Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging: Report on youth researcher engagement with Manchester Museum

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Introduction

This report presents key findings relating to youth researcher engagement with Manchester Museum in the *Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging* (AHCB) project. Drawing on audio-recorded reflections, workshop activities, ethnographic observations, artworks, and artist statements captured over the life of the project, this report provides feedback on youth researchers' experiences and perspectives of working with Manchester Museum, with a view to informing future museum practices of working collaboratively with migrant background young people.

Key Findings

There are three key findings that emerge from the report:

- Migrant-background youth researchers were emotionally, intellectually, and politically **invested in debates about the historical and contemporary work of museums in collecting and managing artefacts** from their heritage countries.
- Youth researchers embraced the opportunity to work with/in the museum, engage in multidirectional learning, and **intervene in its practices of representation**.
- The supportive, enabling environment created by the museum team was critical in **fostering a culture of safety and inclusion.**

These findings are present across the different topics presented within this report through a linear framework that reflects the progression of the project.

Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging

Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging (2021-2023) was a cross-disciplinary, cross-sector, cross-generational participatory arts-based research project between refugee studies scholars, ancient historians, museum practitioners, migrant-background artists, and youth researchers. The project was funded through a UKRI citizen science collaboration grant and led by Dr Caitlin Nunn and Dr Jennifer Cromwell from the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies (MCYS) at Manchester Metropolitan University, in collaboration with Sheba Arts, Manchester Museum and 16 youth researchers. The project used archival, participatory, and art-based approaches to explore how engagements between migrant-background youth researchers and ancient historical objects can facilitate new understandings of the migration and transnational histories of both. The project culminated in a long-term installation in the Archaeology, Egypt and Sudan, and Reimaging galleries at Manchester Museum (2023-).

Project Aims

- To collaborate with migrant-background young people to critically and creatively research the biographies of ancient historical objects from Manchester Museum.
- To use art techniques to explore the biographies of ancient historical objects and to share the outcomes in an exhibition at Manchester Museum and online.
- To use the long history of the migration of objects and people to encourage wider societal discussion about colonialism, migration and belonging in the UK.
- To work with youth researchers to develop skills, knowledge, and networks.
- To show how projects like this can build bridges between communities and the heritage sector and help create new knowledge and understandings.

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Migrant Background Youth Researchers

Migrant background youth researchers were recruited through Greater Manchester refugee and migrant community-based organisations, colleges, schools and arts organisations over November and December 2021. The youth research team were aged between 15 and 22 years at the project's commencement and come from Iranian, Iraqi, Kurdish, Syrian and Palestinian backgrounds, collectively self-identifying as 'Middle Eastern'. Some were born in their heritage country or elsewhere overseas, with many born in the UK to migrant parents.

Project Approach

The project used an innovative approach, participatory arts-based object biography, in which youth researchers integrated personal experiences of migration and (non)belonging with archival research to produce artworks re-presenting aspects of the biographies of ancient objects from their countries of origin. Over a year, youth researchers worked with artists, researchers, and museum curators in workshops to conduct artistic, archival, heritage and sociological activities and to develop artworks and accompanying text based on a chosen object from Manchester Museum's stores. The completed works were displayed alongside youth researchers' chosen objects as part of a long-term exhibition at Manchester Museum which launched in March 2023.

For further information about the project, visit the Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging Website: https://historyandbelonging.com

Findings

Joining the project

Before commencing the project, most youth researchers had had little engagement with museums. Whilst some had previously visited Manchester Museum, most expressed little knowledge of how the institution operated or its wider socio-cultural role:

'I guess I don't really go to a lot of museums I don't have a lot of experience with them.'[2]

In their everyday lives, youth researchers had differing levels of access to knowledge about and experience of their heritage countries and cultures. The project provided an opportunity to learn about or deepen their understanding alongside other young people with shared backgrounds:

'[I came to the project] to explore more of my heritage from a historical point of view and [to see] how we are portrayed in museums.'

Many youth researchers experienced the history curriculums in their schools as offering little opportunity to explore their cultural heritage or to ask challenging questions about colonialism or exploitation:

'The history at my school was basically Eurocentric. It was never about my country or my area.'

In this context, the project provided an opportunity to critically engage with the politics of representation.

Perceptions of the institution of 'The Museum'

There were two competing understandings of museums that were articulated by youth researchers during the project. One was highly critical of the extractive, colonial history of museums in the Global North, with youth researchers expressing frustration that objects were taken from their countries and kept for extended periods in stores, which origin communities have little to no knowledge of how to access:

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[2] All quotes presented in this report come from project youth researchers unless otherwise indicated. These are anonymous, as agreed with youth researchers, in order to respect and protect their identities in this document and further publications.

'…you know how you go to another country on vacation, and you go to a gift shop and buy a souvenir. I feel like that's what museums are, but on a bigger scale…'

In contrast, others felt that museums play a key role in protecting and preserving artefacts, particularly of nations that are experiencing ongoing conflict and the destruction of cultural heritage:

'I feel like museums are interesting [because you] can actually see where you came from and know about your own roots.'

Despite an appreciation for the role that museums could have in providing access to cultural heritage, there was also a perception that Middle Eastern history was rarely showcased in museums and that British society has little interest or appetite for these histories:

'The Middle East has near to no representation in almost everything, and…that is really normal that no one really knows, and no one really cares.'

Through sustained engagement with consultants, museum curators, and researchers, the project provided the opportunity to critically engage with these issues and to foster more complex understandings of the roles and uses of museums:

'[I've learnt] museums aren't one-dimensional. They serve multiple functions, and that depends on whose funding it, what it is called, where it is…I wasn't really made aware of how much museums…can push human agendas.'

Relationships with curators

In light of some of the negative preconceptions of 'the museum', it was important that Manchester Museum curators worked to develop relationships of trust and support with youth researchers:

'Everybody was friendly. And it felt like a family more than job partners. It was really nice.'

Many youth researchers praised the curators for ensuring they felt welcomed, equipped, and heard within the museum:

'I feel like Alex was, like, very on our side. I'm not saying that [youth researchers] and the museum were not on the same side, but it felt that Alex was our bridge in between'

'I was really comfortable working in the museum. No one ever made me feel like my requests were too annoying…Campbell put up with my millions of questions and my 6 million visits to the museum, so I'm appreciative of that'

The accessibility and openness of the curators enabled youth researchers not only to feel at home in the museum, but also to engage in challenging conversations about object acquisition, storage, and display, yielding new understandings for both youth and museum teams.

Experiences of museum catalogue, objects, and stores

Working with the museum catalogue, choosing objects, conducting archival research, and visiting the museum stores were key experiences in the project and generated mixed impressions from youth researchers.

Object selection was first conducted by navigating the digital museum catalogue, which youth researchers described as cumbersome and counter intuitive. The gaps in the museum catalogue regarding objects' creators, original use, and how they came to be in the museum's collection were sources of frustration for youth researchers. These frustrations drove interest to seek more detailed information about objects in the museum stores and to contribute to museum records:

'[Researching objects has given me] the satisfaction of learning information that wasn't already on the category of the museum website.'

One youth researcher pursued their own research on a site in Iran, leading to museum catalogue amendments to reflect the correct site name (blog link here detailing this research).

After initial research on their chosen objects, youth researchers visited the museum and stores. The opportunity to tour the stores, encounter and handle ancient objects and speak with curators had a notable impact on youth researchers:

'I'm just excited to be here and to see everything and to be in a room with stuff that's thousands of years old.'

Despite the enthusiasm and excitement of some youth researchers about the possibilities that the project offered in engaging with ancient artefacts and conducting research, others were more critical about how and why these objects were stored:

'[The objects in the stores] are just like hoarded there. It's like: 'See, we have them, it's with us, we can do anything. But we're not doing anything with them.'

Encounters within the museum and with its objects ignited many youth researchers' imaginations about the possibilities that the project offered for directly confronting this issue, and more broadly, highlighting the rich history of the Middle East and creating new knowledge and perspectives:

'I was around these objects, and they are like five thousand years old. And I was thinking: They have just been through so much, and even though technically they can't tell their own stories, like maybe we in a way can.'

This desire to make a difference inspired some of the youth researchers' artwork, bringing these concerns into the heart of the exhibition:

'In my poem, [I allude to] "Mr. Smith" in 1964 who took the finial from Luristan, Iran. Since then, this finial has been stored in the darkness of temperature-controlled storage units and hence has not been displayed.'[3]

The installation process

Youth researchers worked with curators, researchers, and artists to select the location to display their object, artworks, and text and assisted with installation where possible. Within the constraints of object preservation requirements, youth researchers were encouraged to place their works where they felt they belonged, even if it meant displacing other objects.

Youth researchers felt a strong sense of curatorial control over how, and where, their artwork and objects were displayed:

'I feel like all of my artwork and all of my bits and bobs were under my control. So, it was very free for me, basically. It wasn't like: 'No, you have to put it here'… It was better than I expected. It was completely up to me…it felt like I contributed a lot [to the installation] as well, which I liked.'

Youth researchers also valued the support and flexibility of curators during this process, as well as their honesty about constraints:

'I was working with Alex mainly, and she never failed to just let me know up front if something was or wasn't going to be possible, which I really appreciated.'

Active involvement in installation provided an additional layer of understanding for youth researchers about museum processes, including in relation to conservation and display:

'(Being part of installation) was really nice as well because I got to see a whole other outlook to museums that I wouldn't have seen otherwise.'

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[3] For other examples of how artworks represented object biographies, please visit the online exhibition: Exhibition – Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging (historyandbelonging.com)

Exhibition

Completing artworks and accompanying text was a moment of satisfaction and excitement for most youth researchers, even though it was undercut by a realisation that the project was coming to a close. Exhibiting in the museum gave youth researchers a sense of pride that their works were exhibited in a space of socio-cultural importance, and they delighted in the opportunity for recognition, bringing friends and family to see their work:

'When the project was done and my artwork was in and the museum opened, I went and told everybody: 'Hey, listen, my artwork is in the museum'…It's a great opportunity for me. And I love that people actually went afterwards to the museum. I feel like it was a promotion.'

Youth researchers actively promoted the exhibition amongst their communities, with some sending digital links of the online exhibition to family and friends in other countries in order to share their achievements with them, increasing the reach and impact of the exhibition.

Even though youth researchers expressed excitement about exhibiting within the museum, for at least one youth researcher there was a lingering sense of discomfort that participating in the exhibition made youth researchers complicit in condoning and extending legacies of colonial extractive practice:

'[The exhibition allows the museum to say] "Oh this is us: we are open, we work with people from the community". You know it's a bit like [the museum] put us at the front, like we are ok to exhibit these [objects] But…it's not our choice for them to exhibit [these objects]. If it was our choice, we would send them back to our country.'

Detailed conversations between youth researchers, artist mentors, curators, and the museum team assisted in supporting youth researchers in their final decision making about if and how to display their work, with all electing to take part. Some have used their artist statements to articulate the tensions they experienced and/or used a pseudonym to protect their identity.

The exhibition was officially launched at an event on the 9th of March, which was co-designed and hosted by youth researchers, and placed priority on inviting close friends, family, recruiting organisations, and a select group of project stakeholders. This was another highlight for youth researchers who used the event to reflect on the impact of the project and what they had achieved over the year:

'The gathering we had in the museum [was] when my brain was fully comprehending what was happening… "My work is in a museum", and I've visited this museum when I was a kid before…it was very overwhelming…because at first, I was like, "oh, not a big deal".'

Conclusion

Working with, and exhibiting in, Manchester Museum through the Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging project has had a strong impact on youth researchers. The museum holds an important role in the community and youth researchers are excited by the representational opportunities that emerge from being part of an exhibition. They valued contributing to – and challenging – museum knowledge and developing and presenting new ways of engaging with objects and fostering wider discussion about the migration and belonging of both people and objects. What emerges from this evaluation is the power and importance of welcoming migrant-background young people into the museum and creating open, effective, and authentic collaborations built on trust and respect. When working with the source and heritage communities of particular objects, there are complex emotions and politics involved, and there is a clear need for a culture of safety and care in order to facilitate this work in a respectful and engaged way. While youth researchers do raise concerns related to how they, amongst other community representatives, may be co-opted by museums to condone (neo)colonial practices, continuing to ensure that collaborations are engaged, transparent, and flexible will secure spaces of open dialogue which allow for a continued and respectful debate and collective learning and action.

<u>Next Steps</u>

Audience evaluation and museum staff evaluation of the project is currently underway and will further enrich understandings of the impact of the project. In addition, a self-selected group of youth researchers are continuing to work with Manchester Metropolitan University researchers and education leads at Manchester Museum to develop an education resource to support school-age young people to engage with the installation and the issues it gives voice to.