
- Hahn, C.N., 2016. The Political House of Art: the South African National Gallery 1930 – 2009. Ph.D. Goldsmiths College, University of London.
- Harari, Y.N., 2014. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. London: Vintage.
- Jenkins, S., Lisk, J., and Broadley, A., 2013. *The Popularity of Museum Galleries: Evaluation for Natural Sciences Collections Association*. Report by Jenesys Associates Ltd.
- Jennings, G. and Jones-Rizzi, J., 2017. Museums, white privilege and diversity: A systemic perspective. *Dimensions*, pp.63-74.
- Knapp, S. and Press, B., 2005. *The Guilded Canopy: Botanical Ceiling Panels of the Natural History Museum*. London: Natural History Museum.
- Linnean Society of London, n.d. *Quassia amara*. [online] Available at: <http://linnean-online.org/5881/> [Accessed June 2018].
- Marks, J., 2017. *Is Science Racist?* St. Ives: Polity.
- Mason, R. and Sayner, J., 2019. Bringing museal silences into focus: eight ways of thinking about silence in museums. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25(1), pp.5-20. DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2017.1413678
- Moser, S., 2006. *Wondrous Curiosities: Ancient Egypt at the British Museum*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Price, R. and Price, S. (eds), 1988. *John Gabriel Stedman: Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, transcribed for the first time from the original 1790 manuscript*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.
- RACE: are we so different?, 2016. *Understanding Race*. [online] Available at: <http://www.understandingrace.org> [Accessed July 2017].
- Redman, S.J., 2016. *Bone Rooms: from scientific racism to human prehistory in museums*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Rhodes Must Fall Oxford, 2019. *#RHODESMUSTFALL* [online] Available at: <https://rmfoxford.wordpress.com/> [Accessed 14 February 2019].
- Rutherford, A., 2016. *A Brief History of Everyone Who Ever Lived: The Stories in Our Genes*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Said, E.W., 1978. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- UCL, 2014. *Why is My Curriculum White?* [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dscx4h2l-Pk> [Accessed May 2015].
- van Wyhe, J. and Drawhorn, G.M., 2015. 'I am Ali Wallace': The Malay Assistant of Alfred Russel Wallace. *JMBRAS*, 88(1), pp.3-31.

- van Wyhe, J and Rookmaaker, K. (eds), 2013. *Alfred Russel Wallace: Letters from the Malay Archipelago*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Veron, P., n.d. *100 great black Britons: John Edmonstone*. [online] Available at: <http://www.100greatblackbritons.com/bios/john_edmonstone.html> [Accessed 5 July 2017].
- Wallace, A.R., 1905. *My life: A record of events and opinions* (2 volumes). London: Chapman and Hall.