



## Can Social History Collections be Decolonised?

**What:** This one day seminar examines and explores definitions of, approaches to and reflections on decolonising social history collections. Through a combination of presentations, activities, facilitated sessions and a walk, this seminar encourages social history museum practitioners to develop and broaden their understanding of decolonising practices in the heritage sector, reflect on their own practice and to consider how different approaches could be relevant to their work.

**Who:** This seminar is suitable for practitioners who are interested in developing their understanding of decolonisation and its application in a social history heritage context. It is suitable for those with basic to intermediate knowledge of decolonising approaches.

**Venue:** University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT.

Room details TBA

**Date:** Thursday 28 March 2019, 10am-4.30pm

**Fee:** SHCG and Museum Detox members £35; non-members £50

Lunch not included

To **book** your place, please fill in this form: <https://goo.gl/forms/sXPqkxoAjwQmqVHv2>

*There are limited spaces available*

### **Free Place**

We are offering one free place to a SHCG member and one to a Museum Detox member who have not previously attended a SHCG event. Please complete this form to apply.

<https://goo.gl/forms/BjXnSZAPoprbDy263>



## **Programme**

**10am-10.15am**

Arrivals

**10.15am**

Welcome and introductions

**10.30am-11.15am**

### **Museum Decolonology 101**

Led by social activist Toyin Agbetu, this brief introduction to the core premise of various #Decolonise the Museum movements is designed for museum practitioners interested in learning how to address some of the issues raised and incorporate decolonial practices into their work.

**11.20am-11.40am**

### **Caribbean through a lens: the archive can never be decolonised**

In 2011 The National Archives digitised over 7,000 photographic records from their Caribbean collection. Were the mainly black and white photographs just a visual colonial representation of the colonised; albeit through a romanticised lens of the Caribbean?

2018 marked the 70th anniversary of Windrush and brought the Caribbean collection to life in new and imaginative ways. Sandra Shakespeare, who worked on the project, explores what lessons were learned from an archive that can never be decolonised and the stories that refuse to be colonised.

**11.40am-11.50am comfort break**

### **Concurrent sessions**

**11.50am-12.50pm**

**Curator led walk\***

**Bricks + Mortals: acknowledging racist histories in order to enable institutional change**



Curator Subhadra Das challenges the built environment to uncover a history hidden in plain sight. Using her *Bricks & Mortals* exhibition she explores a way for presenting contentious and difficult histories in active and nuanced ways.

*Spaces limited to the first 16 people booked*

**11.50am-12.50pm**

**Everything you Wanted to Ask about Decolonisation...**

informal breakout conversations between speakers and attendees where you can ask the questions important to you and have in-depth conversations. Attendees can submit questions in advance for discussion too. The session will be contextualized by broadcast journalist and academic Thembi Mutch.

**1pm-1.50pm Lunch - not provided, there are plenty of places nearby**

**2pm-2.30pm**

**What does decolonising social history mean?**

What is the impact and influence of colonialism on our social history? Independent consultant Thanh Sinden explores what decolonising the social history museum could look like.

**2.30pm-3.10pm**

**Decolonising rural museums: Where on earth do we start?**

*15 mins presentation followed by 25 minute brainstorming session*

Decolonising processes tend to focus on places with collections from colonial contexts or on places where audiences demand answers. But our colonial pasts aren't just in these obvious spheres. The Museum of English Rural Life (The MERL) is keen to begin a process of decolonising but problems aren't always explicit nor solutions forthcoming. Join Ollie Douglas, Curator of MERL Collections, as he describes an institution that knows it needs to start a process but doesn't quite know where or how to begin.



**3.10-3.20pm comfort break**

**3.20pm-4pm**

**Decolonising social history collections in a multicultural urban context**

This facilitated session explores how the Museum of London's groundbreaking *Peopling of London* (1994) exhibition would have differed if a decolonial methodology had been applied. Led by Head of Engagement Sara Wajid and Curator Vyki Sparkes.

**4pm-4.30pm**

Wrap up

**4.30pm END**

\*A self-guided tour can be conducted at any time by downloading the podcasts from UCL's website: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/culture/projects/bricks-mortals>

**Social History Curators Group**

SHCG strives to transform social history in museum through events, exhibitions, participative projects and publications.

<http://www.shcg.org.uk/Home>

**Museum Detox**

Museum Detox stands for the deconstruction of unjust racist infrastructures that continue to govern the UK's cultural institutions and museums.

<http://museumdetox.com/>

The seminar has supported by UCL Culture <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/culture/>



## Speaker Profiles

**Toyin Agbetu** is a community-educator, anthropologist and scholar-activist. He has participated in numerous panel and broadcast discussions addressing Afriphobia in the British media, reparations, decolonisation and the repatriation of cultural artefacts from British museums. He is currently based at University College London researching activism in East London for his PhD.

**Sandra Shakespeare** is an independent heritage and arts consultant working with organisations to support inclusion, diversity, wellbeing and community engagement strategies. A co-founder of BAME network Museum Detox, clients include: The V&A, AMA, London Mayor's Office, New Museum School and The National Archives, supporting organisational development on BAME Inclusive Practice.

**Thembi Mutch** started out work at the BBC World Service (Africa service) in the 90's, finding ways to navigate the WASP cultures of BBC TV and Radio 4, and even making a radio feature about the *Peopling of London* exhibition at the Museum of London. In 2000 she moved across to communication consulting (for ANC, Rwandan and Ethiopian Gov and various corporate and NGO's), and then into academia. She lived in Tanzania between 2008-2015, and has also lived and worked in South Africa, France, Palestine, Ethiopia. She is committed to finding imaginative, clever, workable and humorous ways to increase access (and control of) the telling, creation and curation of stories.

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

**Thanh Sinden** is a consultant in Audience Engagement, EDI, Wellbeing initiatives. Board member of Museum Detox, a network for BAME cultural professionals, they work to deconstruct systems of inequality in the cultural sector. Fellow of the RSA and Clore Social leadership peer learning, she works with teams in an empowering way.



**Ollie Douglas** is Curator of the Museum of English Rural Life (The MERL) and President of the ICOM-affiliated International Association of Agricultural Museums. His museum career began at the Pitt Rivers Museum where he held various roles before completing a PhD in the history of collections. At The MERL he is responsible for the management and interpretation of material connected with the English countryside. He grew up on a farm.

**Sara Wajid** was project lead for the 2017 *The Past is Now* exhibition at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery which explored decolonial approaches to collections through co-curation. She is now leading the programme to engage Londoners in shaping the new museum of London.

**Vyki Sykes** helps care for a collection of around 170,000 objects at the Museum of London as Curator of Social and Working History. The collections record the experience of living and working in London over the last 300 years and she curated two samples of the now infamous Whitechapel fatberg in the temporary exhibition *Fatberg!*, the most talked about display the museum has ever done.