

Echoes of An Empire

First Friday @ Marine Studios [06/09/2024]

Introduction: Exploring British Colonialism Through Poetry

Welcome to "Echoes of Empire." This event aims to delve deep into the global legacy of British colonialism and imperialism through the lens of powerful poets from India, Africa, and the Caribbean, and contemporary Black British voices. These poets articulate the profound effects of empire—ranging from the sacrifice and loss endured by colonised peoples to the ongoing struggles of identity, displacement, and resistance.

Each selected poem reflects on a specific moment or aspect of British colonial rule, offering an immersive and nuanced exploration of its impact on both individuals and nations.

1. "The Gift of India" by Sarojini Naidu

Sarojini Naidu's poignant poem captures India's significant yet often overlooked contribution to World War I under British rule. India is personified as a grieving mother mourning the loss of her sons sent to fight in foreign lands on behalf of the British Empire. In doing so, Naidu highlights the deep sacrifice and grief felt by the colonized people.

- **Historical Context:** Written during the British Raj (1858–1947), the poem reflects India's role as part of the British Empire during World War I, where thousands of Indian soldiers fought and died for a cause that was not their own.
- **Themes Explored:** Sacrifice, grief, exploitation, and a plea for remembrance.
- **Key Takeaway:** "The Gift of India" urges the world not to forget the sacrifices of Indian soldiers and calls attention to the exploitation of the colonized in service to imperial ambitions.

2. "Where the Mind is Without Fear" by Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore's visionary poem articulates his dream of a free, enlightened India—one liberated from British oppression. The poem speaks to the intellectual and spiritual freedom that the nation yearns for, standing in stark contrast to the constraints imposed by colonial rule.

- **Historical Context:** Written during British rule in India, Tagore composed this poem as part of his collection *Gitanjali*, for which he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. It embodies the Indian struggle for self-determination and intellectual freedom.
 - **Themes Explored:** Freedom, intellectual liberation, unity, and resistance to colonial authority.
 - **Key Takeaway:** Tagore calls for a future India where minds are unburdened by fear, and the country awakens to an existence defined by freedom, reason, and truth.
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3. "Pagri Sambhal Jatta" by Banke Dayal

This protest poem-turned-anthem emerged during the Punjab Peasant Movement, symbolizing resistance to British-imposed taxes and exploitation. The "pagri" (turban) in Sikh culture stands for honour and identity, and the poem implores farmers to hold onto their dignity in the face of oppressive colonial policies.

- **Historical Context:** Written during the Punjab Peasant Movement in 1907, a period when British colonial rule in India imposed harsh taxes and exploitative agricultural practices on the peasantry.
 - **Themes Explored:** Resistance, dignity, and cultural pride.
 - **Key Takeaway:** "Pagri Sambhal Jatta" became a rallying cry for the oppressed, symbolizing the broader Indian resistance to British colonial rule and the assertion of cultural identity.
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4. "Africa" by David Diop

David Diop's "Africa" is a deeply emotional reflection on the continent's suffering under colonial rule, particularly focusing on the pain of slavery and exploitation. Despite this suffering, Diop highlights the resilience of Africa, describing the continent's slow but inevitable return to freedom.

- **Historical Context:** Written during the era of French and British colonial Africa in the mid-20th century, the poem speaks to the shared struggles across colonized African nations.
- **Themes Explored:** Slavery, exploitation, resilience, and hope.
- **Key Takeaway:** "Africa" serves as both a poem about the suffering caused by colonialism and a celebration of Africa's enduring strength and resistance.

5. "A Far Cry from Africa" by Derek Walcott

Walcott's complex poem grapples with his divided heritage, reflecting on the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya and the moral dilemmas of colonial violence. Caught between his African and European roots, the poet questions how one can reconcile one's identity when torn between the oppressor and the oppressed.

- **Historical Context:** Written in response to the brutal Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya in the 1950s, when the British government responded to the Kikuyu revolt with violent repression.
 - **Themes Explored:** Colonial violence, identity conflict, and betrayal.
 - **Key Takeaway:** Walcott's poem reflects the anguish of divided identity in a post-colonial world, where loyalty to both heritage and colonial culture creates inner turmoil.
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6. "Making Sense" by Malika Booker

In this contemporary Black British poem, Booker reflects on the lasting effects of colonialism and its impact on identity. Through imagery of cultural hybridity and racial displacement, she explores the challenges of navigating modern British society while reconciling her African heritage and the British colonial legacy.

- **Historical Context:** Set in contemporary post-colonial Britain, the poem addresses the ongoing legacy of colonialism on Black British identity.
 - **Themes Explored:** Cultural hybridity, displacement, and racial tensions.
 - **Key Takeaway:** "Making Sense" highlights the complex reality of living in a post-colonial society, where individuals must navigate their identity in a world shaped by the remnants of empire.
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7. "Home" by Sarah Howe

Sarah Howe's poem reflects on the complexities of identity in Hong Kong, particularly in relation to its history as a British colony and its subsequent handover to China. Howe explores feelings of displacement and loss, as well as the transient nature of colonial power.

- **Historical Context:** Hong Kong was under British colonial rule from 1841 until 1997, when it was handed over to China. The poem speaks to the uncertainties and identity crises that arose from this transition.
 - **Themes Explored:** Identity, displacement, and the legacy of colonialism.
 - **Key Takeaway:** “Home” reflects the lingering effects of British colonialism on Hong Kong and its people, navigating the complexities of belonging in a post-colonial world.
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Conclusion: Echoes of Empire

The poems explored in this session offer a profound and multi-faceted reflection on the global impact of British imperialism and colonialism. They highlight the loss and suffering endured by colonised peoples and their enduring resistance, resilience, and hope for a better future. Through these powerful literary voices, we gain a deeper understanding of how the legacy of empire continues to shape individual and national identities long after the formal end of colonial rule.

Exploring British Colonialism Through Photography & Digital Art

Introduction: The Power of Visual Art in Capturing Colonial Legacy

This handout goes with the "**Echoes of An Empire Through Photography & Digital Art**" exhibit, where black-and-white street and candid portraiture, alongside contemporary digital art, explore the long-lasting effects of British colonialism. This visual journey delves into the impact of colonialism on modern British society, particularly focusing on immigrant communities of Asian, African, Caribbean, and South American descent. Through this work, we look to address how colonial history, migration, and nationalisation have shaped the identities of these communities and how the UK schooling system can play a crucial role in fostering better understanding and inclusion.

The featured art aims to stimulate dialogue, challenge beliefs, and bring to light the often-unseen connections between colonialism, immigration, and the complex dynamics of identity in modern Britain.

1. Colonial Legacy and the Formation of Immigrant Communities in the UK

Photography Focus: The black-and-white street portraits capture the stories of individuals whose families migrated to the UK as a direct result of British colonialism. From the Indian and Pakistani communities who arrived after the British Raj, to Caribbean families invited post-Windrush, and African immigrants whose nations fought for independence—the portraits reflect the resilience and complex identities of people navigating their place in modern Britain.

- **Asian Communities:** Many families from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh arrived in the UK post-colonialism, drawn by promises of economic opportunity or displaced by the effects of partition. These communities, once part of the British Empire, are now integral to British society, but their histories of forced migration are often overlooked.
- **African Communities:** From Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya to South Africa, Britain's colonial rule over these countries created long-standing socio-economic instability, leading many to migrate in search of better opportunities. The legacies of the empire are still clear in the cultural tensions they face today.
- **Caribbean Communities:** After WWII, the UK invited Caribbean workers to fill labour shortages, and these immigrants faced significant racism despite their British citizenship. The Windrush generation serves as a poignant

reminder of the disconnect between the colonial narrative of belonging and the reality of exclusion upon arrival in the UK.

- **South American Influence:** While British colonialism had less direct influence in South America, its imperial reach and dominance in global politics affected trade, labour, and migration patterns. These influences can still be traced in the small but growing British-South American communities.

These communities reflect Britain's historical empire, with their presence in the UK being a direct consequence of colonialism. The street portraits aim to highlight how these individuals and families have kept cultural identities while integrating into the British social fabric, despite facing systemic discrimination.

2. Contemporary Digital Art: Reimagining Colonial Histories

Digital Art Focus: The digital artwork going with this exhibit reimagines historical events, maps, and narratives of colonialism through a modern lens. These pieces juxtapose the grandiosity of the British Empire with the lived experiences of the colonised showing how these histories are intertwined but also fragmented by narratives of exclusion.

Through the bold use of colour, abstraction, and historical references, digital art challenges the glorification of empire often seen in mainstream British history. It also illustrates the importance of technology and digital media in reshaping how we understand history, particularly in giving voice to historically marginalised communities.

Themes Explored in the Digital Art:

- **Displacement & Belonging:** The art explores the displacement experienced by migrant families, many of whom were driven to the UK by colonial policies that destabilized their homelands. This sense of searching for a place of belonging, both in their new country and within their own identities, is a central theme.
- **Fragmented Histories:** These pieces reflect the fragmented and often incomplete history taught in British schools, where colonialism is either glorified or marginalized, leaving many in minority communities feeling alienated from the official narrative.
- **Cultural Resilience:** Despite the hardships of colonialism and migration, the art portrays the resilience of these communities in preserving their culture, history, and dignity.

3. The Connection Between Colonialism and Immigration

The street portraits and digital art in this exhibit serve as a reminder of the direct connection between Britain's colonial past and its present-day multicultural society. Colonialism created both forced and voluntary migration patterns that shaped the UK's demographics. For example:

- **Windrush Generation:** Many Caribbean people were invited to rebuild Britain after World War II, only to face systemic racism and rejection. Their contributions to modern Britain were often erased or downplayed, while their legal status came under threat decades later in the infamous Windrush scandal.
- **Asian and African Migration:** Countries such as India, Kenya, and Ghana, once part of the British Empire, saw significant emigration to the UK. Many of these individuals worked in key sectors like healthcare and transport, yet their contributions are often undervalued.
- **South American Migrants:** Though less directly affected by British colonialism, South Americans have historically migrated to Britain for work opportunities, contributing to the UK's diversity while facing the challenges of cultural integration.

4. The Importance of Education in Addressing Colonial Legacies

The UK schooling system plays a critical role in how British colonial history is understood and remembered. For many minority communities whose families were once under British rule, the lack of correct and comprehensive teaching of Britain's imperial past has contributed to feelings of alienation and misunderstanding. It is essential that the curriculum:

- **Teaches an Accurate History:** Many schools currently gloss over or glorify the British Empire, not acknowledging the exploitative and violent nature of colonial rule. A reformed curriculum that includes the voices of the colonised is vital for an honest understanding of Britain's global impact.
- **Recognizes Contributions of Immigrants:** Immigrant communities from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and South America contributed significantly to rebuilding Britain post-war. These contributions should be celebrated in the classroom, countering the false narratives that perpetuate xenophobia.
- **Promotes Empathy and Understanding:** By teaching a fuller version of history, including the effects of colonialism on present-day migration, national identity, and race relations, schools can foster greater empathy and understanding between British-born citizens and immigrants.

5. Understanding and Reconciliation Through Art and Education

The street portraits and digital art in this exhibit not only serve as a reflection of individual identity but also as a call for greater understanding and reconciliation between communities. The legacies of colonialism are still visible in the racial and cultural tensions within Britain, and these works of art challenge the dominant narratives that perpetuate division. While highlighting the complexities of the British ethnic minorities

For Minority Communities:

Understanding the full history of British colonialism can empower these communities to reclaim their heritage and contribute to the national narrative. Art allows individuals to tell their own stories, express their struggles, and celebrate their resilience in the face of systemic exclusion.

For the Broader British Community:

This exhibition invites the broader British community to engage with the stories of those whose ancestors were ruled by the British Empire. Greater awareness of Britain's colonial past—and its direct connection to today's immigration and nationalisation policies—can lead to a more inclusive society. Art, as an accessible medium, can break down barriers of misunderstanding and create space for meaningful dialogue.

Conclusion: The Role of Visual Art in Shaping Identity and History

Photography and digital art provide unique tools for exploring the nuanced effects of British colonialism. These mediums allow for personal expression while also confronting the collective memory of the empire. The portraits and digital art in this exhibit prove how the colonial past is not just a chapter in history—it continues to influence the lives of millions in Britain today, from the children of the Windrush generation to contemporary South American migrants.

As we engage with these images and stories, let us also advocate for an education system that honours the full spectrum of British history, acknowledging both the achievements and the injustices of the empire. Only by addressing this complex legacy can we move towards a more inclusive and understanding society.

Keywords:

Imperialism

Colonisation / Colonialism / Colonial Rule

Empire

British Raj

Commonwealth

Global Dominance

British Navy

East India Company

Colonial Administration

Monarchy

Red Ensign

Union Jack

Victoria Cross

Crown Jewel

Colonial Exploitation

Colonial Architecture

Trade Routes

Colonial Expansion

Missionaries

Queen Victoria

Royal Charter

Imperial Service

British Overseas Territories

Symbols representing the British Empire and colonialism include:

1. **Union Jack (Flag of the United Kingdom):** The Union Jack is perhaps the most recognisable symbol of the British Empire. It was flown over many colonies and represented British authority and sovereignty.
2. **British Crown:** The Crown symbolises the authority and power of the British monarchy, which was central to the governance and identity of the British Empire.
3. **Royal Coat of Arms:** The Royal Coat of Arms represents the monarchy and the authority of the British government. It was often displayed in colonial administrations and on official documents.
4. **Red Ensign (Merchant Navy flag):** The Red Ensign was widely used by British merchant ships and is closely associated with the British Empire's naval dominance and global trade during the colonial period.
5. **British East India Company Flag:** The flag of the British East India Company, a major agent of British colonial expansion, especially in India, stands for the economic aspect of British colonialism.
6. **Victoria Cross:** The Victoria Cross, a military decoration awarded for valour, symbolises British military power, often exercised in the expansion and maintenance of the Empire.
7. **Colonial Architecture:** Buildings such as government offices, railway stations, and courthouses built in British colonial style symbolise the physical and cultural imposition of British rule in colonised territories.
8. **Statues of British Monarchs and Figures:** Statues of Queen Victoria, King George, and other British figures erected in colonial territories symbolise British authority and imperial ideology.
9. **Colonial Seals and Emblems:** Many colonies had their seals or emblems that incorporated symbols of British power, such as lions, crowns, or the Union Jack.
10. **Imperial Service Order:** An award given to colonial civil servants, symbolising the administrative machinery of the British Empire.

The terms **colonialism**, **imperialism**, and the **slave trade** are closely related in British history, but they refer to different aspects of Britain's expansion, control, and exploitation. Here's a breakdown of their differences, particularly in the British context:

1. Colonialism:

- **Definition:** Colonialism refers to the practice of buying and keeping colonies, where one country exercises direct political control over another, typically for economic exploitation and territorial expansion.
- **British Context:** Britain proved colonies across the world, especially in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Colonial rule involved direct administration of these territories, where the British government or companies controlled local resources, economies, and political structures.
- **Examples:**
 - **India (Bharat):** Britain directly controlled India from 1858 to 1947, during what was known as the British Raj.
 - **The Caribbean:** Islands like **Jamaica** and **Barbados** were colonised by Britain for sugar plantations.
- **Goal:** To exploit resources such as land, minerals, and agricultural products while setting up settlements.

2. Imperialism:

- **Definition:** Imperialism is the broader policy or ideology of extending a country's power and influence through diplomacy or military force. It can include colonialism but also refers to indirect control and influence.
- **British Context:** The British Empire was one of the most expansive examples of imperialism. Britain extended its influence not just through formal colonies, but also through spheres of influence and economic dominance in areas where it didn't exercise direct political control.
- **Examples:**
 - **Egypt:** Britain controlled Egypt in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but Egypt was technically not a colony; it was a British protectorate.
 - **China:** Britain imposed trade agreements through force (e.g., after the Opium Wars), gaining control over Hong Kong and significant economic influence in mainland China.
- **Goal:** To expand British political, military, and economic dominance globally, both through colonisation and other forms of control.

3. Slave Trade:

- **Definition:** The slave trade refers specifically to the forced transportation and sale of enslaved people, particularly from Africa to other parts of the world for labour. The transatlantic slave trade involved millions of Africans being enslaved and transported primarily to the Americas.
- **British Context:** Britain was a leading player in the transatlantic slave trade from the 16th to the early 19th century. British ships transported enslaved Africans to the Caribbean and the Americas, where they were forced to work on plantations, particularly in the production of sugar, tobacco, and cotton.
- **Examples:**
 - **West Africa:** British traders took enslaved people from places like the **Gold Coast** (modern-day **Ghana**) and **Nigeria**.
 - **The Caribbean:** Enslaved Africans were sent to British colonies like **Jamaica**, **Barbados**, and **Saint Kitts**, where they were forced to work on plantations.
- **Goal:** To provide a cheap, forced labour supply to support economic ventures in British colonies, especially in the Caribbean and the Americas, maximising profits from cash crops like sugar and cotton.

Key Differences:

- **Colonialism** involved direct control over foreign territories, often including the establishment of settlers and a government structure to control resources and land.
- **Imperialism** is a broader concept that includes colonialism but also involves indirect control and influence over other countries or regions without necessarily settling there or administering directly. It's more about extending power globally, often through economic or military means.
- The **slave trade** was an economic system where people were treated as property and sold into forced labour. It was a key part of Britain's colonial and imperial economies, especially in the Caribbean and the Americas, but was a distinct system focused on human exploitation rather than territorial control.

Connection Between the Three:

- **Colonialism and imperialism** provided the political and economic structures that allowed the **slave trade** to flourish. British colonies in the Caribbean and the Americas relied on enslaved labour, which was supplied through the transatlantic slave trade.
- British **imperialism** often used the wealth generated from colonies and the slave trade to fund its expansion and further political dominance.

Colonialism and **imperialism** describe the broader systems of control and exploitation, while the **slave trade** refers specifically to the exploitation of human labour within those systems.

