

Les Back

Hello, and welcome to Recovering Community, a podcast about community, what it means, how it's formed, and how it can be rebuilt.

I'm Les Back, and I am the Head of Sociology at the University of Glasgow. This is still a relatively new job for me. And with it comes a new home, new colleagues, and new connections. All of these new encounters provide the ground for learning and collaboration. And this podcast, lets me step away from the daily challenges and routines of academic life, to really get to know the work of the School of Social and Political Sciences, in Glasgow and beyond.

Thanks for joining me in these conversations and encounters. I hope they might help you to think differently about what it means to participate in doing research, and listen to people within their communities. Social scientists are fascinated by community, and we're often reflecting on the now, or perhaps trying to predict how it might change in the future. But understanding history, and how it impacts on our lives and relationships in the 21st century is so important when it comes to meaningful and respectful connection, and cohabitation. So I'd like to start by posing a few questions. To whom does history belong? Who is present within it? And what are the absences, silences and omissions within how the past is portrayed?

Glasgow is famous for its museums and galleries from the Burrell Collection in the South Side, one of my favorites to Kelvingrove in the West End. But as you wander around these grand places, which are often very serene, do you ever think about how these traces of the past got here? And what museums are actually for? Perhaps there to inspire, to educate, to memorialise our shared history? Or maybe to help us relax on a Sunday, and enjoy a nice coffee and a piece of cake.

But could there, or Should there be the possibility that museums can make us uncomfortable? It's a question that's in the minds of the curators and community at the Hunterian, the museum right at the heart of the university of Glasgow's main building. The Hunterian is home to a beautiful and important collection of art and objects bequeath to the university in 1783 by the pioneering obstetrician Dr. William Hunter, who was a former student.

A collection tells a story about the collector. It also tells us a lot about the society, politics, and trends of the time it was formed. But when we think carefully about how the collection was put together, it tells us a lot about power, wealth, and privilege. And that's where the stories can start to get uncomfortable. But we shouldn't always be comfortable. Philosopher Walter Benjamin called this the task of rubbing history against the grain. As you walk into the Hunterian, you come across a Declaration of Discomfort printed onto the wall at the center of the space.

Freya Hellier

Most museums are monuments to a system that privileges some people over others, and creates a narrative about the identity of nations or cities that institutions seek to project and protect. Museums

hold collections from donors who benefited from the practice of racial slavery, violent endeavors, forced removal, and the systematic oppression of indigenous peoples. Museums are political places.

Les Back

That provocation is at the heart of curating discomfort. What began as an 18-month project, with the mission to look for ways to change this museum to make it relevant to the 21st century, but it has evolved into something much more.

Discomfort is closely related to confronting the legacy of empire in our culture. The museum exhibits often provide symbols or clues about the unspoken or glossed damage and violence within the historical record. reckoning with that imperial past involves decolonisation, an idea that's in the minds of many people who think about history, from teachers and activists, to artists, curators, and writers. One of those people is Dr Jay Sarkar, who I met not long after I joined the University in 2023.

Jay is an associate professor of global history of inequalities at the University of Glasgow School of Social and Political Sciences. And she directs Decolonisation Through Archives, and archives Fellows Program and podcast, which tackles the issues I've been talking about. Jay introduced me to Zandra Yeaman, the Curator of Discomfort at the Hunterian and a political activist. And when they suggested that we use some objects from the collection to focus our discussion, I was only too happy to close the computer and be guided through the museum by the experts. I began by asking Zandra about the value of discomfort.

Zandra Yeamann

I think the whole point of the discomfort is we are shifting that comfortable narrative that the majority thinking the majority, kind of white ideological Western idea of thinking and that cultural superiority of Western narratives, we are kind of shaking that and that is very uncomfortable for many people. Doesn't have to be, you know, but it's about getting people to kind of sit in that discomfort, give it some thought, and realise that all of this work really is about sharing our history, looking at intercultural ideas, looking at our history through a lens that isn't about privilege and colonisers.

Les Back

So, Jay, can I just ask you as a historian, how does this approach make us think differently about history and the past? And is what do you think are the opportunities within approaching the past?

Jay Sarkar

Yeah, I think the opportunities are really endless. Because, you know, as somebody who teaches historians and non historians in the classroom, I couldn't emphasise more how important the past is because it shapes our present moment, through discomfort, sometimes through reaffirming what we already knew depends on where one is coming from. So we're very fortunate to have you know, curation of discomfort here at the University of Glasgow, and we should probably bring our students more into these spaces

Les Back

Just being here, Jay, you immediately feel the presence of that past, but in a kind of, enlivened urgent way, and I just wanted to ask you a little bit because it feels like in our time, and in the public conversation, there's a lot of emphasis say, well, Oh, can't we just let the history of empires go beyond stay behind, or that's a long time ago? You know, you're talking about slavery still, you know, there's this there's a sort of, in some aspects of the public conversation, there's a, it feels like there's an impetus to try and in a way, draw a line under that past.

Jay Sarkar

Yeah, certainly. But you know, as historians will tell you exactly why we should study more of it. Right? Now we have more archives, because it was so long ago. The other is that, you know, these are uncomfortable histories, right? And these are uncomfortable histories that are global. So when I bring about conversations about empire and colonial capitalism, I frame it as we can't understand the present moment of extreme inequalities, without going to the past, whether it's the question of land, labour, capital, and then you have empire right there, right there is there is no conversation about present inequalities without empire, and how that morphed and reshaped the world that we live in.

Les Back

Jay is just tell us a little bit about what colonial capitalism means or racial capitalism, and how it manifested, perhaps in relation to Glasgow, specifically, given that's where we are.

Jay Sarkar

So I work on histories of capitalism. In terms of racial capitalism, the idea is that, at the very core of it, that that capital has always been far more mobile than labour. Right, and that there is a particular group of people who have access to that hyper mobility of capital. And that is a source of inequality, because labour is constantly keeping up. If labour is getting remunerated at all, and I'm framing it in a very broad way. Right? And so, I think that's why it's important to understand that when thinking about racial capitalism or colonial capitalism, it's about hypermobility of capital and labour struggling to keep up and that division is racialised, and whether it's in the form of nation states Global North, Global South, or, you know, global North global south within the same country.

Les Back

So you know, we're less than a mile from the Clyde. Glasgow's fortunes and economy is connect did to that some of those mobilities. And the business interests here moved didn't they? I'm thinking of the tobacco trade and those kinds of stories, shipbuilding, for example.

Jay Sarkar

Yeah. So we here at the University of Glasgow, I run this program called decolonisation through archives. And what we do is we send what we call archive fellows who are primarily, you know, PhD students, postdocs, sometimes undergrads as well, to go to the archives to uncover some some material that we can then have our listeners, because it has a podcast dimension to it. And so the first episode we had was Glasgow in the world, discussing basically the role of Glasgow or the second city of the empire, during the empire and connecting that on the one hand, with empire, and then connecting that with deindustrialisation and the end of empire, because that conversation often gets

lost, because deindustrialisation seems to be a local problem, and not a global one, and how it's connected to the global networks of empire are left out.

Zandra Yeamann

I think the other reason why museums are great spaces to be able to share these histories, is for too long, it's in the academic sphere. And what does that actually achieve? So for me, as an activist who practices in the same way that a historian practices, you know, we research we look for evidence, working closely with the historians, and using the evidence that they uncover through archives and other research, is really important to be able to bring it into a public space, and to bring it into public discourse. You know, for too long, much of this the story of the enslavement of African people, the story of empire has been discussed in academic elite institutions, further, keeping a distance from the people who are most impacted by the legacy of empire. So I think bringing these different strands and disciplines together, as is really, really important to ensure that we are providing education, providing knowledge, providing spaces for people to be able to actually have the conversation who are directly impacted in the present from things that happened in the past. And that continue to be perpetuated today.

Jay Sarkar

I would also say that, it's it's excellent that we have, you know, we have this conversation about empire and colonialism in the public discourse, and not just in the ivory tower, because it holds academics accountable, right? Because what's happening in the public discourse and public space, is it influences how we are thinking and teaching and in that relationship is symbiotic. It doesn't necessarily is full of conflict or contention. But there is a question of mutual accountability. And I think that's that's important to have the conversation go on and you know, progress.

Les Back

Maybe it's a good moment to encounter some of the objects and see how they make us feel and also for you explain a little bit about the histories and and how they work.

Zandra Yeamann

Yeah, let's take you over here. So one of the first objects we'll look at as the Blackstone chair. So what I found really interesting when I started campaigning as an anti-racist, human rights, social justice activist, and focusing in culture and heritage in Scotland, I would visit the Hunterian and this would be the first object I'd see. So it's the Blackstone chair, and then the label that will talk about the material culture, what it's made of. And we'll talk about how it was used, and it still gets used at the university, but its origins were, if you were a medic, and you have to do your oral examination, this is the chair you would sit on. It's quite sadistic looking,

Les Back

you know, it's a wooden chair with short arms quite doesn't look very comfortable chair, quite upright and above it has like an hourglass.

Zandra Yeamann

So the sand in the hourglass. That's the timer of how long you had to do your oral examination. So no pressure, no pressure. And when I used to come here, I would look at this chair and I would think about not the actual object, which is pretty static. So for me, I would think of well who sat in that chair? And what I sense discovered was James McCune Smith, who was the first African American doctor who studied at Glasgow University to become a medic. He actually got three degrees while he was here. He would have sat in that chair to do his oral examination to become a doctor and what I thought, what else was fascinating about that chair as many medics with have sat in that chair, and went on to work on slave ships.

So James, McCune Smith sat on that chair, and the full knowledge that many medics previously with a thought a man with his background, didn't have the intellectual capacity to sit in that chair. And I started to think about that story. And I started to think more about James McCune Smith, you know, who was born into slavery in Manhattan. And his mother was an enslaved woman, and his father was the enslaver. So there's a complete complicated history around that. At the age of 14, he was emancipated because at that point in New York, that's when you know, the Emancipation Act came into place. And then he came to the UK around about 1833. And at that time, we did have in 1807, you know, the Abolition of the Slave Trade, but it wasn't till 1834, that slavery was abolished. So he was here for a year before slavery was even abolished. So imagine that. And the other thing about James McCune Smith, when he was in Glasgow, he also campaigned for women's rights as a medic.

Around about 1830, there was many impoverished, vulnerable women who a professor of medicine was doing drug trials on that were really harmful. And he discovered that so the so many rich stories we can tell about one single person who sat on that object, and too much to tell in a podcast like this. And there's another layer to that story as no women with a sat on that chair to do the oral examinations, because by the time the University of Glasgow allowed women to enter the university, they stopped using the Blackstone chair.

Les Back

The complexities and and also in James McCune Smith's life in a way, our relation to him can't be comfortable in that sense, because it involves having to confront those complexities.

Zandra Yeamann

It does confront those complexities and also as a way to talk about how people can be more than one thing. We are complex as human beings, but it seems when it comes to history, people become memorialized. And the complexities are no longer something that folk are comfortable to talk about.

Les Back

Is there else we could see Jay or something another thing that would would would help us I think differently about this?

Jay Sarkar

I think this is a great time to discuss repatriation, right? And you had this amazing object that you wanted to show us Zandra, I remember.

Zandra Yeamann

Yes, we'll go and have a look at the Giant Galliwasp Lizard. It's called the Giant Galliwasp, but it's not that giant. So let's go and have a look at it.

Les Back

Okay, here's the Giant Galliwasp

Zandra Yeamann

So what we did here as part of the work of Curating Discomfort is we invited six community curators to come and work more productively with the curators here at the Hunterian. And one of the things that community curators were to do was to think about the objects that are in the collection of the Hunterian and think about how they could use those objects to springboard stories.

And one of the community curators had picked the Jamaican Giant Galliwasp. And what was interesting about that is when they looked at this object, which museums would call a specimen, because what it is, is basically a dead lizard, which is in a jar full of alcohol, so that it still exists. And what was discovered through picking this object was, these are lizards that are extinct in Jamaica. And part of the reason for that extinction is again, colonialism because they introduced another species that actually impacted on these lizards, and they became extinct. And through this work the science curator involved in taking care of that collection since discovered that in Jamaica, there isn't even a specimen of this lizard. So he reached out to colleagues in Jamaica and talked about how we here at that the Hunterian have to in the collection. Can we talk about repatriation? And what was really interesting about this because repatriation has been in the media, it's all over the news. And particularly when we talk about things like the Benin Bronzes, nobody really talks that much about the repatriation of natural history specimens. It's not that pretty to look at. And also you've got to think of well, why is it important to repatriate something like this? Well, again, it's part of the history of the Caribbean, isn't it as part of being able to explore that history of colonialism? And its legacies, because it is not in the past, it's very much in the present.

Les Back

So interesting you say that, because it makes me think of what you said earlier, Jay, about not just about the past as in the historical past, but also about that sort of scale and geography, and where those past will the connections between place.

Jay Sarkar

And I think, as you were talking about, you know, this, this reptile that is extinct in Jamaica, I was thinking about environmental history. And when we think about climate change, we don't necessarily bring in empire and colonialism, like we need to bring empire and colonialism into the fore of our discussion, when we're thinking about climate change and the impact on environment because of empire. Right?

Zandra Yeamann

Which makes us think about James Paraffin Young. So we could maybe go and have a look at that.

Les Back 21:12

Oh, it sounds terrific. Okay, tell us about this.

Zandra Yeaman

So there are always consequences to inventions and what follows. And the process to extract fuel from shale was discovered by James Young. So here Hunterian is a display of some of the objects he collected. So, you know, it's not even about looking at these individual objects. It's actually thinking about the bigger story, you know, when you think about something like fracking, and how that has harmed the environment. How, it's a practice that still happens in large parts of South Africa and the Karoo region, through mining operations. But it also is something that continues in the United States of America, and how much something like fracking has caused concerns over health and environmental degradation. And yet it's banned in Scotland.

Jay Sarkar

It's truly fascinating, right? I was I was looking up, you know, what he has he has done and he was the first oilman of Scotland, and he was at the Anderson institution, currently called University of Strathclyde. And he was working with Thomas Graham. And the technology he came up with sort of revolutionised oil refineries. And then later on shale gas, like how do you extract shale gas? So when I think about empire, I think like the four M's of empire, right? missionaries, merchants, mercenaries and migrants, we forget expertise we, yeah, we forget expertise and circulation of expertise, if it's not four M's of empire four M and E. And just, you know, the story of James Paraffin young just makes it so clear, right? It's absolutely fascinating.

Zandra Yeaman

And it's not about saying he's bad. You know, it's that idea of not thinking about the impact of behavior, because the focus is about capitalism.

Les Back

So we have to sort of think in the here and now and also think in a sort of planetary scale. Is that right?

Jay Sarkar

Yeah, it's planetary. But when you think about empire, it's not just, you know, the British Empire, we need to think in connected ways, right? So if you think about mobility and empire, for example, we find a lot of Scottish people move to Canada and become part of settlers there, or Australia, right. So these are, again, networks of empire where these are not big names. But these are everyday people. And a lot of them have a story of extraction and exploitation here. And I'm thinking about the Highland Clearances connected to a migration of Scottish people, because they had to leave and so they moved to Canada. But then there, there was also eviction and expropriation of land of indigenous people. Right, so there is this layered, exploitation and extraction that needs to be part of the conversation about empire because it's all connected. And it's about, you know, human experience being complex, and you know, you could be exploited in one space and then become the exploiter in another.

Les Back

The idea of the planetary is also a verb to planet to move in the stories of the complexities of those movements. It really conjures that so vividly, listening to you both actually you're changing the story. You're enhancing it in a way that makes us think differently.

Zandra Yeaman

I think this is one of the reasons why I love working with people at Jay, who's you know, working with historians is when we bring our knowledge and expertise and experience together, it's not that we're detracting anything we're actually building and we're creating a much more rich story to tell. And that's all true

Les Back

I wonder what you think about that, that Jay in turn just because in a sense this is a better story of not just the experience of the reconnections between here and the hinterlands of empire. But actually it tells something very deep and profound about what it means to be from Glasgow, what it means to be a Scot what it means to be English, you know, so in the sense, the relevance of this history is important for the way in which the quote, majorities think about ourselves.

Jay Sarkar

Absolutely, and completely agree with you Les and I think there is a story to be told about the politics of textbook history, as opposed to the past and study of the past, right, they are very different. And it's not just, it's not just Scotland. I remember having this, you know, fascinating conversation with a colleague of mine, who was from Glasgow, and they were talking about, you know, the D word that is very popular, and we should talk about it right now. It's decolonisation,

Les Back

Everyone wants to talk about decolonisation, we should talk about

Jay Sarkar

But the way she had not learned about decolonisation, and the way I had learned a lot about decolonisation, were just fascinating. For her, she grew up just, you know, just south of Clyde, and she was telling me that it just didn't exist. But in my textbooks, I'm from the other city of empire, Calcutta, in India. And decolonisation for me was 1947, the Union Jack had fallen down, the Indian flag had gone up, and the Pakistani flag had gone up. And that's it, nothing to see here we are moving on. Okay, so that is not the decolonisation, we just we think about when we think about the 21st century, or the last, you know, decade or so. So there are limitations in ways the past is taught and thought about that there are comfortable histories and the textbooks. And there is a lot of discomfort to be discovered, hopefully, in college classrooms and museums like the Hunterian.

Les Back

If I'm understanding you, well, I'm sure hope I am. That in a way you're trying to keep the kind of relation to coloniality, or the colonial, as it unfolds, constantly shaping the present and moving towards the future open. So that is it the risk of decolonisation that somehow it gets kind of decolonized - done.

Jay Sarkar

Now, when I think about it, and I teach about it, I say there are multiple ways, it's polyvalent it's multifaceted. It's, it means many things to many people, right? On the one hand, there's decolonisation as a moment, which is textbook histories and post colonial states. The one that I grew up in, for example, that this moment 1947, this is when you know, there was there was a different flag, we celebrate that as independence, right? That's decolonisation as a moment. But the reality is that a lot of the times, it's, you know, colonial power structures, sometimes in a very tangible way, same laws adopted by post-colonial governments, right. So there needs to be decolonisation as a process as an ongoing process. That's what I subscribe to. But again, I also believe it cannot happen without decolonisation as a movement, which is about you know, forming partnerships with folks like me in more of an academic and you know, you're an activist and a curator. So I think that's where that's where change is possible, not the first one. But the other two, that is as an ongoing process, and as a movement, but I'm optimistic.

Les Back

And as we're talking here, we're being sort of slowly surrounded by children coming into the Hunterian encountering the things that you're fostering here and bringing the traces of the past you're bringing to life

Zandra Yeaman

People come in, in museums for different reasons. It could be just the aesthetics, you know, it could be because of what you see something that think's quite a famous object, or for some people, it's treasures. And I put that in quotations. But when they actually start to look at it in depth, and they actually see the narratives besides some of those objects, I'd like to think that we then are creating an environment where this insidious messaging of white ideology Western ideology of the past. Or you could even save the colonial thinking of the past, as actually, we're intervening in that and we're changing that it's going to take a generation and the change, I want to see I will not be alive for but all we can do is facilitate a space for those people who are coming after. And it's great to see all these cats because they're the people who are coming after old folk like me,

Les Back

You know, and we should, we should thank you both. What a wonderful conversation. And it's a wonderful place to end so massive thanks, Zandra and Jay.

Jay Sarkar

It was a joy. Thanks for having us on the podcast.

Zandra Yeaman

I know thanks very much.

Les Back

It is such a privilege to be here that Hunterian and to listen to Zandra and Jay, maybe a privilege of a different kind of key that There's sort of notions of white privilege that that we've been talking about. But the thing there leaves me with is embracing some of these discomfoting aspects of history, there's so much that is an enhancement of our historical understanding. So, from James Paraffin Young and the

story and the origins of shale gas, they still haunt the discussions of fracking today to a Jamaican Lizard in a jar, and a seat that medics would have sat on, and where James McCune Smith would have sat when he was conferred his status as a doctor. From those objects that are all around us all the time, we have the clues of the dimensions and scale of a planetary history. And I think that planetary history is a better history, a deeper rich history, a more enriching one. And it's just such an extraordinary thing to be that within touching distance of those objects, and the trace of that past here and now.

Thank you for listening to this episode of recovering community. I'm Les Back and I want to say a huge thank you to Zandra Yeaman and Dr Jay Sarkar for their time, expertise, and for giving me a new perspective on a museum that I walk past every day.

You can find out more about the Hunterian and Curating Discomfort on the University of Glasgow's website. I'll leave a link in the show notes and you'll also find a link to a new podcast that Jay has made as part of the decolonising through archives program. I highly recommend it.

I hope you're enjoying this series of Recovering Community. It makes a huge difference if you subscribe and share it. Next time I'm in Glasgow City Centre to learn about the links between drug deaths violence and homelessness

Jim Thomson

It's very difficult to get people into any kind of treatment centre or detox centre where they get to a place where they feel as if right, I'm ready to go and live, know what I mean? I'm ready to deal with these feelings I'm feeling without having to use drugs and put my life at risk. Because the way people feel they're willing to risk their life so they don't feel it. The risk of death is better than the risk of living, do you k now that?

Les Back

Thanks also to the staff in the School of Social and Political Sciences, and the College of Social Sciences, who helped with this project.

Recovering community is produced by Freya Hellier