

Absent Histories and Absent Images: Photographs, Museums and the Colonial Past

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Abstract

Based on research in a range of UK museums, this paper explores the visibility and invisibility of the photographic legacy of colonial relations and the representation of the colonial past in museum galleries. It explores the conditions of the 'invisibility' and 'disavowal' of the colonial past in the historical narrative developed by museums, and the anxieties that cluster around such narratives in a postcolonial and multicultural society. The paper argues that the photographic legacy of the colonial past offers a way into those histories, but it is one that can only be realized through the critical engagement with photographs themselves and the work they might be made to do in museums. As an example, it examines the active and complex role of photographs played in the galleries of the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Bristol. It concludes that the failure of museums to integrate colonial pasts into their narratives has worked against the wider liberal agendas to which museums subscribe, and that photographic invisibility is both a symptom of and metaphor for the 'invisibility' of the colonial past.

Key words: photographs, colonialism, difficult histories, multiculturalism, representation.

In this paper, we argue that the tensions in museum spaces between the visibility and invisibility of photographs emerging from colonial relations are both a symptom of, and metaphor for, the (in)visibility of the colonial past more generally.¹ Our argument is based on research that explored the role of the photographic legacy of overseas colonialism in a postcolonial and multicultural Europe. Here, we draw on the work in a number of UK museums, predominantly in England.² Principally, this research addresses questions about which histories are told and how, and which histories are not told and why. In particular, drawing on recent work on difficult histories, this paper explores the socio-museal conditions for the production and interrogation of challenging narratives and asks, what is the role of photographs within this?

The threads of the colonial past form a significant part of the weave of contemporary British society. While the notion of 'colonial legacy', if not carefully articulated, can be overdetermining – 'a metaphor worn out beyond retrieval' (de l'Estoile 2008: 267) – both 'ruptures' in, and 'recuperations' of, the colonial past nevertheless 'make up the lineaments of the constrained conditions in which people are now living' (Stoler 2011: 156). Whether the points of articulation are seen or unseen, the colonial past has shaped contemporary Britain, from the demographic make-up of our towns and cities to the food we eat, from episodes of civil unrest to the popular culture that we create and consume. Yet the colonial past is now largely disavowed as histories, events and processes once seen as formative to Britain's national narrative are felt as difficult, shameful and perhaps even unspeakable. It inhabits a kind of structured amnesia that elides the need to confront the asymmetries on which contemporary society is founded. In this, 'painful to the present' is glossed as 'irrelevant to the present' (Barnes 1990: 228). Unlike other difficult and challenging histories, more confidently and discretely dealt with in public culture – and the most visible examples here are those of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the Holocaust – the narrative of the colonial past lacks discursive unity, apparent closure and moral certainty.³ The rawness of its legacy is still under negotiation, and is 'subject to widespread, selective amnesia and disavowal' or 'safely sequestered on the distant fringes

of national narratives where they [...] may violently register the tensions of the moments in which they are recalled or slip surreptitiously into the faded patina of irrelevance' (Hall 1999/2000: 7; Stoler 2011: 121).⁴

An increasing amount has been written on 'difficult' or 'challenging' heritage in recent years and the need to examine what 'is unsettling and awkward, rather than that which can be celebrated' (MacDonald 2009: 1-2).⁵ Indeed, the intuited chain of equivalence between 'heritage' and the celebratory is a serious obstacle to a raw interrogation of the colonial past. In postcolonial Britain, where 'race' and culture are often conflated in the language and imaginings of cultural politics, the colonial is commonly understood through a series of reductionist imaginaries and, as is the focus of our argument, has been rendered largely invisible and unspeakable within museum contexts. Unlike the narrative of the slave trade, in which the power dynamics of the imperial relation are clearly polarized before the ostensible redemption of abolition, more generalized narratives of the colonial past cannot be mobilized for 'positive didactic purposes'; nor can they be easily rehabilitated and reincorporated in the national imaginary (Meskell 2002: 571, 558). Yet the colonial past is formative of contemporary British, and indeed European, society, and provides the context through which multicultural societies must be understood (Gilroy 2004: 2).

The colonial past tends, instead, to fragment, and to erupt into the social and cultural life of the nation as unmanageable 'mnemonic intrusions' (MacDonald 2009: 3). The colonial past resists being reduced to a tidy narrative or a single meaning; rather, it unfolds as an incomplete set of fluid relationships, as any number of unpredictable trajectories, over time and space. The experience of an unruly Indian peasant attacking a police station (Amin 1988), a district officer in 1930s Kenya, an Australian Aboriginal child taken from her or his parents, or an officer of the East India Company in the 1860s appear incommensurable, yet all pertain to Britain's colonial past. Likewise, there were also vastly different colonial experiences, for both colonized and colonizer, structured through constructions of race, class and gender.⁶ Above all, the 'colonial' cannot be safely contained in the past; as Christopher Pinney puts it '[c]olonialism refuses historiographical compartmentalization: it rapidly unfolds into the history of the modern world: modernity and globalization are intimately entangled with colonialism' (Pinney 2006: 382).

These complexities cannot be the subject of this paper, but are noted analytically because they shape the landscape of colonial relations. They are precisely the complexities and nuances that are perceived as difficult to articulate in public culture, resulting, as we shall argue, in patterns of disavowal and aphasia. This is especially so because this landscape of colonial relations has become homogenized within a reductive narrative. We shall argue that this reductive imagination, and its reified formulation as 'colonial legacy' – which 'makes no distinctions between what holds and what lies dormant, between residue and recomposition, between weak and tenacious trace' (Stoler 2008: 196) – is the major barrier to addressing the formative history of postcolonial and multicultural contemporary European society. The challenge for museums is to represent this history without lapsing into apologism on the one hand or a sanitized celebration of multiculturalism in the other. Museums must find a way of articulating this difficult history in a way that can account for complexity while remaining relevant.

Underlying our argument is the confluence of the dominant public discourse on multiculturalism and a reformulated concept of 'heritage' which emerged in the 1980s, and which still underpins much museum thinking in Britain.⁷ Exhibitions that might be understood as 'multicultural' in some way often represent an extension of what Martin Matušík describes as 'ludic multiculturalism' (1998: 101-2). Always celebratory in tone, the strategy of this style of multiculturalism is 'to show people clothed in various "ethnic" garb, serving "ethnic" food to the tune of "ethnic" or "world" music with dancers showcasing "ethnic" steps in the background' (Fortier 2008: 16). One interviewee at a British heritage institution, critical of such an approach, referred to this type of work as a product of the 'saris, steel drums and samosas' school of exhibitions.⁸ While exhibitions that employ a celebratory tone to generate new narratives of belonging might be able to respond to demands for greater inclusivity, they are incommensurable with the need to address the colonial past that prefigures multicultural societies. Indeed, as a kind of socio-political coping strategy aimed at the present, and often devoid of historical consciousness, 'multiculturalism' can function as a diversion from the colonial past, obstructing our view.

Moreover, such expressions of multiculturalism can be traced along the less valued meanings of 'culture' and 'heritage' as each bifurcates: the 'culture' valued in the multicultural – as if it were separate from culture proper – is that of the lived, the everyday, the transient; that which is unthreatening to the authorized culture and heritage of national life. No doubt this easy opposition between the culture of the everyday and high culture is less easy to sustain in the wake of a heritage movement in which '[t]he lives, artefacts, houses, workplaces, tools, customs and oral memories of ordinary people have begun to take their rightful place in the national heritage' (CFMEB 2000: 162). Nevertheless, fixed notions of 'race' and culture stubbornly continue to intersect within the multicultural, producing essentialized subject positions little different from their ideological antecedents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Finally, an introductory word about the photographic legacy of the colonial past. Outside anthropology museums, with their problematic colonial collections, photographs are often the links between other histories and the colonial project. They intersect, for instance, with the mining of raw materials for industry, the lives of locally-born missionaries, and the colonial experience hidden in the pages of family albums. These photographs are important because they carry the inscriptions not only of the 'events' of colonial domination – from Delhi Durbars to punitive expeditions – but also of the banal traces of difficult histories, of asymmetries, of injustices and also of aspirations and affections, the ludic and the ridiculous. They are often understood, however, merely as documenting and giving context to other classes of object, rather than providing points of fracture and vertical incisions into the surfaces of other histories to reveal complex sets of relations. In the latter context, they can, following Stoler's analysis, bring to the surface 'what lies dormant', make 'weak traces' tenacious and even make visible 'the uneven durabilities of colonial constrictions' (Stoler 2008: 196).

Photographs, museums and the colonial past

Almost all museums use photographs – in displays, in publicity, in the management of other classes of object. Many have photographs in their collections, or access to photographs in related archives and libraries. Photographs possibly constitute the largest and most widespread traces of colonial relations, marking the everyday of small colonial acts and experiences, of servants, of manifold indigenous resistance, of infrastructure, religious hope and economic aspiration. These are not the objects of colonial collections such as those that fill anthropology museums, but of the unremarkable cross-cultural relations emerging from Europe's expansive political-economic desires. Yet despite some thirty years of critical museology and a burgeoning theory of photography, these photographs are seldom made to work hard in public culture. Mobilized within the didactic space of the museum, they are expected to authorize and authenticate, and to function not as critical or reflective spaces, but as unmediated windows on the world. For while almost all museums employ photographs in their public galleries in some way, the problematic of photographs in the museum space exists precisely in their unproblematized use.

In her seminal 1989 essay, 'The Economy of Truth', Gaby Porter addressed the ways in which museums use photographs to make meanings and to construct notions of truth (Porter 1989). The tenets of Porter's critique of museum practice – concerning questions of access, multiple histories and the ownership of heritage – are now commonly, if unevenly, addressed across the museum sector, with far greater emphasis placed on self-reflexivity in exhibition narratives and museum objects offered less frequently as 'value-free evidence' (Porter 1989: 21). However, significantly, the role of photographs in the reproduction of museum values – the central point of critique in her argument – remains largely unaddressed. Porter points to the paucity of engagement with the medium as an historical source. Rather than excavating the historical voice of a photograph, displays often mobilize photographs for their assumed immediacy, directness, and unmediated inscription; they are used to authenticate other classes of objects, to give 'period' – 'to provide the "look of the past"' (Porter 1989: 24) – or a comfortable ambiance to galleries. They may even be used as a design solution, within an over all positivist rhetoric.

Photographs, then, rank low in the hierarchies of museum objects: indeed they are seldom afforded object status. Often photographs in museums are used not to illuminate the narrative of a gallery, to function as objects in their own right or to develop their own voice within

the gallery. They are seldom represented as integral to the knowledge-making practices of museums, and are often marginalized and undervalued as significant players in museum practice. As a result, they are denied their own historicity and their own social biography as dynamic forces in the making of museum narratives. As Porter writes, '[o]rder in the museum requires the elevation of the object and the subjugation of the photographic image' (Porter 1989: 24). The complex and large unarticulated role of photographs in museums means, then, that photographs sit awkwardly between the two polarities of difficult heritage. First, the transformative power of colonial period photographs to rethink historical understandings, and second, the realist insistence of photographs might disturb the political erasure of those understandings, in that they are deemed unsuitable for a narrative of contemporary social polity.

This is not to say that photographs are entirely invisible within public displays that engage with difficult histories. In the Holocaust exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, London, photographs are displayed, although these produce the familiar icons of the Holocaust rather than the most challenging or horrific images, as well as behaving as general metaphors for loss. Elsewhere, photographic engagements with difficult histories emerge outside of the museum

mainstream. An example is Autograph's 2011 exhibition *Without Sanctuary* at Rivington Place, London, of James Allen's collection of photographs and postcards of lynchings in America. The exhibition foregrounded the social biographies of lynching photographs and demonstrated their continued currency in an economy of racialized viewing and violence. This was achieved in part by displaying original photographic objects, images of lynchings reproduced and traded across various contexts, and the reverse of postcards which confronted visitors with the handwritten testimonies of racists no less troubling than the spectators at lynchings who confidently faced the camera's lens.⁹ Through this strategy, the exhibition was self-reflectively constructed as part of an ongoing narrative of photographic engagement. But conversely, it is also worth noting that this follows a pattern of a broader marginalization to temporary exhibitions of anything that might be construed as troubling in some way. As an exhibitions officer at a national museum commented, 'in temporary exhibitions you can be more risk taking... and be



Figure 1. *The faces of Henry Wellcome.*
 Photograph: Rama Knight, 2007/Wellcome Library, London.

more adventurous'.¹⁰ From such a position, these representations seldom make the permanent galleries, especially with the latter's requirement of long-term investment. Consequently these exhibitions do little to shift the status quo of institutions or unsettle their overall narrative. Moreover, the examples cited only testify to the continuing absence of photographs produced out of colonial relations – a history uncomfortably closer to home.¹¹

This becomes especially invidious where the colonial relations of photographs, when they do appear, are elided. In Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, a pith-helmeted railway engineer, E. B. Harris, is shown standing at an excavation site – but only to demonstrate the authenticity of the object, the Sultanganj Buddha, 'the museum's most valuable object' and one of its earliest acquisitions (Wingfield 2010: 54). In the Wellcome Collection's permanent exhibition, *Medicine Man*, which explores the vast and unusual collection of Henry Wellcome, this technique is used to expansive effect. The ludic eccentricity of Wellcome is foregrounded through a selection of images, which collectively privilege the theatrical. On the first wall of the gallery, the visitor is presented with a studio portrait of Wellcome from 1885 in a monk's costume, complete with false tonsure; another from the same year shows Wellcome in a shooting outfit reminiscent of Pathan tribal dress of the Indian north-west frontier. Significantly, these images are afforded the same status and given within the same aesthetic order as a photograph of Wellcome in a light-coloured suit and pith helmet in the hills of Jebel Moya. Wellcome conducted archaeological excavations here between 1910 and 1914 where, ambitiously, he believed he might be exploring 'the veritable birthplace of human civilisation itself' (quoted in Larson 2009: 58) and where, as part of a 'philanthropic enterprise [...] Wellcome made it a rule that every applicant must be found some work to do' (Larson 2009: 58). But the image of Wellcome in Jebel Moya is not put to work as part of an historical excavation; rather it is employed to evoke a nebulous colonial fantasy safely contained within the romance of Victorian eccentricity. The suit and helmet are presented as one of so many theatrical costumes, the landscape of the Sudan substituted for the theatricality of the studio backdrop. In this selection of photographs, a complex colonial narrative is elided. There is room for neither



Figure 2. Ethnographic photographs. Photograph: Rama Knight, 2007/ Wellcome Library, London.

Wellcome's benevolent paternalism – his 'mission' to teach 'the natives [...] the benefits of our civilisation, and the advantages of truth, honesty, right and justice' (quoted in Larson 2009: 58) – nor the asymmetric power relations that make such benevolence possible.

The appropriative subtext is given further force by the nearby display of 'ethnographic' photographs. These are presented in the gallery in order to demonstrate Wellcome's interest in anthropology and the ethnographic. However, they are all images of aesthetic and picturesque appropriation from the canons of the history of photography: John Thomson's photographs of China from the late 1860s and early 1870s, photographs from Edward S. Curtis's monumental work of picturesque ethnographic imagination on Native Americans undertaken in the early years of the twentieth century, and Alfred Duggan-Cronin's ethno-romanticism in Southern Africa in the 1920s and 30s. Here the photography itself becomes a site where the aesthetics of historiographical entanglements function to elide their colonial foundations and their temporal and cultural range. Photographic style thus functions as another device through which to distance the colonial conditions of Wellcome's collecting. Compounding this, the mode of display, with sepia-toned images of varying sizes hung closely together, in a gallery elsewhere saturated with deep red cloth set in American walnut cabinets, encourages an aesthetic indulgence in visual practices reminiscent of the late nineteenth-century drawing room.

Whatever the motivations for these curatorial decisions, these strategies determine what is visible and what remains invisible in historical narratives intended for public consumption. It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the broader museal frameworks within which photographs are expected to operate, or the kind of work that photographs are asked to do – or more precisely not asked to do – in museum space.¹² But such considerations underlie a more precise question: given that photographs address the colonial past not readily articulated through other classes of museum objects, to what extent can photographs be engaged with to articulate the complexities of histories which are multi-faceted, contested, difficult and sometimes unspeakable, yet which are also foundational to British history? As we have noted, it is a history which, with one notable exception to which we will turn shortly, is remarkable in its absence. Moreover, given the shape and density of the colonial archive, it is a history all the more remarkable by its photographic invisibility in public space.

Fundamental to this pattern of invisibility is the problem that these photographs, as historical objects, emerge from a series of political and social practices which have lost their legitimacy, and which to all appearances, run counter to the demands of an historical narrative for a postcolonial society, in which the social outputs of museums are deemed to foster and enhance inclusion for a wide range of communities, and the challenging of stereotypes and intolerance (Dodd and Sandell 2001: 4). Whereas, of course, this charge can be made of many museum objects, the immediacy of photographs – their evidential claims and their translation of the 'there-then' into the 'here-now' (Barthes 1977: 44) – makes them especially problematic within the contexts of difficult histories.

Then there is the question of whose history do photographs from a colonial past represent, for they are objects of cross-cultural inscription? In many instances this is appropriative, through the rubrics of the colonial gaze. But again, to reduce all photographs of the colonial encounter to so dichotomous a model, however asymmetrical their originating contexts, becomes another form of disavowal and aphasia, because it closes down both the possibility of analysis and the possibility of historical agency for colonial subjects. Anthropology museums have done much to address their colonial pasts and the social biography of objects in their care, often with photograph collections as key players in patterns and projects of restitution (see Poignant 1996; Brown and Peers 2006; Geismar 2009, Geismar and Herle 2010). But the focus has been on the descendants of colonized subjects elsewhere in a restorative rhetoric, rather than addressing the problematics of the colonial past as it is experienced at home within a multicultural society. If there has been such an address 'at home', it is where photographs have been part of a targeting of 'culturally specific' collections as 'relevant' to specific communities or social groups. In a move of worrying cultural essentialism, this position implies that only specific parts of historical narratives appeal, a position which in its turn stereotypes, essentializes and even patronises audiences (Shaikh 2001: 100-1). What is missing is a sense that the colonial past, however disturbing, is a shared social and cultural history, profoundly relevant to all constituencies.

However, so freighted are narratives of the colonial past, that photographs, with their apparent immediacy and ambiguity, risk becoming uncontrollably volatile, with curators unable to contain the semiotic energy of images as they intersect with the experiences, assumptions



Figure 3. Gallery 36. The photography case. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 2012. © Birmingham Museums.

and desires of audiences which cluster around photographs and the didactic expectations of their role in the museum space. Although now over 20 years ago, there is still no better demonstration of this than the way in which photographs became one of the key flashpoints of objections to the Royal Ontario Museum's *Into the Heart of Africa* in 1989. This exhibition explored the intersecting histories of Canada and parts of Africa through the lives of Canadian missionaries. While there were differently motivated and focused critiques levelled at the exhibition, there was a particularly angry focus on a photograph showing a missionary's wife supervising the washing of four African women, and quoting from the original in the description from a missionary publication (Butler 1999: 61).¹³ The photograph was seen not through the irony intended by the curators, but redolent with implicit and explicit, subliminal and obvious statements about the racial and ideological basis of colonial relations and the 'development' of Africa. In addition, postcards in the 'Missionary' section of the exhibition, which carried objectifying captions such as 'Young Bantandu Woman' and 'Young Civilized Negress', were seen as replicating or internalising the very ideology being discussed in the exhibition (Butler 1999: 24-5). As one protester put it 'the "savage" and "Dark Continent" are buzzwords of this sad and disgraceful presentation' (quoted in Butler 1999: 24). If nothing else, the exhibition demonstrated the ongoing and unresolved nature of the colonial past, its continuing rawness in the present, and the ways in which readings of images were central to this. What it also demonstrated, very significantly, was the way in which photographs are perceived in museums as standing for the 'truth' of the past.¹⁴ Yet, simultaneously, it was the uncontrollable recoding of images by visitors to the museum that worked against the intended exhibition narrative and destabilized it irrevocably.

There have been efforts within the UK's museum culture to open up the problematic space of the colonial period photograph, and attempts to move representation beyond that of brute economic and political oppression 'to a vision of colonialism as a concatenation of ideas, categories, texts, images and exhibitions' in which '*colonizing projects* are increasingly approached through their complex cultural entanglements' (Pinney 2006: 383). This approach was taken by Pitt Rivers Museum's *Picturing Paradise* exhibition, which explored the cultural biography of historical images of Samoa and marked the complex emergence of stereotype (see Edwards 2001: 196-197). Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology's exhibition *Collected Sites* similarly explored photographs as objects that flowed through

colonial networks making complex, and sometimes contradictory, meanings (Boast, Guha and Herle 2001).

In another example, Gallery 36 at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery – which overlooks the ethnographic displays of the celebrated Gallery 33 – offers a critical space concerned with the way museum knowledges, and by implication other knowledges, are made. Significantly, the gallery includes a case of photographs – including some not unlike the postcards that elicited such anger in Toronto. They are used not for informational or contextual purposes, but to comment on the nature of visual knowledge itself, especially in cross-cultural and, by implication, colonial relations. The display is framed by the question ‘Do photographs reflect reality?’ As such, it explicitly asks museum visitors to reflect critically on the photographs, which are shown in precise facsimiles so as to emphasize the images as objects with their own histories.¹⁵ However, these images nevertheless belong to an uncontentious discursive space. Visualized ethnic difference, caught in the asymmetric power dynamics of late nineteenth and early twentieth century ethnography, is produced not through images of groups who are well represented in contemporary Birmingham, but largely through representations of Native Americans. Although such a display would require very careful contextualization in the USA, for a UK audience these photographs provide an ostensibly unproblematic discursive space for the enactment of ethnic difference. Images used from Africa and the Caribbean are largely ‘positive’ images and framed so as to appear clearly ‘of the past’. The material qualities of the images are part of this construction with their ‘sepia tones’ signifying temporal distance. Yet this gallery is seen by museum staff as being ‘too academic’ and testing to the limits photographic possibilities within the museum. As a curator commented, ‘I feel [it] is quite accessible, [but] people feel that it’s too academic, and it’s too inward looking. So if we want to take it further we may come across problems’.¹⁶ Yet, by using questions such as ‘Whose view are we seeing?’ and ‘Do photographs reflect reality?’, it is the one place in the museum where photographs are actually made to work critically. Gallery 36 foregrounds and interrogates the practices of mediation which embed photographs rather than presenting them as transparent and, in so doing, the photographs and their display intentionally move the viewer beyond the content of the image.

The Expanded Frame

There has been one notable attempt within museum culture to challenge this historical disavowal and to articulate the colonial past as integral to the national narrative. The now-closed British Empire and Commonwealth Museum (BECM)¹⁷ in Bristol provided an exception to the rule both in its attempt to address the complex histories of the colonial past and – particularly in the context of our argument here – in its extensive use of photographs to move the narrative through the museum space and to engage the visitor with the complexities of colonial relationships. As one curator commented, ‘we made the images work really hard intentionally’.¹⁸ In so doing, the exhibition consciously attempted to avoid both celebratory and shaming accounts of the colonial past, and developed a clear informative narrative that did not preclude multiple points of view. This was not without its problems: arguably the exhibition with its broadly humanist narrative addressed an assumed white audience in that it positioned empire in that perspective – the ‘Empire and Us’ (McLeod 2009: 159-60) – and the immediacy and ‘humanity’ of photographs can undoubtedly feed such a reading.

While an extensive discussion of this particular problem is beyond the scope of this paper, nonetheless, the museum constituted an interesting attempt to establish an arresting yet complex and unreductive narrative on the intersecting experience of both colonized and colonizer, through which the audience might come to understand the complexity of Britain’s colonial past. Though it must be noted that this was achieved largely, but not exclusively, through material inscribed by the colonizers, in particular, there was a sense that photographs filled the space of the unspeakable, where language failed, and opened possibilities to the viewer visually. As a curator commented,

...if you have a problem with your terminology, if you’re not sure what words you can use, if you’re not linguistically very rich, having a photograph is a fabulous way of being able to talk about something without having to have the words.

Because you can stand there with someone and you can look.¹⁹

The permanent gallery comprised a route through the complexities of the colonial past with an emphasis on the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, incorporating also the processes of decolonization and the emergence of the Commonwealth from the remnants of Empire. While the museum addressed the geographical scope of the British Empire, there were concentrations on India and east Africa. It confronted directly many challenging issues: violence, displacement, racial science, law and order, and cross-cultural and inter-racial relationships, as well as questions of governmentality, economics, infrastructural development and colonial legacy.

What is significant, as we have suggested, is the way in which much of this narrative was carried photographically. The use of photographs, from the Museum's own collections and the collections of other institutions such as the National Archives, was extensive and intelligent. While the photographs spoke to an immediacy – to the appearance of an historical moment – they were not unproblematic. A typical panel employed four images – two top, two bottom – literally to frame the text. However, these images were often mobilized to establish a tension



Figure 4. Panel detail: "Railways". BECM, 2011. Photograph: Craig Madden. Reproduced with permission.

and complicate the simpler explanatory statements of the exhibition text. These would routinely suggest a strong sense of narrative beyond the frame of individual photographs, which was nevertheless contained through the multiplicity of photographic images used across the whole exhibition. In other words, the photographs formed a critical mass of mutual context. For instance, a panel exploring the development of the railways in parts of Africa dominated by the British Empire juxtaposed an image of official guests celebrating the opening of the Lagos Steam Tramway in Nigeria in 1902 with a photograph of railway workers gathered at a work site in Sierra Leone on payday, *circa* 1900. It thereby foregrounded the ways in which Empire was differently experienced by colonizer and colonized. Shown here, as they were in the Museum's galleries, without heading or detailed text, the chosen images were made to work hard and the museum visitor asked to think for her or himself. In the Lagos image, recognisable signifiers of Empire are framed through the official photography of the Crown Agency. A quietly triumphant vision of Empire is signalled by a string of Union Jacks decorating engine and carriages, while the hierarchy of those present is expressed by who stands where, by who is clearly visible and who is not. The discourse to which this image most easily lends itself seems clear: the Empire is represented as a force for modernization and progress. Careful curatorial control was required to ensure that such an image did not lapse into a nostalgic view of the British Empire, and a realism that mitigates the iconographic pomp of this first image was secured by juxtaposition with the second.

In the photograph made in Sierra Leone, where the British first began the project of railway construction in Africa in the 1890s, we see dozens of men gathered behind the fence

of the site offices. This is a less formal, but still official, image and like the first was donated by the Crown Agents' Railway Archive. The scene seems to be taken from everyday life and as such does not subscribe to a ready-made repertoire of colonial iconography. What this photograph could not show, but only hint at, was how, in constructing lines from mines to ports, British powers chose to ignore the needs of dependencies; or how subsistence farmers were often forced into labour as a way of commuting taxes imposed by the British; or how death rates of those forced into labour, where such figures were recorded, were between 100 and 150 per thousand, resulting from a combination of malnutrition, disease and strenuous work.²⁰ Such absences often prove to be the limit of working with an official archive.

However, the pairing of these two photographs was bold enough to signal the clear inequalities that clustered around 'race' and class, the colonizer and the colonized, in British West Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century. Without the story of one image being reduced to the story of the other, taken together the two photographs suggested the power dynamic of a particular moment and, thus, moved beyond the specificities of each image. This sense was enhanced by the chance compositional similarities of the images, with the angle of the train and clustering of white dignitaries in the first substituted for the lines of fence wire and group of black workers in the second. In particular, the row of wheelbarrows in the second image, which replace the railway carriages of the first, emphasise the friction between the signs of labour in the one and pomp in the other. While these similarities might be coincidental, the grouping of images was not. In this example then, curatorial intentions can be understood to



Figure 5. Panel: "The British Assault on Benin". BECM 2011. Photograph: Craig Madden. Reproduced with permission.

expand the possibilities of the images. While the official status of these photographs was not interrogated, images made on behalf of the Crown Agency were nevertheless 'recoded' as a different set of signifiers were brought into play to foreground some of the inequalities of Empire through the appearance of the routine and the everyday.

If this panel harnessed the insistent realism of the Sierra Leone image to unsettle the pomp of the Tramway inauguration, image pairings on other panels both heightened and complicated this realism. On an exhibition panel that tackled the history of the 'British assault on Benin', the first photograph accompanying the text showed four 'Benin hostages' under guard. The faded areas of the photograph and the scratches on its surface worked to retain a sense of the photograph as an object, and helped to historicize the image, despite its remediation as an

exhibition board. In the second, the materiality and historicity of the photograph were also emphasised by the degradation of the image; it is difficult to make out the faces of those in the back row. Thus, the ostensible transparency of our historical view is unsettled. But these images also complicated the visitor's view of this well-known and difficult history in another way. Notably, both photographs depict Britain's African allies: in the first, an African soldier stands erect and alert, guarding the four prisoners; in the second, an African officer sits behind one of the large Benin tusks with two Britons, implying some equality of status in this enterprise. The historical complexity suggested in these images is typical of the museum's approach, in which the violence of the colonial past, while frequently racialized, cannot be coded through 'race' alone.

The exhibition text was critical and unflinching: the decision to use the term 'assault' rather than the more common 'expedition' – as is used in the Africa Gallery at the British Museum in a benign account of their acquisition of 'Benin Bronzes' – indicated a curatorial intention to reassess conventional narratives of Britain's colonial past.²¹ Indeed, the panel text referred to what is now southern Nigeria as 'Edo' rather than 'Benin' in an effort to recover something of the local point of view. This effort to balance the narrative was extended to the conflict itself: the text does not position the killing of nine British officers by Edo soldiers, which instigated the British assault on Benin, as an unprovoked attack, but emphasises the local perception that the British officers were on a 'secret mission to depose their ruler'. What emerged, then, through the critical spaces of image and text, was a complex representation of power stratified across colonizer and colonized and an acknowledgement of competing narratives in this history that makes no claim to finality.

In both the treatment of the development of railways in West Africa and that of the assault on Benin, photographs from Britain's colonial past were made to work hard. As one curator commented, '[w]e intentionally used photographs that were hard hitting and we knew were controversial because we wanted people to think'.²² Such strategies mitigated against the possibility that the photographs might function to facilitate 'the retreat into empirical particularism [which] can be very comforting' (Pinney 2008: 383).

This counter-balance to the particularism inherent in photographs became extremely important in the case of unexpected images. As Nicholas Thomas has argued, 'if colonial perceptions and relations can take diverse forms – including say gentle exoticism as well as racist settler violence – the stance of comfortable dissociation from what is being analyzed and criticized is less available' (Thomas 1994: 17). BECM used this range of relationships and their affective qualities to both confront visitors and to draw them into perhaps uncomfortable association but, at the same time, expanding the audience's ideas about the shape of colonial relations. For instance, a display entitled 'Innocence Lost' – on the subject of colonizers' children – included a photograph from Tanganyika (Tanzania) of a male servant and a small white child. In the protective shelter of the servant, the little girl leans forward in her chair to drink from a cup. It is difficult not to read this as a quiet and tender, even affectionate, image. According to one of the BECM's curators, '[t]hat photograph... stopped them dead and really made them think [about the complexity of colonial relationships]'.²³ Such images, if not handled with curatorial care, might easily feed into a pre-existing discourse of colonial nostalgia. This possibility was mitigated to some extent by the direct text on the preceding board, which insisted that while '[s]ome employers grew very fond of their servants [...] they often did not see them as responsible adults [and that] white employers routinely called their adult male servants by the term "boy"'.

If this panel used photographs to raise difficult questions about the diverse forms of colonial relation – affection within asymmetry, the ludic within the oppressive – in the several years in which the galleries were open to the public, only one complaint about a photograph was received. This was despite including photographs of the aftermath of colonial violence, evidence of disturbingly asymmetrical relations, the scientific abuse of the colonized body through anthropometrics, and the social, economic and cultural control of the colonized subject. The object of the complaint was, significantly, one of the very few photographs for which the nineteenth century caption was used as the basis of the museum caption. It was in a section on 'Protection and Paternalism', which explored the complexities of race and colonial subjectivities. The photographs constituted a 'before and after' pair, their original role, to demonstrate the

colonial project of the perceived transformation of 'savage criminals' into modern policemen, proving that 'the civilizing mission' worked. In a way that parallels the shape of objection to the photography in *Into the Heart of Africa*, the complaint arose from the use of language contemporary with the photograph which, despite the use of 'scare quotes', was misunderstood

as an institutional voice which perpetuated colonial racial values and attitudes. It also demonstrates more broadly the fragility of the relationship between image and text in the gallery space and the communicative dominance of photographs in shaping the message of a gallery.

As we have suggested, BECM, constituted something of an exception in its treatment of photographs. It is perhaps significant that this expansive photographic narrative occurred in a specialist and highly focused context. Perhaps this articulation of a photographically saturated representation of colonial pasts worked at BECM because the museum visitor, entering the specific space that constitutes that museum, was prepared for such a confrontation, in the way that they might not with the use of photographs of a colonial past in, for instance, a social history or local history gallery.



Before: Indian tribes posed as savage criminals, by Major-General G.C. King, 1909
 Reproduced with permission from the British Library



After: the same men as previous policemen - posed that the civilizing mission worked
 Reproduced with permission from the British Library

Figure 6. Panel detail: "Protection and Paternalism" BECM, 2011. Panel detail. Photograph: Craig Madden. Reproduced with permission.

of slavery, there is little or no acknowledgement of sets of colonial relationships on which their industries and later their populations were built.

This is demonstrated again in Bristol but at the new M-Sheds project ('Bristol's History, Bristol's Story') in which the display of the soap, tobacco and chocolate industries which flourished there in the nineteenth centuries are, with the exception of a small chocolate bar in the slavery gallery, void of any connection to colonial economic activities and the city's role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The social life of such objects too often begins in the local docks

Visible Shifts

If, as a DCMS document claimed, 'Museums can help visitors reflect upon their place in the world, their identity, their differences and similarities...Museums can provide a tolerant space where difficult contemporary issues can be explored in safety and in the spirit of debate' (quoted in Sandell 2007: 3), then the more general absence, in museums, of a narrative of the formative role of the colonial past, however painful, is puzzling. Our research suggested that it was possible for museums to tell the story of cities like Birmingham, Leicester and Liverpool, in which, with the exception of a safely distanced and morally certain address

in Britain, not in the plantations of Malaya or West Africa.²⁴ But this position is symptomatic of the wider disavowal of the colonial past and the uneasiness of its inclusion in national narratives.

If the colonial remains invisible and unspeakable in broader social histories, it is beginning to emerge in the treatment of personal histories that might make up those larger histories. An example is furnished by a recent exhibition *Suits and Saris*, at the New Walk Museum, Leicester. This exhibition explored clothing in the contexts of migration, especially that of the East African Asian community who came to Leicester in the 1970s, but also British families who had moved to India during the colonial period. In this exhibition, photographs were used to explore the movement and experiences of people within a shared but difficult history, in which the colonial figured as an overt and fully articulate set of relations which shaped the contemporary (Kraamer 2012).

Although an extended discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth considering briefly at this point, how the structure, governance and finance of museums might have an impact on the position that we have discussed. Many curators we spoke to in the PhotoCLEC project were concerned about the financial and managerial impact of directly addressing so raw, problematic and complex a history as that of colonial relations, especially in any direct way. The political demand, within forms of governance in which financial security was ultimately based, was for a celebratory heritage and ludic multiculturalism 'reflecting' contemporary communities, rather than destabilizing the status quo with disturbing histories. While this characterization does not seek to undermine the major efforts and achievements of museums in finding an inclusive address to their communities, it remains that there was a profound unease about finding ways of integrating the saturating narrative of the colonial past into 'local' narratives.

It is significant then that BECM was founded on a model of independent funding, one acknowledged by its Director as being unsustainable. Despite winning many awards especially for its education work, the museum failed to secure a permanent funding base (Griffiths 2004). Its attempt to address an otherwise unspeakable and disavowed history was met, at least initially, with considerable political hostility from potential funders and from the museum sector and broader instruments of governance. As one curator who worked on the project noted 'we were told that just by asking the question [about the relevance of colonial history] we were racist, even if we didn't realize it'; 'I found that very frustrating that there was this assumption that we must be right-wing, we must be racist and we were going to do this glorification of the Imperial past'.²⁵ The parlous state of BECM's financial base can, thus, perhaps be linked directly to more general patterns of aphasia and disavowal and the lack of commitment to engage with colonial histories. At one level, such early responses to it clearly suggest a reductionist assumption and the misunderstanding of the intellectual enquiry that should surely inform all public statements of history made by museums. But at another, it represents the difficulty of negotiating such an historical narrative within systems of governance and finance on which so many museums depend.

At the time of writing, potential changes were afoot that promise to address perhaps the position that we have discussed in this paper. The object, photograph and film collections of the closed and disbanded BECM have been transferred by deed of gift to Bristol City Council's Museum and Art Gallery and Bristol City Archives.²⁶ This acquisition and integration means that, for the first time, a local authority museum and archive service have responsibility for a major collection relating to the multiple relations of the colonial past, outside the remit of ethnography. While it is significant that the ethnography department is seen as one of the areas in which the collections might be used, Deputy Leader of Bristol City Council, Simon Cook, stated

The collections will form an important and most appropriate addition to the city's holdings and we look forward to making them available for study, through exhibitions and as a further enhancement of our educational programmes. We would anticipate that the collections will eventually be displayed in the City Museum.²⁷

The use of the word 'appropriate' is perhaps significant. This transfer will integrate the visual legacy of the colonial past into the overall narrative of the city's past. The photograph collection is currently being assessed, sorted and prepared, eventually for recataloguing.²⁸ While one

does not preclude the other necessarily, it will be interesting to see whether the photographs simply settle into a specialist commercially-orientated picture library, or whether they will be made to work in order to create new resonances and new narratives in publically visible histories. Time will tell.

Closing Thoughts

At this point, we want to widen the discussion to consider the ways in which the broad photographic invisibility of the colonial past in UK museums stands as both a symbol and a metaphor for wider patterns of disavowal. We would argue that the directness, ambiguity and recodability of photographs risks unsettling the carefully crafted state multiculturalism that museums routinely deliver through celebratory narratives. Part of the problem would appear to be a simultaneous nervousness about photographs and an undervaluing of their potential role. Numerous curators commented to us that 'photographs are too difficult', 'they don't tell the truth', that 'they need [more] contextualisation than can be done in the gallery'.²⁹ This can be related perhaps to the systemic undervaluation and marginalization of the status of photographs as sources and as integral to the knowledge systems of museums. Consequently, serious engagement with photographs is outside the experience of most curators. The challenge then of controlling the semiotic energy of the photograph in the museum for many seems too great. Yet, as the permanent galleries at the BECM in Bristol demonstrated, by thinking through the work photographs can do this and, by framing them appropriately, it is possible to use complex and hard hitting photographs within the museum space.

Yet constructivist models of exhibitions, which have been the dominant model for some years now, acknowledge the co-construction of knowledge within museum spaces and that displays and exhibitions will invite a number of different readings. Such an approach recognizes also that some misreadings must be consciously set up in the museum space as aberrant and invalid, and the visitor guided towards preferred readings (Sandell 2007: 11). It is, perhaps, this relationship that structures the principal difficulty for any museal articulation of the colonial past. Any telling of this history cannot trade in the absolutes of, for instance, slavery or the Holocaust, if it is to engage varying visitor constituencies in a range of intelligent considerations about the nature of the colonial past. But there is also the danger that aberrant readings produced will include the reinforcing of racist attitudes harmful to the social good and the civic probity of contemporary Britain rather than challenge those attitudes. The difficulties of using photographs to explore the banal traces of this challenging history lie then in the competing and contradictory requirements of, on the one hand, the constraints inherent in the museum form and, on the other, the narrative complexity demanded by any address of the colonial past. The result, as one curator put it to us, is that '[s]pecific histories become distanced, and one is left with generalization and depoliticization' which 'is only brought out in response to specific problems or audiences, but not part of the culture of institutions'.³⁰

Negative heritage, such as that which clusters around the colonial past, is constituted around strategies of both remembering and forgetting. Yet there is a tendency to elide negative histories 'in a deliberate policy of collective amnesia' while styles of colonial remembering remain difficult for museums (Meskell 2002: 561, 566). One of the tasks of a renewed colonial studies 'would be to sharpen and rethink what constitutes an effective history of the present' (Stoler 2008: 211). But, if this is so, the terms on which such potential might be premised, especially in museums, remains undecided. As Ashworth has commented,

...the assembly of the heritage product is indelibly linked to messages which are not marginal accretions to the process, or a rare perversion of it, but form an essentially binding medium, without which the various components selected from the past could not be transformed into heritage products. (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996: 28)

The disavowal of the colonial past in museums removes that part of historical narrative from the productive potentials of such a process. Is it possible, for example, to address the colonial past in museum space in ways that do not comfortably distance this history into anthropology, or do not shape the narrative as one that ends, redemptively, with celebratory and ludic multiculturalism?

Should representations of the colonial past in UK museums be subject to a form of the 'critical preservation', which has characterized the post-war confrontation with the Nazi past in Germany (Meskell 2002: 566; MacDonald 2009)?

The photographic trace of the relationships of the colonial past offers a way into these histories, but it is one that can only be realized through the critical engagement with photographs themselves and the work that they could be made to do in museums. Photographs offer an infinite variability as markers of past relations, rather than a monolithic and reductionist expression. Although not without its problems, as the BECM in Bristol showed, photographs can be used to both anchor and complicate a difficult history, to carve out and suggest routes through a complex landscape.

Photographs are sources that are bathed in humanity – they literally people history – but at another level they confuse narratives and open up to the uncontrolled space of the imagination. They can become dangerous objects in territories as contested as the colonial past, as the curators of *Into the Heart of Africa* learned to their cost. This is, of course, true of all museum objects and, in very many ways, exhibitions are exercises in controlled readings. However, the realist insistence of the photographic image and the social expectations of its function in the museum, renders the confluence of the photograph and the difficult and challenging history of the common colonial past uncertain territory for museums. However, those interested in the construction of public historical narratives in the museum space must 'register and analyse how certain kinds of queries are rendered safe for public consumption' and whether this in the end is a viable historical practice (Stoler 2011: 144).

Arguably, the nuance and understanding such a strategy engenders is becoming even more vital. Since we started this research in July 2010, there has been an accelerating political unraveling of state multiculturalism as it has been pronounced 'dead' in the political gesturing of, successively, Germany, the UK and the Netherlands, remaining also the focus of heated debate in France.³¹ This adds a further dimension to the understanding of the possible role of photographs in a postcolonial Europe and the role of museums in articulating this complex history. Further, one ponders the effect on museums and their representational practices around the colonial past of the potential reinstitutionalization of 'good' colonial histories within the schools' curriculum in the UK under the current government initiative.

The photographic invisibility of the colonial past in museum displays is not a question of ignorance but part of, as Stoler (2011: 122) puts it so powerfully, the 'affective practices that both elicit and elude recognition of how colonial histories matter and how colonial pasts become muffled and manifest'. Arguably, the failure of museums to integrate colonial pasts into their narratives, has actually worked against the wider liberal agendas to which museums subscribe by 'spurn[ing] its substantial lessons, and obstruct[ing] the development of multiculturalism by making the formative experience of Empire less profound and less potent in shaping the life of the colonizing powers than it actually was' (Gilroy 2004: 2).

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Notes

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- ² Significantly, beneath a narrative of English colonialism in Scotland, the narratives of the overseas colonial past in National Museum of Scotland, follow the pattern that we describe here.
- ³ This is not to suggest that these histories have a comfortable closure or fail to resonate still, but rather that they are locked into a redemptive narrative structure that is generally assumed to have closure for a British audience.
- ⁴ One is reminded here of the emergence of photographs in relation to the Mau Mau atrocity files in the UK in 2011.
- ⁵ See also Meskell (2002) and the Challenging History project at City University London (<http://www.city.ac.uk/arts/creative-practice-and-enterprise/cultural-policy-and-management/challenginghistory>). [Last accessed 20 December 2012].
- ⁶ See for instance Midgley (1998) and Sinha (1995).
- ⁷ This is revealed by any trawl through the policy and strategy outputs of DCMS, MGC and its successor MLA (for instance, DCMS (2005)).
- ⁸ Curator interview, 6 April 2011.
- ⁹ *Without Sanctuary* now has an online presence at <http://withoutsanctuary.org/>.
- ¹⁰ Curator interview, 26 January 2011. For another example see Mead 2012.
- ¹¹ Curator of *Without Sanctuary* at Rivington Place and Autograph ABP Director, Mark Sealy, commented to us that the history of Britain's colonial past and the production of lynching imagery in America do not simply run in parallel; it is rather that 'the legacy of African Americans is completely tied to Empire. The story of the movement of black people into those spaces, those Africans in that space, and, if you like, [...] the germination of that violence is absolutely embedded in Empire' (interview, 29 September 2011). However, while it is true that Britain's colonial past and the production of lynching photographs in America might be usefully articulated, it is also true that this is not the most immediate context for understanding the latter, nor provides the most direct confrontation with the former for visitors to UK museums.
- ¹² For a discussion of these issues see Edwards, Lien and Mead (forthcoming)
- ¹³ Butler (1999) This volume offers a thorough account of the exhibition, the background to the protests and the museological significance of this extended episode.
- ¹⁴ This exhibition remains pertinent because, although it had an influence on a range of museum practices, the use of photographs was not one of them. If anything, concern about the demonstrated ambiguities and ironic use of photographs pushed that usage back to a straightforward and unproblematised didacticism on the one hand, and on the other rendered a whole range of images 'unusable' in the public space.
- ¹⁵ There are major conservation issues in exhibiting original photographs and the permanent nature of Gallery 36 precludes this. However, the facsimiles of albumen prints, gelatin prints and post cards, used in the display give a good approximation of the formats, textures and tonal ranges of the originals. For the significance of this in museums, see Edwards and Hart (2004).
- ¹⁶ Curator Interview, 19 May 2011.

- ¹⁷ BECM opened in 2002 and was closed to the public in 2008, with education programmes ceasing in 2009. Plans to move to London were shelved owing to financial pressures and allegations of management irregularities. The PhotoCLEC project had access to the museum's collections and galleries until early 2011.
- ¹⁸ Curator Interview, 25 August 2011.
- ¹⁹ Curator Interview, 25 August 2011.
- ²⁰ See A. Adu Boahen (1990).
- ²¹ See <http://photoclec.dmu.ac.uk/content/photographic-treatments-benin-punitive-expedition-two-british-museums> [Last accessed 18 December 2012]
- ²² Curator Interview, 3 May 2011.
- ²³ Curator Interview, 3 May 2011.
- ²⁴ In National Museums of Scotland, the Pakistan origin of raw materials for the jute industry is noted, but not visually represented.
- ²⁵ Curator interviews, 3 May 2011; 25 August 2011.
- ²⁶ <http://museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/29032012-becm-collections-given-bristol-council> [last accessed 19 December 2012]
- ²⁷ <http://www.bristol247.com/2012/03/29/empire-museum-collection-given-to-bristol-61388/> [last accessed 19 December 2012].
- ²⁸ We are very grateful to Richard Burley of Bristol Record Office for keeping us up-to-date on BECM's photograph collection. BECM's *Images of Empire* website of about 6000 photographs will soon be reinstated online, under the auspices of Bristol Archives (Burley to Edwards, personal communication 21 December 2012).
- ²⁹ Curator interviews, 25 January 2011, 3 May 2011 and 19 May 2011.
- ³⁰ Curator interview, 15 March 2011.
- ³¹ See, for instance, UK Prime Minister David Cameron's speech, delivered at the Munich Security Conference, 5 February 2011, in which he claimed that '[u]nder the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We've failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We've even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values.' <<http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference/>> [last accessed 28 November 2011].

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