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Legacies of colonial violence in natural history collections

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This paper includes references to terms and descriptions that may be culturally sensitive or are considered inappropriate today. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that this paper contains names of individuals who are now deceased.

Abstract

Most stories told by natural history museums inevitably concern natural history, using collections to engage people with biological and geological mechanisms behind life on earth. Such institutions typically aim to inspire visitors and other audiences to care for the natural world. However, including narratives exploring troubling *social* histories attached to the acquisition of *natural* history specimens is an important step towards decolonising natural history museums. Telling these stories is vital in enabling museums to better reflect the societies they serve. In this paper we use the specific histories of two specimens as case studies that involve issues which museums interested in decolonising their collections could explore and share with their audiences. Through a gorilla in Leeds, we consider exploitative attitudes of colonial collectors and the legacy of collecting in today's distribution of natural heritage. Through a springhare in Cambridge, collected by a soldier at a British-run concentration camp during the Second Boer War, we demonstrate how extraordinary acts of military violence took place in amassing Western museum collections. Collecting at or beyond frontiers of imperial invasions can represent a particularly brutal aspect of already violent colonial histories. Finally, we consider the challenge museums face in tackling these issues, including the constraints faced by curators in undertaking research of this kind.

Keywords: Decolonisation, decolonial approaches; history of science; natural history; curation; museum interpretation; museum ethics; social justice; documentation; specimen-based research

Introduction

The involvement of natural history museums in the establishment and maintenance of structurally racist perspectives on history is becoming increasingly acknowledged and discussed within the sector, as demonstrated by the Natural Sciences Collections Association's *Decolonising Natural Science Collections* 2020 conference (papers from which will form a special edition of this journal in 2021; videos of the presentations themselves are available at http://natsca.org/natsca-decolonising). White European men's roles in natural historical discoveries, and the collection of specimens, have long been a disproportionate focus of interpretation in the sector. By contrast, the contributions of people of colour, and women, in those discoveries have often been omitted or underplayed. This view of history through an artificially white lens not only

distorts history, passively perpetuating notions of white supremacy, but also disenfranchises non-white audiences (Das and Lowe, 2018). Many museums' visitor demographics do not represent the diversity of the communities they are intended to serve – for example the latest data from the Department of Digital, Culture, Media & Sport's *Taking Part* survey found that 'Black respondents were less likely to have visited museums in 2019/20 (28%) than White, Mixed and Asian respondents (46-63%), a similar trend to previous years' (Department for Digital, Culture Media and Sport, 2020) – and the biased representation of white-centred histories may be one reason why (Das and Lowe, 2018). Fortunately, there are a number of steps we can take to improve our interpretation and collections management with a hope to mitigate this. At the same time, the museum sector needs to develop robust evaluative tools to demonstrate whether decolonisation does indeed increase audience diversity.

Decolonial practice in museums involves addressing these historical imbalances in the narratives represented in museum galleries and programming (e.g. The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, 2020). Such activities are based on breaking down systemic hierarchies where European narratives have typically been considered superior to any others, for example by showing how colonised people's contributions have been side-lined in order to elevate European achievements, or when we go about exploring the ways that museum collections were put together based on unequal power balances as a product of empire. Archival research can uncover the colonial roots by which collections were amassed for museums, in order to inform interpretation. In this paper we revisit the more typical forms of colonial narratives associated with natural history collections, before moving onto more violent examples of where collections come from. The examples which follow are intended as potential case studies for how other museum researchers could approach decolonial practice in natural history museums.

Museums as colonial legacies

As European governments directed exploratory 'voyages of discovery' across the globe, beginning in earnest in the seventeenth century, knowledge of a country's natural history often equated to knowledge of the potential resources – be they animal, vegetable or mineral – that could be exploited there. The European colonial machine sought to identify and export these resources from colonised lands for imperial gain, and museum collections are repositories of their endeavours.

There are geographic biases to these collections. British museums, for example, are far better stocked with specimens from countries in the former British Empire than regions where Great Britain was not the colonial power, such as Russia and China. This is due both to the relative ease with which colonial officials, traders, teachers, missionaries, soldiers, farmers, doctors, miners, foresters etc. could travel to and through 'their' colonised territories and collect and export specimens, and to the political imperative to investigate the potential value of natural resources which could be exploited there (Ashby, 2017). In addition to the scientific and economic value tied to research specimens, game-hunting was another factor driving the opening of in-roads into countries' interiors (e.g. Evans, 1822) or closely followed initial settlement. Trophy specimens such as mounted heads and taxidermy specimens are a legacy of this activity (Machin, 2020).

In recent decades, museums have struggled to find ways to display mounted trophy heads within interpretative frameworks focusing on themes such as animal biology or the environment. The mission statements of twenty-first-century museums typically explicitly reference the institution's role in engaging audiences with the natural world and inspiring them to take action to protect it. Mounted heads are so obviously associated with hunting for pleasure that they arguably undermine museums' conservation messages unless carefully interpreted. These specimens have regularly been confined to storerooms rather than public display, presumably because they are increasingly considered distasteful (Wade, 2016). Strategies to more openly explore the social histories, as well as natural histories, of zoological collections could find a new use for these unfashionable specimens by making them a focus of decolonial interpretations. Rather than avoiding our colonial past in natural history galleries, looking at our collections from a decolonial perspective could help museums to reinterpret and update them for a broader diversity of audiences.

Mok the gorilla: exploitative attitudes

A popular specimen displayed in Leeds City Museum's (LEEDM) Life on Earth gallery is a western lowland gorilla *Gorilla gorilla gorilla* Savage, 1847, known as Mok, an abbreviation of Mo Koundje (LEEDM.C.1938.40.1.4079) (Figure 1). His articulated skeleton (LEEDM.C.1938.40.2.4080) is stored at Leeds Discovery Centre. He is unusual in the Life on Earth gallery in that his interpretation comprises information about his individual history, rather than more general information about gorillas. This gorilla is a good example of how the history

Figure 1. The taxidermy mount of Mok the Western Lowland Gorilla at Leeds City Museum. (LEEDM.C.1938.40.1.4079). © Leeds Museums and Galleries.

and interpretation of a museum specimen can be used to help visitors look more deeply at the legacy of colonialism. The current label reads: 'This is "Mok". He lived at London Zoo in the 1930s. You can see his skeleton at Leeds Museum Discovery Centre'. Mok's previous owner, André Charles Capagorry (1894-1981), was a colonial administrator in what was the French Congo, now Republic of the Congo (also known as Congo Brazzaville). He had kept Mok as a pet for two years, alongside a female gorilla named Moina Massa, before selling them to London Zoo in 1932. Details of Mok's life have been gathered from British and French press archives, archives of the Zoological Society of London, the Natural History Museum, London, and the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, France. Mok's life, including his journey from Africa to London, and life at London Zoo, forms the focus of a future publication (Machin, in press).

Mo Koundje is thought to mean 'little chief' in a Congolese language (Boulenger, 1932). Using an African language to name the gorillas may simply have been a mark of respect to colonised Africans, or an acknowledgement of the gorilla's home country, comparable to the modern practice of European researchers giving African names to gorillas in habituated groups, or in zoos. However, it is also possible that Mo Koundje's name was meant to mock the appearance of the local people living under colonial control. For example, Merfield (1956) recounts being given a young gorilla who had been named after a 'particularly ugly chief' of a nearby village. While a pet, Mok was fed a 'European' diet, including food imported from France (Baker, 1932). It is likely that he was better fed and sheltered than most Congolese people under French rule, including those employed to help care for him. Accounts of gorillas kept as pets in colonial Africa include several examples of gorillas who ate with white families 'at table', using cutlery (e.g. Zwilling, 1956), and sleeping in beds in their white owners' houses (e.g. Geddes, 1955).

The existence of gorillas and other animals in British and other European museum collections is inextricably linked to colonialism, and violence. The more deeply colonisers penetrated the Congolese forests, attracted by ivory and other natural resources (MacKenzie, 2017), the more vulnerable gorillas became to human threats, including hunting for trophies, museum specimens and bushmeat, and conflict over resources. The impact on gorillas of collecting for museum collections is documented by hunters' accounts, and by gorillas' corporeal remains displayed in museums (e.g. Akeley, 1923; Merfield, 1957). But hunting expeditions also exerted huge tolls on colonised people in Africa and elsewhere. Hundreds of people travelled long distances from their homes and families, and paid meagre wages to work in dire conditions, undertaking work such as carrying heavy equipment for hundreds of miles, clearing undergrowth, or skinning and preserving carcasses. In Mary Hastings Bradley's (1922) account of Carl Akeley's (1864-1926) 1921-22 expedition to the former Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, also known as Congo Kinshasa) to film and collect gorillas for the American Museum of Natural History, the treatment of colonised Africans is all too often, albeit casually, laid bare, as they knowingly made African people vulnerable to exposure from cold, predation, exhaustion and malnutrition. Hundreds of African men, labelled as 'boys', were hired as porters, their status described by Bradley as 'voluble chattels'. Carrying huge volumes of unnecessary luxuries such as cups and saucers, tinned soft cheese and jam, porters subsisted on daily rations of basic food such as plantains. Bradley's five-year-old child accompanied the expedition, adding nothing to its scientific value but adding to the burden on other expedition

members. White hunters were carried over rivers 'on the backs of the nearest natives'. It seems white hunters sometimes had more regard for the animals they were hunting than the welfare of the African people essential for the success of their expeditions. The goal of acquiring the gorillas wanted for the museum, and indeed personal hunting ambitions, seemed to take precedence over the humane treatment of African employees.

Despite the independence of African countries from European empires, the worldwide distribution of African natural history collections in museums in the global north, and their comparative lack in Africa, forms a colonial legacy that perpetuates an unequal power relationship. While many museums have gorilla remains in their collections, there is a dearth of gorilla material in African museums. For example, forty British museums contain gorilla material, compared to just seven in the whole of Africa, none of which are in countries where gorillas are native (Cooper and Hull, 2017). Researchers and the public in Britain continue to be able to access and learn from gorilla specimens such as Mok, while people in Republic of the Congo, his homeland, do not have access to any gorilla specimens in museums. Although natural heritage, in the form of museum specimens, is shared, it is not equally, nor fairly, distributed.

Recent advances have made data from biological specimens far more accessible wherever they are held in the world, through the sharing of genetic sequences and 3D- and surface-scanning data. Making these valuable data freely accessible through online repositories can be viewed as one way of decolonising natural history collections, by reducing barriers to access. In other parts of the museum sector, repatriation of objects to once-colonised countries is regularly discussed as one possible outcome of decolonisation work. It seems increasing likely that this could become more common in natural history museum discourses, in order to help return some of the natural heritage and its associated intellectual capital to countries of origin. The effects of colonialism on the conservation of endangered wildlife in Africa are ongoing (Garland, 2008). While museum curators in countries such as the UK often use collections to help inspire people to conserve biodiversity, perhaps we should consider the benefits they could bring to people (and biodiversity) in previously colonised nations.

Violence and collecting

Although the terms 'settlement' and 'settler' are commonly used when discussing the migration of European colonisers to colonised territories, this language suggests a gentle movement, rather like settling snow (similarly, 'collecting' serves as a sanitised euphemism for what most people call 'killing'). However, imperial expansion was a typically violent process involving military and non-military force, and/or the threat of it. As such, one approach to decolonisation could be for museums to acknowledge that violence against Indigenous peoples was one factor that ultimately led to the collection of specimens in their care. The causal strength of that link depends on the specific history of how they were collected and by whom. For instance, the people who collected specimens were either passive beneficiaries of the violence, collecting in a post-frontier landscape after Indigenous populations had been dispossessed of their land and/or sovereignty (although often in collaboration with them); or direct agents in it, simultaneously collecting and dispossessing. These two categories are not always easily separated, but here we explore different roles played by individuals operating in colonised regions, in amassing collections and contributing to the violence as examples to illustrate part of the spectrum of the links between violence and collecting.

Early European collecting in Australia

Shortly after the invasion of Australia by the British in 1788, Joseph Banks (1743-1820) employed and enlisted collectors to build natural historical knowledge of Britain's newly acquired lands. Banks himself had been the naturalist aboard the HMS *Endeavour*, under the command of James Cook (1728-1779), which arrived on the southeast coast of New Holland in April 1770. Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had lived there for at least 60,000 years, Cook subsequently took possession of the east coast of what would become known as Australia for the Crown. As a result of two weeks of collecting plants around the location where they first made landfall, Cook renamed the site Botany Bay (its existing Indigenous name was Kundul). Banks then went on to recommend to parliament that Britain should establish a colony there (although when the First Fleet arrived in 1788, they were decidedly unimpressed with the site Banks suggested, and New South Wales was founded with a settlement slightly further round the coast at Port Jackson) (McHugh, 2006).

Banks maintained a close interest and control of Australian scientific discovery (Moyal, 1986). For example, he employed George Caley (1770-1829) to travel to New South Wales specifically to

gather knowledge and specimens of the fledgling colony's natural history. He arrived in 1800 and the arrangement would last for eight years before Banks approved Caley's return home. Over 500 of Caley's botany specimens are now in London's Natural History Museum (Natural History Museum, 2020a).

Caley made the journey from England aboard the HMS *Speedy* along with Philip King (1758-1808), who was being installed as the colony's third Governor, and Caley stayed with King in Government House when they first arrived. Both men had been mentored by Banks, and both would write to him regularly with natural history updates throughout their time there (Olsen and Russell, 2019). It was King who sent Banks – and Europe – the first complete preserved specimen of the Platypus *Ornithorhynchus anatinus* Shaw, 1799, a species which had become a central interest of European naturalists. Banks had previously been sent platypus skin specimens by King's predecessor, Governor John Hunter, who was credited with the 'discovery' of the first specimen he sent, although in reality it had been caught by a Darug man Hunter had been watching (Home, 1802) (the Darug are a group of Indigenous Australians from the area that now incorporates Sydney).

Perhaps reflective of their different roles in the new settlements, Caley and King had very different approaches to relationships with the Indigenous population and how that interplayed with specimen -collecting. King and the people working under him used extreme violence to suppress Indigenous resistance to white settlement. As a result, the history of the platypus becomes associated with the actions of the man that supplied the landmark specimen.

In their exceptional 2019 book on Indigenous Australians' contributions to early zoology, *Australia's First Naturalists*, Penny Olsen and Lynette Russell describe how Pemulwuy (c.1750-1802), the Eora resistance-leader (Eora is the name given to the people whose country includes the areas that the British first settled, near what is now Sydney), had been shot dead in June 1802, after a reward had been offered for his killing. King sent his head as a trophy to Banks, writing, 'understanding that the possession of a New Hollander's head is among the desiderata, I have put it in spirits and forwarded it by the *Speedy*' (in Olsen and Russell, 2019). In essence, this suggests that King and Caley had been sent to Australia with a list of things that would be of interest to Banks (Banks was in the habit of providing such lists for his collectors in other parts of the world (Warren, 1958)), and that list included not only platypuses, but an Aboriginal person's head. King used the opportunity provided by the killing of Pemulwuy by the military to fulfil Banks' order. In requesting an Aboriginal person's head be sent to him in England, Banks must have been aware that this would most probably result from an act of deadly violence.

It would obviously be overstatement to imply that all colonial collecting was so closely linked to such violence. As a contrasting example, Caley was one of the Europeans in the colony who didn't want any of this unrest and made clear his intention to establish good terms in order to be able to exchange information about plants and animals in return for food and tools. Within two years he had learned enough language to communicate with a number of the local Eora groups and to an extent mixed freely with them. It is important to note, however, that this doesn't necessarily mean that Caley was trading with Aboriginal Australians on equal terms, and his attitudes were unquestionably paternalistic and proprietary (Olsen and Russell, 2019). Nonetheless, he protested that conflicts with 'the natives' – which he considered to mostly have been instigated by the colonisers – were hampering his ability to build the relationships he considered so vital to collecting facts and material to send back to Banks. Caley clearly appreciated the value of the natural historical insights of the Eora and other Darug people. He regularly mentioned by name such people who had contributed his understanding, particularly a young Darug man named Moowattin (c1791-1816) who became a close associate over many years (and went on to travel to England with Caley, however following his return he became the first Aboriginal person to be tried and hung in New South Wales, having been found guilty of rape – a crime he insisted he was innocent of), Narrang Jack (who was later proclaimed an 'Enem [y] to the Peace and good Order of Society' for resisting dispossession (Macquarie, 1816) and Cadingera. This mark of respect was often not practised by colonial naturalists around the world. He also told Banks that he 'could single out several that surpass numbers of Englishmen in mental qualifications' (Olsen and Russell, 2019). Collectors with a more egalitarian approach such as Caley – particularly when they name their collaborators – potentially offer museums the opportunity to communicate that people of colour played a major role in scientific discovery in their role as expert naturalists and collectors. This decolonial approach has the potential for a greater diversity of people to feel represented in museums and the history of science (Ashby, 2020).

Collecting in the act of colonisation

To date, the majority of the discourse around colonial collections has centred on stories dating from periods of established colonial rule, typically taking place within the frontiers of colonial settlements or where European administration and control was already well established but limited settlement took place (such as India). However, there is a subset of collections which date from the specific acts of invasion or the expansions of frontiers. These closer associations with colonial violence – in time, space and personnel – provide potential for particularly poignant examples for decolonial practice. Specimens collected by imperial military troops as they were taking possession of other countries represent the particularly brutal end of the spectrum linking museum collecting and violent colonial histories. These could be considered in a similar way to the punitive military expeditions, such as those in Benin, China and Abyssinia, which already form a significant part of the discourse around decolonisation more readily associated with other museum disciplines in the UK and other European countries. Because of their obvious association with acts of colonial violence, these specimens offer tangible foci for decolonial narratives, particularly for audiences that are relatively unfamiliar with museum interpretation exploring decolonisation.

A springhare from a Boer War concentration camp

One example of this kind of collecting is on display in the University Museum of Zoology, Cambridge (UMZC): a taxidermy specimen (UMZC E.1441) of a springhare *Pedetes capensis* Forster, 1778, a large hopping rodent from South Africa (Figure 2). It was collected at a British-run concentration camp during the Second Boer War (1899-1902), by a captain of the 5th Royal Irish Rifles, Gerald Edwin Hamilton Barrett-Hamilton (1871-1914).

Barrett-Hamilton was a child of empire, having been born in India to Irish parents. He went to school at Harrow and studied Natural Sciences at Trinity College, Cambridge. Barrett-Hamilton was later employed by the British Museum (Natural History) (BMNH, now the Natural History Museum (NHM)) and is celebrated as a naturalist, particularly for his contributions to the understanding of British mammals. Among his associates and collaborators were Alfred Newton (1829-1907) at Cambridge, M.R. Oldfield Thomas (1858-1929) at the BMNH and the polar explorer Edward Adrian Wilson who was a member of Scott and Shackleton's Antarctic expeditions (Moffat, 1914).

The springhare in Cambridge has the potential to be an effective specimen for exploring a narrative around the violent and oppressive histories that can be associated with natural history museum specimens. As it was collected in the twentieth century, there is less opportunity for the sanitising effects of time to remove audiences from the violence involved historic collecting.

The term Boer is used to describe colonists of Dutch, French Huguenot and German descent who had first invaded South Africa in the middle of the seventeenth century. In a context where different Indigenous groups had already been impacted by European colonisation, the Second Boer War was fought between two competing white colonial powers. It involved the subsequent invasion and annexation of the South African

Figure 2. The springhare from the University Museum of Zoology, Cambridge, which was collected in a British-run concentration camp (UMZC E.1441).
© University of Cambridge.

Republic (Transvaal) and the Orange Free State by the British Empire, following the discovery of gold in the Transvaal, which the British wanted to exploit (BBC, 2010). As the Boer people fought back, the British worked to quash the resistance by employing Lord Kitchener's 'scorched earth' policy to depopulate the land, destroying homes and crops in order to flush out guerrilla fighters. The tactic removes the ability for fighters to receive shelter and provisions from family farms, effectively starving them out. However, it also renders the land uninhabitable by any of its other residents, in this case thousands of black Africans. In order to weaken the fighters, the British army, alongside troops from Canada, Australia and New Zealand, carried out an attack on civilians at a national scale, creating massive numbers of refugees. Unable to feed themselves, women and children, Boer men who were not fighting (often due to age) and black men were forced from their homes and their farms into concentration camps which were administrated by the British. Separate camps were established for black and white refugees (known as 'black camps' and 'white camps').

The conditions in the camps were abominable and those interred in camps were sometimes forced into labour (albeit paid) (Boer Concentration Camp, Project, n.d). By the end of the war, it was reported that 27,927 Boers (of which 22,074 were children under 16) (van Heyningen, 2015); and 14,154 black people (Lucking, 2004) had died of starvation, disease and exposure.

It was within this context that Barrett-Hamilton, stationed in South Africa as Instructor of Musketry, collected the Cambridge springhare. According to its documentation, it was captured in June 1901 at 'Vredefort Road, Orange River Colony'. Vredefort Road (or Vredefort-weg) was a concentration camp with both 'black camps' and 'white camps'. Records show that there was no water available within three miles of the camp, and very limited rations, which were often rotten. There were far too few tents for the number of people, and those they had were full of holes (Boer Concentration Camp Project, n.d.).

The collection of the springhare that is now in Cambridge was clearly not the result of an isolated opportunistic incident whereby Barrett-Hamilton took a chance to acquire a one-off specimen. Looking at collection records, it appears that that he was using his military deployment in the war to make a major scientific collection. The University Museum of Zoology, Cambridge, has a small number of additional specimens – a springhare (UMZC E.1442) and aardvark *Orycteropus afer* (Pallas, 1766) (UMZC E.1327, UMZC E.1338 and UMZC E.1339), which Barrett-Hamilton collected around Vredefort Road at this time. He donated a more significant collection from his Boer War deployment to the British Museum (Natural History), including over 1,100 birds (for example, NHMUK 1901.9.20.1-20 and NHMUK 1905.12.28.1-900) (Sharpe, 1906). Of these, around 300 are currently recorded as having been collected by him at this same camp in 1901 and 1902 (Natural History Museum, 2020c). (This count is intended to be illustrative of the scale of his wartime collecting – it was retrieved from the NHM Data Portal, which is not comprehensive and so many more may have originated from this location). In terms of logistics of how to transfer specimens overseas from a military garrison, the aardvark, at least, was sent to Cambridge via the British-born curator of the South African Museum, William Sclater (1863-1944) (Barrett-Hamilton also contributed specimens to the South African Museum, for example over 100 entomology specimens are listed on GBIF as having been collected by him, including from Vredefort Road (GBIF.org, 2020)).

Both receiving museums were aware of the military source of these collections. The UMZC Accession Register for September 3rd 1901 includes, 'at present serving with the forces in S. Africa' next to Barrett-Hamilton's name. An internal note from one of the curators to the Museum's superintendent comments on the arrival of the aardvark, making clear a link between military action and diminished conservation concerns: 'You know of course the beast is now vigorously protected and scheduled, but soldiers in Boer-land can and may do many things' (Gadow, 1901). A Natural History Museum list of donors includes this biographical line for him: 'In April, 1901, he accompanied his regiment, the 5th Battalion Royal Irish Rifles, to South Africa, and remained there till the close of the war. Being in charge of some of the block-houses, he utilised his leisure time in collecting specimens of natural history, and presented to the Museum a fine series of birds' (Sharpe, 1906). In addition to Vredefort Road, most of the other localities for his NHM specimens are also the sites of concentration camps (Bloemfontein, Heilbron, Kimberley, Klerksdorp, Nylstroom, Rhenoster, Roodewalspruit, Warrenton and Wolwehoek) (Natural History Museum, 2020b; Boer Concentration Camp Project, n.d.). This suggests that as he was posted at different military garrisons, he spent time specimen-collecting in his 'leisure time'. This all took place against the backdrop of a major refugee crisis which had been

deliberately orchestrated by the destruction of homes and livelihoods, and in which over 40,000 civilians died in the camps alone (let alone civilian and fighter deaths outside the camps) (van Heyningen, 2017).

Discussion: Interpreting colonial violence

Collecting by active members of the military on assignment is not particularly unusual (see, for example, the wealth of objects in museums collected by soldiers and other employees of the East India Company (MacGregor, 2018). Nor is it surprising that soldiers spent their free time collecting as they explored their surroundings whilst posted abroad. And given that military expeditions provided clear opportunities to expand national collections, it is to be expected that museums welcomed the donations that resulted from them. However, any museum professional today knows that one of the most common questions we hear from our visitors is, 'How did you get all this stuff?'. It would be unreasonable to assume that most audiences were aware of the close links between museum collections and conflict.

As such, when museums have direct examples of which specimens were collected in this way, it provides an opportunity to tell these stories in an honest way. A key strand of public engagement work underway at UMZC (planned for when visitors can explore more freely after the end of restrictions related to covid-19 pandemic) is to introduce a series of trails and labels intended to diversify the range of voices represented in the galleries, co-produced with different partner groups. One will explore the colonial history of the collection, highlighting the diversity of people responsible for amassing the specimens (but who so far have not been well represented in museum interpretation) as well as the hitherto less-well communicated – often problematic – stories such as links with colonial violence, including the springhare. That specimen may also feature in a temporary exhibition organised across the University of Cambridge Museums about the legacies of empire.

Similarly, Leeds Museums and Galleries hope to include Mok's story and its links to colonial history in a temporary exhibition in 2021. Subject to successful funding bids, a proposed redevelopment of the Life on Earth gallery would take a decolonial approach, highlighting individual stories such as Mok's in ways that help visitors understand more about the legacies of colonial violence in our collections.

Discussion: How do natural historians come to learn these histories?

Incorporating decolonial interpretation of specimens like the above examples in museum galleries and programmes is likely to prove a significant challenge for the sector. This is not simply because it is likely to require changes to interpretation strategies, or expenditure on labels and text panels. Another, perhaps greater barrier is the resourcing of specialist research into collection histories.

This research is dependent on museum staff learning or identifying which parts of the collections are likely to benefit from a decolonial approach. This is not straightforward. It is unlikely that natural history museum staff principally trained in natural science subjects will have the background historical knowledge to automatically recognise relevant themes from the historical events associated with all the regions represented in their collections. Although the national curriculum for England (Department for Education, 2013) does now include 'follies of mankind', in primary schools, this is currently taught within the context of the Roman Empire, with no explicit mention made of the British Empire until secondary school (although doubtless many teachers do raise it as part of other topics). However, this is at least an improvement on the authors' history education, from which British colonial history was absent. Naturally, museum visitors of different ages and backgrounds will have different experiences depending on the local educational practice at the time, and their teachers' varying scope for individual choice of topics. Pupils of any generation would not be expected to learn all the facts about all instances in history during their education, however our point here is that biologically-trained curators looking at a specimen are less likely to instantly spot touch-points for a given decolonial or historical theme in the same way that they might spot a potential link to a given natural historical theme.

Research on Mok's story and its colonial links was predominantly undertaken outside of work hours, resulting from the author's (RM) personal interest in the subject. The history of pets as gorillas in colonial Africa now forms the focus of a PhD, and will feed back into the practice and public outputs of Leeds Museums and Galleries. Using the example of the springhare, the author (JA) was only made aware of the specimen's history through complete happenstance. Having posted a picture of the springhare on Twitter (completely unrelated to decolonisation), one respondent

(@Goatlips) chose to look the specimen up on the Museum's online catalogue. They saw the collection locality was recorded as 'Vredefort Road; Orange R. Colony' and replied to the tweet to point out that this was a Boer War concentration camp, and that the dates matched the period of the war. The author was completely ignorant of the details of the Boer War. Only as a result of this chance online interaction did this story come to light, which prompted further research into the history of the specimen, most of which took place outside of work time.

While this demonstrates the value of online engagement, the democratisation of knowledge and museums making their collections records available online, it also illustrates the challenge museums are facing. When tackling the transcription of data from thousands of specimen labels, in order to identify avenues for decolonial research we need to be aware that some place names used at the time of collection are no longer valid or appropriate. Some countries have been renamed since independence from empire, and old names or spellings of locations may become offensive. This becomes relevant for collections managers undertaking documentation. While some museum database software enables a distinction between original and updated geographical terms, others require curators to manage this information as best they can (online resources such as the Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names (https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/tgn/) can be useful here).

Likewise, taxonomic terms curators may encounter could be problematic, by incorporating colonial or racist epithets. Others have pointed out the historical links between taxonomy and scientific racism generally (Das & Lowe, 2018). However, when a specific taxonomic name includes a racist term, should a specimen's documentation reflect this too? In any case such instances open up a further opportunity to engage audiences in a dialogue about the colonial narratives in museums. Other museum typologies have been treated in this way in museum disciplines outside of natural history. For example, the Labelling Matters project at the Pitt Rivers Museum explores potentially problematic language in an anthropological collection. It recognises that the labels themselves are an historical part of the objects, and 'thus the project is seeking ways to create interventions within the museum that does not erase the history of those labels but uses them to explore the processes, such as colonialism, that uphold hierarchical ideologies and stereotypes' (The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, 2020).

The intersection of documentation, collections management systems and decolonisation is an emerging discourse at this time, having regularly been mentioned at recent conferences (see e.g. the Collections Trust 2020 conference paper by Errol Francis, 'Decolonising the database' https://youtu.be/MbrC0yvBCNo), but with firm practices yet to be established.

Museum staff regularly come across the names of people and places on specimen labels that are novel to them – or taxonomic terms that they may not realise could be seen as problematic – and they are unlikely to be able to research every name and location they encounter. At present, time to research collections is hard to come by in most museum professionals' work plans, particularly when it is untargeted. Unless someone had opted to search for South African specimens collected during the years of the Boer War, it is extremely unlikely that the UMZC springhare's history would have been uncovered. And whilst Barrett-Hamilton is well known among historians of British mammalogy, his army career is not. It is hard to imagine how this specimen would have been identified as one for a decolonial approach through the narrowing of *a priori* parameters.

There are potential approaches that museums could take to actively search for colonial histories associated with their collections, such as systematically targeting individuals or locations of former colonies. Resources such as the database of slave-owners published by UCL (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/) could be useful tools or starting points for research. Nevertheless, given the breadth of potential locations across the former British Empire, and the number of people involved, museums are likely to need to delineate the scope of any investigations rather than start with a blank page.

If museums are serious about decolonising their collections, it will be necessary to resource time to research their specimen histories and collaborate with communities and specialists in other disciplines to help unlock and interpret the stories. Unless museum funders are to support such work to invest in decolonisation in a sustained way, museums may need to reallocate resources from other areas of work to achieve this.

Discussion: Additional outcomes for decolonisation

Decolonial practice in museum interpretation often seeks to break down systemic hierarchies which have elevated certain Eurocentric narratives above others. It is typical for the goals of such

work to include better representing the contributions of a greater diversity of people in museums', science's and society's histories, particularly in order to better enfranchise people of colour. At the same time, more accurately telling the histories of our collections and institutions is considered vital – and morally necessary – in order to have honest conversations. Or put another way, to fail to do so would be dishonest and risks engendering mistrust between an institution and its intended audiences: it is simply the right thing to do. The implicit assumption behind these goals is that a primary audience for decolonisation work is people of colour or other groups who have traditionally been under-represented in these environments.

In thinking about the challenges facing museum staff with limited historical expertise – which in part is reflective of colonial biases remaining in school curricula – we identify a further benefit to decolonisation practice in museums and elsewhere. Decolonisation – as well as other practices related to equality and inclusion strategies – or actions in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, for instance – has experienced significant resistance from some members of the public. For example, calls to remove or reinterpret statues of problematic individuals have regularly met with accusations that history was being 'rewritten'. We suggest that such responses are, at times, a subconscious symptom of the ingrained, systemic narratives that subtly elevate notions of white supremacy and nationalism that decolonisation practice seeks to address. Because most people have been taught so little about the violent history of the British Empire, it is not surprising that many are resistant to actions that hold that history as their starting point.

As such, by more accurately representing troubling instances in British history (or other nations with similar imperial histories) in their displays, by telling the *social* histories of their specimens as well as the *natural* histories, museums can improve the general level of public knowledge about problematic instances in the country's past. We may hope that this encourages a better understanding of why this work is necessary. It is reasonable to suggest that resistance to decolonisation is based in part on a lack of knowledge of historic injustices. Museum curators have been found to be among the most trusted professionals in the UK (Kendall Adams, 2020). By being honest about their links to acts of colonial violence, invasion and oppression, museums have the opportunity to better inform the public about the true nature of British history. This isn't *retelling*, it's simply telling our story more accurately.

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