

**genealogies  
of the  
emergency**

A Conversation on Race, Climate and Museums with Subhadra Das & Ashish Ghadiali facilitated by [Rodney Harrison \(RH\)](#) & [Henry McGhie](#)

[Subhadra Das \(SD\)](#) is a historian, writer, broadcaster and comedian. For nine years, she was Curator of the Science Collections at University College London (UCL) where she worked with the Eugenics and Pathology Collections, and the auto-icon of Jeremy Bentham. In 2021, she was a Researcher in Critical Eugenics at UCL's Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Racism and Racialisation. She regularly talks to diverse audiences in classes, seminars, lectures, public talks and stand-up comedy about all aspects of her work from the history of eugenics and scientific racism to working with human remains. She uses historical archives and museum objects to tell decolonial stories in engaging and affirming ways.

[Ashish Ghadiali \(AG\)](#) is a filmmaker and activist who organises with the climate justice collective Wretched of the Earth. He is a member of the co-ordinating committee of the COP26 Civil Society Coalition and a commissioning editor at Lawrence and Wishart Books where he is developing a new Soundings imprint, to be launched with a slate of books on Race and Ecology in 2022. He was formerly Race Editor, then Co-Editor of *Red Pepper* magazine (2017–2020) and part of the team that set up the Freedom Theatre in Jenin Refugee Camp (in 2006). Ashish's 2016 feature documentary, *The Confession*, explored the geopolitical arcs of the War on Terror through the testimony of former Guantanamo detainee Moazzam Begg. Ashish is currently developing new projects for film and TV with BBC Studios and BBC Films and is a regular contributor to *The Observer New Review*.

[Henry McGhie \(HM\)](#) has a background as an ecologist, museum curator and senior manager. He established Curating Tomorrow in 2019 to support museums and their partners to accelerate and enhance their contribution to sustainable development agendas, including the SDGs, climate action, biodiversity conservation and human rights. He is a member of the International Council of Museums Sustainability Working Group and IUCN Commission on Education and Communication. He is a member of the *Reimagining Museums for Climate Action* research project team and a co-curator, with Rodney Harrison and Colin Sterling, of the *Reimagining Museums for Climate Action* exhibition.

HM Ashish, could you tell us about the origins of Wretched of the Earth?

AG Wretched of the Earth emerged around 2015 in response to the Global Climate March. It was really about people of colour self-organising within the climate movement to draw attention to the frames of global justice, the intersection of race and climate, and the crucial fact that the people on the frontlines of climate breakdown are the people who are least responsible for causing it, who are largely Black and brown people of the global south. So that was the point of origin.

And then in the spring of 2019, as the climate movement shifted and became more present in public consciousness, through Extinction Rebellion and the youth strikes and the emergence of new actors like Greta Thunberg, the group felt the need to intervene within the discussion which was emerging at that time. We presented an open letter to Extinction Rebellion that attempted to take the line of a critical friend, sharing many common aims and objectives, and not wholly critical about the kind of tactics around mass arrests that were being used, but trying to draw attention to the omission of race within that schema, as well as the centrality of race within the problem of climate more generally. The aim was to encourage them to look at the tactics that were being used and who they included and who they excluded, at the intersection of policing Black communities, at the politics of the border, and the relationship of those issues to the ongoing climate emergency. It was really with that open letter that Wretched of the Earth caught a global public imagination and rose to a new degree of prominence.

In 2019, it was agreed that the overarching strategy of Wretched of the Earth would focus on reparations, on reparatory justice and on building an awareness within the climate movement about the necessity of reparation. But then 2020 and the pandemic knocked us off course in different ways. Individuals within the collective were caught up with financial issues, issues of community care and other pragmatic concerns which the pandemic raised for many people. That ethos of care is very much the underlying motivation for what we do, and so it assumed centre-stage. For me the year somehow led towards the COP26 mobilisation. I've ended up, through Wretched, getting involved in the COP26 Civil Society Coalition's political strategy, and working to organise diverse grassroots organisations, including with activists from Extinction Rebellion, school strikers, Green New Deal UK etc, to start to address climate justice as a key part of the international climate conversation. Now we're looking at how to bring that back together in the run-up to COP26 and beyond, to renew that focus on reparations and reparatory justice.

RH How does this relate to the work that you're now doing for the Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Race and

Racialisation at UCL? And can you tell us about what it means to be an activist-in-residence at a university?

AG The initiative that I'm currently working to develop with the UCL Climate Hub is called A 1.5°C Charter for COP26 and Beyond, and it is a direct reflection of the situation across the different groups and organisations I've been interfacing with through the COP26 Civil Society Coalition.

The background to this is that around February or March in 2019 I was asked to speak about climate justice on Keir Starmer's campaign for the UK Labour Party leadership. He was holding a "listening event" and pitching himself as a champion of climate justice in the hunt for climate votes and race votes. What was coming from his campaign team was pretty flimsy, and that was pretty much what I said on the platform. We invited them, if they wanted to take climate justice seriously, to work with people like us to school them, which they initially made positive noises about. Obviously, once he had won the election, he started to backtrack. By that point though a certain momentum had already been created in which members of Wretched of the Earth, in collaboration with others, were trying to bring people around the table to start to address questions that in a way haven't really been addressed at the level of mainstream policy – about the fundamental limitations of the idea of a green new deal, of green growth, of the green industrial revolution – and the reality that unless we engage with the discontents of extractivism, then we are simply rolling into a new era of exploitation and ecological catastrophe.

It became apparent that while Wretched of the Earth had been operating as a protest group, or grassroots activist group, there were suddenly a lot of people coming to us within the movement and within the policy space, saying "Okay, your critique is really compelling, where does that lead in terms of policy? How can we facilitate the emergence of a climate justice policy agenda?"

We started working towards that, as I say, initially in dialogue with the Labour Party frontbench. In the meantime, we found there was actually more genuine interest in engaging from the COP26 unit of the government in the Cabinet Office, who were very keen in the run-up to the COP to demonstrate inclusion of the kind of groups that we were bringing together. They invited us to brief them early in the new year, and that invitation led to a significant reflective discussion amongst ourselves on what the climate justice asks of COP26 really are, which in turn led to a strong response very much led by people of experience – including Farhana Yamin, the climate lawyer and former negotiator of the Paris Agreement and Asad Rehman, Executive Director of War on Want and co-founder of Wretched of the Earth – that what was important, for us as UK civil society, was to underline the importance, above all for the world's most vulnerable communities, of limiting global

warming to 1.5°C. We feared that this target – a demand from the governments of the global south since Copenhagen in 2009 – was something that the UK Presidency was hoping to consign to the dustbin of history at COP26. On this issue of 1.5°C, what we were seeing, across the climate movement, was a number of key organisations afraid to engage with the language of what they feared might prove an impossible target to achieve. They feared that failure might demoralise the general public, and so sought a more “optimistic” message. But this approach, to many of us, seemed to point towards a crucial moral predicament that we face in 2021 – that we’ve come to a point where we could be so scared to talk about the possible negative impacts of what’s coming down the line, that we would rather ignore them completely than actually engage with the reality of what those impacts are. A lot of that was being packaged under the banner of optimism, or the banner of positive accelerationism, which was emerging around COP26. It seemed to me to be a paradigm in ascendancy that really needed to be challenged and replaced.

The 1.5°C Charter has developed as a response to this, in dialogue with key climate scientists like Tim Lenton, whose work on tipping points is very much central to the positive accelerationist philosophy, but who himself completely recognizes that unless there are values underpinning that, it doesn’t actually get us on track towards ecological equilibrium. So, Tim Lenton has been a key coarchitect of that vision, as have Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin at UCL. The 1.5°C Charter aims to set out a new paradigm for climate finance for the 2020s. Rather than averting our eyes from the horror in front of us, the aim is to start to develop a language and a culture of looking the crisis in the eye and speaking about it in pragmatic terms.

The denialism that still runs our country, and many others, makes it still viable for the UK’s Prime Minister to stand up in Parliament and say that net zero 2050 is as fast as we can afford to decarbonise without breaking the back of the economy. That’s obviously a fiction, it’s a small ‘c’ conservative fiction that is about maintaining the status quo for fear of actually doing what’s needed, built on the complete failure to look at the actual impacts, the actual cost benefit of breaching 1.5°C.

The costs of breaching 1.5°C in any way you look at it, are going to far outweigh the costs of limiting global warming to 1.5°C. Those costs will be globally distributed, they will be most felt by the people with the least resources to mitigate against those impacts. Crucially, they’ll be intergenerational – we don’t incur those costs the day that we breach 1.5°C – our children do and our grandchildren do. Those costs will spiral on for at least 70 years, but without the right culture of leadership they continue to spiral. So, in terms of the paradigm that we are looking to lay out, this is the one that gets us back on track. It’s the one that allows us to say this is the nature of the crisis that we face, and any mechanisms that are going to be effective, need to be commensurate with that problem.

RH To segue from one form of denialism to another form of denialism, I want to turn to Subhadra, who up until recently, has been a colleague of yours in the Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Race and Racialisation, working on a project on the history of eugenics at UCL.

And in some ways they seem like unconnected issues at first glance, but I think both you and Ash have variously pointed to the ways in which the inequalities which mean that climate change differentially affects indigenous, Black and Minority Ethnic people, as well as people in the global south more extensively, relates to the history of scientific racism, and the endless progress narratives which were established and have been supported by the discourses developed in 19<sup>th</sup> century museums through until today. This has been something that we've been really keen to emphasise and try to unpack in the *Reimagining Museums for Climate Action* project. I wondered if you could talk to us a little bit more about your work on eugenics and how you see it as relating to these entangled issues of museums, climate and global inequalities?

SD Thank you for the invitation. There is so much in what Ash has been talking about that I sympathise with and understand, and I feel like these are similar problems that we're addressing. Particularly as you say, there is a form of denialism about eugenics and systemic racism in the context of the University and in the context of our society more widely which I have been trying to address and which connects directly with the differential impacts of climate on Indigenous, Black and Minority Ethnic people throughout the world.

Despite the fact that the "science" of eugenics had been arguably disproven by people working in the UCL Genetics Department in the 1960s and 1970s, when I started working for UCL a series of very prominent scientists associated with the eugenics movement were still celebrated and commemorated with their names on buildings, and this was still not a part of the overall conversation at the University in ways that I thought were important. When I started curating the thing that is called the Galton Collection at UCL, by rights really it should be called the Eugenics Collection, it was clear to me that these conversations were starting to bubble up, but they were not necessarily part of the mainstream, and I felt like as curator of that collection it was my role to bring that into the mainstream more. In doing this, a couple of the people who were influential in my thinking and approach to these issues were Dr. Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman, who was Research Associate in the Philosophy of 'Race' at UCL at the time, and Dr Debbie Challis, who was at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology.

They collaborated on an event called UCL Faces Race, which was I think probably the first time the conversation around the history of UCL, the history of eugenics and how race fits into that question, was really discussed openly. Debbie went on, as part of the

research that she had been doing into the Golden Centenary in 2011, to publish a number of papers and a monograph about her research into the history of eugenics at UCL.

So I turned one of those papers – which was to do with the famous archaeologist Flinders Petrie and his research relating skull size to the environment and all of those other hideous cultural materialist approaches to understanding ancient past – into an exhibition focusing on the buildings that were named after famous geneticists. Because as I said, to me this was a history that as a UCL student I had never heard, as a UCL member of staff, despite being curator of the Galton Collection, it was a story that I had not heard until I started working with the collection.

I felt like until we were all *au fait* with the history, and *au fait* with the language of it, we weren't going to be in a position to start to talk about things in meaningful equitable ways. Ash has very eloquently made the point that the climate crisis is a racist crisis, and I can appreciate that my saying that sounds almost like a cliché, but I don't think it's part of the mainstream discourse in the way that it should be.

So yes, to me addressing the history, speaking openly about the history and then acknowledging the crossovers is important. In the history of the environmentalist movement in the United States in the early twentieth century for example, there are significant connections with the eugenicist movement at the same time. People like Theodore Roosevelt, Madison Grant and Henry Fairfield Osborn, who are all considered to be key figures in the history of environmental conservation in the United States, all participated in the second International Eugenics Congress at the American Museum of Natural History in 1921. Madison Grant is the author of a book called *The Passing of the Great Race*, which is one of the most influential scientific racist works ever published. Without wanting to descend into a history lesson, all of these histories are combined and feed into systemic inequality today.

RH Yes, it's interesting that you mention Theodore Roosevelt, because he is part of the back-story to the magical realist film *Elephant in the Room* which is part of the *Reimagining Museums for Climate Action* exhibition. The film begins with the diorama call "The Alarm", which is a series of taxidermied and staged elephants in the Akeley Hall of African Mammals at the American Museum of Natural History, at least one of which was amongst the thousands of animals and birds which were shot on an expedition that Roosevelt made to Africa at the start of the twentieth century.

The other point that you've made before is the way in which the eugenics story that begins at UCL, then makes its way out into the world and has significant and long lasting global policy impacts, resulting in the forced sterilisation of hundreds of thousands of Black, Indigenous and Minority Ethnic women, and also women that are perceived to be disabled or mentally ill or members of the "lower classes" throughout the world.

**SD** Entirely. If I take this opportunity to encourage your readers to look up the sixth episode of my most recent podcast, which is called “What Does Eugenics Mean to Us?”, where I’m in conversation with Paige Patchin from the Sarah Parker Remond Centre, and also Kate Law and Kalpana Wilson, all of whom do research into this area. We talk in a lot of detail about this idea of the population question – which can take us through straight back to Madison Grant in the early twentieth century – the idea that the population of the planet is stretching, that there are huge numbers of people and that somehow it is the responsibility of those Black and brown people whose populations are growing exponentially and in other ways which are put forward in rather fearful language. It belies really a lot of this history of eugenics, of racism and of course the general, extractivist, capitalist imbalance in the way that Ash was talking about. So yes, eugenics is a fundamental part of this history which is still going on in the policing of women’s bodies in terms of reproductive injustice. Those two things come together very firmly in the context of this conversation.

**HM** I wanted to ask you to talk a little bit, Subhadra, about another activist group, which is Museum Detox. Could you tell us a little bit about the group and the work they’ve been doing?

**SD** I am a founder member of Museum Detox, which I think is just a fancy way of saying I was there at the first meeting, which is quite a while ago now. Museum Detox is a network for museum and heritage professionals from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and together we provide each other solidarity and support, and activism in the field more widely. A lot of the work that we do is for each other in terms of being a space of mutual support and holding each other up.

While we are a substantial group now – I think there’s more than 200 members – it’s definitely the case that a lot of people who are members of the network are very much going to be the only Black and Minority Ethnic people working in their organisations. To give an example of the organisation that I’ve just left, UCL Culture is an organisation of about 60 people, and depending on how you counted, two of us were people of colour.

While there is greater diversity across gender and across sexuality within the museums and heritage sector, I think it is very telling that representation in the heritage and the museum workforce is so particularly biased in favour of white people. Obviously, that is part of a bigger set of issues to do with representation and the pay gap. But again, the fact that we are not in the room and that our voices are not being heard when it comes to telling these histories, but also when it comes to addressing the systemic inequalities, is a problem.

So, a lot of the work that Museum Detox is doing is internally within the group to support its own members, but also externally in terms of say, Twitter campaigns and various other social media activity. Detox does the work of holding large organisations, particularly the national museums, to account in terms of addressing how diverse their workforce is. But also, how diverse and how critical is the work that they're doing within the sector, including when it comes to addressing things like the climate crisis.

**RH** I wondered whether it might be relevant for us to talk about Black Lives Matter and the impact that it's had on the public discussion around histories of race and racialisation and the ways in which they are related to ongoing, systemic forms of racism. And I wondered how you've both seen these discussions impacting on discussions of history and its relationship, in Ash's case to the discourse around climate justice, and in Subhadra's case to the discourses around museums.

**SD** So much of the discourse around statues, particularly statues coming down – fallism – what to do with statues, etc. in the UK has been framed as a question to do with heritage rather than a question to do with political equality and social injustice. So much of the argument is nonsense co-opted about what to do with these things, when the answer is very clearly obviously pull them down and put them in the sea and leave them there.

As poignant as the current redisplay of Colston in Bristol is, to me there was an argument for leaving him in Bristol Harbour for quite a longer period of time than he actually was. Because essentially what you've had there is the state retrieving its property and then reappropriating it in the context of a heritage organisation, which is still blanket covering the wider issues to do with systemic injustice. The reason for pulling down that statue was not to create a new museum piece, the reason for pulling down that statue was to highlight histories of and continuing social injustice.

**RH** Ashish, what has been the impact of Black Lives Matter on your work with Wretched of the Earth? Was there any sense of last summer's events taking focus away from the climate conversation?

**AG** We felt that, as a result of the open letter, people started talking about the intersection of race and climate in a different way. People also started appropriating the phrase "climate justice". We broke through some kind of barrier because people that meant something very different from what we meant by climate justice felt that there was political capital to be accrued in using the same words, which is always an indication that you've ruffled feathers. One of the things that we did in the open letter, that I think was

kind of stunning for readers in different contexts around the world, was that we were speaking about 500 years. We were saying that in order to understand the nature of this climate event right now, you have to understand the 500-year history of globalisation, of slavery, of colonialism, of neoliberal structural adjustment, as part of one continuous narrative. And only once we've understood the seeds of that oppression, can we actually start to create a community of care around the world.

In terms of impact, we certainly saw a massive uptake in people wanting us to come into their spaces and talk to them about that. And we've done a lot of work with very different audiences in very different contexts from museums and art galleries to schools and activists' collectives, to government departments and policy makers, where we're really trying to take people with us into these intersectional frames of climate and colonialism. But at the level of the COP26, the mainstream intergovernmental private conversation, I'd say that hasn't yet moved at all. I don't think that language or that understanding is yet there. We're at the beginning of a very long process.

Key members of Wretched of the Earth are also key members of Black Lives Matter, and we're absolutely unequivocal in our solidarity for that organisation and for Black lives around the world. So yes, there's absolutely no way in which the events sparked by George Floyd's murder were felt to be taking away from the climate conversation. It was the opposite; it was kind of extraordinary to see the historical timeframes that we'd been talking about becoming the targets of global actions in a way that led to conversations being had around the world in the most unlikely of contexts around the meaning of Leopold the Second and Christopher Columbus and Edward Colston.

I think that the events of last summer need to be understood as a precursor of the consciousness and the awareness that is to come. There is a generation of young people whose consciousness will have been raised by that event. And the impacts of that event will be felt over exactly the same timeframe in which the transition towards global justice, towards ecological equilibrium has to unfold.

At the same time, the act of pulling down statues can only really be understood as the beginning of a process of reimagining our civic centres and our public spaces. For now, the statues have come down and where they used to be there is a void. The void creates all kinds of feelings of discomfort and anxiety. But the real task ahead of us now is not what you put in the place of that statue, but actually how do you work from the basis of that void to cultivate a new sense of public imagination. That is a process that I feel has not yet even started.