

Key Note Presentation

Miranda Lowe, Natural History Museum and **Subhadra Das**, University College London

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Nature Read in Black and White: An Update

There has been an enthusiastic uptake of ideas and practices around decolonising the natural history museum in the wake of the publication of our paper 'Nature Read in Black and White: Decolonial Approaches to Natural History Collections' in the NatSCA Journal in 2018. People have written blogs, there have been exhibitions relating to the topic and even the Daily Mail scare quoted cancel culture fears when they heard the Natural History Museum in London was reviewing the colonial histories of its collections. A highlight moment was when Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, complimented one of the co-authors of the paper, saying he had read all sixteen pages and how it was accessible and easy to read. We are gladdened by the national and international impact of our words and research, and this has encouraged us to reflect on this success and raise some other related issues that we would like to share with you in this keynote presentation. In addition to listing recent successes within our own organisations and some plans for future work, we also plan to talk about two further topics about decolonising natural history museums. The first will consider the colonial roots and context of the environmentalist movement, while the second will examine the question of representation in the natural history museum workforce. We will consider the current state of the discourse around decolonising museums, and discuss what continues to be required in the interests of long-term, equitable change.

Miranda Lowe is a principal curator and scientist at the Natural History Museum, London ensuring collections management and care for the Museum's crustacea and cnidaria marine invertebrate collections. She presents lectures and publishes on both curatorial and scientific research, with related appearances on radio and TV. Her work with creative industries allows her to link art, science and nature to aid the public understanding of natural world. With an avid interest in the history of natural history she helps to reveal and recognise contributions of those underrepresented black voices within natural history and science. As a STEM Ambassador she is passionate about ensuring diversity and social justice at all levels and works with various charities mentoring young people as future advocates for museums and the planet.

Subhadra Das is a writer, historian, broadcaster, comedian and museum curator at UCL Culture where she works with the UCL Pathology and Science Collections. She regularly talks to diverse audiences in classes, seminars, lectures, public talks and stand-up comedy about all aspects of her work from collections management to working with human remains. Her main area of research is the history of science and medicine in the 19th and 20th Centuries, specifically the history of eugenics and scientific racism. She uses museum objects to tell decolonial stories in engaging and affirming ways.

Dr Bergit Arends, University of Bristol

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Decolonise! Activations of natural history collections by international contemporary artists

Nowhere else is the encounter between Western science and the cultures of non-European peoples so evident than in the collections of European museums. These encounters are reflected in the collecting practices, the archiving and documenting, the conservation of objects and in the ordering systems through which these artefacts are interpreted. But in Western museums we need to learn how to recognise and how to acknowledge these encounters.

Museum collections are sources of both cultural and environmental knowledge (Thomas, 2018), particularly natural science collections. Moreover, taxonomic systems of the past, particularly in the natural sciences, are now considered to be one of the most important resources for understanding the interconnections of science and culture (Browne, 1989). How can historic collections be mobilised to address contemporary issues? How can the natural sciences be understood as cultural practice? How can the violence of past scientific practices be acknowledged in natural history museums?

I discuss how artists challenged historic and contemporary scientific and collection care practices. In the international artists' residency programme (2010-2013) at the Natural History Museum London, Daniel Boyd (Australia), Hu Yun (China), and Sunjo D (India) used the collections to explore shared histories and to research scientific practices. The artists engaged with the collections' provenance, bureaucracy, access and visibility, and the collection objects themselves to create public displays. I discuss their works through the impetus for decolonisation, referring to revisiting institutional taxonomies, scientific and collection care practices and colonial impositions while speaking out for cultural multiplicity and recognition. The programme worked with artefacts, histories, the museum, and communities. I present how strategies to decolonise collections through contemporary art can be derived from this programme.

Bergit Arends curates and researches interdisciplinary processes, with a current focus on the environment and visual art. She publishes widely, recently on plants in *The Botanical City* (2020), *Botanical Drift* (2018), *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* (2018), and on decolonising natural history museums (*Art in Science Museums* 2019). Her thesis 'Contemporary Art, Archives and Environmental Change in the Age of the Anthropocene' (2017) resulted in the award-winning publication *Chrystel Lebas. Field Studies* (2018). She has curated contemporary art projects for the natural history museums in London and Berlin (*Art/Nature* 2019). Most recently Bergit was in Collection Care Research at Tate and is now British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of History of Art, University of Bristol.

Rebecca Machin, Leeds Museums and Galleries

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Mo Koundje: how gorilla histories can help decolonise our collections

Mo Koundje ('Mok') is a Western Lowland Gorilla in the collections of Leeds Museums and Galleries (LMG). His taxidermied skin is displayed at Leeds City Museum, while his skeleton is in the store at Leeds Discovery Centre. At present, his remains are used as an example of 'gorilla' in the Life on Earth gallery, but they have the potential to tell us so much more. Using archives from the Zoological Society of London, the Natural History Museum, and the Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer, as well as French and British press archives, I have found out more about Mok's life. His story touches on domestic life in French colonies, the interaction between colonists and colonised communities, and the illegal hunting and trade in gorillas, which continues today. The remains of animals from once colonised countries have the potential to reveal stories not only of their own experiences, but of the people whose lives were affected by colonisation. By entering colonial homes, gorillas enable us to look at racial and gendered hierarchies imposed by European colonisers from a new perspective. We can, and should, use these stories to engage our audiences with a range of political and environmental issues still relevant today.

Rebecca Machin is a curator of natural sciences at Leeds Museums and Galleries. Most recently, she has been working with community outreach colleagues on the Windows on Nature project, encouraging socially isolated older people in Leeds to enjoy birds from their homes, even under lockdown. She has published work around gender representation in museum natural science displays, exposing the misrepresentation of female animals, including humans, in public galleries and stored collections. Rebecca recently started a PhD at the University of Leeds, researching the history of gorillas as pets in colonial Africa.

David Gelsthorpe, Manchester Museum

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Decolonising Manchester Museum's mineral collection – a call to action

The history of Black people, people from indigenous cultures and the role of empire in museum natural history collections is largely ignored. This talk uses Manchester Museum's mineral collection to take the first steps to uncover these stories, analyse the role of empire and expose racism.

For the first time, archive photographs from the early 1900s are used in a new display, to tell the story of the people who mined the Museum's South African gold ore specimens. Recent research and the Museum's Sierra Leone diamond are used to tell the story of 'Blood Diamonds'. Data analysis of the mineral collection reveals that 24% of the collection comes from colonial countries. 50% of the Museum's minerals from the British Empire are Australian, of which 33% came from the Imperial Institute.

This research has shown that Manchester Museum's mineral collection is intimately connected to empire, but the history of Black and indigenous people is ignored or unknown. This is institutional racism and museums need to be proactive in addressing this. There are enormous opportunities to develop this research through fostering partnerships with source communities around the world. This paper is a call to action.

David Gelsthorpe has been Curator Earth Sciences at Manchester Museum for the last fourteen years and worked at the Yorkshire Museum, York, Sheffield and Scarborough and Whitby Museums before that. He has led the redevelopment of the Manchester's Nature's Library permanent gallery and the temporary exhibition 'Object Lessons', which showcased scientific models and illustrations. David was heavily involved in the 'Climate Control' exhibition which used natural history collections to inspire action on climate change. More recently, he has led the Museum's citizen science project 'Reading Nature's Library' documenting over 90,000 objects with online volunteers.

His research interests include decolonisation and historical geology. He is a NatSCA committee member and sits on the Arts Council England Accreditation panel.

Jack Ashby, University Museum of Zoology, Cambridge

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The political platypus and the colonial koala – how to decolonise the way we talk about Australian animals

Decolonisation is about breaking down systemic hierarchies, where European narratives have been considered superior to any others. In this talk, I will be asking whether this can be applied to the way we talk about Australian mammals.

My argument is that the ways in which museums and other sources represent Australian animals today are often fundamentally pejorative, and reflect an ongoing subconscious colonial bias. This attitude begins with the colonists and explorers of the 17th and 18th centuries, but remains detectable in the ways that Australian wildlife is interpreted today, in museums, TV programmes and in the popular zeitgeist. This may sound extreme, but I will be asking whether the zoological and socio-historical stories of marsupials, platypuses and echidnas may intertwine to have severe impact on global politics.

I will explore some common tropes for how Australia's wildlife appears in our museums, and propose language and narratives to avoid perpetuating colonial narratives in museum interpretation.

Jack Ashby is the Assistant Director of the University Museum of Zoology, Cambridge. He is author of the book *Animal Kingdom: A Natural History in 100 Objects*, which explores what we can learn about the incredible mechanisms behind life on earth from specimens in museums; as well as discussing how natural museums present a potentially unnatural view of nature. A key area of interest is the biases that are detected in how animals are popularly represented, particularly in museums. He regularly undertakes fieldwork on the ecology of Australian mammals. Jack sits on the Committee of the Natural Sciences Collections Association and the Council of the Society for the History of Natural History, and is an Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at University College London.

Rachel Jennings, Powell-Cotton Museum

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Colonial Critters: Decolonising the Powell-Cotton Museum

The Powell-Cotton Museum's dioramas are visual spectacles that delight audiences, but they aren't representations of 'real life'. Starting in September 2020, we are undertaking a project called 'Colonial Critters', which will look critically at the context in which these displays were created. In this project we will delve into the history of the Museum and uncover the 'hidden' stories in our extensive archive, including those of the communities with whom Percy Powell-Cotton worked across the African continent, in India, and in Kent to make this place. We will engage our staff and audiences in the process to find out what stories they would like the Museum to tell, giving the opportunity for some uncomfortable - but ultimately more rounded - histories to be displayed. The aim of decolonisation is not to re-write history, but to be more open and transparent about the origins of our collections.

This presentation will outline the Colonial Critters project, and discuss what decolonisation means to us at the Powell-Cotton Museum.

Rachel works at the Powell-Cotton Museum, where she is Curator of Natural History and manager of the Colonial Critters project. Her research encompasses the history of natural science collections at the intersection of trophy hunting, scientific collecting, and colonialism. She has an extensive collection of animal-themed clothes, some of which she has sewn herself.

Hannan Cornish, Luanne Meehitiya, Tannis Davidson, Subhadra Das,

Grant Museum of Zoology, UCL Culture

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Displays of Power: A Natural History of Empire

The *Displays of Power* exhibition explores the zoology collections of the Grant Museum, motivated by the conviction that, “there are stories of empire in any natural history collection – if you know how to look”.

Research found that empire played a key role in the development of the Grant Museum. The map of the British Empire was reflected in where the specimens were collected and empire helped to turn animals into objects for worldwide trade. Teaching specimens were used to promote racism and colonialism. Specimens hunted to extinction by colonists evidenced how empire affected the natural world. Hunting trophies demonstrated imperial attitudes towards animals that persist.

Displays of Power was inspired by a paper co-authored by Subhadra Das, one of our curatorial team, and Miranda Lowe, a Principal Curator at the Natural History Museum, which argues that natural history museums perpetuate racism and alienate BAME visitors by ignoring colonial histories. To remedy this erasure, *Displays of Power* foregrounds the legacy of empire throughout the museum display.

The exhibition takes the unusual approach of reframing and reinterpreting objects that are already on display. In this way, we turned a lack of temporary exhibition space into an opportunity to show that stories of empire are ubiquitous but untold throughout collections. *Displays of Power* was created as a means to open up the conversation around empire in as many different ways as possible.. This includes a collaboration with poet Yomi Sode, visitor conversations with trained front of house staff and family and school activities and resources. Associated events include a community take over day and evenings exploring privilege through comedy and a giant immersive game of snakes and ladders. Visitor feedback highlights the deep personal impact of the exhibition. Visitors are sending a strong message that we (and other museums) need to continue decolonising our collections and that is what we intend to do.

Hannah Cornish is a Science Curator at UCL working with the Science Collections and Pathology Museum. She has a background in natural history and anatomy collections and her interests include collections research, documentation, and the history and ethics of natural science and medical collections. She is one of four co-curators of the *Displays of Power* exhibition at the Grant Museum of Zoology.

Molly Phillips, Florida Museum of Natural History, iDigBio

Hao Ye, University of Florida

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Ally Skills 101: Why Allies?

Natural science collections are, by their nature, collaborative and cumulative, and benefit from the inclusion of diverse people with diverse experiences and backgrounds. Yet many of us recognize that our workplaces, and STEM at large, are not welcoming to all, even after decades of efforts. It is increasingly clear that one of the challenges is that we lack training in turning our shared values into action. In this talk, I will introduce ally skills as a path to change. An ally is a member of a social group that enjoys some privilege that is working to end oppression and understand their own privilege (Frame Shift Consulting <https://frameshiftconsulting.com/>). We introduce ally skills via workshops offered by the Gainesville Ally Skills Network. In these workshops we teach people how to recognize when they have power and influence to act as an ally and take effective action to make their workplace more inclusive.

Hao Ye is a lapsed computational ecologist with a background in computer science, psychology, and oceanography. As the Reproducibility Librarian at the University of Florida, Hao teaches and promotes open science and reproducible research practices to empower individual researchers, and lower or dismantle gatekeeping barriers. With training from FrameShift Consulting, Hao is an active member of the Gainesville Ally Skills Network, providing workshops and talks about the importance of allyship to increase inclusion and equity in the academy.

Molly Phillips is a biologist with a background in evolution, ecology, and natural history, which includes a decade working in natural history collections. As the iDigBio project Education, Outreach, Diversity, & Inclusion Coordinator (EODI), Molly is responsible for coordinating and implementing the EODI activities of iDigBio and communicating and facilitating coordination and networking among other initiatives in order to promote, encourage, develop, and implement collections-based EODI programs. Molly is also an active member of the Gainesville Ally Skills Network. With training from FrameShift Consulting, this group provides workshops and talks about the importance of allyship to increase inclusion and equity in academia.

Isabelle Charmantier, The Linnean Society of London

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The lost artists of British Enlightenment natural history

Taking the art collection of the Linnean Society of London as a case study, this paper looks at the many drawings, paintings and illustrations of the natural world collected and commissioned by the Society's Fellows in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These Fellows came from varied backgrounds, including surgeons, medical doctors, reverends and army soldiers. They were part of the British colonial enterprise, exploring and settling in Burma, Nepal, India and the West Indies. Their observations about the botany and zoology they studied were sent back to the Society to be read to other Fellows at meetings and published in the Society's journals. Yet the artwork accompanying these observations was not generally drawn by the authors themselves but by local or indigenous artists they employed. The identities of these artists remain unknown in most cases, but the images they drew were of paramount importance in the construction of natural historical knowledge in Enlightenment Britain. The images they drew to accompany textual descriptions of new plants and animals were often the first to be seen in Europe. These artists were steeped in their own visual and technical traditions, yet they were expected to conform to Western standards of depicting plants and animals, that mirrored taxonomic and nomenclatural objectives. The resulting works reflect the meeting of different cultural, sociological and ecological concerns. The talk will present three specific examples from the Society's collections and explore what can be done to decolonise the collections, to resurrect these artists, and give back the recognition they deserve.

Dr Isabelle Charmantier is Head of Collections at the Linnean Society of London. After a PhD on the history of early modern ornithology, and a postdoc at the University of Exeter working on Carl Linnaeus' manuscripts, she retrained as an archivist and catalogued the Linnaean manuscripts at the Linnean Society. After a short spell as Collections Manager at the Freshwater Biological Association (Windermere), she has been back at the Linnean Society since 2017.

Jim Middleton, Scarborough Museums Trust

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James J. Harrison: Unnatural History

Scarborough Museums Trust holds an archive of the big game hunter James Jonathan Harrison (1857-1923) comprising of not only the usual hunting trophies, but also a large number of photographs and nine hunting diaries. Shortly after his death, his collection was donated to Scarborough Corporation, where for many years it was displayed in the upper rooms of the library before eventually making its way to the town's Natural History Museum when that opened in 1952.

After several years of neglect, many of the mounts and trophy heads were destroyed or removed from cases and only through careful detective work have a number of mounts been able to be definitively attributed to this collection.

One of the more interesting aspects of this collection are the photographs and diaries which give an insight into his privileged lifestyle and insatiable appetite for shooting. In 2021/22 the museum is planning an exhibition based around Harrison's photography which will have to address a number of difficult issues regarding not only the slaughter of hundreds of animals but also the exploitation of the indigenous peoples of Africa and especially the Congo.

In 1904/5 Harrison brought six 'Pygmies' from the Congo which at the time was under the brutal rule of the Belgians and toured them around the UK before returning them home. This historically has always been related in a cheery, anecdotal way with little regard for the clearly exploitative nature of the venture (bearing in mind that at around the same time the Bronx Zoo had a Congolese man on display in a cage). This aspect of the narrative will be retold in a way which makes people think a little more about the inherent racism within collections and how we can redress this.

Jim Middleton is the Collections Manager for Scarborough Museums Trust. A life long Naturalist of the old fashioned type, Jim started his career in museums in the late 90s at the Jorvik Viking Centre, but was always happier discussing the environmental findings of the digs rather than the historical artefacts. Following a brief spell digitising the Hull University Herbarium, he worked as an ornithologist monitoring raptors on potential windfarm sites in Caithness and the Western Isles. In 2008 Jim started working for the Scarborough Museums Trust initially front of house, and has worked his way up since then. When not staring blankly at computer screens, Jim researches historical natural historians for the Natstand website, which he runs with his father.

Mama D Ujuaje, Rhian Rowson, Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives

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Legacies of Jamaica: A not so Elegant Priest!

This presentation discusses a previous successfully curated public event, The Food Journey, held in the summer of 2019, forming part of a long term international project linked to our Jamaican botanical collection.

Addressing many of the contentions of Jamaican history, this presentation evokes a feel of mid-eighteenth century Jamaica by describing how making use of dramatic narrative, a soundscape, food tasting, aromas and textures of the time and geography, allow the context of the collection to come alive and to, as it were, 'answer back' to the authority of the author's claims. We use costumed dialogue to help re-enact the immersive feel of the original production.

We include in our presentation a discussion of the how the collection came about and its use over the years and how that might be critiqued in the context of slavery analyses over time and current notions concerning the erasure of traditional knowledge forms.

To have Jamaican natural history recorded by a non-Jamaican and subsequently interrogated from a Jamaican perspective is relatively novel. This opens the possibility for other such archives to be subject to similar pluralistic interpretations of histories. Encouraging localised communities to explore their past and present natural environment from their unique perspectives is particularly both valuable and relevant. Current biodiversity loss and environmental degradation relates to the historic imperial quest for variety and the exotic. Transplantations of now naturalised species may well have impacted the centres of diversity of endemic species. Our troubling colonial histories interface with current conversations concerning, food distribution, social justice and climate crisis today. Engaging with the history of these collections can help us and others begin to recognise damage and measure changes in biota today as well as inform scientists and the public alike as to the opportunities for corrective and reparative action.

NB: the above abstract refers to the original live presentation which featured food tasting. Conference delegates online are invited to bring along any of the following food items whilst watching the presentation - pineapple, chilli pepper, papaya - to participate in a fully sensory experience.

Mama D Ujuaje is a great grand-daughter of Africa and the Caribbean and a student of agriculture, horticulture, and their lived practice in East and West Africa, the Caribbean, as well as in the UK. She now works on cultivating the minds and hearts of people to grow agency, affirm life and support community by weaving stories at intersections of justice, power and resilience.

Rhian Rowson has been the Natural History Curator for 15 years at Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives and worked previously at National Museum Wales. She is passionate and knowledgeable about British solitary wasps and bees, and has worked on Bristol Museum's early Jamaican herbaria.