

Heritage Intercepted Ep.3: History is Now Transcript

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

heritage, people, history, pronouns, heritage sites, plaques, conversation, organisations, Black, stories, acknowledge, brum, telling, britain, years, generations, build, cultural shift, British, space

SPEAKERS

Amirah, Jasmine, Aaliyah, Tapiwa, Muhibb

Amirah 0:36

I didn't ask which way I am looking? Am I just looking straight ahead?

So I'm Amirah, I'm 20. I use all pronouns, and I'm here today because I helped write the Heritage Manifesto. It's something that I'm very passionate about, the heritage space and heritage in general. I just thought it was important that young people were finally having this conversation.

Aaliyah 1:13

Hi, my name is Aaliyah. I'm 22 and a current law graduate and my preferred pronouns are she her. So I'm here today to talk about what heritage means to me, and to me, heritage is an interwoven tapestry of the things that make us human. So they are things that you want to preserve for the collective benefit of us all. They are important because they make us us and they have inherent value.

Muhibb 1:46

Hi there, my name is Muhibb, I'm 26 years of age, my pronouns are he him, and in my spare time, I like to act and perform. I'm just trying to show the world a bit more expression of me.

Jasmine 2:02

Hiya, my name is Jasmine, my pronouns are they them. I am 25, and a journalist and public speaker in mental health and diversity inclusion. Is that alright?

Tapiwa 2:19

Hi, my name is Tapiwa. I'm 18 years old. My pronouns are she her, and I'm quite into youth activism and public speaking in general.

Amirah 2:29

To me, heritage is everything that has been is and will be, it is the blood, the trees, the soil. It's the stories that my aunt was telling, as she was cornrowing my hair, and it was sitting down and watching documentaries with my granddad, while begging not to watch roots. It has been everything. It is everything to me, I don't think there was a person, even if they're not interested in heritage, who isn't innately interested in heritage.

The decolonising of the heritage space in general, and the reclamation of heritage and the fact that, you know, we've been. British history can't be British history if the people of Britain aren't seen in it. I just thought it was time that heritage was truly intercepted. You know, it was time to pass the mic. I don't think that you can claim to be a space of education and liberation, and art and storytelling, and not let young people and old people and the word of mouth actually travel.

Communities experience heritage differently and I thought it was time that we actually got to hear people instead of read things. Heritage needed to be accessible, it needed to be exciting, and quite frankly, I was sick of just not being seen.

Aaliyah 4:20

So we're here today to talk about the fact that history is now. So when we're talking about heritage organisations in particular, the history is now, this is what we're going to be looking back on in years to come, you know, future generations to actually see the impact of actually opening up.

Heritage spaces being more diverse, you know, being more aware of different people's cultures and backgrounds and histories so that we can all I guess, revel in the collective heritage that we share.

Amirah 4:49

I also think it's really important to acknowledge not only that the reason that history and heritage is now but I think history is now because heritage is yet to change. I think that the heritage sector, as an institution, is falling behind.

I think that a lot of us are here today, because we want them to catch up. We want to see ourselves reflected when we walk through the halls that our peers have been walking through, and seeing that ancestors in and seeing the fights and the losses and the victories and the culture reflected.

I think that until heritage spaces are more representative of who we are, and what Britain truly is that we're not going to ever move past fighting to see history. One day,

this might be historic, yes, but there was a lot that came before us that we get to see that we've all individually had to look for. I think that in itself, is exactly why history is now.

Jasmine 6:02

Its history has changed. It's not history that's been eradicated. So I think a big fear that heritage sites have, heritage organisations and the general population, is that by including our history, they're going to all of a sudden have to, you know, it's bit of like, give and take, that they are going to have to lose bits of their history. Obviously that's not how history works. History is expansive, so you can just build around it.

I think it's also about, we create new history by incorporating and by acknowledging the flaws that we have had previously not accounted for. So with the Edward Colston statue, we put someone like him on a pedestal, we applauded him, but we now have a history that shows that we know the history that we're making that doesn't do that.

We tear those people down, we throw them in rivers, we cover them and stuff, and then they are now displayed like that. So I think it's not about just including past histories, but I think it's about what you said, as well, just what is the evolution of history? How is it existing at the moment? What are we changing about the way that we're telling history? How are we no longer telling history? What is and isn't acceptable to us anymore?

I think we sort of have to have a re-evaluation of history, in order for history to become contemporary. It feels like history is still stuck in the past, because it's not acknowledged all of the new things that we've learned about history up until this point. So you have to go reforming history and you have to reform it with us. Then you include in that history that the reason it was being reformed is because we made it so not because you guys made it. So that's our history. It is the movement of people, hopefully, within heritage sites,

Aaliyah 7:41

Definitely I guess decolonising that space, but also speaking with the point you said about, you know, give and take, it's actually just more giving. It is expanding history in the fact that you know, in Birmingham, we've got old Joe, the largest freestanding clock tower, you know, that's history, Joseph Chamberlain. He did a lot of good things, but a lot of bad and it's actually being aware of those things. It's not about, you know, diminishing anyone else's history. It's about adding and making a more truthful and unbiased account so that everyone's heritage feels included.

Tapiwa 8:12

I feel like also making it a lot more tangible because I know organisations such as BRUM UK, they take things like the Windrush generation, for example. They bring it up to speed because obviously, like there's issues like reparations, for example, for the Windrush generation, but also the issues of people not feeling like the Windrush generation happened as a thing, even though those there is people still fighting now to prove that they're British, and to prove they came here legally. So like BRUM, pretty much keeps people up to date with real life people that are going through that process.

Amirah 8:51

I think that another organisation who's doing very well and showing representative history without making it seem like they are advertising diversity is the Black Country Living Museum. They continuously adapt the villages within the museum, and I remember a few years ago, they let us know that they were currently developing one. So there might be certain sections you couldn't go to, but it was specifically to look at ethnic minorities that came over during the Windrush period.

It was to celebrate the Black nurses and doctors that helped to build the NHS. It was one of the first times I had seen it institution by themselves acknowledge how the history they told hadn't been as representative. They noticed that they had been stuck in the Victorian era and only telling specific history, but then they wanted us to be able to walk into houses and see how the first generation, like Caribbean kids, were being raised in and around the Black Country. They wanted you to see the uniforms that nurses were wearing. They wanted you to be able to know that people have been here for generations and fighting through generations, and living with each other and loving one another for generations.

It made me so proud to have been like growing up in Birmingham, but the fact that my great grandparents, when they settled in Wolverhampton they were very much like the fabric of the Black Country. So to actually have a museum reflect it, it's not a little thing. It wasn't for Black History Month. It was here to stay because they stayed. It was something that was very reassuring and I think it was the first time I actually had a bit of hope in the sector, that our history is being accepted as British and not British other.

Muhibb 10:59

The past is represented like we're gonna put people on a pedestal because we need people to be perfect particularly, I think in Britain, where you have that old stiff upper lip mentality. Listen man, Winston Churchill, mashed the Nazis up. Okay, cool, but what about everyone else who was fighting in Africa, in Asia during the war?

Aaliyah 11:22

You have a really good point, actually, about how you had to go seek this history out. I'm sure I speak for all of us, when I say we've probably all sought our own histories out, we've had to find answers to our family trees. If we don't have a family, you know, speaking of people that are in care or adopted, you've got to seek these stories out, wherever you can. I don't think these stories are being told in our current heritage organisations or the school curriculum. It is very cut and narrow.

I could tell you who was divorced by Henry but I cannot tell you a single royal from a country outside of England. Is that necessarily the way it should be? I also find in the same vein as history months, and not to diminish the work of people that have come before us, but corporate pandering is definitely a thing. Instead of having a Black Little Mermaid, I would have rather had a Black story about Black people. I would have actually preferred to have original stories told from the cultures of which they originated from, because there are so many stories that go untold, so many pieces of heritage that aren't even considered heritage, like recipes, for example, you know, food is a love language.

There's so much of that practical heritage that we're missing out on and when we do get it, it is in piecemeal chunks. We shouldn't have to seek our history out, it should just be given to us.

Muhibb 12:46

Yeah, if you can take our resources, you can give us some history like it's a fair deal.

Aaliyah 12:55

It would be amazing. If all year round, there would be an element of diversity to exhibitions. There is no point in time at which our past did not link. I think I said in my one to one, you know, heritage is interwoven, we are all connected in some way. One race, the human race and all that stuff, but also how did these stately homes get built? Where did the funds come from?

Tapiwa 13:17

How did half of the stuff in the British Museum get there?

Jasmine 13:19

I think that's the biggest thing. If you want to have Black or Brown people, or people who aren't white involved in heritage, then you have to stop putting royalty at the epitome of your heritage. Everything from primary school to heritage sites, there is always something about the royals, the working man and the peasants. Every time I

see the royal family, I see their influence on my heritage which was very destructive. So when you put them on a pedestal or only tell the story without criticism, I don't believe the story you're telling. If you are going to put them on a pedestal you have to criticise them as well because I don't feel like the story is coming at it from a genuine perspective. I feel like you're telling British history for the sake of British ego and that's not what I want to learn about.

Amirah 14:19

Where it's more mythology than history.

Aaliyah 14:21

In terms of the here and the now, the main thing you can do is, it's not about centering us it's about decentering, assuming yourself. It's about decentering the narrative that we are different. It's about adding those plaques that say actually, this jewel came from this place. This was how it arrived as well. You know, plaques were famous people who used to live well, who built those houses and who made those bricks. It's about encouraging conversations like this.

It's about funding into things like this to actually foster genuine unique conversations and having focus groups and talks. It's about a whole cultural shift from the top of management down to actually commit to making a change. I would say outreach from day one as early as primary school. The field trips to heritage sites are about building excitement and making children feel like they are a part of something bigger because we're all part of each other's heritage.

Jasmine 15:17

I think it means we need to account for our mistakes now rather than later, I think that's going to be the biggest thing that heritage sites can do. To make us feel included they need to apologise and take accountability. I think I agree with you on plaques and stuff like that but I think that a lot of heritage sites are intentionally going to have to reconcile with the heritage that you have access to might not be the very British heritage that you thought it was.

Through acknowledging the impact and stuff like that, and actually, you're gonna have to deal with the controversy that comes from that to start to have conversations like this. I would like an acknowledgement before I see where the jewels on the crown actually belong.

I think we all want to see that. So heritage sites are going to have to make an effort to do that, to not just be honest, and acknowledge the mistakes that they're making, not just put signs on things to acknowledge that there's more information that hasn't

been shared, but actually maybe start taking some reparative action. What that might look like in Britain will look different from what they are doing in America.

Amirah 16:34

I massively agree with that. I think I want to see, you know, heritage organisations actually start branching out and not working with academics. There are people who've dedicated their entire lives to uncovering history that was hidden intentionally. There are people who have put themselves in positions where they went through debt, and they've put themselves through university, and they've done all the lectures, and they release paper after paper after paper, just begging for someone to acknowledge the history and their life's work. Their life's work was making sure history was accessible for all generations to see what came before them.

I want heritage sites to not be afraid of the word black. I want them to not be afraid of the terms that have been used to enable marginalised communities. We have a Black Studies degree, especially operating out of Birmingham, the first Black Studies degree in all of Europe. The guy who set it up, is still pushing out work that talks about the British Empire. You've got exhibitions on the British Empire and at no point have you contacted this man for the other side. So it's not biased. So there's quotes for the plaques, there are people who have written book after book and if we can find them.

If we can trace them and we're doing it as like working class struggling students, because we desperately want to see this, and we think it's necessary for the people around us, and not just the people that look like us. So there's a wider understanding of the society that we've grown up in, and that we live in and that we're making. Speak to the people that have dedicated their lives to doing it, don't just operate on the people dedicated to putting money into it. I think there needs to be a moral value as opposed to a monetary value.

Aaliyah 18:52

I would like to say that during this whole conversation, I felt incredibly respected and heard. I feel like that's why it's so important that the history is now and that heritage organisations do make a cultural shift and that we are community organising with you know, young, bright talents.

Tapiwa 19:15

Everyone just has a lot to say which I think is very reflective of the kind of world we live in and people need to be given more opportunity to show that so that we don't create these kinds of closed off spaces where it feels like I am the only person that feels a type away.

Jasmine 19:31

So I think the thing that I've really taken from today is how similar all of our perspectives and how different they all are. We all have like base level agreement but then we will have our own nuances and different ways of seeing things and different ways of implementing. I think it just really emphasises that point that we are not a monolith, you know, we regardless of race. We've all said slightly different things, we're not a monolith, and it's so nice to be around people and just have that reaffirmed. We're not a monolith and that needs to be represented in our history.

Amirah 20:32

I think that for me, personally, from this conversation, and the experience of this day in this project, in general, have been the, you know, like, yeah, as you said, we're not monolithic. We all come in with similar ideas, but from wildly vast perspectives. It's really reinforced to me that there is so much lacking in the heritage space, despite it doing better. I have learnt a lot more about our intersectional experiences, and parts of our individual and communal histories from today from just speaking and listening to you guys than I have in recent years walking through heritage institutions.

I think for me, it really reinforced that there are people who know what we want. The fact that we've been given the opportunity to even do this shows that there are people who want to support what we want. I think it's the first time in a very long time, I've actually been able to comfortably say that something is changing. It's nice, and as nice as it is, I don't want it to be something that is easy for the heritage sector to swallow. It shouldn't be, it wasn't easy for us to find our histories. I think that there is a lot to do, and it is going to be very hard to catch up to where we should be, but it's nice to be able to say that we're still at the start.

Something that I was saying earlier was the fact that like, I am my mother's daughter, but I'm the one that taught her to be me. It really encompasses the fact that practical history is so key to longevity, but because I don't want to have to keep teaching or keep explaining myself to people around me. I should not have to explain my heritage. People should know where I started from, my heritage should be visible and clear for all eyes to see.

I think for me, working with the young people in this project, or just people in the local community that I've got to reach out to, you know, has been such a self reflective experience. I got to learn that I'm not alone and it is very liberating to know me and the young people around me are actively creating spaces and participating in projects and decolonising the space. I think a lot of people in the heritage sector think that we are trying to create new representation. We are just trying to represent

and actively trying to represent the people who were like us before that weren't us. When we were we were not a part of an acronym, not a label. It's nice to see history as history and heritage as heritage and how that is now. So I appreciate all the people around me right now.