

From De-colonial to Anti-colonial: What's Next for Museum Interpretation?

Online event 26 November 2020, 11.00-14.00 (GMT)

<https://www.britishportraits.org.uk/events/from-de-colonial-to-anti-colonial-whats-next-for-museum-interpretation-2020/>

Programme

- 11.00** Welcome from chairperson **Sonya Dyer**
Keynote by **Prof Kehinde Andrews**, Professor of Black Studies at Birmingham City University (@kehinde_andrews), followed by Q&A
- 12.00** *Illuminating Black Histories*. Contributions from actor **Paterson Joseph** (@ignatius_sancho) and baritone **Peter Brathwaite** (@PeterBrathwaite #GettyMuseumChallenge #BlackPortraiture) exploring the roles of artists in illuminating Black histories, alongside rethinking monuments with visual activist **Prof Nicholas Mirzoeff** (@nickmirzoeff)
- 12.30** Comfort break
- 12.45** *Where do we go from here?* Chairperson Sonya Dyer is joined by our contributors for discussion and Q&A:
- **Anjalie Dalal-Clayton**, Decolonising Art Institute, University of Arts London (@AnjalieDC)
 - **Subhadra Das**, UCL Culture (@littlegaudy)
 - **Sarah Thomas**, Birkbeck, University of London (@drsarahbthomas)
 - **Marenka Thompson-Odlum**, Pitt Rivers Museum (@MarenkaOdlum)
 - **Alice Procter**, Uncomfortable Art Tours (@aaprocter)
- [with an additional online presentation by **Michael Ohajuru**, Senior Fellow, Institute of Commonwealth Studies]
- 1.45** Closing remarks

Contributors' biographies and abstracts

Kehinde Andrews is Professor of Black Studies at Birmingham City University. His research focuses on resistance to racism and grassroots organisations. His latest book *Black to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21st Century* was published in 2018. He also wrote *Resisting Racism: Race, Inequality and the Black Supplementary School Movement* in 2013 and is editor of the *Blackness in Britain* book series with Zed Books. His next book, *The New Age of Empire: How Racism and Colonialism Still Rule the World* will be published in February 2021 by Penguin Allen Lane in the UK and Bold Type Books in the US. Kehinde has written opinion pieces for outlets including the Guardian, Independent, Washington Post and CNN. Kehinde is founder of the [Harambee Organisation of Black Unity](#); and co-chair of the [Black Studies Association](#).

Peter Brathwaite is an opera singer. After his degree at Newcastle University he trained at the Royal College of Music and Flanders Opera Studio, Belgium. Recent and future engagements include performances with the Royal Opera House, English National Opera, Glyndebourne, La Monnaie, Nederlandse Reisopera, Opéra de Lyon and Opera North. His wider professional interests include new work, diversity in arts education and mentoring. He has written for [The Guardian](#) and [The Independent](#), and is a [BBC Radio 3](#) Next Generation Voice. Documentary work includes [BBC Radio 4's Black Music in Europe 2](#), presented by Clarke Peters. He currently writes and presents features for [BBC Radio 3's](#) Essential Classics. He is a Churchill Fellow, Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a Trustee of the Gate Theatre, London, and a Trustee of Second Movement Opera Company.

Dr Anjalie Dalal-Clayton is an art historian focusing on the African and Asian diasporas in Britain. She is currently a Research Fellow with University of the Arts London's Decolonising Arts Institute, where she is examining how decolonisation can be taken up within art history, museums and archives. She was previously a researcher on UAL's Black Artists & Modernism project, for which she led the first nation-wide audit of works by black artists in UK public collections. Anjalie is currently writing her first monograph, *Curating Black British Art: Exhibition Cultures since the 1980s* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

Abstract

Why Words Matter: The Impact of Art Museum Interpretation on the Production of Art's Histories

Anjalie Dalal-Clayton will discuss her research on interpretation texts in public art museums, ranging from her use of speech act theory to explore how exhibitions critically and historically position Black artists, the Black Artists & Modernism project's close-reading interventions, to her most recent work on the Tate-led Provisional Semantics project that considers how anti-racist and decolonising practices might be employed in the production of interpretation texts in art museums and heritage organisations.

Subhadra Das is a writer, historian, broadcaster, comedian 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.

Sonya Dyer is a London-based artist and writer and is an Associate Lecturer at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

Paterson Joseph is an actor and writer. His acting career has taken him to the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company and many other venues in the UK as well as on world tours. Film and television appearances include, *Noughts & Crosses*, *The Leftovers*, *Peep Show* and *Timeless*. His mono-drama *Sancho - An Act of Remembrance* will be seen at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith in February 2021. Paterson's first novel, *The Secret Diaries of Charles Ignatius Sancho* will be published by Dialogue Books in October 2022.

Nicholas Mirzoeff is a visual activist, working at the intersection of politics, race and global/visual culture. In 2020-21 he is ACLS/Mellon Scholar and Society fellow in residence at the Magnum Foundation, New York. Among his many publications, [The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality \(2011\)](#) won the Anne Friedberg Award for Innovative Scholarship from the Society of Cinema and Media Studies in 2013. [How To See The World](#) was published by Pelican in the UK (2015) and by Basic Books in the US (2016). It has been translated into ten languages and was a *New Scientist* Top Ten Book of the Year for 2015.

The Appearance of Black Lives Matter was published in 2017 as a [free e-book](#), and in 2018 as a limited edition print book with a graphic essay by Carl Pope and a poem by Karen Pope, both by NAME Publications, Miami. Since the 2017 events Charlottesville, he has been active in the movement to take down statues commemorating settler colonialism and/or white supremacy and convened the 2017 collaborative syllabus [All The Monuments Must Fall](#), fully revised after the 2020 events.

He curated "Decolonizing Appearance," an exhibit at the Center for Art Migration Politics (September 2018-March 2019) and is currently collaborating on a global public art project with artist Carl Pope, poet Karen Pope and gallerist Lisa Martin, entitled "The Bad Air Smelled of Roses." A frequent blogger and writer, especially for the art magazine *Hyperallergic*, his work has appeared in the *Nation*, the *New York Times*, *Frieze*, the *Guardian*, *Time* and *The New Republic*.

Michael Ohajuru is a Senior Fellow of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies with honours degrees in Physics (Leeds, 1974) and Art History (Open University, 2008). He blogs, writes and speaks regularly on the black presence in Renaissance Europe, and has spoken on the subject at institutions including the National Gallery, Tate Britain, British Library, National Archives and Victoria & Albert Museum.

He is the Founder of the [Image of the Black in London Galleries](#) a series of gallery tours (The National Gallery, Tate Britain, The Wallace Collection) highlighting the overt and covert black presences to be found in the national art collections in London. He is also the Project Director and Chief Evangelist of [The John Blanke Project](#): a contemporary Art and Archive project with over 70 contributions from artists and historians, celebrating John Blanke the Black trumpeter to courts of Henry VII and Henry VIII. Michael is the co-convenor of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies [What's Happening in Black British History](#) series of workshops fostering a creative dialogue between researchers, educationalists (mainstream and supplementary), archivists and curators, and policy makers. He is also co-convenor of the [Institute of Historical Research Black British History](#) seminar program. Founder of [The BP2 Podcast](#) from the Black Presence in British Portraiture network of scholars, museum

professionals and collectors with a passion for discovering, understanding and presenting the black African presence in British portraiture from 1500 to 1800, in each episode a portrait is discussed by members from the network.

Abstract

The John Blanke Project: Reconstructive History in Action

The history of black people in Britain appears to be a history of one exceptional individual after another: the celebrity, the first, the founder and so on. *The John Blanke Project* seeks to create a much more considered, rounded, fuller life and times of John Blanke beyond his celebrity as the first person of African descent for whom we have both an image and a record.

The Project takes a reconstructive history approach through imaginative, Socratic questioning of the little that we know from Tudor records, by historians and artists, considering such questions as why did he come to England, where was he born, who did he marry? Addressing the challenge in the Project's strapline 'Imagine the black Tudor trumpeter' in their contributions to the Project.

Alice Procter is an art historian, writer, and educator. Since 2017, she has run the Uncomfortable Art Tours, unauthorised guided tours of national collections, exploring how major institutions came into being against a backdrop of imperialism. She is the author of *The Whole Picture: the colonial story of the art in our museums and why we need to talk about it* (Cassell 2020). Her work concentrates on the intersections of postcolonial art practice, the curation of historical trauma, and narratives of national identity.

Abstract

Naming the subjects: finding individuality in indifferent archives

What does it take to name and identify individual people of colour within the collections of museums and galleries? Beyond temporary exhibitions and interventions, is it worthwhile or even possible to connect these subjects and their representations when the historical record has been so consistently exclusionary? Drawing on the experience of leading museum tours and the context of other storytelling-led practice, this paper explores the options available to researchers and museum workers.

Sarah Thomas is Senior Lecturer in History of Art & Museum Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. She was formerly a curator in Australian art museums. Her current research interests focus on the art history and museology of the British empire, the iconography of slavery and the cultural legacies of British slave-ownership. Her book, *Witnessing Slavery: Art and Travel in the Age of Abolition*, was published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press in 2019. Other publications include: 'The Spectre of Empire in the British Art Museum' (*Museum History Journal*, 2013) and 'Violence and Memory: Slavery in the Museum', in *World Art and the Legacies of Colonial Violence*, Daniel Rycroft (ed), Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

Abstract

Slave-ownership in the Art Museum Today

Following emancipation in 1833, twenty million pounds was paid by the British government to former slave-owners across the empire to compensate for their loss of income. Given such extraordinary wealth it is perhaps not surprising that some slave-owners were also significant connoisseurs, art collectors, patrons and founders of key art museums across Britain.

This paper considers the impact of slave-ownership on some of Britain's key cultural institutions, focussing on the seminal period between the establishment of the National Gallery in 1824 and the National Portrait Gallery in 1856. What was the role of key slave owners in Britain's cultural history during this formative period? How is the slave-owner acknowledged (or not) in the labeling and cataloguing of works of art in the museum today? Why does this matter, and what needs to change within the context of current debates around de-colonisation?

Marenka Thompson-Odlum is a Research Associate at the Pitt Rivers Museums and a doctoral candidate at the University of Glasgow. Her doctoral research explores Glasgow's role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade through the material culture house at Glasgow Museums. At the Pitt Rivers Museum, she is the researcher on the Labelling Matters project, which investigates the problematic use of language within the museum spaces and ways of decolonisation through re-imagining the definition of a label.
