PLANETARY FUTURES IN AND WITH THE PUBLIC MUSEUM: A MANIFESTO

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During the past decade, a range of activist groups have been engaged in the development of what has broadly been termed different forms of *decolonial* practice. The desire to reckon with the ongoing effects of injustice and inequality deriving from imperial and colonial relations is now common to cultural organisations and educational institutions in the former colonial powers as well as in their former colonies throughout the world. Wherever they have appeared, these initiatives have frequently involved interventions relating to issues of historical representation; reparations; contested statues, monuments, and heritages; de- and re-naming strategies; repatriation of cultural objects; consideration of rights to land and waters; and anti-racist initiatives. These recurrent interventions have often developed in parallel with activities aimed at equality, diversity, and inclusion in corporate bodies and workforces, as well as other activities aimed at diversifying audiences and publics.

Those undertakings can be counterpointed by a second series of activities concerned with environmental justice and immediate responses to local manifestations of the climate emergency. While the most valuable forms of expertise in these areas are often understood as residing in the natural and environmental sciences, there is increasing appreciation of how the humanities and social sciences might also play key roles in working towards the radical reimagining of human planetary inter-relations which is required by the climate emergency. Indeed, such global challenges demand collaboration that can only be built upon an overdue reconsideration of the very foundations of social, economic, and political relations. History, heritage, and museums are not discrete from these issues, but are deeply implicated in them.

How might museums thus address the challenges of the present moment in order to facilitate a reimagining of contemporary and historical human-environmental relations and become a conduit for public action for climate empowerment and in ongoing struggles for ecological and social justice? This paper aims to begin to map out a

manifesto for a new understanding of the role of museums in society in which they play a central role in a newly reimagined collective more-than-human public sphere. It does so by way of a consideration of the concept of just transitions (and (in)justice more generally), a topic which has dominated discussions of the necessity for widespread systemic change to address the climate emergency, alongside a consideration of the application of emerging conceptual approaches to planetary more-than-humanism. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a range of new ways of thinking about planetary approaches to museums and heritage which are emerging across the sector.[1]

Why Rethink Museums?

The history of the public museum is a history of institutional reform. Indeed, as Tony Bennett notes, the concept of culture is itself a *reformer's science*.[2] So, what is it about the present moment that might particularly prompt us to rethink the role of the public museum? I would suggest there are at least three particular reasons why this is a particularly timely and urgent endeavour.

First, museums make a difference—they underpin and reinforce ideas of racial, cultural, national, regional, ethnic, gender, and class-based differences[3]—and those forms of difference have significant implications for the cultural and social governance of populations.[4] During 2020 when Black Lives Matter protests targeted colonial and slavery related monuments throughout the world, we were reminded of how important heritage is to debates regarding social inequality and racism.

Second, museums have and continue to emphasise progress narratives and stories of human exceptionalism[5] which justify harmful

1. Rodney Harrison and Colin Sterling (eds.), *Deterritorialising the Future: Heritage in, of and after the Anthropocene* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2020); Sterling, "Critical heritage and the posthumanities: problems and prospects," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26, no.11 (2020): 1029–1046, https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2020.1715464; Katie Natanel et al., *A Framework for Environmental Justice* (Radical Ecology), https://www.radicalecology.earth/files/a-framework-for-environmental-justice.pdf; Fiona Cameron, *Museum Practices and the Posthumanities: Curating for Planetary Habitability* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2024).
2. Tony Bennett, *Culture: A Reformer's Science* (London: Sage, 1998).
3. Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013).
4. Bennett et al., *Collecting, Ordering, Governing: Anthropology, Museums and Social Governance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
5. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); Bennett, *Museums, Power, Knowledge: Selected Essays* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017).

environmental and social practices. I'm thinking here of the ways in which ideas of human progress, civilisation, and extractivism are fundamentally museological notions which underpin and reinforce fossil fuel-based capitalism and the exploitation of both humans and nature.

Finally, heritage is fundamentally concerned with how we draw on the past and utilise natural and cultural resources in the present to build new futures.[6] The idea of the Anthropocene—the age in which humans have become the primary and fundamental driving force of planetary change—forces us to see both positively valorised and negative legacies of human behaviour, such as climate change, extinction, waste, chemical pollution, as aspects of heritage, as parts of our human inheritance, and to rethink our relationship with them collectively, as well as our relationship with the planet and our nonhuman planetary companions.

Colonialism and Climate Change

For the first time, the sixth and latest assessment report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group 2 on *Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, published in 2022,[7] stated explicitly that colonialism, racism and other systemic historical and contemporary forms of inequality have unequivocally exacerbated the impacts of climate change and have contributed directly to the uneven vulnerability of both people and ecosystems to climate change across the world. That small and perhaps obvious acknowledgement was far more significant than it might initially seem. It not only marked the first deployment of the term *colonialism* in the language of the IPCC—established some 34 years ago—but also represented an explicit recognition of something which has long been argued by BIPOC(Black, Indigenous, and People of Color)/Global Majority activists and, more recently, by a small but significant group of scholars across the humanities and social sciences. In an important recent publication that sought to shape those discussions, Ian Baucom,[8] who draws

6. Harrison et al., *Heritage futures: comparative approaches to natural and cultural heritage practices* (London: UCL Press, 2020); Harrison and Sterling (eds., 2020).
7. H. O. Pörtner et al. (eds.), *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press), doi:10.1017/9781009325844.
8. Ian Baucom, *History 4° Celsius* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

closely on the work of Paul Gilroy[9] and Achille Mbembe[10], amongst others, expands on these observations to argue for the necessity of the development of a method of critical exchange between climate science, black (and Black Atlantic) studies, humanism and posthumanism. I see heritage and museums as key sites through which to begin to develop these new lines of enquiry which the climate crisis makes necessary.

While the emerging public recognition of the intersections of systemic historic and contemporary social, racial, and political inequalities with ecological injustice and climate catastrophe is promising, it also presents significant challenges. For example, it requires bringing together broad and apparently discrepant disciplines in order to address the climate emergency and augment the work involved in plugging significant knowledge gaps across environmental and climate science, policy-making, and practice. Currently, there is only a thin understanding of how working through the lingering aftereffects of colonialism, broadly understood, might supply central elements in a new series of global responses to the climate crisis and the just transitions it necessitates. The work of assembling these new tools can no longer be seen exclusively, or even primarily, as the sole concern of scientists, policy-makers, and politicians. As geographer and political ecologist Farhana Sultana notes:

> The coloniality of climate seeps through everyday life across space and time, weighing down and curtailing opportunities and possibilities through global racial capitalism, colonial dispossessions, and climate debts. Decolonizing climate needs to address the complexities of colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, international development, and geopolitics that contribute to the reproduction of ongoing colonialities through existing global governance structures, discursive framings, imagined solutions, and interventions. This requires addressing both epistemic violences and material outcomes.[11]

9. Those include the following. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000); Gilroy, *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).
10. Those include the following. Achille Mbembe, "Bodies as Borders," *From the European South 4* (2019): 5-18; Mbembe, "Futures of life and futures of reason," *Public Culture* 33, Issue 1 (2021): 11–33, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-8742136; Mbembe, *Out of the dark night: Essays on decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021); Mbembe, *Pathways of Tomorrow: contribution to thinking commensurate with the planet*, Education Research and Foresight Working Papers 32 (Paris: UNESCO, 2023).

There can be no doubt that the climate emergency is the defining planetary challenge of our time. The need for international cooperation and collaboration in transitioning to green technologies and meeting global commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in order to limit global warming to 1.5 °C is well established. There is a widespread acknowledgement that the rapid energy (alongside political, economic, and social) transitions this will require must be undertaken in a *just* manner. The concept of just transitions first emerged in the 1990s as Labour movements began to describe the need to protect worker's rights and livelihoods in transitioning to more environmentally sustainable industries, but has since come to encompass a range of issues relating not only to contemporary inequalities and injustices but also increasingly those systemic forms of inequalities that are rooted in the past. The concept thus touches on a range of issues of relevance to museums, including social, economic, political, ecological, racial, and historical justice, and issues of reparation, repatriation, reconciliation, and repair as part of the acknowledgement of such injustices.

Alongside these new understandings of the relationship between contemporary and historical injustices and their impact on climate and transitions away from fossil fuels and environmentally harmful practices more generally has been a further, parallel development in new ways of understanding the more-than-human rights and legal status of the environment. Over the past two decades, a number of countries including Bangladesh, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, India, Mexico, New Zealand, Uganda, and certain tribal councils in USA, have recognised the legal rights of specific non-humans—for example rivers and/or mountains—and/or associated ecosystems, or even more expansively, *nature* in general to exist and thrive. Such legal developments are distinct from, yet overlap with, the recent (2022) UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution recognizing the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a basic human right in the sense in which they also recognise the rights of non-humans to exist independently of their contribution to human health and wellbeing. A recent UK Law Society report *Law in the emerging Bio-Age* (2022) notes the importance of these newly emergent rights discourses.

11. Farhana Sultana, "The unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality," *Political Geography*, Article 102638 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102638.

> Rights have already been granted (and more are being sought in different jurisdictions globally) for elephants, trees, rivers, ecosystems, and landscapes. Rights for nonhumans communicate our dependence on and a greater role for nature in decision-making. The process and execution of a nonhuman rights-based framework in international and local law may differ radically from a human rights-based approach. For example, if rights were granted to nonhumans or living systems, then questions of liability for damage to the environment, such as climate change or biodiversity loss, arise.[12]

Questions of financial and cultural reparations and repair have become central to museums and heritage, not least in the wake of responses to the Sarr-Savoy report on the *Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*, commissioned by Emmanual Macron and published in 2020.[13] The discussions of the legal rights of nonhumans raise further questions not only of liability, but what forms the reparations for such liabilities, losses, and damages to non-humans might take. How could we appropriately value the payments we would make to a river, for example, for damaging it? And what form might those payments best take?

A focus on *just transitions* potentially opens up fruitful issues of justice and reparation. However, in the light of the IPCC's statements about the relationship between colonialism, racism, and climate change, those questions must rely upon broader discussions of how critical understanding of coloniality might be re-written so as to accommodate bio-catastrophe on the one hand and the specific importance of racial hierarchy as the articulation of nature and history on the other. That shift would help to orient discussion towards a place where studying racism, genocidal violence, and other dimensions of European imperial domination could be considered broadly instructive rather than seen only as a topic for specialists. The value of that approach would also be transferable, adding to the way that action on climate catastrophe could be presented as both legitimate and ethical. This variety of historical thinking about the damage accomplished in the name of race can teach us things about the past and the future of our species and raise the difficulty of seeing the world anew as a common planetary home.

12. Wendy Schultz and Trish O'Flynn, *Law in the Emerging Bio Age,* Horizon Report for The Law Society (London: The Law Society, 2022), 3.
13. Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (Paris: Philippe Rey/Seuil, 2018).

There is now a significant literature, building on the work of Gilroy, which explores his thesis in the Black Atlantic that "the concentrated intensity of the slave experience is something that marks out blacks as the first truly modern people, handling the nineteenth century dilemmas and difficulties which would become the substance of everyday life in Europe a century later"[14] and suggesting that it is the transatlantic slave trade, the slave ship and the plantation, alongside the development of the steam engine and the atomic bomb, which should be seen as the emblematic markers of the beginnings of modernity and the Anthropocene/Capitalocene.[15] This is not only because slavery financed the Industrial Revolution in Europe and beyond, but also because the transatlantic slave trade marks the widespread global industrialised commodification and exploitation of humans in the quest for limitless financial growth which also underpins the climate crisis.[16]

Although the negative impacts of climate change and the concept of loss and damage are included in international conventions, such as the United Nations Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage and Article 8 of the Paris Agreement, the concept remains poorly defined. As Emily Boyd et al note:

> Loss and damage (L&D) is both a policy mechanism and the sum of impacts inflicted by climate change and extreme events. They can be both financial and physical, and include the loss of property, assets, infrastructure, agricultural production and/or revenue, but also extend beyond this and can be difficult to quantify in economic terms. Degraded health, losses induced by human mobility, loss of cultural heritage, and loss of Indigenous and local knowledge are such examples.[17]

These issues have been at the core of discussions at various recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Conferences of the Parties (COPs) which have aimed to address the ways in which those

14. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 220-221.
15. See also Françoise Vergès, "Racial Capitalocene," in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, eds. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (London: Verso, 2017), 72-82; Dominic Boyer, *No More Fossils* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2023).
16. Baucom (2020); Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (London: John Murray Press, 2021); Malcolm Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022).
17. Emily Boyd et al., "Loss and damage from climate change: A new climate justice agenda," *One Earth* 4, Issue 10 (2021): 1365.

countries, communities and individuals who have benefited least from fossil fuel-based industrialisation, and have thus contributed the least to climate breakdown, are most severely at risk from the impacts of climate change, and most vulnerable to the financial and social impacts of green transition. How might we take the current discussions about loss and damage in relation to climate change as an opening point to consider a broader framework of calls for racial, social, and ecological justice across a range of different fields? What is the range of mechanisms by which such issues have attempted to be addressed in the past? How might discussions related to a range of other initiatives concerned with recognising and rectifying historical injustices and their social, economic, and ecological impacts be related to discussion of loss and damage in climate policy and discourse? How do these relate more generally to the question of justice, understood broadly, and just transitions? Opening the concept of loss and damage to a consideration of other forms of justice that have emerged historically around other forms of transition—for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, or instances of cultural restitution of objects from museums—provides a lens through which to consider not only how losses and damages have been reconciled in the past, but how best to manage such processes in the future. As Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò argues,[18] any project of reparation must be a fundamentally planetary project which transcends the nation state and which is not focused on defining harm, but instead focuses on repair as an ongoing, future oriented process.

Towards an Elemental Understanding of Planetary Heritage

In what ways might thinking elementally about museums and heritage advance this agenda? The broadly *cosmopolitical* traditions which have been rearticulated in the work of Gilroy and Mbembe insist upon interrogating absolutist categories of difference—especially race—whatever their ontological basis. Instead, they focus upon the fragile potentials of common life which have acquired even greater significance in emergency conditions, for example where the right to breathe has been revoked or qualified (Here I refer not only to the refrain *I can't breathe* which has become associated with the Black Lives Matter

18. Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

protests and issues of racial inequality more generally, following the homicides and murders of a number of young black men in the United States through the use of illegal chokeholds by police officers, but also the issue of air pollution and the impact of the climate emergency on atmospheric health for humans and non-humans more generally). In addition to themes of breath, respiration, and air, water provides a further focal point for engaging with the manifestations of the climate crisis and the historic links between colonialism, climate, and justice. Bearing in mind that all living things require both air and water in order to survive, thinking elementally allows us to explore broader questions relating to the changing relations between territory: woods, fields, swamps, deserts, and mountains and lakes, rivers, seas, and oceans. Borders are traced and sovereignty extended over land and water in continuum. The entanglements and specificities of engagement with air, land, and water provide a mechanism through which to rethink history—challenging histories of territory and conquest, and drawing attention to strategies of resistance/contestation of their separation from one another and their transformation into commodities which allow their access to be restricted and capitalised upon.

Similarly, we could think of carbon as a key element which is central to all known planetary life processes. All known life cells on the planet are built around carbon molecule chains. Indeed, as Timothy LeCain[19] so convincingly argues in his critique of the concept of the Anthropocene and his suggested replacement with the concept of the Carbocene, it is our addiction to carbon in the form of fossil fuels which has literally fuelled climate change and global warming. Carbon reduction and photosynthesis play a key role in reducing global warming and mitigating against the worst effects of climate change. The role of coal in the industrial revolution and the lifestyles which the industrial revolution has supported, alongside our subsequent addiction to further fossil fuels in the form of oil and gas, are also part of the story of the emergence of heritage and museums as a phenomena, as industrialising societies began to attempt to make sense of rapid social change and to organise and order societies in specific ways. Each one of these elements or building blocks of all forms of life forms a bridge between humans and non-humans and allows us to begin to think collectively about forms of planetary more-than-humanism which supercede selfish

19. Timothy J. LeCain, "Mining the Anthropocene: How coal created the supposed 'Age of Humans'," in *Boom – Crisis – Heritage: King Coal and the Energy Revolutions after 1945*, eds. Lars Bluma et al. (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021), 283-292.

human interests to think collectively about the shared conditions which will allow us all to survive the coming crisis.

Such an elemental framework also allows us to think critically and productively against the grain of heritage, which tends to be framed around positively valued objects, places, and practices from the past, to consider instead those ambiguous or negative traces of past human behaviour in the present. Thus, climate change, waste, pollution, and other Anthropocene legacies all become forms of heritage with which to be reckoned. This idea of waste as a form of negative or ambiguously valued heritage was a significant theme to emerge from my work on the *Heritage Futures project*, which considered various forms of toxic heritage and legacies such as nuclear waste, and how they might help us to productively rethink the role of heritage in the light of the climate emergency.[20] Similarly, the documentation and interpretation of the imperial debris which remains within the postcolony—the statues and monuments to former political ecologies, and the traces of protest and even removal which they have accrued through time—can also be read as forms of counterheritages,[21] or as a kind of outdoor countermuseum.

Conclusion

Museums and heritage potentially have a significant role to play in supporting action for a newly understood interconnected set of issues relating to climate justice, just transitions, and anti-racist/anti-colonial agendas, but they will only do so alongside an acknowledgement and critical exploration of how they themselves have been central to the colonial project and to the development of progress narratives that have underpinned models of racial inequality, human exceptionalism and which have justified forms of exploitation and reinforced late capitalist notions of limitless growth. Indeed, such acknowledgements could become a key part of reimagining the contemporary role of the museum in society and accounting for the complex connections between race,

20. Harrison et al. (2020); Harrison, "Legacies: Rethinking the Futures of Heritage and Waste in the Anthropocene," in *Heritage Ecologies*, eds. T. Rinke Bangstad and Þóra Pétursdóttir (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021), 31-48; Sterling and Harrison, "The New Inheritance Paradigm: Heritage in, of and after the Anthropocene," in *Climate Inheritance*, eds. Rania Ghosn and El Hadi Jazairy (New York and Barcelona: Actar Publishers, 2023), 128-135; Esther Breithoff, "From Bombs to Bracelets: War Waste as Involuntary Heritage in the Anthropocene," *Heritage & Society* (2025): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/215903 2X.2025.2475413.

21. Denis Byrne, *Counterheritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage Conservation in Asia* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014).

colonialism, and climate and new imaginaries of future forms of reparation, justice, and reconciliation for damages caused by humans to other humans and non-humans alike. By broadening our understanding of heritage to include waste, climate, and other less valorized legacies of human pasts, and in shifting to planetary, more-than- and post-human frames of reference, I argue that heritage as a concept and museums as public institutions might play a key role in developing more just social and ecological futures.

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of Curating Tomorrow. It continues to be developed and amplified by the work of colleagues around the world, including in Korea through a book project[22] which not only translates the original text, but also adds to them a range of practitioner, academic and student-led perspectives on the role of museums in the climate emergency. Aspects of this work continue as part of the AHRC/DCMS (UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport) funded project *Empowering Action for Climate through Collections-based Institutions in LMICs* (Low and Middle-Income Countries) in partnership with ICCROM, and the Horizon Europe/UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) funded project *Petrocultures' Intersections with The Cultural Heritage sector in the context of green transitions* (PITCH). See further information at https://pitch-horizon.eu/.

22. Cho Juhyun (ed.), *Drifting Curriculum* (Seoul: Drifting Curriculum, 2024). Available online at https://ebook-product.kyobobook.co.kr/dig/epd/ebook/E000007831555.