

Prisoners of Love: Affect, containment and alternative futures

Esi Eshun & Louisa Minkin

28 June 2024

Our 2022-24 project, *Prisoners of Love: Affect, Containment and Alternative Futures* aimed to bring colonial-era collections lodged in UK museums (Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford; Horniman Museum and Gardens, London; Hastings Museum and Art Gallery East Sussex) into proximity with dispersed home peoples, enabling participants from Ghana, from India and from Blackfoot Territory in Canada along with individuals from UK-based diasporas, to respond to complex colonial and settler colonial histories, linking Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia. Throughout the project, we aimed to explore how participating artists, curators and researchers might work together to revitalise relations with objectified and sequestered museum items, through a range of material, digital, affective and discursive responses. In doing so, we acknowledged [with philosopher Yuk Hui] the techno, onto-epistemological and axiological diversity alongside the many affinities that characterised these relations.

The UK based participants initially comprised a small self-selecting group of MA Fine Art students from Central Saint Martins and Winchester School of Art - many of whom continued their involvement post-graduation - alongside members of staff from the institutions and from Pitt Rivers Museum/Oxford University. Functioning as a transdisciplinary, transnational, extra-curricular and extra mural set of activities and emergent processes, the project encompassed museum and gallery visits, object handling sessions, academic, artist and curator talks, training in digital technologies including photogrammetry, 3D modelling and Reflectance Transformation Imaging, opportunities for bronze casting, 3D printing and working with AR, a residency programme including informal discussions around theory and practice, four exhibition opportunities, and participation in discussions and virtual visits with overseas cohorts - a relatively extensive set of activities despite the modest budget.

While all UK based students were initially from diasporic backgrounds, including students from US/Palestine, France/Burkina Faso and Indonesia, those who remained longest with the project all claimed an African background of some kind, with one of British Caribbean origin, and another describing herself as Ugandan Asian. Meanwhile, the main overseas partners were, on the one hand, students and staff members of the Blackfoot nation attached to the Indigenous Art Programme at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, and, on the other, archaeology students and staff from the University of Ghana, who, in both cases, joined UK participants to take

part in dedicated virtual viewing sessions of objects selected from ethnographic collections at Hastings and Pitt Rivers museums.

Although this paper focuses on the above participants, a separate strand of the project, led by Ian Dawson and the AHRC GCRF Rethinking Waste Project, involved the Compound 13 Lab, in Dharavi, Mumbai, as part of a broader remit focusing on the knowledge politics of the informal waste management industry in Dharavi. The PoL team harnessed remote viewing sessions to connect members of the Lab with objects at the Horniman Museum, related to items in common use in their community, scanning, capturing and disseminating digital files for Augmented Reality use and for creating 3D printed versions made from waste materials - a reminder of the iterative, mutable and trans-locational nature of digital forms, scales and life ways.

Framing our methodology primarily around virtual visits, transient workspaces and relationship-building, we aimed to bring both remote and local participants into museum collection stores by developing techniques to improve virtual interactions, and to facilitate the circulation of knowledge and distributed art practices. By working with digital technologies alongside more 'traditional' forms of making, we were able to summon up notions of avatars or digital ghosts, capable of liberating themselves from museums, enroute to new ideas, connections and meanings. In a manner analogous to Yuk Hui's idea of cosmotechnics, we sought to position archival material within past and present interrelated technological and cosmological frameworks reflective of the complexity of the thinking, technical processes and ethics embedded in their making and uses. As a result, the research we were conducting moved through lived experience, metabolized in techno-diverse and idiosyncratic ways.

Among the wider aims of PoL was for participants to produce creative and critical responses in relation to their individual artistic, research and professional development interests. An increased understanding of the socio-material, historical and cultural contexts, among others, of objects, would, it was hoped, improve awareness of colonial networks of capture, extraction and classification, and, by extension, enhance understanding of the participants' own positioning within such networks, while providing them with tools, such as guidance on museum accessioning procedures, to help mitigate against their potential instrumentalisation at the hands of institutions keen to demonstrate the strength of their decolonial credentials. Similarly, by circumventing, in part, the mediating and gatekeeping role of museum professionals, the project aimed to question the reductive categorical frameworks ascribed to objects and the communities which made them, emphasising instead the notion of "living connections animated through the exchange of story" and through other forms of reciprocal engagement.

Rather than deploying an overarching authorial voice, we suggested *that knowledge is networked, collaborative, and in process*. In a similar vein, we sought to contend that a collection is not simply held by one institution but exists as a fragmented body in multiple places connected through material presence and through intangible modes of expression, including those of story, song, memory, conversation

In considering whether we could incorporate this [ontological?] approach in our exhibition and collection practices, in order to unbraid the hegemonic power/ knowledge structures inherent to museums, we asked participants, both in real life and virtual settings to preselect objects from online catalogues prior to their detailed examination.

In producing creative responses to the objects, we found, contrary perhaps to expectations, that participants tended towards personal and inventive responses rather than literal ones, linking at times, their lived experience to broader political contexts, while configuring the past in ways that complicated notions of singular, objective truths. For the UK participants, many, though not all the objects chosen seemed to embody resonant emotional content that, to some extent, appeared to answer gaps in knowledge and lived experience resulting from geographical, historical and cultural estrangements from respective 'lands of origin' while also reflecting existing research interests. Items chosen from Pitt Rivers ranged from a sword attributed to a region of Nigeria where the participant's parents had been brought up, to a doll fashioned from a desiccated corn cob to a woman's belt associated with an Akan/Ghanaian background, the apparent mundanity of which, was intended to prompt an enquiry into the museum's criteria for storage and display.

Although the viewing sessions with Blackfoot and Ghanaian partners were not intended to facilitate notions of 'digital repatriation', their ability to render a degree of sensorial contiguity to the objects through tailored, multi scalar software, allowing close observation and a semblance of the touch and feel of objects, meant that participants could identify materials, indicate provenance in some cases, and on occasion, become reacquainted with largely forgotten craft techniques - a factor which resulted in new variants of practices as seen in the hat created by Deserae Tailfeathers for her mother, later turned into a 3D printed artwork by Ian Dawson.

Of note however was the tendency, observed in some participants, to refuse to offer creative responses, and to appear reluctant to draw specific conclusions – a stance perhaps explained by one Blackfoot student's suggestion that they lacked the experience to produce works that might, in retrospect, be positioned as redressing institutional failings. However, this group was also distinguished by a willingness, - on building trust - to offer work for refiguring and recontextualisation by others.

For their part, Ghanaian participants responded enthusiastically to a virtual viewing session with Pitt Rivers, which predominantly featured their selection of Akan gold weights. These items - small, personalised brass or bronze figurines used as counterweights for measuring gold dust, the currency in pre-colonial Ghana/Gold Coast - were discussed in some depth, with students pointing to the place of the objects within wider socio-economic, spiritual, and material/technological contexts. In response and in preparation for an exhibition, U.K. participants chose objects of their own for 3D printing and bronze casting – many of which bore comparison with gold weights - while one member, already engaged in similar research, printed images of the Pitt Rivers weights on fabric, presenting the work, in collaboration with others, in a number of different forms and settings, effectively bringing the weights back into compromised kinds of functionality and circulation.

A similar idea emerged in the context of the project residency and exhibition, OST, held in a disused bank, a short distance away from the Bank of England. A large number of brightly coloured 3D printed peanuts modelled from scans of gold weights were gifted to exhibition visitors in order to draw attention to multiple, clashing, overlapping, cross cultural value systems, symbolised by the original weights, by the peanuts they represented, and by the rarified digital art economies the work also alluded to.

Elsewhere in OST, preoccupations with story, transformation and varied cosmologies, revealed themselves in fragmentary fashion. Commissioned by Pitt Rivers to work with its sound archives, artist Charles Nyiha invoked animistic lifeworlds in a soundscape located within the bank's vaults, with the recordings spatialised by dropping speakers into the bore holes already drilled into the building's walls and floor. Other works that adopted a similar syncretic approach included Adanma Nwankwo's performance of a River Goddess, in which she walked serene and barefoot in a self-made dress through the City of London tracing the route of the sunken river Walbrook. Elsewhere in the exhibition, other tutelary figures emerged, including the multiple emanations of the AI generated future selves of artist, Dawn Codex, caught in a decaying, digital, dystopian, future City of London marked by a techno futurist African aesthetic linked to her encounters with Pitt Rivers artefacts.

On the whole, few U.K. participants engaged directly with colonialism, although Rihanata Bigey used text and body prints to refer to the subsuming of linguistic diversity in Burkina Faso under colonial and neo-colonial rule. Elsewhere, Blackfoot participants referred more frequently to such themes, alluding to the collective impact of residential schools in Darby Herman's hawk painting and to the desire to remove a public memorial to one of Columbus' ships. Meanwhile, a digital painting by Ghana's Mame Afua Mensah took inspiration from a fertility doll to invoke the richness of Ghana's past and potential futures.

In the light of these cases, we might consider, as we go forward, what means to take to aggregate such works, through what means they might become graspable as knowledge systems. We need also to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples and those of the global majority in general, face systemic issues in regard to digital sovereignty, collective ownership, and legitimacy in exercising authority over their heritage. We need to do more to understand the data landscape, the implicit personhood rights of 'objects' and the ways in which the 'digital' might be a key factor in figuring this question.

Our project encourages critical reflection on the intersection of digital technologies, representation, and power dynamics. It emphasises the need to interrogate the underlying assumptions and implications of digital practices, particularly within the context of museums and cultural institutions. In making 3D digital models, skeuomorphs or *container-forms*, of museum items, we are conjuring, presencing or liberating ghosts while, in dilemma, we locate with Seb Franklin¹ the deep history of digitality in the development of racial capitalism. Computational photography with its own origin story in the 1860s is just another teleologically deployed technology within the broader socio-cultural, socio-colonial, structures of modernity - of power, commodification and domination. Can we think with processes perverse to a dominant regime, and work heuristically with remnants and transient spaces counter-extracted from carceral institutional routine?

¹ Seb Franklin. *The Digitally Disposed: Racial Capitalism and the Informatics of Value*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021.