

# Coloniality and the Politicisation of Literary Heritage Conservation

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# A Picture of England?

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Alan Bennett's play *People*:

June: Isn't it time we made amends?

Dorothy: What for?

June: For the wool that built the house, the tenants turned off their land for sheep. After sheep, it was iron and after iron, sugar, and sugar meant slaves

Ralph Lumsden (NT): No, please, Lady Stackpoole do not get up. I am after all, a suitor, a suppliant. I crawl. Besides, I want to envisage you enthroned among your treasures. *A picture of England.*

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# Gaps in the Literature:

- Rise of scholarship on coloniality and heritage in the wake of Rhodes Must Fall and BLM
- Eg, Stephanie Barczewski *Country Houses and the British Empire*, Corinne Fowler's *Green Unpleasant Land* (2020), Dan Hicks *The Brutish Museum* (2020)
- **BUT:**
- Literary heritage repays evaluation in its own right
- And...the scholarship on literary heritage focuses almost exclusively on the writers' museums and country houses!





# Why does this matter now?

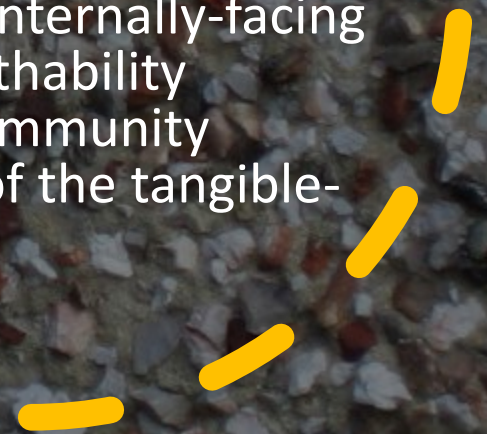
- English Heritage Report on Properties with Slavery Connections (2007)
- National Trust Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the care of the National Trust (2020)
- Bernardine Evaristo: Black Britain, Writing Back
- UNESCO City of Literature 2004 sees the UK represented by Edinburgh (2004), Norwich (2012), Nottingham (2015), Manchester (2017) and Exeter (2019) but what and who is left out of this representation?
- Chartered Institute of Building 6% classified BAME in the construction sector: what does 'For Everyone, for Ever' mean when thinking more broadly about heritage conservation?
- George Elliot defended while Alfred Fagon is defaced
- What do we *conserve* and what does this say about colonisation?





# Pebble-dashing History?

- Pebble-dashing: a metaphor for decolonization approaches to UK Literary Heritage
- Decolonisation initiatives are too often a superficial remedy for the colonialism of the past paying attention to the surface, rather than the structural, implications of Empire-building
- UK literary heritage 'pebble-dashes' through its celebritisation of certain types of writer who are hailed as 'national treasures'
- The process of decolonising in much literary heritage is, like pebble-dashing, a superficial and unhealthy covering up against the storms of present debates and cultural shifts
- Like pebble-dashing we 'seal in' through internally-facing conservation rather than promoting breathability through external-facing approaches to community curation and a recognition of the fallacy of the tangible-intangible divide in heritage







# A Morrisian approach:

- Two strategies for understanding & communicating complex intangible significance within tangible buildings & artefacts
- 1. Construction of a critical intellectual landscape connecting international & exploitative contexts to everyday life through writing & polemic
- 2. Engaging in the mechanisms of the production & conservation of the material substance of everyday life itself in a way that engages people as producers, makers, and active users rather than as consumers or observers
- We are arguing for the inclusive reintegration of the social and political context of buildings, the writers they housed, and the words they wrote



# The Problem: Country House=Writer's House

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- Equating Literary Heritage with the Country House reinforces issues of class and coloniality
- Case Study: Knole House
- A Feature of the NT's *Pride and Prejudice: Exploring LGBTQ+ Lives*
- Jacobean Manor House
- The childhood home of writer Vita Sackville West and her writer cousin Eddie Sackville-West







## The problem: Country House=Writer's House

BUT:

- Also a feature of the National Trust's Colonialism and Historic Slavery
- Edward Sackville was Governor of the Somers Island Company responsible for governing Bermuda between 1623 and 24 and Commissioner of the Settling of Virginia from 1629-34
  - Richard Sackville's household contained two 'blackamoor' servants, John Morockoe and Grace Robinson and these servants feature, in a romanticised format, in writing by both Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf
- Coloniality mapped into the buildings structures and artefacts but this does not feature in the interpretation





# The problem: The 'isolated' writer and their artefacts

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- The 'celebritisation' of the isolated writer and their writing artefacts is a key feature of writers' houses and museums from Batemans to Shaw's corner
  - Example: Jane Austen's House
  - But coloniality is written into the material culture of these artefacts:
  - Quills: Black Goose=Hudson's Bay
  - Oak Galls Ink=Aleppo
  - Gum Arabic=Sudan
  - Pounce-Gum Sandarac=Morocco
  - Sealing Wax: Lac=India
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# 'National Treasures': Bennett's House

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- Work carried out on Alan Bennett's Writers' House
- On moving to Chalcot Crescent, Bennett left the house as a shell with veneers and fragments of its active role in authorship
- The intervention of builders unfamiliar with the strictures of Listed Building legislation and protection of heritage assets added to the problem
- But it raised the question of what to conserve and why?





# 'National Treasures': Bennett's House

- Is a space a contributory factor in writing?
- What does the law as directed to the protection of buildings (not chairs and desks) do when the writer leaves?
- One could 'reconstruct' all that has been relocated or lost ie Bennett's house writ as shrine because we have photographs from the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s to do this
- The lazure on the study walls laboriously executed by the writer himself using Quink Ink and Copydex was fairly intact although the dampness of the house was slowly peeling them apart.
- How then to argue for significance when technical failure meets a lost context, the props that constituted the reality of the spatial identity of the writer missing?



## 'National Treasures': Bennett's House

- The Writers' House became the setting for the Lady in the Van-the spaces re-dressed to reconstitute a real history rewritten as a play and later as a film
- So the house becomes part of a national imaginary





# Decolonising 'National Treasures':

Arguing that space and buildings are not the de-facto constituents of heritage significance for the writers house, but that chairs, desks, accumulations of pictures and lever arch files of undeveloped typed ideas *were* challenges the notion of what we choose to preserve and designate as heritage, and what we accept and the ephemerality of lives lived.

Furniture is tangible, but so often in the 'National Trust-ification' of houses it acts as a prompt to establish an aura of the past – rather than being the armature of reality that the 'real thing' is and was.



## Decolonising 'National Treasures':

- Decolonising history requires us to question not only the events and characters we lionise, but the actual process of lionising buildings themselves.
- As Bennett said himself in a letter to the Conservation Officer overseeing our work on his house, had he thought that anything he did to the house would prevent the new owners making it theirs then he should have kept Miss Shepherd's van rusting in the front drive. Ensuring the readability of history is sustained and present in the way it supports new inhabitants.





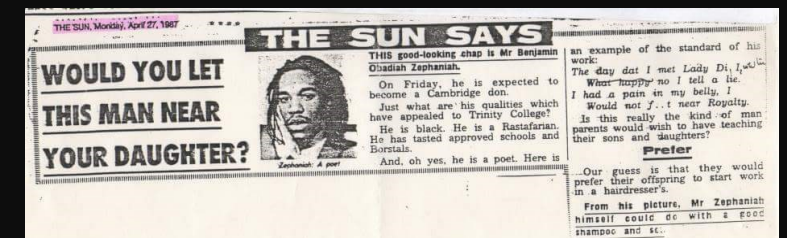
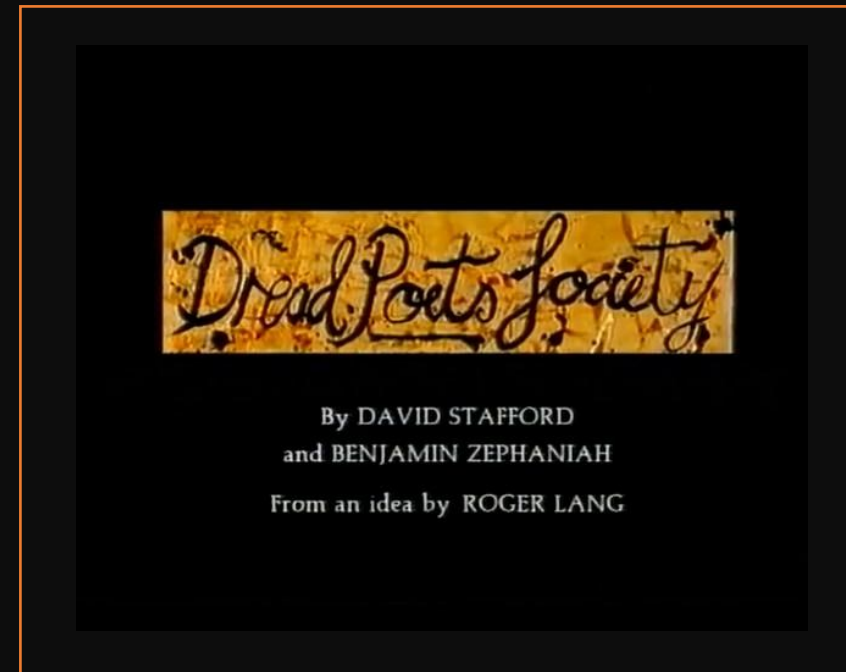


# Decolonising ‘National Treasures’:

- Applying Morris’s principles of active addition and listening to Bennett himself around the role of the house in the writing, the conservation was also the transformation of the house but leaving ‘history in the gaps’ (SPAB Manifesto).
- Defying the Instagram expectations of image continuity whilst ensuring the readability of history is sustained and present in the way it supports new inhabitants.

# Ghosts of Coloniality:

- Benjamin Zephaniah Dead Poet's Society (1987): the ghosts of Shelley, Byron, and Keats create poetry with Zephaniah on a moving train
- Created as a riposte to Cambridge University's refusal to elect Zephaniah a fellow of Trinity College following the racist media storm surrounding his appointment
- *The Sun*: 'Would you let this man near your daughter?' (23 April 1987)
- *The Daily Mail* presented a cartoon of a spliff smoking Zephaniah surrounded by disapproving dons with the caption 'If you hear any rumblings it's Keats, Shelley, and Byron turning in their graves' (23 April, 1987)
- The ghosts of Keats, Shelley, and Byron are awakened from their 'rumblings', galvanised to life by the electricity of train lights, and convinced, on encountering Zephaniah in a carriage, that he is the embodiment of Frankenstein's monster brought to life to continue the work of the Dead Poet's Society





A contrasting sense of  
*home*:



- 'I like the idea of Benjamin Zephaniah coming to Cambridge. Every time he comes here a buzz of excitement goes around the University....but I want him to go *home* at night''.
- But where is *home* for this writer?
- The Thomas Neville, Christopher, Anthony Salvin inspired Trinity-architecture contrasting with Frank Matcham's 1901 Music Hall (now Grade II listed).
- An interesting 'queering' of the Hackney Empire architecture is taking place here because of its Empire branding, the imperialism of Terracotta, and the statue of Thalia (Greek Muse of Comedy) on the roof of the theatre
- Literary Heritage presented here as liminal, oral, and communal



# Mapping alternative heritages:

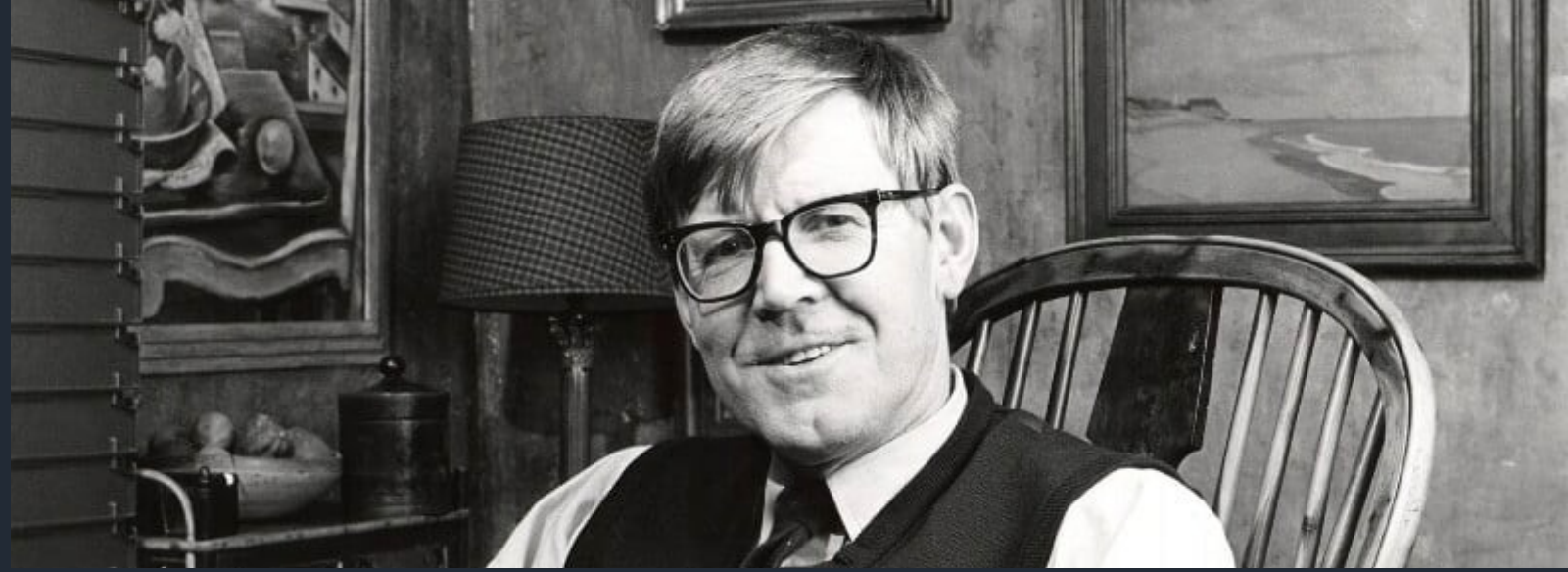
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- For Zephaniah the writers' house/s must be located within a wider framework of heritage(s)
  - London Borough of Newham
  - Birmingham
  - Hackney Empire
  - Riverside Studios a 'home from home' for young black creatives in the 1970s and 80s and the Black Theatre Co-operatives
  - "For young black people at the time, there were very few places to go. Full stop"
  - The writing process necessitates communal-co-operative-living and creating eg Umija Housing Co-operative eating
  - The lines between tangible and intangible heritage become blurred
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## Conclusions:



- Challenge the 'Pebble-dashing' of history through active engagement and critique of superficial approaches to decolonisation in UK literary heritage
- Challenge the false dichotomy between tangible and intangible heritage: physical making & remaking, communal place-making, liminal 'homes'
- Deconstruct 'whiteness' and the national imaginary in relation to this.
- Reflect on the wider participation of 'everyone for ever' in cultural production with society as a whole responsible for what heritage is and what it becomes

# Contacts:

**This paper is part of a wider project exploring the politicisation of literary heritage conservation**

**Our themes include:**

**Decoloniality and literary heritage**

**Class and radical literary heritage**

**LGBTQIA+ literary heritage**

**UNESCO Cities of Literature**

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