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**Roots and routes: Literary archaeologies of British museums in contemporary  
Black and Asian poetry**

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## **Roots and routes: Literary archaeologies of British museums in contemporary Black and Asian poetry**

### **Abstract**

This article explores some of the ways in which contemporary poets are tracing the *roots* and *routes* via which objects have come to, and continue to, reside within the walls of the museum. Focusing on poetic mediations of British Museums — on the Museum of London, the Manchester Museum, and *the* British Museum — the article analyses the works of Bernardine Evaristo, Inua Ellams, and Daljit Nagra. These poetic mediations can be read as *literary archaeologies*—as the concept is used by Evaristo — which speak to the histories, movements, and contemporaneous moments of colonial encounter that take place within the institution of the museum. The article moves to consider the way in which literary archaeologies might chart both a history of migration — looking at Bernardine Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe* — and the migration of objects which are displayed in museums in Britain—with a focus on Inua Ellams’ poem *Tusk* — before going on to examine the museum as *institution*, as it is presented in Daljit Nagra’s collection *British Museum*. Setting these distinct, but complementary poetic interventions alongside one another, the article asks: How do these literary archaeologies respond to the histories and present-day stories told by — and *about* — British museums in the twenty-first century?

**Keywords** museum, colonialism, British Empire, poetry, literary archaeology

In her poem, “British Values”, poet Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan writes about the juxtaposing “values” of Britain, from which one particular line stands out within the context of this article: that “Britain is stolen artefacts in museums named after itself” (2019: 134). There is, in the disciplines of museology and archaeology today,<sup>1</sup> as well as in wider public discourse,<sup>2</sup> a growing recognition of the connections that are threaded between museums and colonialism, of the particular contexts via which objects held by and/or displayed in museums have been acquired, and, with this, an acknowledgement of the violence that so often accompanied these acquisitions. Further still, and of central significance to this article, there is a developing understanding of how violence is implicated not only in the historical acquisition of such objects, but also via the continued possession of these objects in the present day.

In Manzoor-Khan’s poem, an additional layer of violence can be inferred by the naming of the very museums in which these stolen artefacts are held, and in the course of this article I am interested, in particular, in British Museums — *the* British Museum, the Museum of London, and the Manchester Museum. These national and/or city museums, named by their locations, are home to numerous artefacts many of which have, over the decades and centuries, been sourced from outside of Britain and, in many cases, as a result of British colonial and imperial endeavours. This article begins to think through some of the ways that museums are confronting their difficult histories of, and complicity with, British colonialism, and what role literature — and in particular, poetry — might play in attesting to these pasts and, just as importantly, the present.

This article analyses some of the ways in which contemporary poets are tracing the *roots* and *routes* via which objects have come to, and continue to, reside within the walls of the museum. In what follows, I focus on poems written by Bernardine Evaristo, Inua Ellams, and Daljit Nagra, which have been produced within the space of British museums (as poet-in-residence, or by commission), and/or are explicitly written about British museums. What tensions emerge when poets work in concert with British museums? Do the political and economic overtures of formal residencies and commissions place pressures on poets to serve as intermediaries of the nation state — “fostering a national identity, a multicultural, or clarifying English identity” (Rogers, 2020: 22–23)? Or does poetry’s craft and capacity for “progressing affective and sensory experiences” (Golding, 2013: 96), in fact revolutionize unfettered thought and feeling, in spite of, and in defiance to those institutional structures “defined by profit, by linear power” (Lorde, 2017: 10)?

I read the poetic mediations analysed within this article as *literary archaeologies* — as the concept is used by Evaristo (qtd. in Hooper, 2006: 4) — which speak to the histories, movements, and contemporaneous moments of colonial encounter that take place within the institution of the museum. More specifically, the article considers the ways in which literary archaeologies might chart both a history of migration — looking at Bernardine Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe* — and the migration of objects which are displayed in museums in Britain — with a focus on Inua Ellams’ poem *Tusk*. The article concludes with a consideration of the museum as *institution*, as it is presented in Daljit Nagra’s collection, *British Museum*. Each of these poetic interventions is distinct, but

there is a pedagogical usefulness in setting these poems, written by Black and Asian British authors and poets, alongside one another, in order to trace the different, yet complementary, roots and routes that literary archaeologies might take. How do these literary archaeologies respond to the histories and present-day stories told by — and *about* — British museums in the twenty-first century?

### **Literary archaeologies: Stasis and movement in the museum**

In thinking about the institution of the (or “a”) British Museum, and how it might be conceived of in the UK today, I turn, first, to Dan Hicks’ recent, yet foundational, book on the subject, *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (2020). Hicks writes from his position as an archaeologist and anthropologist, specifically as Curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, and speaks about both this museum and British museums more broadly, focusing his discussion on objects looted from Benin following its violent sacking during Britain’s punitive colonial expedition in February 1897. Hicks estimates that objects looted from Benin are currently on display in approximately 161 museums across Europe and North America (2021: 3). The eponymous *Tusk* in Ellams’ poem, which I will draw back to shortly, and which is currently displayed at the Manchester Museum, is from Benin.

Hicks argues that, at the time of British colonialism, and since, “museums became, and remain, part of the physical and ideological landscape of imperial borderwork through the display of loot” (2021: 193). Museums are implicated within the structure and systems of the empire. Further to this, Hicks’ invocation of “imperial

*borderwork*” infers the importance of borders to both historic colonialism and present-day imperialism. Movement which involves the crossing of a border is inherently politicized. Throughout his book, Hicks argues that the continued holding of an object within a museum perpetuates colonial ideologies — and remains extractive both economically and culturally. Writing in support of restitution — on the return of each object to its place of origin — Hicks invokes another example of border crossing, as yet mostly unachieved: the refusal to allow a person or object to move across national borders is also political.

Hicks argues that museums create an illusion of static — or slowed down — time (2021: 15). In spite of this simulacra, however, museums are, in fact, “devices for extending events across time: in this case extending, repeating and intensifying the violence” (Hicks, 2021: 15). Each object that exists in the museum is, Hicks argues, “a live event” (2021: 15), subject to change anew, with every day it continues to reside within the museum’s walls and with every visitor that walks past and observes it. If, then, we read those objects currently held or displayed in museums as moving in time — even when they appear still — what routes might we take to better understand these objects and their associated histories and presents as being in motion?

One such route — and the principle subject of this article — might be taken via literary archaeology. The term “literary archaeology” has an extended genealogy, but in this article I most interested in Bernardine Evaristo’s conceptualization of the term.<sup>3</sup> Evaristo uses it to describe her process of writing the 2001 novel-in-verse *The Emperor’s Babe*, which was born, in part, from her experience of “carrying out research

for the book with archaeologists and conservationists” as poet-in-residence at the Museum of London in 1999 (Evaristo, qtd. in Hooper, 2006: 4). Aligning her research practice with processes of excavation, not just for *The Emperor’s Babe*, but also her earlier, and loosely biographical work, *Lara* (1997), Evaristo notes: “I saw myself as an archaeologist” (qtd. in Hooper, 2006: 4).

The discipline of archaeology is as much about the act of storytelling as it is material excavation. Every notation, label, and piece of correspondence that is produced as part of the archaeological process contributes to the storying of each particular object. Equally relevant, however, is to consider how each of these notations, labels, diaries, and letters are, themselves, storied objects. Anthropologist Rosemary Joyce describes how “[w]riting archaeology is self-evidently more than a form of neutral representation of facts, arranged in a storyline that makes some kind of sense” (2014: 55). For Joyce, writing archaeology is heteroglossic, as the narrative assumes the speaking voice of many (2014: 55) — of the archaeologists and curators in the present, and of the creators and owners of those objects from the past being spoken of, for, or about.

These storied objects — both the artefacts under examination and their photographic and written documentation — are, as Hicks argues, “not a fragment of time, but an endurance” (2021: xxii). Archaeology is not static, but in motion, moving in time. In thinking not just about the history that archaeology seeks to unearth, but also of the history of archaeology, it is prudent to recognize that it is a discipline mired by colonial history, and is “solidly grounded in Western ways of categorizing, knowing, and interpreting the world” (Atalay, 2006a: 280). While the practice of archaeology



seeks to reveal a hidden, or otherwise absent, history, these histories are rarely invisible to those who lived them. It is by recognizing the epistemic violence conducted by archaeology (and museology) both during historic colonialism and present-day imperialism, that we might come to question the stories that have been created for and about particular artefacts displayed in museums, and the methods by which such stories are constructed.

Literary archaeology, by itself, is unlikely to have the sole capacity to challenge the “epistemic colonialism” (Schneider and Hayes, 2020) underpinning the discipline of archaeology in its entirety. It does, however, have disruptive potential, not least due to its interdisciplinary styling, which might facilitate the introduction of new and intuitive creative-critical methodologies. For example, while exploring “how calls for a different mode of embodied knowing might work in [archaeological] practice”, Josie Gill, Catriona McKenzie, and Emma Lightfoot ran a series of workshops placing archaeological scientists and creative writers in a collaborative setting (2019: 26). The workshops, which asked both scientist and writer to consider the methods via which they might come to “understand the inner lives of enslaved Africans”, prompted the creative writers to consider “whether they could or should reconcile the knowledge derived from archaeological science – as information and as method – with their own craft” (Gill, McKenzie, and Lightfoot, 2019: 22; 31). One of the poems that emerged from these workshops, “How I Feel”, by Valda Jackson (see Gill, McKenzie, and Lightfoot, 2019: 31-32) describes the moment she handles a person’s remains. The bones, as Gill, McKenzie, and Lightfoot describe, are presented in boxes labelled

“handle with care”, but the poem “suggests that real care for these bones involves something more – a care for subjectivity” (2019: 33). By this account, literary archaeology presents a means to think not simply of the material and materiality of an object, but of the other kinds of thinking and feeling that transpire at the moment of touch shared between that which is handled and its handler.

If literary archaeology is a methodology qualified by a responsibility of care, then, I argue, it has the potential to begin unravelling not just the stories and subjectivities of particular objects and histories, but also the epistemologies, the institutions, and the archives that have told particular versions of those stories, and occluded others. As Sven Ouzman argues that “[a]rchaeology’s two strengths, materiality and context, can productively expose significant ruptures in master narratives through archaeologies of archive that ask how objects come to be collected and displayed (or not) and at what cost” (2006: 169-70), the literary mediations considered within this article seek out not only hidden histories, but the institutions and archives that have elided them from canonicity. By reading the archive — by turning our attention to the physical space of the museum within which it is displayed, and by recognizing the political, economic, and cultural space of the museum as institution — *literary archaeology* does more than mediate: it excavates the histories *and* presents that continue to bear upon objects as live events.

In thinking about objects as live events — as perpetually moving in time, and not part of some distant or remote past — I find Daljit Nagra’s consideration of the relationship between *root* and *route* to be particularly useful. In an interview with Nagra

about his 2017 collection *British Museum*, Andrew Green notes that the word “root”, and various others belonging to its family, such as “rootless” and “uproot”, frequently emerge throughout the series of poems (2020: 13–14). Nagra responds to this observation that alongside such terms there is “also R-O-U-T-E” (qtd. in Green, 2020: 14). He notes: “That homophone is quite powerful [...] because I feel that everything is constantly on the move and that I’m capturing people in transition, whether it be from India to Britain or a transition within British identity itself” (qtd. in Green 2020: 14). Here, Nagra draws on how histories, and the people and objects caught within the thrall of time, are in motion — on the move; in transition.

This transitional vision of routes recalls Édouard Glissant’s account of roots as rhizomatic, as “an enmeshed root system, a network’ that is precipitated on movement, and which ‘maintains [...] the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root” (2021: 11). As Glissant critiques the notion of “roots” that are fixed, so too does Nagra argue that “where roots are idealized and institutionalized to the extent that they can never be challenged: that’s a problem” (qtd. in Green, 2020: 14). Roots and/as routes are, then, far from static. Following this, if the museum is understood to create an illusion of stasis — of objects and histories that are rooted, resolutely, in the past — then this is, as Nagra infers, cause for concern. James Clifford describes museums as typically instituted and “rooted in specific metropolitan centres”, in cities which are, “themselves the products of powerful cultures and histories” (1997: 144). Such centres, Clifford observes, assume a periphery (1997: 193) — the stories that circulate around the collections housed within these institutions decentred; the routes along which these

objects travel obfuscated. In the face of this, I argue that *literary archaeology* represents a means to challenge the imposition of stasis, to trace both the roots and routes via which an object has come to be in a particular place, and where it might go next.

It is, then, perhaps no coincidence that one of the poem's that emerged from Evaristo's residency at the Museum of London is named "Routes" (2000). The poem, which draws its inspiration from the "London Bodies" exhibition at the museum, muses upon the first inhabitants of Britain (Evaristo, n. d.), proclaiming "Welcome | first citizen" as the poem charts the "vibration | of polar sheets" and "tropical and glacier cycles" (Evaristo, 2000). Addressing these migrators, the poem observes "your long trek north, from below | the Sahara, circling a camp fire by the Thames", yet "unaware that you are dislocating | from France as you eat, that the Channel is rising" (Evaristo, 2000). The routes charted by Evaristo here are made not just by people but by the very land itself, as polar sheets and gulf streams move to form the territories, rivers, and straits that we, today, give names to and use to demarcate borders — the Thames, the Channel. The poem's line breaks frequently occur at points of transition or movement — "vibration", "burying", "diverting", "welcome", "dislocating", "rising" — affecting a sense of momentum converse to the slow, almost sedentary, pace often adopted when taking a long historical view. There is, in Evaristo's poem, perhaps a tentative celebration of the *routes* travelled before people have come to be *rooted* as citizens of any one particular place. This account of history in the course of the poem — which we might read here as a literary archaeology — seeks to excavate a history *of movement*.

Evaristo, of Nigerian and English parentage, whose father arrived in the UK on the “Good Ship Empire” in 1949, presents in much of her literary oeuvre a nuanced exploration of belonging and identity, often pertaining to contexts of migration and race. This is evident in her poem “Routes” as well as in her much longer works including that of *The Emperor’s Babe*, from which we can trace roots and routes of Britain’s migratory history. *The Emperor’s Babe* follows the character of Zuleika, a second-generation migrant, whose parents come from Nubia, and who grows up in Londinium in around 200AD. While Evaristo sets her novel-in-verse in the historic London of Roman times, the text carries, as she describes it, “a very contemporary sensibility” (qtd. in Hooper, 2006: 9), with modern-day allusions to “custom-made” sedans, “Armani” togas, and “Gucci” dresses (Evaristo, 2020: 91; 170; 207). This hybrid Londinium/London also comes through the mix of “Latin, Italian, Cockney-rhyming slang, patois, American slang, [and] pidgin Scots-Latin” (Evaristo, qtd. in McCarthy, 2003) that features throughout the text. Evaristo depicts Londinium as a multicultural city, as a city built and inhabited by migrants, and in doing so, she speaks both to a quietly hidden history about migration in Britain, as well as to cultural, political, and economic contexts of class and race in contemporary London.

We read, over the course of *The Emperor’s Babe*, of the journey — the *route* — of Zuleika’s parents, first from Meroe, to Khartoum after some kind of natural and political disaster sees them displaced; avoiding Rome, which is “too congested”, to instead seek out Londinium, “way out in the wild west”, as a promised provincial land for work and coin, where “a man could make millions of denarii” (Evaristo, 2020: 125-

26). This journey, charted out some millennia ago, resonates with recent historical and present day stories of both forced and economic migration. As the characters of *The Emperor's Babe* become embroiled in the political, cultural, and economic affairs of the Roman Empire, Evaristo brings to light how Britain's history of migration is not, as many would see it, *a recent history*.

As literary archaeology, Evaristo's novel works to unearth a history of London that is not commonly known and offers up different *roots* and *routes* of British culture. As a port city, Evaristo contends, Londinium would have been multicultural, "peopled by people from the Roman Empire" (qtd. in McCarthy, 2003). As Evaristo argues that, "in one sense, *The Emperor's Babe* is a dig at those Brits who still harbour ridiculous notions of 'racial' purity and the glory days of Britain as an all-white nation", she reminds her readers that Britain — that London — has, in fact, been multiracial for centuries (qtd. in McCarthy, 2003). What Evaristo does with this text, as literary archaeology, is not simply challenge the reading of a particular kind of British citizenship and history, but reminds us that a history of race, a history of our nation's roots/routes does not begin with the British Empire, but much earlier. In thinking about how museums might uphold or, otherwise, challenge colonial legacies, it is equally important to consider those migrations and movements that far precede this time period, and the influence this has had — and continues to have — on our culture today.

**Storying history in the museum: Inua Ellams' *Tusk*, entropy, and affect**

While Evaristo's poetic interventions chart histories of migration that precede the British Empire, Inua Ellams' poem, *Tusk* (2019) closely follows the violent sacking of Benin, during Britain's punitive colonial expedition in February 1897. The poem, which was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival and the Manchester Museum, is about an object — a tusk that was looted from Benin and which is now on display at the Manchester Museum. Such an act of literary archaeology recalls but also, I argue, exceeds, the practice of object biography, a methodology used in the fields of both anthropology and museology. Hicks is critical of object biographies, which serve to “overstat[e] the stability and coherence of things as they move between contexts” (2021: 26). The fixity imbued by the cultural biographies of objects, Hicks argues, exacerbates “persistent colonial inequalities” by mitigating and facilitating the continued dispossession of looted objects and, in so doing, “stifle[s] any discussion of enduring colonial violence [and] hold[s] back dialogue and action on cultural restitution” (2021: 26). Object biographies fix an object in space and time, often chronicling a sanitized or simplified story of an object *before* its arrival at a museum, with its arrival presented as the story's conclusion.

While Hicks' presents restitution and reparation as *the* overwhelmingly most important intent of decolonial and anti-colonial work within the space of the museum, he also contends that it is the urgent task of museums “to use their status as unique public spaces and indexes of enduring colonial histories to change the stories that we tell ourselves about the British Empire” (Hicks, 2021: 35). Contrary to object biographies — the labels and notations displayed alongside objects, or presented in

brochures — I contend that literary archaeologies have the capacity to tell those stories that might otherwise have been elided within the space of the museum; to speak about the where and when of the object, both in its past, *and* in the present day, capturing its continued movement in space and time. *Tusk*, which was commissioned by the Manchester Museum, and performed at its Living Worlds Gallery by Ellams on Friday 15 November 2019, creates a story both within and about the archival, public, and performative spaces of the museum.

Born in Nigeria in 1984, Inua Ellams is a UK-based poet and playwright. In his footnote to *Tusk*, he notes how his father was “born in Edo State, which is where Benin City was located” and that writing this poem enabled him to “explore this part of my world, of my heritage, my father’s ancestors, and the cultural riches that were stolen from them” (Ellams, 2019: 9). Ellams’ poetic intervention, with each stanza documenting a particular year, beginning in 1840 and finishing in 1914, offers a literary archaeology of how a tusk from Benin enters the British Empire, and the continuing machinations and repercussions of colonialism. As literary archaeology, *Tusk* is as much a contribution to the biography of the British Empire as it is about the eponymous object, tracing the migratory roots and routes that have been enforced by colonial violence, and continue to endure.

The poem charts the travails of British soldiers, from India to Nigeria, and along the Benin River. Ellams gives an account of 1884, “the year the British Empire sunk thirty thousand troops into Africa” (2019: 4). The poem, which uses slashes in lieu of line breaks, evokes a vision of colonialism as engorgement — as though the Empire



*sinks its teeth* into the continent, “clawing for its land / thirsty for its rivers / famished for its flesh” (Ellams, 2019: 4). The act of looting — a negative but relatively clean and clinical term — is, in Ellams language, one of abject devourment. As the soldiers move through Africa, the poem comments: “Whether or not the British soldiers danced in their blood is unconfirmed / but what I know is bloody bootprints were found / down river / inland” (Ellams, 2019: 4). Here, Ellams makes no claims to what is unconfirmed, but presents an evidence-based claim — that “bloody bootprints were found” — to gesture to the routes taken by the empire, “down river / inland”, and the violence that followed down this path. Here, the poem marries the language of scientific, archaeological investigation with a literary mediation of events, in its telling of history.

Following the sacking of Benin City in 1897, Ellams narrates that 1898 is “the year the tusk entered the Empire” (2019: 7). Here, the poem focuses on a British soldier. Upon entering the throne room, the spirits of Benin’s past kings “sized up his soul and found its honour lacking / that this shamed him / that he shamed himself” (Ellams, 2019: 7). Touching the carvings inscribed onto the elephant tusk, the poem recounts how the soldier “sensed a century of history beneath his fingers”, and in what follows, the soldier drags his plunder:

that he could not bear its weight to the ship / or from the ship to the shore / or  
from the shore to his home / so dragged it again / through the streets of Salford  
and Manchester / with fragments of ivory / breaking against the cobbled stones /  
splintering into snow

(2019: 7)

The poem affects shame upon the soldier and, we might argue, the reader and/or audience. Initially performed by Ellams *in* the Manchester Museum, those in attendance, occupying that same space as the tusk, might begin to recognize the brutality and immorality of its journey across the sea, as well as its continued presence behind the display glass. Its mode of arrival at Salford Docks serves as a reminder of the port's centrality to the city of Manchester, whose wealth and successful textile industry, greatly benefitted from colonial commerce and the cotton trade borne from slave labour in the Americas. The soldier quite literally *feels* the weight of the tusk's history, sensing it beneath his fingers as he touches the figures and inscriptions carved upon it. The poetic medium evokes an affective response that allows the reader to feel the story, no longer abstract, as the tusk, weighed down by its history in Benin, and weighed down by the shame wrought by colonialism, must be dragged, first to the ship, then from the ship through Salford and Manchester. As it is dragged, the ivory, upon which the tusk's story is etched, breaks and splinters upon the surface of the street, a recognizable metaphor for colonialism and, in this specific case, the punitive expedition to and violent exploitation of Benin, which fractures and elides others' stories and histories.

Ellams' poem represents an inscription of sorts, a recognition and continuation of this tusk's history, which does not stop with its arrival in Manchester. This biography of the object does not stop upon its entry into the museum's archive, and the poem elucidates how the institution of the museum operates as a mechanism of the empire, as imperial loot is kept, "to trade / to display / in Monday meeting rooms / to bury in cellars", as they are "dissected / mishandled / misrepresented / mislabelled / misused /

misremembered and forgotten” (2019: 8). The repeated slashes that serve as Ellams’ line breaks reinforce the sense of fragmentation and rupture experienced by these stolen objects. Reading Ellams’ poem as literary archaeology, he speaks not just to how the tusk came to arrive in Britain — or in the British Empire — but also the motions it was subjected to once it arrived — where and how it was documented, archived, displayed, and (mis)labelled. Ellams’ archaeological endeavours extend beyond the object in question — and the weight of its history, even before the arrival of British Empire — to also tell a story of the enduring physical and epistemological violence of colonialism, to which the institution of the museum contributes. And yet, in the final stanza of the poem, set in 1914, as Benin City is rebuilt under the watchful eyes of the British Empire, who have lined Africa’s “borders in blood / had formed Nigeria”, Ellams ends his poem with a warning that for even the most powerful of empires, “time would consume them all” (2019: 9). Inasmuch as the museum attempts to imbue a sense of stasis, Ellams concludes his poem with the warning that we are all subject to the ravages of time. The longer we hold out — to keep still, to grip a particular vision of history — the more catastrophic the consequential entropy.

Ellams’ poem, as a piece commissioned by and performed within the Manchester Museum, contributes to the object’s continuing biography. With both its content and performance, the poem situates the tusk within the historical and contemporaneous space and time of the museum. The emphasis placed on conservation and exhibition by museums sees “the separation of objects and humans [...] become steadily more elaborate and bureaucratized” leading to an increased sensory isolation of

objects that are viewed through glass walls and which cannot be touched without the wearing of gloves (Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips, 2006a: 20). This sensory deprivation operates as one of many apparatuses that strives to set the object in stasis — set outside of its own context, constructed, or constituted, within the institution of the museum. The museum’s role as mediator, however, is not neutral; objects displayed or stored by museums are, as Hicks argues, “a live event” (2021: 15). Ellams’ performance of *Tusk* embodies this “live event”, and renders the tusk affectively.

Viv Golding’s exploration of poetics within the space of museum helps to illuminate the generative potential of literary archaeology in not only *telling* histories, but helping us to apprehend and *feel* them in an environment that covets stasis. Golding utilizes feminist pedagogy in her reading of the *Uncomfortable Truths* installation at the V&A in 2007, and extended programming at the Horniman, also in London, to consider what potential there is for poetics to “tackle the ways in which colonial histories linger in the present”, as well as to possibly “positively impact on our futures” (2013: 81). The *Uncomfortable Truths* installation was composed of work produced by eleven international artists, displayed in galleries throughout the V&A, as part of a series of events responding to the bi-centenary of the parliamentary abolition of the British slave trade, and which refused “unthinking sentimentality, unilateral outlooks or easy conclusions” (Whitley, n. d.). In developing her analysis, Golding draws on the pedagogy and praxis of poet and civil rights activist, Audre Lorde, specifically her essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury”, and the affective capacity for poetry to “give name to those ideas which are [...] nameless and formless [...] but already felt” (Lorde, 2017: 7; see

Golding, 2013: 95). Lorde’s account of poetry, or poetics, as something that can imbue feeling asks curators and visitors of the museum, as well as readers or listeners of poetry written in, about, and presented via the museum, to co-operatively and collaboratively engage in the “physical, emotional and intellectual labour” required, as Golding puts it, to “reflect [up]on the ethics of colonial encounters, the stories we tell about self and others, and to relate this to our lived experiences today and in the global future” (2013: 97). The evocation of this labour, by poet, artist, curator, and visitor is underpinned by a responsibility of care — “a care for the feeling, emotion, and connection evoked” by those objects and subjectivities that reside within the museum (Gill, McKenzie, and Lightfoot, 2019: 33). This model of affective poetics asks us to attend to both past and future — to recognize the histories of those objects displayed within the museum, and their affective resonances in the present day.

The act of visiting a museum is a colonial encounter — a “live event” (Hicks, 2021: 15); a “lived experience” (Golding, 2013: 97) — which takes place in present time. There is, in Ellams’ poem, as it is performed within the museum, a bid to affect not just the reader, but the visitor, and in so doing, the poem is as much about the institution of the museum as it is the object contained therein. Reckoning with museum objects as being in motion — as unfinished, ongoing events — the practice of literary archaeology must speak to both their histories *and* their presents if there is any chance of reaching that hopeful future goal of cultural restitution.

**Mediating the museum: A public place, a place of protest, a meeting place**

Integral to literary archaeologies, as Ellams' poem illustrates, is not just the historical account of a period in time, or the origin of any particular object, but also the necessity of recognising how the museum (as institution) and, in particular, British museums (as *national* institutions) are complicit in the stories that are told, or not told, about the colonial past and present-day imperial modalities. Taking up Daljit Nagra's collection, *British Museum* (2017), and, in particular, "Mediations on the British Museum" as a literary archaeology of the museum itself, this final section of the article explores in greater depth the institution of the museum as a place of colonial encounter.

Museums are public places which invite visitors to travel through their halls, to explore exhibitions, and to look at displays. As visitors enter into museums, with their "bodies and biographies", Hicks wonders: "Does some small trace of such visits even remain for future visitors, building up in the gallery space?" (2021: 230-31). Museums are not static. The routes via which objects arrive at museums, and are moved between displays and exhibitions, and the routes that are taken by visitors down well-trodden halls, aisles, and atriums produce a myriad of histories and present-day stories that persistently affect our apprehension of these cultural institutions. What kinds of encounter — both inimical and generative — might take place within their walls?

Daljit Nagra is a British Asian poet, whose work frequently contends with contexts of migration and the diaspora, and the linguistic and cultural translations that emerge from these. His most recent collection, *British Museum*, looks at various cultural institutions in Britain, including the "Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge" (2019: 25), "The Poetry Library at Southbank Centre" (46), and, as the title

of the collection implies, *the British Museum* (48–53). Attending to these cultural storehouses, Nagra’s collection challenges the reader to think “of Britain and Britishness and the ways in which such views are institutionalized” (Green 2020: 3), as well as to consider poetry’s own relationship to the British nation and its institutions.

Formal residencies and commissions represent moments of encounter between poet and institution, which can, as Evaristo’s and Ellams’ poetry illustrate, present alternative creative-critical methodologies for apprehending history and culture. These poetic interventions are not required to show their institutional sponsors in a forgiving light, but their affiliation to these cultural storehouses remains an ambivalent one. Such residencies and commissions see poets entrenched in what Sarah Brouillette identifies as “creative-economy” (2014: 2). Where income and opportunities are sourced by arts funding, poets must negotiate with the neo-liberal expectations of policy-makers and funders, whose diversifying agenda remains underpinned by the tenets of consumer capitalism and gentrification (Brouillette 2014: 132; 157). Museums, even those that provide free admission, are sustained by cultural capitalism — via corporate partnerships, council grants, and charitable donations.

Writing against this cultural, political, and economic backdrop, “cultural workers confront with unease their lack of substantive independence and their incorporation into creative-economy projects and vocabularies” (Brouillette, 2014: 205). Nagra voices this unease in his poem “The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge”, where he recounts his first day as poet-in-resident at the eponymous museum. The poem opens:

I am held apologetically in a seminar room.

This the dawn of my days as a poet-in-residence

who has been commissioned to produce a poem.

(2019: 25)

In its opening lines, the short poem captures the ambivalent politics of these formal residencies. The description of how Nagra is “held” in the seminar room carries with it a sense of stasis — of suspension — which correlates with that “illusion of stoppage” (Hicks, 2021: 15) that permeates the museum space. That this scene unfolds in a seminar room — separated off from the museum’s galleries and atriums — accentuates this sense of limbo that is both temporal and spatial. Yet the seminar room, much like the “Monday meeting rooms” cited in Ellams’ *Tusk* (2019: 8), is not neutral territory. Instead, it serves as a reminder of the functional, corporatized spaces and routes “behind-the-scenes” where decisions on the organisation and presentation of the museum’s exhibitions, partnerships, and events are made. Here, the poet-in-residence, in situ, is “held apologetically”, in much the same way as museums, today, hold objects — with a sentiment of regret, quietly voiced, so as not to draw too much attention.

Nagra is attuned to this neo-liberal, neo-imperial fuelled creative-economy, however. Placatingly “furnishe[d]” with an apple strudel slice, he notes: “Yesterday, my slice was one of many settled before | the prime minister of Fiji visiting his island’s wares” (2019: 25). The fraught politics of museum ownership are clearly displayed as Fiji’s prime minister is cast as “visitor” to this Cambridgeshire museum, within which his island’s cultural heritage is “held”. As the same “slice of the sweetest English



apples” that wins over the prime minister is presented, also, to Nagra (25), we get the sense that he is also in need of winning over — that the poem that has been commissioned represents as much risk as reward to the museum’s creative-economy. Nagra is a writer, as Brouillette argues, who, “while partaking in the same cultural moment, focus[es] their inquiry on the practice of making culture itself” (2014: 9). By choosing to linger in that seminar room, rather than make the subject of his poem one of the museum’s galleries or objects, Nagra interrogates the relationship between institution and poet, and illustrates how poetry — at the interstices of stasis and movement — can challenge the spaces it inhabits, even as it negotiates with it.

Critiquing the idealization and institutionalization of roots — national or otherwise — Nagra presents in his poetry the transitional routes and ambivalent, “dynamic shifting of Britishness” (qtd. in Green, 2020: 14). As literary archaeology, “Mediations on the British Museum” presents the eponymous museum as storied; its relationship with colonial histories and imperial presents continually affected by the moments of encounter and meetings that take place amongst its public halls.

Throughout the poem, Nagra elucidates the uncomfortable positioning of the British Museum as a national museum and, at the same time, a museum born of the British Empire. Written across stanzas, Nagra writes of “A museum as nation, || a fragment of varnished Britannica” (2019: 50). The break in this line, across stanzas, does its own metaphoric work, a fracture or fragment at odds with the vision of pax Britannica, that period of the apparently peaceful or peaceable British Empire that reigned in the 1800s. A “varnished” or (if we mis-read) a vanished nostalgic past of an

imperial nation is viewed via rose-tinted glasses, or, as Nagra later describes “that rose through the oculus” (2019: 53). In both political and cultural discourse, colonial history is, as Paul Gilroy notes, often “overlooked” and “sanitized” (2004: 52), in spite of and, in so doing, contributing to persisting colonial modalities. This sanitized — rose-tinted — vision of colonial history works as part of what Gilroy calls “postimperial melancholia”, a denial of past atrocities based on discomfort, guilt, and shame which both perpetuates and excuses continuing racial discrimination and imperialism (2004: 98). Museums, as cultural institutions, and *the* British Museum, as a storehouse of British national — and imperial — culture, sit awkwardly as preservers of history, whose own actions in history and in the present are defined by colonialism. Nagra voices his ambivalence over the role of British museums today, noting that “[i]n the past Britain was guilty of appropriating things, but Britons are also incredible preservers”, something he finds “increasingly important” in light of events such as the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 2001 (qtd. in Green, 2020: 15). In spite of Nagra’s uneasy pragmatism, however, it is worth remembering that the destruction of cultural wealth is, as in the case of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, often a consequence of violence and political instability which either directly or indirectly results from colonial machinations. “Postimperial melancholia”, as Gilroy defines it, is, as the “post” suggests, often ignorant of colonialism’s pervading presence *in the present*.

Nagra’s rendition of the British Museum ponders these slippages between past and present colonial encounters, at an institution that, at one and the same time, exhibits

imperial power and marks out its territory as a neo-liberal, public place. A particular passage observes:

[...] My gilded masters who sat to model compassion  
that rose through the oculus, who'd say now, which sanctioned invader leaves  
each trove unguarded while it enshrines another oil giant?

(2019: 53)

A provocative dialectic presents itself, here, between a colonial past — as seen through rose-tinted glasses — and the agenda of neo-imperial *and* neo-liberal powers today.

While Britain's colonist forebears model compassion and merit preservation — however sanitized this vision of “varnished” history may seem — Nagra's poem criticizes contemporary imperial, economic exploitation that is ignorant of a country's cultural value, in favour of lucrative deals struck with oil and petroleum companies.

Yet, both the “gilded masters” of historical colonialism and the “sanctioned invader” of present-day imperialism are culpable for the appropriation of wealth and resources — whether these are “troves” of cultural treasures or oil exports. The slippage between past and present colonial encounters in this stanza is further felt when we take into account the corporate partnership shared between the British Museum and the oil giant BP (British Petroleum), since 2002 (Hicks, 2021: 207). The British Museum might preserve the cultural treasures displayed within its walls, hallmarks of a colonial past, but it does so in financial partnership with a company which represents a neo-imperial and neo-liberal corporation.

The partnership between the British Museum and BP has spurred public protest: in February 2020, climate activists BP Or Not BP? staged a 3-day occupation of the museum, protesting its financial ties with the oil corporation. The occupation of the British Museum was made possible by the institution's status as a public place, especially as a site that provides free admission for visitors. This museum, as public place, can, therefore, also be a place of protest. While the BP Or Not BP? occupation illustrates a familiar mode of protest, this article also poses that creative intervention within the space of the museum — even those commissioned by museums — can facilitate acts of protest. Ellams' writing and performing of *Tusk*, as well as the *Uncomfortable Truths* installation at the V&A, discussed previously, are examples of affective poetics, which illuminate and prompt meaningful reflexive thinking and feeling on how the act of visiting a museum is one of colonial encounter, not just with history, but also in present time. Occupations, poetry performances, and art installations are not only sites of protest, but also meeting places, inviting not just examples of colonial encounters, but also productive, affecting, and generative exchange and community building.

This article has been concerned with the rhizomatic roots and routes of objects and object histories displayed within the institution of the museum. Roots and/as routes are, I have argued, far from static, and Nagra has expressed concern for cases where roots — as they pertain to identity — become entrenched, “idealized and institutionalized” (qtd. in Green, 2020: 14). It is, perhaps, unsurprising, then, that his poem “Mediations on the British Museum”, is transitory in its musings. It is a poem

conscious of the migratory histories — both object and human — that actively construct the museum: a “show of travels abroad” (Nagra, 2019: 49); to recall “Rhodes plotting red lines” along the African coast (50); as curators and visitors “go soft | about these rooms” (50-1); with histories of “precious cargo | of slave and migrant being run overboard” occluded (53). There is, throughout this literary mediation, a vision of the museum as something built of migrations past and present, of the museum as contingent on not just movements to and from the museum, but also within its walls. These movements give way to colonial encounters, but *also* generative meetings.

Museums, as public spaces, as sites of protest, as meeting places, perhaps, also have the potentiality to facilitate encounters amongst intersecting diasporic histories and communities.<sup>4</sup> As Nagra’s poem closes, it reads: “We’re at home, albeit lost, while roaming among our kind | in Cuerdale, Yarlung, Shang, Ashanti, Aulong, Kush, Thule, Ur” (2019: 53). These final two lines illustrate the ambivalences that weave their way throughout the poem — of objects both “at home”, and yet also “lost”; “at home” while also moving, “roaming” amongst those who have followed different routes, from distant roots, with a shared history and continuing story of colonial encounter. The stories of these objects, from Yarlung, Aulong, Kush, and places alike, are unfinished — they encounter visitors and each other, perhaps productively, generatively, writing new chapters, unfurling while still in motion, in transition, awaiting restitution.

Literary archaeologies — poetic mediations that intersect with history, object, and institution, and which tell affective and affecting stories for readers and visitors alike — allow us to trace the movement, of both roots and routes, that is so fundamental

to museums and their colonial histories, which continue in perpetuity. This article has analysed selected poems by contemporary Black and Asian British poets which foreground museums and, more specifically, British museums, tracing colonial encounters both past and present that take place within their walls. Evoking both spatial and temporal movement, Evaristo's, Ellams', and Nagra's poems respond to the museum as an institution that is as unfixed, ambivalent, and transitional. These poetic interventions highlight that what is read as history — as being in a state of stasis — is, in fact, still in motion, and affects, and is affected by, the present moment; by encounters amongst visitors, listeners, protesters, and diasporic communities. The institution of the museum, these poems would contend, is a meeting place, with all the complexity and potentiality that entails. In the storying of these meetings in verse, poetry has the capacity to excavate and illuminate imperial histories in productive, affective ways, and to contribute to the continuing archive of cultural objects exhibited within museums, a part of their, as yet, unfinished history.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Edwards E, Gosden C and Phillips RB (eds) (2006b) *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic; Atalay S (ed) (2006b) Special Issue: Decolonizing Archaeology. *American Indian Quarterly* 30(3/4); and, more recently, Hicks D (2021) *The British Museum: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. 2020. London: Pluto Press.

<sup>2</sup> Some examples of recent cultural and political discourse on the relationship between museums and colonialism include the oft-cited museum scene from Marvel Studio's superhero film, *Black Panther* (2018) and the recent introduction of a new all-party parliamentary group on African reparations in the UK (see Hickley 19 November 2021).

<sup>3</sup> The term "literary archaeology" circulates amongst Black feminist approaches to the literature and histories of transatlantic slavery (see Sharpe 2003; Gill, McKenzie, and Lightfoot 2019). In her account of narrating Black histories, Toni Morrison describes the process of literary archaeology as an "imaginative act", to reconstruct a world from those remains that have been left behind (1995: 92). In doing so, Morrison seeks to "yield up a kind of truth" (1995: 92). Evaristo's literary narratives on Britain's migratory history are similarly constructed. Describing *Lara* (1997), she states: "In one sense the skeleton of the story is based on fact [...] but the flesh is imagination" (qtd. in Hooper, 2006: 4).

<sup>4</sup> The underpinning argument of this concluding analysis, which posits museums as potential meeting places for intersecting diasporas, was developed following the Q&A session that succeeded the presentation of an earlier draft of this work as part of the Kent Postcolonial Seminar Series on 28 October 2021. I am grateful — and give full credit — to Shelley Angelie Saggar for sharing the idea as part of our discussion, which is introduced in her PhD, examining representations, reclamations, and contestations of the museum in Native North American and Aotearoan/New Zealander film and literature.

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