

To Bludgeon or to Heal? The Influence and Role of Volunteers in Supporting Decolonisation within the Horniman Museum's *Chá, Chai, Tea* Exhibition

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Abstract

Post-2020, museums are increasingly coming to terms with their colonial pasts and are dedicating themselves to becoming spaces where visitors can encounter critical histories of Empire. However, there has been a lack of academic focus related to how public facing or 'live interpreter' volunteers are strategically utilised to support the delivery of museum decolonisation, as well as the implications this has for volunteering. Drawing upon semi-structured interviews and participant observation, this paper examines the experiences of Engage volunteers at the Horniman Museum in supporting the delivery of the decolonising *Chá, Chai, Tea* exhibition, and explores the extent to which these experiences align with top-down institutional aspirations. Findings suggest that whilst Engage volunteers are supportive of the decolonising emphasis of *Chá, Chai, Tea*, they are equally frustrated by institutional frameworks that hampers their live interpretation and subsequent contribution to the Horniman's decolonisation process.

Keywords: Volunteers, Volunteering, Live Interpretation, Decolonisation, Museums

Introduction

On the 26th July 2021, the Horniman announced the launch of their new Reset Agenda. This corporate plan was developed as a direct response to the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests, as well as the widespread impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this plan the museum proposed seven priorities that would shape the institution's future practice:

1. Engage wider audiences through programming and communications
2. Diversify staff and volunteers
3. Consult people and work in partnership
4. Address the history of the Horniman business and institutional collecting
5. Enhance our digital provision
6. Make the Horniman greenhouse gas neutral and more biodiverse
7. Maximise income generation to support this agenda.¹

Therefore, the organisation recognised that since the 'Horniman itself has its roots in British Empire and colonialism, from the family wealth generated by the tea trade, to the acquisition of much of the collection through colonial connections', there was a moral prerogative to redress these wounds.²

With reference to coming to terms with their colonial past, the Horniman in 2022 not only returned ownership of 72 Benin Bronzes that were in their possession to the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments, but also commissioned, co-produced, and opened the exhibition *Chá, Chai, Tea*. The aim of this exhibition was to provide visitors with an awareness of the global significance of tea, the varying socio-cultural contexts in

which the beverage was and is consumed, as well as problematize Frederick Horniman and Horniman Tea more widely.³ Whilst this top-down intent was in place, limited consideration was given as to how it might impact volunteers and volunteering. As noted by Sarah Brenner (2020) and Emily Clare (2022), volunteers demonstrate a strong willingness to support their organisation's decolonising initiatives, however this necessitates clear and transparent communication of why this process is happening, alongside empowering volunteers to take ownership of their practice in a way that they perceive as meaningful. As a result, the delivery of decolonising discourses intersects with the actualities of volunteer practice, especially in terms of how volunteers decide to shape their practice. Therefore, when applied to the case of the Horniman, this raises two further questions when thinking about their volunteers and volunteering: 'how do volunteers feel about the *Chá, Chai, Tea*?' and 'in what ways are they able to support the delivery of the top-down aspirations of the exhibition?'

Engage volunteers are an important stakeholder group at the organisation since they operate as 'live interpreters' (see definition below), responsible for facilitating visitors' engagement and learning with the Horniman's permanent galleries and temporary exhibitions (such as *Chá, Chai, Tea*). As of March 2023, there were 140 volunteers at the Horniman, 66 of whom were Engage volunteers. These volunteers thus represent a significant part of the public facing operation of the museum.⁴

Theoretical Background

One way through which museums and heritage institutions have tried to come to terms with their colonial pasts and contemporary legacies is through the idea of the 'contact zone'. First introduced by Mary Louise Pratt (1991: 34; 1992) - and later adopted by James Clifford (1997) - the contact zone refers to 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.' In this vein, the contact zone was expected to act as a space to facilitate forms of trans-cultural dialogue and exchange whereby various meanings concerning specific objects and histories are negotiated. As described by Ruth Phillips (2005), the ultimate aim as part of this inter-cultural dialogue was to enable the breaking down of binaries between the former coloniser and the formerly colonised since as Pratt (1991: 35) describes 'members of subordinated groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture' as a means of disrupting essentialised, inaccurate, and hegemonic representations of their cultural heritage. Institutions then sought to move beyond the singular voice of the 'expert' towards a plurality of narratives regarding the display and interpretation of material culture and corresponding subjects (Clifford 1997).

However, the reframing of the museum as a contact zone has been problematized due to its role in perpetuating neo-colonial collaboration. Tony Bennett (1998: 212) states that the 'cross-cultural dialogue' afforded as part of engaging with formerly subjugated communities reinforce the asymmetrical power relations between the museum and source communities, thereby, leading Robin Boast (2011: 67) to describe them as 'asymmetric spaces of appropriation', and Anthony Shelton (2003: 184) to state how resulting representations are made 'through voices of their foreign interpreters'. More specifically, Boast (2011: 66) describes how forms of 'clinical collaboration' emerge as part of the contact zone since it is designed from the outset to appropriate the resources necessary for the museum in order to reaffirm their own relevance as well as their right to maintain their colonial collections, whilst also silencing those voices that are not deemed as relevant. For example, Bruno Brulon Soares (2023) describes that requiring the knowledges, lived experiences, and narratives provided by collaborators to be validated by the 'expert', or the curator, entails a form of scientific paternalism that is codified as 'co-curation' or 'collaboration'. Therefore, the utilisation of a contact zone and engagement with collaborators within in it can result in exploitative and tokenistic interactions, as well as operating as a tool for governing indigenous groups and source communities by assimilating them to support the museum's intent.

Based on the problems of utilising contact zones, Brulon Soares (2023: 3) states that any sort of museum decolonisation should be primarily concerned, not with destroying

the museum or re-colonising its contents, but rather be oriented towards disrupting and deconstructing the workings of coloniality with the aim of enabling subaltern groups to reconstruct, redistribute, and reshape the museum as a political device for the (re)appropriation of their cultural heritage. Consequently, Brulon Soares (2023: 6) states that 'deconstructing, reconstructing and redistributing' museums and other heritage institutions should be concerned with rehumanising people Mbembe, 2003; 2015) by directly interrogating the specific regimes of value and knowledge upon which these institutions rest, and redistributing the museum's authority to those who occupy the periphery so that a new relation emerges between those in power and those who have been/are deprived of it. This can also be viewed as what Walter Mignolo (2018) describes as epistemic decolonisation and reconstitution, which refers to uncovering epistemic silences from the perspectives of those who have been, and are still, racially devalued by the workings of Western modernity, and then reaffirming their epistemic rights and subjectivities so that they become revalued. Based on this, for Brulon Soares (2023: 129) decolonising museums should be grounded within a museology of hope which they describe as:

(...) not being optimistic and narrating a romanticised view of the past. It is more about now that the past is ours to be taken, re-translated and transgressed. It is about remembering our pains and loss, recognising our shared wounds and acknowledging that the wounded also have a voice, no matter how disturbing it may be.

According to Brulon Soares (2023), by doing this museums would fashion themselves into places for and of a 'connectiveness' dedicated to reconfiguring the relationship between coloniser and colonised. This is because museums would directly challenge, not only the binaries and separations they were and are responsible for propagating, but they would also promote ways of practicing and being that are regenerative and focus on what connects us so that shared colonial wounds can be repaired. In other words, museums need to facilitate the examination of shared sensibilities of varying populations according to class, gender, race, sexuality, and other forms of difference, which emerge in conjunction with, and as a response to, colonial dispossession, exploitation, and violence.

So how can this be applied to volunteers? The International Labour Organisation (2011: 13) defines volunteering as unpaid, non-compulsory work; that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organisation or directly for others outside of their houses'. This means it is an activity that is characterised as unpaid labour, being conducted out of free will, conducted for the benefit of others, and associated with NGOs or formal organisations. Itamar Shachar et al. (2019: 252) reject this top-down view of volunteering, since they assert there is a need to directly account for the varying 'discourses, motivations and practices' that comprise of voluntary activity, and so they recommend adopting an agent-centric approach which is geared towards unpicking the 'Black-Box' of volunteering. As part of foregrounding an agentic-centric approach to volunteer practice, Noreen Orr (2006: 197-201) describes how heritage volunteering offers a specific vehicle through which people can 'visit' heritage attractions, develop their own interests, and express commitment to a particular locale. As a result, one can go beyond viewing volunteers and volunteering solely in economic terms, or as a strategic resource that can be used to enhance the visitor experience, but rather as a unique audience who are strategically using and modulating their sustained experience and its boundaries for their own leisure.

This also has implications when applied to volunteers' live interpretation activities and supporting the intent of a museology of hope. Freeman Tilden (1957: 9) describes that interpretation should be viewed as 'an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience and illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.' Based on this, Tilden (1957) states interpretive methods should not simply be used to communicate information, but rather as a vehicle through which concepts revolving around specific philosophies, cosmologies, emotions, and attitudes can be contextualised and unveiled. Tilden's (1957)'s insights led Andrew Robertshaw (2006: 43-45) to define live interpretation as 'any presentation using people whether in a historical environment or not which aims to place artefacts, places, or

events in context against the background of the human environment of the past'. Consequently, volunteers following this form of practice are not simply communicating historical facts, but rather a bundle of key discourses and messages veiled through the content of their live interpretation. Therefore, live interpreter volunteers and their corresponding practice, such as the Engage volunteers at the Horniman, can be viewed as a key conduit through which specific discourses (i.e., the enacting of a museology of hope or dismantling the epistemic binaries between coloniser and colonised) can be actualised.

Methodology

The methodology guiding this paper is George Marcus' (1995) Multi-Sited Ethnography (MSE). MSE follows the processual connections between sites and attempts to reconstruct the systems of relations and trans-local interdependencies that coproduce any particular social settings/phenomena. Marcus (1995) describes six different modes of following: following people; following an object; following the construction and circulation of a metaphor; following a story and the way it influences social memory; following a biography; or following a conflict. Paolo Boccagni (2019) and Mark-Anthony Falzon (2009: 2) emphasise that any fieldwork guided by MSE investigates social issues and cultural formations by following people, connections, associations, objects, and relationships that are mutually interrelated. As a result, Falzon (2009: 2) states that these phenomena are 'substantially continuous but [may] not [be] spatially contiguous' and operate as the embodiment/elicitor of social practices and memories within various temporal and spatial contexts (Boccagni 2019; Falzon 2009). Consequently, adopting this methodological lens enables one to follow the key discourses underpinning the operations of a museology of hope and how they may shape, modulate, and eventually manifest within volunteer practice.

To facilitate this following, the data generated for this paper came from semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I adopted the use of semi-structured interviews to not only mitigate the researcher's partial comprehension of the 'field', but also to provide participants with the ability to move beyond a generalised line of inquiry so that they introduce topics that they deemed as significant (Brinkmann 2018; Hannerz 2010; Kreps 2019). This was compounded by my specific decision to select volunteers who had been at the organisation for at least a year, so that their experiences and practice, as well as how they strategically shape their heritage volunteering, is fore and foremost. Based on this, I conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews with curators, volunteers, and volunteer managers at the Horniman Museum as informed by these selection criteria:

- had been volunteering at the Horniman for at least one year and must still be actively volunteering at least once a month;
- must be interacting with members of various publics as an Engage volunteer;
- and attended trainings related to *Chá, Chai, Tea* or where the Horniman's future decolonisation efforts were discussed.

The topics covered in the interviews with volunteers included:

- their volunteering motivation and place attachment to their site of volunteering;
- their thoughts and perspectives concerning 'decolonisation', or *Chá, Chai, Tea*; and how pursuing such practice may have implications for their volunteering experience and consumption of and identification with the organisation's ideals, policies and practice.⁵

The interviews, which were conducted between September 2022 and December 2023, either took place on-site at the Horniman Museum, or online via MS Teams/Zoom depending on the preferences of my participants.

I built on the data generated during the interviews by utilising active participant observation which focused on my own practice and that of my peers. By being a public facing volunteer, I was able to immerse myself in the social settings in which volunteers operate; become familiar with the ways in which they were expected to and did interact with

various audiences; and capture how themes related to decolonisation and Empire manifested themselves within the everyday volunteering experience (De Walt and De Walt 2011; Geertz 1973; Siegel 2018). My generated fieldnotes contained: a summary of the morning briefing as well as the overall structure of the volunteering shift (e.g., where I am volunteering, who I am volunteering with, and what activity I am conducting); notable conversations and interactions that I had with fellow volunteers and members of various publics related towards Empire; and then concluding reflections and reactions on the shift at the end.

I further utilised secondary sources pertaining to volunteer live interpretation to gauge what the boundaries of their practice are, especially considering its status as 'hard' data (Morse 2018). I consulted volunteer training materials; volunteer code of conducts; as well as volunteer induction materials. These sources fleshed out the discursive terrain in which volunteers are situated and how they are strategically utilised by the Horniman Museum to communicate specific messages to their audiences.

I then undertook two rounds of coding of the data generated from each of these sources via NVivo. My first round of coding was inductively informed, as I wanted to organise the meanings already present in my dataset without any sort of theoretical imposition (Braun and Clarke 2006). From this, key themes emerged regarding volunteer opinions of the decolonial efforts of the Horniman Museum, in the form of *Chá, Chai, Tea*, as well as their perceived role and responsibilities in supporting the exhibition. My second round of coding was deductively informed since it tested my already established codes and categories against already established theories (Clarke and Braun 2017). These theorisations were: the main tenants of Brunlon Soares' (2023) museology of hope, with a specific focus on forming a place for and of connectiveness; Tilden (1957)'s view of live interpretation; and how Engage volunteers may strategically shape their own volunteering practice according to their own needs and wants, as reflected by Orr (2006). Therefore, the data presented within this article, mainly in the form of quotes from volunteers, are reflective of the volunteers' own attitudes as categorised by the common themes formed through my deductive and inductive coding process.

Using these three data sources facilitated a form of triangulation since I was able to combine both forms of soft and hard data which enabled me to cross-reference and test the credibility of the findings. Moreover, this enabled me to engage in forms of member checking which reaffirm the confirmability of the findings since they could be tested and verified by my participants as an accurate and authentic representation of their perspectives and practice (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba 2023).

Prior to any data generation, I received ethical approval from both the UCL Institute of Archaeology and internal approval from the Horniman Museum on the condition of full anonymisation. This means that whilst I can give my interlocutors general pseudonyms, I am not at liberty to provide further context surrounding their positionality (i.e., their racial identity or ethnicity) for the fear that they may be identifiable amongst their own volunteering cohort. As a result, I have provided a generalised person specification that gives some basic details related to the role and responsibilities of each interviewee and how long they have been operating at the Horniman Museum. I applied this anonymisation protocol to all fieldnotes, secondary sources, and transcripts, and gave participants key pseudonyms (e.g., Volunteer C13). Participants were also sent their redacted transcripts to review and provide commentary, and requested changes were made when necessary. Based on the parameters of my ethics clearance, I am not at liberty to provide access to my redacted transcripts and fieldnotes due to my commitment to safeguard the identities of my participants.

Chá, Chai, Tea: Institutional aims and objectives of the exhibition

As part of the Horniman's decolonial practice, they commissioned a temporary exhibition titled 茶, चाय, *Tea (Chá, Chai, Tea)* which aimed to explore the global significance of Tea whilst also interrogating the colonial connections of Frederick Horniman and Horniman Tea. As part of the exhibition, Curatorial Staff C3 explained that there is a need to explore the intersection between the wealth accumulated by the Horniman family via their tea company, and their promotion of Sinophobia and indirect complicity in fuelling the opium epidemic in China at the time of the Opium Wars.⁶ However, whilst some elements of the exhibition are

dedicated to this, C3 did stress that the overall focus is on the various cultural contexts and practices surrounding tea consumption:

...the purpose of the exhibition really is to explore the Horniman's imperial history but tell the story through means which centre the communities that were most impacted by the wider legacy of it, essentially.

Consequently, this positions the exhibition as a space that is actualising forms of epistemic decolonisation and reconstitution by providing interpretation focusing on the historic and contemporary consumption of tea predominantly from South, South-East and East Asian perspectives (Mignolo, 2018).

As part of this, C3 stated that the exhibition is also guided by two concepts: 'resonance' and 'connectedness'. For resonance, the aim of the exhibition is to have visitors experience and interrogate the significance that tea has in the lives of different people, meaning that it is oriented towards foregrounding the relationship that people have with it today:

...we want our visitors to be very clear about actually, the history of tea is not, it's not a history of tea, it's a social lens of tea basically that very much impacts us today and our relationship with it, and it's an interrogation of that.

This is further consolidated by Curatorial Staff C3's emphasis on notions of connectedness. This is because the exhibition seeks to emphasise the commonalities that all peoples share via tea, meaning that the exhibition is geared towards engendering a pluralistic understanding of how people in Britain are connected to various communities:

So, it's about actually, we're all connected through tea, and we want people to feel that connection to other communities that they might not have engaged with, as well. So that's kind of the way, those are the core principles of it.

This then fashions the exhibition space not only into a place for, and of, connectiveness, since visitors are encouraged to contemplate and contest the supposed fixed and oppositional positions of coloniser and colonised, but also a pluralistic space where they are exposed to differing ways of being, knowing, and seeing regarding the use and significance of tea as a beverage, thereby, humanising it.

Chá, Chai, Tea: Volunteer opinions and communicating colonialism

Volunteers were asked how they felt about *Chá, Chai, Tea* to ascertain how their opinions regarding the Horniman's decolonisation efforts may have shaped their practice in the exhibition space.

Volunteer C13 proposed that *Chá, Chai, Tea* represented a significant step for the Horniman in making amends for its colonial past since they were not 'gloss[ing] over' their complicity.⁷ One example they cited was the presence of a letter that was sent by the Chinese Ambassador, Lin Zexu, to Queen Victoria which directly foregrounds how British merchants fuelled the opium epidemic in China as part of their 'strong desire to reap a profit' (see figure 1). For C13, they felt the Horniman's inclusion of this, and the political-economic and societal context in which tea consumption became popular in Great Britain, has 'addressed the mistakes that Britain has made' since the institution was guided by forms of truth-telling and engendering epistemic justice. Consequently, this then speaks to the perception of C13 in viewing the exhibition space as a place for healing and is indicative of the workings of the discourse of resonance as emphasised previously by Curatorial Staff C3.

Volunteer C14 held similar views regarding the necessity of the exhibition since they also viewed the exhibition space as a place for healing, especially since encountering unflattering histories can provide opportunities for dialogue and result in transformative and transgressive outcomes on the part of visitors.⁸ They explained:

Okay, in my opinion, history, even the really dark sides where we don't necessarily want to be faced or confronted with something that our nation has done, or any nation that is, it should never be erased or omitted, or glazed over, because it's

important that we learn from the past where we can, you know, and that then opened up another conversation as to what's going on in the world at the moment.

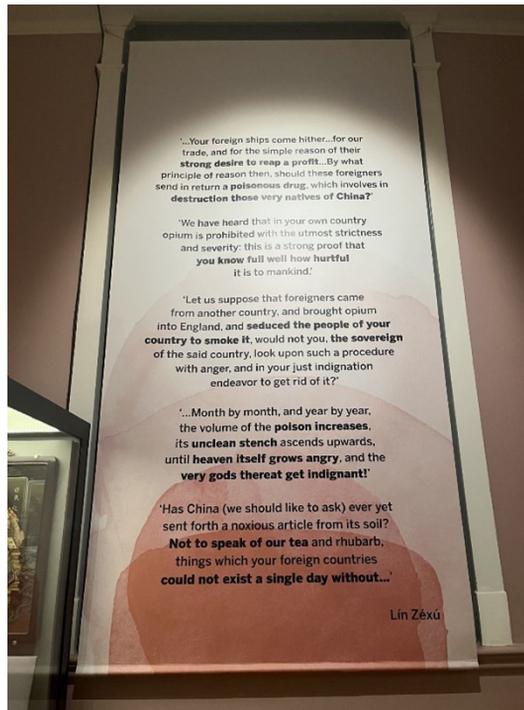


Figure 1. Banner reproducing the letter sent by Lin Zexu to Queen Victoria. Photograph taken by the author in 2023.

C14 built on the significance of this standpoint when describing their interaction with one visitor who was critical of the exhibition's content and framing of the exhibition. As they recollected when describing the encounter:

I responded in the sense that I felt that, you know, it's important that the museum felt that it was important and valid to the entire process, the entire journey of tea and also its impact on the world and how it's impacting still, you know, today that those, those kind[s] of darker times are touched upon.

From this, it is possible to see the discourses of 'resonance' and 'connectedness' at work. This is because C14 not only asserts and justifies the importance of the Horniman curating and producing this exhibition since it not only 'touched upon' historic colonial and epistemic violence, but also moved beyond these initial historic acts by recognising their afterlives and ongoing 'impact on the world' by engaging with a plurality of socio-cultural milieus (see figure 2).

The second theme that emerged from Engage volunteers was the role of the exhibition as a place of learning. This is because all participants commented on their prior unawareness of the colonial connections of Frederick Horniman, and so being able to immerse themselves in the exhibition space allowed them to become more familiar with how the tea trade enabled his collecting. Volunteer C13 explained:

It's just increased my knowledge more because I didn't, I didn't know that. Like I didn't, I didn't know that Horniman, the founder Frederick Horniman used to trade tea...



Figure 2. One of the installations in the *Chá, Chai, Tea* exhibition dedicated to exploring the 'entire journey of tea' through people's current relationship with and consumption of the drink. Photograph: The Horniman Museum, 2023.

Volunteer C12 also commented that the exhibition enhanced their understanding of Empire and its afterlives beyond the confines of the Horniman Museum, reinforcing the importance of the exhibition space as a place for critical and public pedagogy.⁹ The content of *Chá, Chai, Tea* enabled C12 to learn more about British colonisation and European imperialism more widely during the nineteenth century, as well as the current global coverage of the contemporary tea industry:

So, I didn't, I have not studied much history. So, I obviously knew about the tea trade of the British Empire. I didn't know about the Opium, Opium Wars, and I didn't know how still extensive the tea trade is today, even though it's different.

As part of this learning, Volunteer C13 also commented on the benefits of having material culture present in the space to elucidate the object journeys and histories of the tea trade, Frederick Horniman, and the subsequent Opium Wars. C13 recognised that discussions surrounding colonialism, Empire, and its legacies can appear to be somewhat abstract and ephemeral, and so having material culture present in the space grounded those connections and made them more visible and visceral. This reflects the workings of resonance as stated by C3 (see figure 3). As exemplified by C13, '...seeing the boxes of tea, the containers, that kind of really, you know, highlighted that, like, it made everything more real.'

However, Volunteer C14 did provide some critique for the exhibition as a place for learning, especially when tracing the influence and workings of combatting coloniality. Firstly, they commented that the exhibition seemed to have no apparent 'journey' that people could follow based upon their observations of visitors within the space. As a result, visitors may have haphazardly engaged with the exhibition's content as they meandered through the space:

But the majority of the time, they bounce because they don't really know how this then corresponds to that etc. etc. So, I just feel that maybe that something needs to happen with that journey...

According to C14, the apparent lack of structure also had implications for the depth of potential visitor learning. This is because they noted the amount and layers of interpretation present in the space, and so not having a clear guide of what to follow may result in either information overload or visitors having a cursory glance on what is on display:

I've noticed that they're not actually really looking properly at times. So, and it's a shame, because there's, there are so many different objects and things on so many different levels. But you don't see them necessarily really taking the time....



Figure 3. Tea crates that were used to import Horniman Tea. Photograph taken by the author in 2023.

This then contributed to C14's perception that the overall design of the exhibition may be a potential impediment to visitors developing a layered and nuanced understanding regarding the historic consumption of tea, the colonial exploitation and violence tied to it, and the decolonising emphasis of the exhibition itself.

Based on C14's commentary, one would assume that Engage volunteers would be a vital conduit to facilitate layered and nuanced visitor learning. Whilst Engage volunteers were responsible for facilitating Object Based learning with the four objects shown in figure four, they are also limited in what they can say about the Horniman's colonial past and its contemporary legacies due to the importance of message management and discipline. This is because there was a prevalent awareness that, given the enflamed culture war context, Engage volunteers could cause institutional harm by conveying narratives that went beyond the institutionally mandated practice, conforming instead to their own personal opinions regarding colonialism and its contemporary afterlives. As a result, volunteers and their practice needed to be somewhat regulated to prevent this from happening. As noted by Researcher C7 when describing the difficulty of having volunteers communicate colonial histories:

I guess the difficulty with involving volunteers is that you're putting them on the front line of potentially, like quite a quite a fraught debate and that does pose issues, I think around well-being first and foremost, but also around kind of message discipline, I think.¹⁰

This implicit danger was also commented on by Volunteer C1 who recognised that any sort of discussion surrounding colonialism, or the provenance of objects that may have been looted, with people who claim descentance from impacted communities may resort to them feeling urged to apologise for the actions of the Museum.¹¹ This may then directly contravene the established practice and policies of the Horniman, thereby, alluding to a particular point of tension that Engage volunteers occupy as ambassadors of the organisation:

...there are a variety of places around the (...), and I'm talking to visitors, and they kind of say, 'oh, that's from my country.' There is a kind of almost like discomfort

to it, for me. I mean, obviously, that's very kind of like, that's my discomfort, that's on me. (...) I almost want to like apologise.



Figure 4. Objects that are used by Engage volunteers as part of their live interpretation. Photograph taken by the author in 2023.

Based on these worries, the Horniman decided to provide an explicit suggestion that volunteers should not engage with difficult conversations. For example, Engage volunteers occupying the touch-table in *Chá, Chai, Tea* were expected to direct visitors to the relevant sections of the exhibition that discussed colonial dispossession, exploitation, and violence, or encourage them to provide commentary on the feedback cards and to get in contact with the email provided (see figure 5).¹² This was further confirmed by Volunteer C12 when commenting on the institutional expectations for Engage volunteers navigating any potential conflict:

We were told to sort of, you know, kind of ignore them, not sort of, not ignore them (...). Kind of deflect to answer their questions truthfully, but not in a way that is going to give them a reaction or something that they can use as a sort of smoking gun.

Part of regulating Engage volunteers was informed by the need to guarantee their wellbeing. This is because there was a strong perception that they may be drawn into potential conflict with visitors, and so there was a need to provide them with a reliable avenue through which they could either avoid or de-escalate scenarios. As articulated by Volunteers C2 and C6:

I don't really want to have hand to hand combat with someone who I know is right.¹³

...[it] would be equipping people to say, 'I don't know.' This is not what I'm, just having that ability to say, 'this is not what, let me get someone else for you here. Let me point you in the right direction.'¹⁴

This is particularly important considering there is an expected duty of care that must be had towards volunteers, and they should not be mandated to defend the Horniman's practice. As alluded to by Volunteer C8:

I think that's a really interesting question about what because the psychological contract that we have with the Horniman is different from paid staff, and yeah, you're right, that needs to be sort of in the conversation, doesn't it?¹⁵

Although safeguarding measures are needed, encouraging volunteers not to explicitly engage with the topic of colonialism was met with a sense of frustration by Volunteer C10.¹⁶ This is because they felt that the strategies promoted to avoid any sort of conflictual encounter, combined with the lack of consultation (at the time of the interview) with Engage volunteers regarding the topic, represented a form of paternalism. In part, this can be attributed to a perceived undermining of the expertise accumulated by C10 as part of their working career and their prior experience of engaging with topics related to colonialism and decolonisation. They stated:

You know, what does that mean? What does it mean not to engage with contentious topics?

And:

It's really trying to dumb it down, isn't it? In a way.

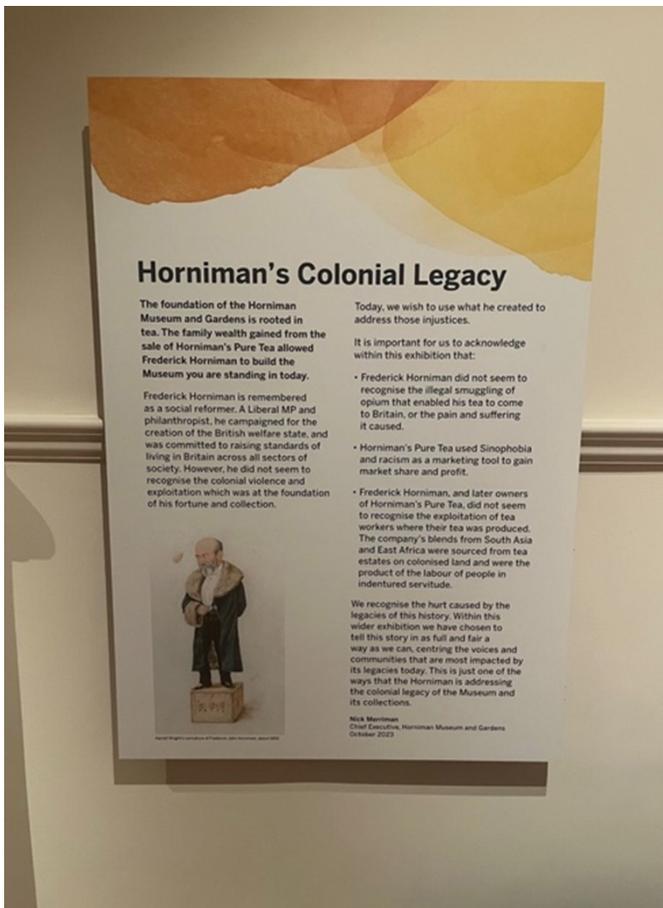


Figure 5. Panel present in the *Chá, Chai, Tea* exhibition that explains the Horniman's approach to tackling their colonial legacy. Photograph taken by the author in 2023.

Volunteers C2 and C12 raised further grievances. Volunteer C2 described that having the institution potentially mandate specific narratives that they must convey as an ambassador of the organisation represented a partial overreach and encroached on their ability to take

ownership of their practice. This is because they were worried that mandating how volunteers are supposed to talk about the topic of colonialism could undermine what they perceived as being authentic and substantive engagement with visitors. They didn't 'want to sound like a programmed robot...'

This was further corroborated by Volunteer C12 who described how following a specific 'script' or mandated talking points could inhibit their conversations with visitors regarding the Horniman's colonial past. C12 felt that having such a structured approach could be viewed as being rather rigid, and not responsive and sensitive to the concerns or questions that a visitor may have. They explained as such when talking about how potentially talking about colonialism differentiates itself from their normal structure of how they engage with visitors:

I almost have a script in my head of the question I'm going to ask the visitor, the stuff I'll say to them, but if I get asked something about colonialism, I don't want to have a script about something like that. I want to, you know, a more natural answer, a proper conversation. It doesn't feel right....

The views of C2 and C12 then speak to importance of trusting volunteers to address these topics and converse about them in a sensitive manner with their audiences. Therefore, there is a need to recognise the agentic capabilities of Engage volunteers as live interpreters, and to be attentive to how what they perceive as either 'natural' or substantive as part of the visitor experience shapes their communication of colonial histories.

However, as part of this 'natural' engagement, Volunteers C9 and C13 did raise an interesting point regarding the appropriateness of talking about colonialism to children.¹⁷ For Volunteer C13, they felt that children may not sufficiently be able to grasp the sensitivity of the topic, let alone be able to understand its complexity, and therefore Engage volunteers should be cognizant of this and focus on topics present within the *Chá, Chai, Tea* exhibition that deviate from colonial violence:

It's a very sensitive topic, and I feel like children wouldn't be able to understand it, you know, it's a bit complicated. So how would you? How would you get that across to a kid?

Volunteer C9 also demonstrated their preference to avoid the topic completely when interacting with children. This is because they felt that the primary responsibility of Engage volunteers is to facilitate the learning of children that is responsive to their motivation for visiting. They explained:

I don't think that should be their primary mission because everyone you engage with is here for a different reason. Why would you bludgeon a child with, you know, all sorts of stories about colonial mistreatment of people?

By using the word 'bludgeon', this implies that any attempts of utilising Engage volunteers to talk about colonialism could undermine the perceived sense of innocence that children may have regarding these topics; may prevent them enjoying the space; and result in potential harm or feelings of discomfort that could underpin any future consumption of the Horniman.

However, it should be noted that this may not necessarily be applicable for children from global majority backgrounds, or visitors from older demographics. For example, Volunteer C10 made explicit reference to the perceived success of Engage volunteers' interactions with teenagers and adults, and described how integrating narratives concerning colonialism and decolonisation as part of their practice could result in a more fruitful visitor experience:

And I think the teenagers who come in, we don't really engage with them very well. I mean, if you get older school children, and they treat it as a playground to run around largely, but you could actually have a much better dialogue programme going with that, where that would maybe decolonisation and those kinds of discussions would be more relevant.

Both Volunteers C6 and C10 did suggest that there were effective methods for Engage volunteers to not only navigate potential conflict, but also engage with various demographics

with topics like Empire.¹⁸ Volunteer C6 noted that volunteers can be sensitive with their communication of colonial histories, and how this is partially informed by sufficient training and awareness of the afterlives of exploitation that are made manifest within the museum space. In their own words:

If as a volunteer, you understand the significance of a space, then you are a lot more equipped to deal with it in a sensitive way. But it's, you don't, it doesn't have to be about like, standing there on a box and like telling the visitors all about this stuff. It doesn't have to be like [that], it can be more nuanced...

This then implies that communicating the Horniman's colonial histories does not need to be at the forefront of Engage volunteers' practice, but rather a topic that can be raised in response to the active interest of their visitors.

This was further supported by Volunteer C10's suggestion that such encounters did not necessarily need to be combative but could be guided by more of a soft-handed approach oriented towards changing the visitor's thinking. They asserted that deploying the use of effective open-ended questions would not only help visitors engage critically with potentially opposing viewpoints, but also the wider structural and material circumstances that engender their reasoning:

...it's just getting people to think a bit more. I mean, you don't, you don't necessarily have to get into an argument just to get somebody. I mean, it's just, I think, if you've got the right questions at your fingertips more, then you can just prompt people a bit to say, 'well, why do you think somebody's going to think differently to you?' Is there some way that we can kind of move that dialogue along a little bit?

Therefore, one can view the soft-handed approach as not only engaging with visitors dialogically, but also through a guise of an engendering alternative understandings of phenomena related to colonialism. This then introduces the prospect of conceiving Engage volunteers as critically aligned pedagogues.

As part of this, Volunteer C6 did raise the possibility of Engage volunteers operating as active listeners. This is because they stipulated that since Engage volunteers are live interpreters, they ought to possess a sufficient awareness of the colonial wound at the institution, so that they can understand why visitors may experience feelings of discomfort within the space. They explained:

As a space, you know, this is a purpose-built museum building built on the tea trade, someone might be uncomfortable being in it, and just having because if you just have that awareness, then you're able to try that little bit harder to just make it fun...

This then introduces the potential pastoral dimension that Engage volunteers may have with their role as they may become responsible for communicating colonial histories, and thus become concerned with helping visitors navigate their own discomfort with the space.

The potential limitations of this were recognised by Volunteers C1 and C13. Volunteer C1 drew attention to how the positionality of the Engage volunteer would not only shape the way in which they interact with visitors, but also how visitors may perceive them which could implicate their willingness to touch upon a potentially sensitive topic. By way of example, they discussed how their own ethnic identity may have limited their understanding of the affective connections that visitors from global majority backgrounds may have with the Horniman and its contents:

...my view is definitely limited by the fact I am white, and British, you know, I'm not going to pretend I can speak for the way that certain people like feel about these objects from their home cultures that are in our museums.

In remedying this, Volunteer C13 pointed to the benefits of having a more diverse volunteering 'team'. They cited how their own ethnic heritage could help distressed visitors navigate the content of the *Chá, Chai, Tea* exhibition, since there may be some common alignment in how

they feel in the space. As they explained:

And then I feel like in my, especially in my team, volunteering team, I'm the only person of colour so I feel like if there is someone else who is of colour or like, of Indian origin, they can speak to me if they feel too uncomfortable speaking with someone... [who is white].

This alludes to perceived boundaries that implicate the live interpretation offered by Engage volunteers, as well as the differential capabilities of people to grapple with topics concerning colonial legacies.

Discussion

So how did volunteers feel about *Chá, Chai, Tea*? As shown by the evidence, volunteers responded positively to the exhibition's content and framing, especially since they viewed as exhibition as a space of healing and learning which demonstrated that the Horniman was dedicated to raising awareness concerning its colonial roots, thereby, making amends for its colonial past. However, critiques did emerge regarding the depth of visitor learning and the lack of ability for Engage volunteers to talk sufficiently about the colonial connections of Frederick Horniman and Horniman Tea. The exhibited frustrations, as well as the offered solutions, from Engage volunteers reflected how they view themselves as being vital for, not only supporting the visitor experience, but also for facilitating critical reflection and encouraging empathy that would come with actualising a museology of hope. As a result, even-though there were top-down assertions of how *Chá, Chai, Tea* was guided by discourses concerning epistemic decolonisation and reconstitution, connectedness, and resonance, the holistic manifestations of these were hampered by a lack of volunteer live interpretation that could sufficiently grapple with the Horniman's colonial wounds.

The recent activity of the Horniman returning ten objects to the Warumungu community in Australia demonstrates that the organisation will continue to embrace decolonial practice.¹⁹ Thus whilst it is vital to safeguard volunteers so that they don't experience further emotional labour as part of their volunteering and to prevent any sort of spreading of misinformation or causing of institutional harm, interpretation volunteers must also be able to grapple with museum decolonisation as part of their practice since, as ambassadors of the organisation, they may be subject to further questioning from visitors about the topic. Furthermore, the likelihood of volunteers getting into conflict with visitors can be queried. Lisa Nandy (current Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport) recently announced that the government will no longer sow division and flame the culture wars and will be 'celebrating and championing diversity and [the] rich inheritance of our communities and the people in them.'²⁰ Whilst it may be overly optimistic to assume that the 'culture wars are now over', the lack of hostile activity and pressure from government towards museums and other heritage institutions who are embracing decolonisation/decolonial practice may result in its softening, which in turn may detoxify encounters that Engage volunteers could have with dissenting visitors. Therefore, one hopes that Engage volunteers in the future have the proverbial green light to fully engage with colonial histories, their legacies, and decolonisation as part of their interaction with inquisitive visitors.

Taking this forward, how can the lessons learnt in the case of the Horniman be applied to other institutions who may use live interpreter volunteers to support their decolonisation efforts? Whilst the evidence reinforces the desire of volunteers to engage with topics concerning decolonisation, questions remain regarding the ethics of this, especially given the white-majority nature of volunteering within museums and heritage organisations (Harflett 2015). There is a need to account for the differential impacts for volunteers of pursuing and supporting decolonisation, as it may be informed by their own positionality and lived experiences of legacies of colonialism and imperialism. In turn, this could have specific consequences regarding the outcomes of decolonially inclined volunteer practice, as its purported transformative potential may be dulled due to differing understandings of the necessary steps needed to redress an organisation's colonial wounds or the diminishing of the importance of museum decolonisation (Basu 2024; Sterling and Larkin 2021). Consequently, there are two central questions that

other institutions should grapple with going forward:

- when utilising volunteers in order to actualise praxis, how can organisations appropriately safeguard volunteers, especially from global majority backgrounds, to prevent them from undertaking too much emotional labour whilst providing an experience that benefits them and which they view as meaningful?;
- and how can organisations design volunteering experiences within their decolonisation efforts which are not appropriative and respectful of the needs and wants of subalternised groups who may be using the institution to heal their relationship with the past?

Disclosure Statement

The author undertook ethnographic fieldwork as an Engage volunteer from September 2022-December 2023.

Notes

- ¹ The Horniman Museum, 'Resetting the Agenda for the Horniman's Future', Horniman Museum & Gardens 2021. <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/story/resetting-the-agenda-for-the-hornimans-future/>, accessed 11 September 2024.
- ² The Horniman Museum, *Resetting the Agenda*.
- ³ The Horniman Museum, 'Six objects to return to Nigeria as Horniman formally transfers ownership of "Benin Bronzes"', Horniman Museum & Gardens 2022. <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/story/six-objects-to-return-to-nigeria-as-horniman-formally-transfers-ownership-of-benin-bronzes/>, accessed 1 March 2023; The Horniman Museum, 'Chá, Chai, Tea', Horniman Museum & Gardens 2023. <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/event/cha-chai-tea/>, accessed 11 September 2024; Curatorial Staff C3, interview by author, audio recording, 3 December 2022, London.
- ⁴ Volunteering Staff C5, personal communication, 2 February 2023.
- ⁵ Examples of interview questions include: 'What does the Horniman Museum mean to you?'; 'what do you think of the Cha, Chai, Tea exhibition?'; 'how important do you think it is for the Horniman Museum to acknowledge and communicate its colonial history and the legacies of these?'; and 'what role do you think Engage volunteers should have within this process?'
- ⁶ Curatorial Staff C3 is a staff member at the Horniman and played a key role in both curating and training Engage volunteers for the *Chá, Chai, Tea* exhibition.
- ⁷ Volunteer C13 is an Engage volunteer who has been at the Horniman since 2023.
- ⁸ Volunteer C14 is an Engage volunteer who has been at the Horniman since 2023.
- ⁹ Volunteer C12 is an Engage volunteer who has been at the Horniman since 2023.
- ¹⁰ Researcher C7 is a PhD researcher specifically exploring the colonial legacies of the Horniman Museum's founding collections.
- ¹¹ Volunteer C1 is an Engage volunteer who has been at the Horniman since 2021.
- ¹² Author fieldnotes, 6 October 2023.
- ¹³ Volunteer C2 is an Engage volunteer who has been at the Horniman since 2015.

- ¹⁴ Volunteer C6 is an Engage volunteer who has been at the Horniman since 2022.
- ¹⁵ Volunteer C8 is an Engage volunteer who has been at the Horniman since 2012.
- ¹⁶ Volunteer C10 is an Engage volunteer who has been at the Horniman since their retirement in the late 2010s.
- ¹⁷ Volunteer C9 is an Engage volunteer who has been at the Horniman since 2022.
- ¹⁸ Volunteer C6 is an Engage volunteer who has been at the Horniman since 2022.
- ¹⁹ The Horniman Museum, 'Horniman to return 10 Warumungu objects to Australia', Horniman Museum & Gardens 2024. <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/story/horniman-to-return-10-warumungu-objects-to-australia/>, accessed 11 September 2024.
- ²⁰ Peter Walker, 'Era of culture wars is over, pledges new culture secretary Lisa Nandy', The Guardian 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jul/09/era-of-culture-wars-is-over-pledges-new-culture-secretary-lisa-nandy>, accessed 11 September 2024.

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