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From 'Finders' Keepers' to 'Lost and Found': Tales from the Museum and Landmark Poetics

By Deirdre Osborne (Goldsmiths, University of London)

Re-viewing the past in terms of Black people's presences in British history has produced distinctive cultural interventions. Working with and through the imprint of the imperial-colonial aftershock (and not hiding or denying its effects and affect) can produce a variety of unsettling encounters that reconfigure the ways in which the 'canon' and the 'collection' can be reconsidered. For a number of contemporary Black British writers, museums, burial places and monuments have catalysed a means of representing Black people's lives in illuminating and imaginative ways. By creatively rendering heritages hidden in the museum space and inscribing Black presences into landmarks, they contribute to a radical revision of commemorative cultural history. 'Landmark Poetics' is a term I have coined that describes poems that are engraved on material surfaces other than paper – especially those that have a commemorative function in sculpture, on pavements, on buildings or gravestones. Landmark poets hear echoes that reverberate throughout history and (re)imagine the lives of Black people devalued or overlooked by national record-keeping, in more respect worthy terms. Poets such as SuAndi ('Poems on Discs' Centenary Walkway, Salford Quays, 1994), Jackie Kay ('Anne', The Bronte Stones Project, 2018), Lemn Sissay ('The Gilt of Cain' set in Michael Visocchi's sculpture, Fen Court, London, 2007), Dorothea Smartt (*ship shape* in response to Sambo's Grave, Sunderland, Lancashire, 2009), Patience Agbabi ('Chains' The Historic Dockyard, Chatham, 2010) Grace Nichols ('Breath' Goldsmiths University, 2020) and Fred D'Aguiar ('At the Grave of the Unknown African Henbury Parish Church', 1992) have all produced this counter-monumental work that creates its own archive, a shrine, a literary museum of black people's bodies in relation to British history.

Another point on this reorienting of the cultural compass, is Bernardine Evaristo's novel *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) which evolved out of her residency in the Museum of London and features an unforgettable Nubian-Roman heroine Zuleika, of whom her author states, 'The idea of a black girl in Roman Britain is a revolutionary idea because it challenges notions of Britain and its history'. Set during the rule of African-born Emperor Septimius Severus, Evaristo's tragicomic epic stretches imaginations back beyond the entrenched 'known narratives' of post-Renaissance periods (enslavement, colonization, post-WWII migration) as being all-defining and inevitable flashpoints for Black British history in white-dominant culture. Evaristo confirms, 'I wanted to write about the African presence in Roman Britain because there was a legion of Moors stationed in the north of the country 1,800 years ago. I wanted to disrupt the notion that Britain was only populated by white people until recently.' (Collins, 2008, 1200) A novel in verse, *The Emperor's Babe* digs deep into the ancient past when Britannia was merely a 'far-flung northern outpost' (41) of the Roman empire, and the reader emerges from the novel with fresh genealogies of understanding this period and its 'remains' today in language (80% of English has a Latin root) and civic spaces. The novel absorbs street names, now-submerged rivers, the manners and mores of ancient Roman life to revivify views of ancient Londinium through a black-woman-centring lens. Evaristo's technique perfectly illustrates Toni Morrison's indispensable literary model of 'rememory' as inaugurated in her novel *Beloved* (1987), an authorial process where the imagination fleshes out the full capacity of histories erased in post-Renaissance enslavement and its aftermath— racism and indentured labour. As Alessandro Barchiesi proposes, classical scholars 'may stand to learn from the whole post-colonial atmosphere something that has a bearing on the cultural history of the Roman empire.' 154) Evaristo notes that, 'I did actually use the term literary archaeology when I began working on *The Emperor's Babe* [...] I saw myself as an archaeologist, partly inspired by the fact that I was working at the

Museum of London as poet-in-residence [in 1999] and carrying out research for the book with archaeologists and conservationists there.’ (Hooper, 2004, 4) Furthermore, ‘Since the book came out the Museum has introduced a black Roman character played by an actor who guides people around the Roman part of the Museum. I get great satisfaction from that very tangible result.’ (6) As Evaristo unearths hidden herstories in order to represent Londinium 211 CE, it is worth excavating its juxtaposition with another empire, the British Empire, as Britannia was to develop into centuries later, and the results of what remains in museum collections.

### **Grave matters...**

Disinterring of Indigenous burial sites and their destruction is one cornerstone of British museum history generated by imperial ideology, colonialism and the capital of collecting. While in the field of archaeology the preserving of human remains evolved from antiquarian collection and the excavation of ancient burial sites from the renaissance period onwards—generally displayed under ‘antiquities’—how, when and why human remains ended up in boxes, drawers, store cupboards and display cabinets in British museums is overwhelmingly laced to the violence, displacement, dispossession and consequences of the British Empire’s imperial-colonial legacies. The assumptions behind the evolution of Britain’s collection ecologies and the dedicated buildings housing the acquired items have been traditionally rationalised by agendas of a civilised safekeeping, a grand prerogative of cultural protectorate of that removed from colonised territories and elsewhere. Whereas the return of people’s ancestors’ remains is, indisputably, the only moral and ethically appropriate action for the institutions who hold them, there is a dimension to repatriation that disturbs and afflicts this being a straightforward action. Firstly, is the racist cataloguing of people not accorded their humanity by the imperial bone collectors. Of Waridjuri and Celtic parentage, artist, curator

and scholar Brook Garru Andrew recalls, 'Early on in my research of archives at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, I encountered a human skull of an Aboriginal person that was part of the "Mammals Register"'. (2018, 223) Additionally, besides the iniquity of dehumanisation, is the irreversible loss of place of origin. Paul Daley writes of the boxes of 725 Indigenous people's remains stored in the National Museum of Australia in Mitchell, Canberra,

The identities of pitifully few of those held at Mitchell can be determined. The provenance (the geographic areas and peoples from which they were stolen) of 434 can't be established. The remaining 291 are either being held indefinitely at the museum at the request of communities or can't be returned for other practical reasons. The stories of most are lost. (2014)

Thus, despite the repatriation of many human remains from British collections, many victims of coloniser atrocities remain in limbo in museum spaces of the former Empire, the rituals of burial in home communities an impossibility.

But what of the archaeological exhumations of ancient burial sites *in* Britain? Although in no way comparable to the desecrations and cruelties cited above, the ways in which ancient funerary contents (both bones and artifacts) are displayed in museums has offered insights and correctives to misremembered and erased presences of people of African descent in the British Isles. The disinterment of graves dating back to the period of Roman occupation has enlivened and reconfigured the closed narratives that aided and abetted myths of a monoracial history. These 'remains of the day' are approached in terms of ascertaining African ancestry through bioarchaeological evidence via ancient DNA, and diet as the Museum of London's *Roman Dead* exhibition (2018) testifies.

<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/surprising-diversity-roman-london-docklands>

As has been detected, the care and respect for how individuals from ancient eras were buried opens up fresh perspectives, not only on those periods but on how subsequently later history displaced and submerged such facts. The case of the ‘Ivory Bangle Lady’ uncovered in York in 1901, ‘contradicts assumptions that may derive from more recent historical experience, namely that immigrants are low status and male, and that African individuals are likely to have been slaves.’ (Leach et al.142) Memorably, in *The Emperor’s Babe*, the heroine Zuleika plans her burial, specifying the objects to accompany her into the afterlife so she will be entombed ennobled in ‘violet damask dalmatica / with gold thread [...] my hair // done in beautiful elaborate braids’ (248) [...] ‘and don’t forget my jet afro pick, // tweezers and nail file’ (249)—perhaps to have the hypothetical last laugh about any future interpretations archaeologists would make about her remains.

### **A Black British Museum : Providing Sites and Sights of Social Justice**

Crispin Paine (2013) writes, ‘Museums drain objects of their power’. Yet, from whose perspective does such an observation emanate? For many visitors, a museum displays the evidence of a past in which one’s ancestral cultures were collected, displayed and objectified, a place where architecture, atmosphere, contents and emotions all collide to produce a traumatic experiential space. They can also be places of omission as Yosola Olorunshola has memorably described in the happenstance of encountering a single room dedicated to the Haitian Revolution in the British Museum. When she ‘wandered into the neighbouring room, desperate to find out more’, she found herself ‘surrounded by portraits of white men.’ She reflects, ‘The juxtaposition was jarring. I realised the exhibition had already come to an end. That was it – a single room on an entire revolution. Instead, I’d entered the museum’s vast Enlightenment Gallery, brazenly labelled “Collecting the World”.’ (2020) In her article on the subject, Olorunshola quotes Sandra Shakespeare, co-founder of Museum Detox, and

founder of the Black British Museum Project who expresses the pressing need for a museum dedicated to Black culture in Britain. ‘There are around 2,500 museums in the UK depending on what you include. There’s a dog collar museum, a marble museum, and a lawnmower museum. But, surprisingly, and given [that there was] a Black presence in Britain dating back to Roman times, there is no permanent museum dedicated to Black British history and art’ (2020) As Brook Garru Andrew the first Indigenous Director of the 2020 Sydney Biennale, *NIRIN* (‘edge’ in Wiradjuri) argues, ‘While an exhibition might speak to themes of the global—and include artworks by “other” makers—this by itself does not make for a radical activity that undoes the canon. To be antagonistic towards histories of imperialism, through an exhibition, involves a dismantling of the institution itself.’ (2019)

The formation of two significant organisations in the UK, Museum Detox and the Black British Museum Project are visionary and reparative examples of curatorial practice that promises to unsettle and dismantle (white) Eurocentric dominance. This work is vital to engender how both the ‘sites’ and ‘sights’ of museum spaces are transformed by social, cultural and racial justice. However, in creating space for ‘feeling better’—in all its possible variations—that must accompany justice, Sara Ahmed cautions that ‘Feeling better is not a sign that justice has been done’ (2014:201). It is also unavoidably emotional work as Ahmed explains.

Emotions show us how histories stay alive, even when they are not consciously remembered; how histories of colonialism, slavery, and violence shape lives and worlds in the present. The time of emotion is not always about the past, and how it sticks. *Emotions can also open up futures, in the ways they involve different orientations to others.* [my italics] (2014:202)

In this spirit, the two-day international symposium co-convened by UAL and Goldsmiths, *Exhibiting Embarrassment: Museums, Public Culture and Consequentialist Aesthetics* 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>

June (2021) virtually gathered together scholars, arts activists and curatorial specialists from Australia, the Netherlands, France, Korea, the UK and the US, in order to explore the ways in which the legacies of imperial-colonial acquisition ecologies have become barometers of change in (re)thinking about Britain's cultural institutions. It was underpinned by the question, 'How do we navigate the arc of cultural valuing of such materials from being cherished and revered items to being the source of excruciating embarrassment, even leading to shame?' The Black British Museum Project's working with and working through the provenances and inheritances from the past promises to emancipate the museum space through 're-interpretation'. As Sandra Shakespeare writes, 'A Black British Museum needs to think intelligently about the objects and collections it seeks to exhibit and display. What can we do differently?' (Elliott and Shakespeare, 2021) James Baldwin provides a partial answer when he urges, 'Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it. Sing or shout or testify or keep it to yourself: but *know whence you came.*' (p.xix)

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