Folkheroes, the Imagined Past, and the National Future: An Exhibit
Justifications and Theoretical Implications

Folkheroes, the Imagined Past, and the National Future: An Exhibit presents a limited array of tales and items associated with four major national and folk heroes from across the former British empire: Boudica, Queen of the Iceni, England; Dulla Bhatti, India; Nanny of the Maroons, Jamaica; Daniel O'Connell of Ireland.[1] These figures are unbounded by temporal limitations. Their origins range from the 1st century CE to the 18th and the periods in which they are represented come forward into the present, grounding the project in the heightened relevancy of discussions surrounding national identity and the belief that public history practice should center the idea that modern observers are not separate from the flows of history. The exhibit has evolved from my undergraduate research on the use of historical, mythologized figures like Boudica and King Arthur to solidify British national identity and imagery in the late Victorian and Early Edwardian eras. Through these works, I developed a set of characteristics I believed unified the figures and facilitated their successful use as a national icon. These are: balancing the remote and the relatable; creative freedom for cultural creators and consumers; state involvement with the promotion of the figure as a national icon; and an attempt to preserve the potency of the figure for new generations. I sought to test these frames through the lens of a more geographically and culturally diverse set of 'heroes.'

[1] For the sake of clarity, I have included the nations which claim these figures as their national heroes; however, with the exception of Daniel O'Connell, it is important to note these nationalities are ascribed posthumously and do not indicate any evidence of personal identification on the part of the figures as many of them pre-date the nation they are associated with by centuries. This speaks to a key aspect of nation building: it occurs retroactively and is to some degree an exercise in wishful thinking. Also note that Daniel O'Connell is a national hero for Irish nationalism which means I use the name Ireland to suggest affiliation with both the Republic of Ireland and the UK territory Northern Ireland.

Consciously executed for a non-academic public, the exhibit offers an approachable introduction into the machinations of national identity formation through the engaging vehicle of mythologized historical figures. This can be understood in effect as a distorted mirroring of the experiences which have led to the popularity of these figures— 'inauthentic' in that it does not arise out of a culture the audience shared and in that it is passed on more formally than many of these stories typically would be, but maintaining the creativity and compelling nature of these tales in order to emphasize their dual role as cultural instruction and entertainment.

The research process and final exhibit format encompass three key considerations, implicitly and explicitly. Firstly, connections are drawn to highlight the similarities between folk heroes prevalent in different cultures. This speaks to both the nature of national identity formation, and nationalism more broadly, as well as furthering the educational opportunities presented through the exhibit by encouraging cross cultural thought and independent reflection. Secondly, some didactic labels directly engage with how the images and stories of these figures are used to reflect understandings of national identity and promote the perpetuation of these conceptions. This scaffolds the viewer's understanding through an adapted form of modelling while leaving space for additional conclusions to be drawn both about the item in question and others presented throughout the digital exhibit experience. Finally, the introductory text and exhibit supplements consider theories of nationalism, and how they may differ based on geographical and socio-political contexts. This is informed by the processes and continuing implications of imperial and colonial rule.

The purpose of this investigation, which is differentiated from the research questions, has been two-pronged: first, I am concerned with the mechanics of nation-building and the cultural processes that accompany the diffusion of national identities, and second, I seek to investigate

what makes folk heroes compelling and how they gain their power. While related to the guiding questions, these purposes are not as directly presented in the primary facet of the project and serve as the basis of my internal understanding rather than the public-facing interpretation. This aspect of the project will be the primary focus in the coming pages.

The process of this investigation has taken place along three primary avenues: 1. Theories of Nationalism and Folklore, 2. The content of the digital exhibit (the figures themselves), 3. Curation Theory and Interpretation. This paper will examine these three avenues in turn to sketch out the theoretical framework of the exhibit and the confluence of academic theory and translated implementation in the content of the exhibition. The public facing portion of the project is available here: Folk Heroes, The Imagined Past, and The National Future

Modernist and Traditionalist Theories of Nationalism

As my foray into the material began with an examination of influential theories of nationalism, I find it relevant here to provide a brief overview of these ideas and their evolution before moving to how they have been adapted for my approach. Though rarely directly mentioned in the exhibition text, in an effort to maintain broad appeal and reduce the risk of alienating audiences or over simplifying such theories in a way that could present nationalism as a monolith, academic theory underscores the entirety of the project both in terms of methodology and in terms of the choices made by those in power to promote identification with these figures.

There are two primary theories on the origins of nationalism which hold sway today: the 'modernist' and the 'traditionalist.' While the modernist approach is still the de facto theory, increasingly scholars are coming to align themselves with a composite theory combining aspects of both these approaches tailored to fit the individual nature of their object of study. Hans Kohn

and Elie Kedourie are generally considered the pioneers of nationalism theory and as such outlined the essential nature of the modernist approach.[2] This view defines nationalism as a form of political thought that emerged in late eighteenth century Europe and is precipitated by the advent of modernity. Essentially, it claims that nationalism without modernism cannot exist and intrinsically ties nationalism in all forms to the western historical canon. Nationalists, in the conservative modernist view, constructed identity in place of division largely out of political necessity and the process spread from country to country through horizontal diffusion made possible by increased international trade and communication. Ernest Gellner writes, "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist."[3] This suggests a primarily top-down diffusion within a nation.

The 'modernist' theory first rose to popularity in the 1980s and is deeply informed by the rising nationalism which accompanied the end of the Cold War. These theorists, particularly Benedict Anderson whose book *Imagined Communities* has essentially functioned as the New Testament of modernist theory, took a more bottom-up approach emphasizing the role of mass media in the initial spread of nationalist thought. This approach however still suggests an initial origin among the educated classes because of the centrality of the printing press. More important in this context however is the idea of the imagined community which holds that, regardless of 'truth' in origins or the validity of a national movement, belief in a national identity requires a certain level of abstraction because of the need to feel community and a sense of oneness with the nation as a whole despite the impossibility of knowing the members of your community. In Anderson's view, imagined community does not connote a fictional community though he does

---

[2] Lotte Jensen, "The Roots of Nationalism: Introduction." In *The Roots of Nationalism: National Identity Formation in Early Modern Europe, 1600-1815*, edited by Lotte Jensen, Amsterdam University Press, 2016, 13.
[3] Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change*, p. 169 via Benedict R Anderson, O'G, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. (London ; New York: Verso, 2006),

still adhere to ""the objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye."[4] Anderson's theory and others like it stress the importance of horizontal diffusion, framing the development of strong national identity as more complex than simply foisting it upon the general populace. This speaks to how people come to internalize beliefs about nationalism rather than the overly political approach put forth by earlier theorists.

'Traditionalist' theories, as they are referred to by Lotte Jensen in *The Roots of Nationalism: National Identity Formation in Early Modern Europe, 1600-1815*, a 2016 book seeking to complicate accepted modernist theory by emphasizing continuities between early modern nationhood and their modern forms, refute the idea that nationalism, in both the political and cultural meanings of the word, is uniquely modern or Western. She writes, **"**Modernity is defined by a series of causes that are also presupposed for the rise of nationalism. Hence, the conclusion is drawn that nationalism should be considered as a product of modernity. The modernist way of reasoning has much in common with what has been labelled in economics as a 'positive feedback loop system."[5] Such a view holds that modernist theories have written the ending before looking at the beginning in order to support the idea that nationalism as we understand it today is an entirely fabricated phenomenon. The danger here is that it can lean too far into the rhetoric of nation builders, particularly romantic nationalism, which claims that national identity is intrinsic to human nature and immutable; however by emphasizing the unique character of the development of nationalism in different communities and rejecting narratives of historical inevitability scholars can assuage these risks.

[4] Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 5.
[5] Jensen, *The Roots of Nationalism,* 12-13.

More and more, theorists are coming to realize the downfalls that accompany pitting these two theories against each other, as Anthony Smith, a sociologist who ascribes to more 'traditionalist' theories, set out in his 1998 comprehensive survey of the history of nationalism theory, *Nationalism and modernism : a critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism*. While the book has been vital in compiling the major arguments of various schools of thoughts, and his later explanations of ethno-symbolism theory are particularly relevant to the promotion of national mythology, its promotion of a dichotomy between the two camps encourages an unproductive focus on semantics rather than on historical and sociological reality.

A common theme in such understandings is a belief that nationalism, at the outset was a positive force, but has since been perverted into something dangerous and toxic. This implies a change in the nature of nationalism rather than a recognition that such tendencies are firstly, not a given and secondly, present from the origins of nationalism. These perceived schisms, temporal and theoretical, keep scholars from understanding the nature of nation building more thoroughly as does the promotion of generalized theories when they must consistently be trimmed and hemmed and reshaped to fit each case study or the pre-assumed conclusions of whomever happens to be writing at the moment. Rather, in my work I have accepted these theories as lying on a spectrum and do not presume to be so omnipotent that I can put forth a comprehensive process of nation building or definition of nationalism. The 'truth' or 'fiction' of national mythologies is largely irrelevant to the exhibits because of the reality that they are believed, to varying degrees, by such large swaths of a population. While I agree, and demonstrate through exhibition didactics, that nation building is aided by the promotion and acceptance of invented narrative and assigned meaning, to suggest a wholly inorganic process diminishes the agency of those who internalize feelings of national belonging and give these notions their power. The

mutability of nation building is what has helped it become so pervasive. The process is neither top-down, or "official" as some term it, nor is it bottom-up, or "popular," but in its most compelling forms both.

Simply because a phenomenon has not been named yet, and in the case of the nation written sources reveal it had, does not mean it cannot exert its power. Strict modernist theory of nationalism is based on the assumption that because nations of the 19th century are different from conceptions of nations, or even supracommunal identity, in the early modern era they are two disconnected phenomena, but a square is a rectangle. The perceived break between the two eras is derived from a choice to emphasize difference over similarity and these developments do not exist in a vacuum.

Folklore and its connection to Nationalism

The study of folklore as a method to analyze nationalism is well-documented and the development of folkloric studies and theories of nationalism have been intertwined for centuries. Its use in nation building has been intermittently under discussion since the late 18th century when the concept of romantic nationalism was first being put into writing. Roger Abrahams goes so far as to claim that it was "under the sway of Romantic Nationalism, folklore emerged."[6] Romantic nationalism is typically contrasted with 'official' nationalism associated with enlightenment thinkers. The quintessential example of this difference is the nation building process in France, which occurred after the Revolution and was accompanied by significant governmental oversight, and in Germany, which is depicted as emerging 'organically' by the will of a people. Romantic nationalists, particularly Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) whose rambling tracts provide the root of philosophical and political discourse for romantic

[6] Roger D. Abrahams, "Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics." *The Journal of American Folklore* 106, no. 419 (1993, 3.

nationalism, fancied this process an 'awakening' or 'reawakening' of a 'national soul.' The national soul is understood to be an immutable part of every person and each nation's soul represents its individual character. Despite its intrinsic nature to humanity, romanticists believed that city-life and the trappings of the enlightenment had obfuscated this soul and that the peasantry, or more accurately an idealized vision of the common folk, were the carriers of this past greatness through stories, poems and other manifestations of folk culture. The path to individual and collective fulfillment lies, according to Herder, in the devotion one gives to the national whole and the recognition that they are simply one part of this body.[7]

By framing the publication and popularization of folklore and its subsequent transformation into a more defined national mythology as a 'reawakening,' romantic nationalists legitimized their undertaking though many still consciously framed it as a construction which required mass education and propaganda to achieve. Nation building through folklore certainly includes instances of invention of origin tales, or 'golden ages,' however it also leverages existing forms and stories in order to galvanize feelings of abstracted belonging. Previous exposure to these stories and ideals can prime people to be more receptive to shifting meanings when the stories are subsequently reworked to be more explicitly in favor of national unity. They may be familiar with the form a popular ballad takes, or have heard variations of the same tales since childhood. These systems provide an avenue for the diffusion of such lessons and ideas without building additional infrastructure or relying on literacy among audiences. Nation building works overtly, but it may also be advanced through more subtle ways. This can promote a conflation of collective and personal identity which makes nationalistic ideas appear to the

[7] William A Wilson, "Herder, Folklore, and Romantic Nationalism." In *Marrow of Human Experience, The*, edited by Jill Terry Rudy and Diane Call Essays on Folklore by William A. Wilson (University Press of Colorado, 2006) 109.

individual as ‘common sense’ and as such feel deeply rooted in their sense of self and experience.

The role of folklore and other forms of storytelling in nation building has also featured heavily in historical and sociological studies of the topic, and is widely affirmed as an integral part of national identity. Ethnosymbolism, a critique of modernism, emphasizes the role symbolism through shared myth, stories, and figures plays as a centripetal force in modern-nation states. Anthony Smith classifies it as a “supplement” rather than a comprehensive theory designed to patch up gaps of knowledge in other theories. Ethnosymbolism privileges cultural factors over the political under the assumption that it is these elements which contribute to the emotional allure of nationalism or ‘passion’, transforming a ‘discursive formation’ into something people believe is worth dying for.[8]

Anne-Marie Thiesse includes national heroes, folklore, and monuments in her ‘checklist for nationhood.’ She writes,“If we consider the various European national identities, we notice that they have a list of common features. Each nation has founding fathers, a history establishing continuity of the nation through the ages, a series of heroes embodying national values, a language, cultural and historical monuments, ‘realms of memory,’ a typical landscape, a folklore, not to mention picturesque traits: traditional costumes, food, an emblematic animal.”[9] These ‘milestones’ closely align with the items included in *Folk Heroes, the Imagined Past, and the National Future.* Thiesse, a modernist, centers her analysis on European nations and views the similarities as evidence that nation building is an entirely constructed endeavor brought about by

[8] Anthony D Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*, (London ; New York: Routledge, 2009), 14.
[9] Anne-Marie Thiesse, “National Identities: A Transnational Paradigm,” In *Revisiting Nationalism: Theories and Processes*, edited by Alain Dieckhoff and Christophe Jaffrelot, 1st ed., (CERI Series in Comparative Politics and International Studies. New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 124.

the increased transnational communication of the modern era. I hold that many of these manifestations of national identity exist beyond Europe whether that is due to formerly colonized nations modeling their nation building efforts on European nations, as may be argued in the case of Jamaica, or because they speak to desire for community which predates nation building and European contact and has since been adapted to fit these forms. Regardless, these symbols become shorthand for the nation as a whole and offer a point of entry both for members of the community and for outsiders. They make up "the first chapter of travel guides."[10]

The Figures

Imperialism and nationalism are often depicted as existing in contrast with each other and as inherently contradictory; however, the spur of motivation and the passion imperialists exhibit for their conquest is deeply national. Imperialist ideology is rooted in the supposed superiority of a singular people and in the extraction of resources and wealth to better strengthen the nation. My choice to focus this exhibit on the former British empire underscores the complexity and multitude of relationships between imperialism and nationalism through the representation of Boudica, who rebelled against empire, as an imperial figurehead, and through the use of nationalism as a form of resistance against imperialism. These stories also bear testament to the richness of culture and identity in their communities of origin regardless of if their memory is used in an explicitly political context. Systematic assimilationist policies in colonial and imperial regimes seek to assert the dominance of the ruling culture and distance inhabitants from their own identity. Thomas Babington Macualey, president of the Committee of Public Instruction in Bengal from 1834, wrote in 1836, "No Hindu who has received an English education ever

[10] Ibid.

remains sincerely attached to his religion. It is my firm belief that if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolater among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years."[11] Examples of forced assimilation abound in global colonial histories from boarding school systems, to formal prohibitions on language like the Administration of Justice (Language) Act (Ireland) of 1737, which banned the use of any non-English language in all court proceedings and is still technically yet to be repealed.[12] In this climate, the simple act of preserving oral traditions and passing down stories of cultural significance becomes an act of resistance.

Given the infinite numbers of national and cultural heroes that exist, I found it necessary to outline several criteria for the highlighted figures. Firstly, each of them originates in Britain or former colonies of the British empire. This is intended to provide a thematic limitation for the selection of figures. It also allows for a more coherent analysis since a level of connection between the nations is a given. The impacts of colonialism on nation building functions as an underlying factor rather than a central feature of my analysis. It should be noted that in the case of Nanny of the Maroons, Daniel O'Connell, and Dulla Bhatti there are instances of their character being defamed or otherwise maligned by British government and colonial officials and private citizens.

Second, each of these figures has some sort of historical base. In contrast, Robin Hood or Paul Bunyan who are both undoubtedly 'cultural heroes' would not be valid inclusions because

---

[11] Eugene Smith, *India as a Secular State*, 339 *via* Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* 91.

[12] Irish Legal News, "'Historic' Irish Language Law in Northern Ireland Receives Royal Assent," December 7, 2022. https://www.irishlegal.com/articles/historic-irish-language-law-in-northern-ireland-receives-royal-assent. "Language and Identity Laws Could Spell Significant Change," December 11, 2022. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-63923308.
The Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 includes provision to repeal the 1737 act, but the repeal has yet to be formalized. Thus someone could be fined for speaking Irish in the court system though the likelihood of this happening is scarce.

they are literary inventions and not historical figures who have been transformed into 'characters'. The degree to which verifiable information about the selected figures is available varies widely. While Daniel O'Connell's life as a politician and accomplished lawyer is exceptionally well-documented, Queen Nanny is mentioned in the written records a total of four times and for many years academic historians believed her to be a wholly legendary figure. The requirement of an historical base is rooted in an acknowledgement of how historical education has been manipulated to galvanize nationalist efforts and a belief that an element of truth fortifies the myths which have built up around these figures. Karla Gottlieb writes, "The past is a source of pride, it is what makes Maroons who they are, and it must be taught and shared."[13] This assertion is supported on a broader level by the prolonged efforts on the part of the English, in the case of Boudica, and the Jamaican government, in the case of Nanny, to demonstrate the historical existence of these figures and uncover biographical data pertaining to their lives.[14] Finally, the figures must have been subject to significant mythologizing, or creative expansion of their lore, posthumously. This requirement arises out of the four characteristics I sought to test through this investigation: balancing the remote and the relatable; creative freedom for cultural creators and consumers; state involvement with the promotion of the figure as a national icon; and an attempt to preserve the potency of the figure for new generations.

---

[13] Karla Lewis Gottlieb, *The Mother of Us All: A History of Queen Nanny, Leader of the Windward Jamaican Maroons*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000), 14.

[14] In the late 19th century, several archaeological excavations were conducted or proposed to verify the accounts of Boudica's rebellion. These include excavations at Colchester and at Parliament Hill which was known at the time as 'Boudicca''s grave.' *See* "A MEMORIAL TO BOADICEA." *The Standard*, October 20, 1894, 3, *British Library Newspapers* (accessed September 22, 2021).
In the Jamaican case, after fears were raised that the nation would be the subject of international humiliation were they to formally name a mythological figure a 'national hero,' Kamau Braithwaite conducted extensive research to prove the existence of the historical figure Queen Nanny. More details on this investigation can be found in the labels or *see* Karla Lewis Gottlieb, "Queen Nanny as Historical Persona," In *The Mother of Us All: A History of Queen Nanny, Leader of the Windward Jamaican Maroons*, 23–43, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000.

Despite the limited number of requirements I placed on the selection of figures, the 'heroes' represented in the exhibit display numerous similarities unintentionally. All of them initially rose to prominence due to acts of resistance against the prevailing government of their time, and with the exception of Nanny of the Maroons, who by oral history accounts lived a long life and passed peacefully, they were all subjected to bodily harm and formal censure by those they resisted. Boudica's rebellion began because of the brutal treatment she and her daughters faced at the hands of the Romans. Dulla Bhatti's grandfather and father were, according to some versions of the tale, hanged and skinned by Mughal emperor Akbar while Dulla was a infant, and Dulla Bhatti met his own end by beheading.[15] Daniel O'Connell was arrested on suspicion of sedition and imprisoned for three months in 1844. His health declined following his imprisonment and O'Connell died less than two years later. While these injustices are partly the reality of living under and resisting colonial governance, they also can serve as a form of rhetorical device spurring outrage at oppressors and allowing audiences to see their own grievances reflected in the suffering of the venerated figure.

Themes of resurrection, deification, and fated greatness also make appearances across the figures' verbal and visual representations. Nanny of the Maroons has by far the most supernatural elements woven into her persona. In some accounts of Queen Nanny's arrival in Jamaica, it is claimed that she made the treacherous journey from Ghana to Jamaica to free her people. She is commonly referred to as "the Mother of us all" and in a popular story saved the Windward Maroons from starvation by planting three pumpkin seeds which grew to gargantuan size in the span of one night and fed her people for many years to come. Additionally, she is rumored to be able to catch bullets and throw them back toward the shooter, disguise herself as a tree, and keep

[15] Sheikh, 38.

all non-Maroons out of the true Nanny Town.[16] Daniel O'Connell's birth in certain tales is portrayed as miraculous owing to his parent's advanced age, a possible connection to biblical lore, and that before his birth was prophesied he would be the 'Saviour of Ireland.[17] Other tales ascribe him healing powers and invincibility akin to Achilles and he is commonly referred to as 'Immortal Dan.' In one commonly sung *aisling,* Síle ní Ghadhrá, *Sïle*, personification of Ireland describes her anguish as her churches have been torn down and how she has waited through the years for the coming of her son, O'Connell, who would restore her glory.[18]

Dulla Bhatti's birth is similarly prophesied and it is said that the nurse who helped his mother knew he would "earn a great name by virtue of his bravery."[19] Moments after his birth he was fed diluted opium and water from the blade of a freshly sharpened sword. [20] In the case of Boudica, a notion arose out of the Victorian fascination with Roman Britain and Boudica's tragic story that her failed rebellion is what set Britain on its oath to global hegemony. This idea is alluded to in William Cowper's "Boadicea, an Ode" in the lines, "Regions Caesar never knew/ Thy posterity shall sway,/Where his eagles never flew,/None invincible as they" which is engraved on the pedestal of *Boadicea and her Daughters*, a monument which stands at the end of Westminster Bridge near the Houses of Parliament.[21] It also comes into play in a niche 1900 novel by Marie Trevelyan, *Britain's Greatness Foretold: the Story of Boadicea, the British Warrior-Queen.*[22] The bestowal of supernatural powers and even god-like features unto these

---

[16] Gottlieb, *The Mother of Us All,* 70-77.
[17] Ríonach Uí Ógáin, *Immortal Dan: Daniel O'Connell in Irish Folk Tradition*, (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1995,) 74, 180-181.
[18] Uí Ógáin, *Immortal Dan,* 89.
[19] Asad Salīm Sheikh, *Dulle Di Bar: Dulla Bhatti and His Homeland*, (Lahore: Izharsons, 2008), 35.
[20] Ibid.
[21] William, Cowper, "Boadicea: An Ode," *Luminarium*, 1782, 2006. http://www.luminarium.org/eightlit/cowper/boadicea.htm.
[22] Marie Trevelyan and Edwin Collins, *Britain's Greatness Foretold: the Story of Boadicea, the British Warrior-Queen*. London: J. Hogg, 1900.

figures demonstrates the respect the people of these communities held and hold for them. More importantly, it provides a vehicle for positive self-representation and for expressing hopes for the future of their respective nations. Multiple interpretations of the same story work to provide a creative outlet in which people can mold the figure to better fit the needs and values of their personal identity and local community while common threads promote the imagination of community beyond the immediate. Adherence to national identity requires a confluence of personal and collective identity through a mitigated model, balancing rigid belief in some respects and amorphous threads of connection in others.

Curation Theory and Interpretation

The essential base of curation theory and practice is the belief that objects in and of themselves have something of worth to tell us; they have meaning etched into their materiality, and a discursive power which can impart knowledge to the viewer simply through coming into contact with them. Each object embodies layers of hidden stories from the initial idea to the hands which shaped it, the story of the materials, and the personal life history of the item as it has been passed from generation to generation. In order to accept curation and exhibit development as a valuable endeavor we must first understand that there are arguments and lessons which cannot be fully explored verbally.

Early in the history of museums, and in periods throughout the intervening centuries, it was believed that objects solely on their own were capable of transmitting this knowledge, both in the sense of the moral lessons they were hoped to teach and in the sense that they were believed to provide an education in *looking.*[23] Museums in their early stages functioned largely as outlets for nation building and for the spread of colonialist ideologies. The claim here is that

[23] *See* Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," in *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics. Culture : Policies and Politics,* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995).

properly arranged "artifacts of the national past… offer [the imagined past] a template for public guidance, for inspiration of the modern nation."[24] This frame views labels as a distraction from the true purpose of the exhibit, and in some cases even as an attempt to control the audience's experience by privileging the opinion of the curator or museum. In the 1980s, the *pictorial turn* grew to prominence in other disciplines of the humanities and was reflected in museums as well. Educators and curators sought to understand how image worked alongside text.[25] This later became absorbed into the *ethnographic turn* which holds that an object's meaning is inextricable from the cultural context in which it was created.[26]

Morgan expands on this point, writing, "Objects are not examples of ideas waiting to be tagged by wall texts, but participants in extended networks of things, spaces, institutions, and people. The challenge for the curator is how to convey this in a way that does not require an attendant lecturer or essay."[27] Through the use of geographically bounded objects like monuments and references to place names, my curative choices make clear the ways in which these items and the larger context they work within are directly informed by the local communities of which they are a part and connected through shared cultural vocabularies to perceived national communities. This also underscores one of the great advantages of a digital learning experience: neither objects nor visitors need to be in a certain physical space to access the exhibit content. While this can lead to a less impactful experience because of the lack of physicality, it also opens up the way for the inclusion of immovable objects or items that for other reasons would not be available for physical display. Each of the objects I have chosen have

---

[24] David Morgan, "Museum Collection and the History of Interpretation," In *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives,* edited by Gretchen Townsend Buggeln, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate, 117–27, (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing PIc, 2017), 119.
[25] Morgan,"Museum Collection," 117.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Morgan, "Museum Collection," 124.

some sort of compelling visual appeal which warrants their inclusion beyond simply engaging with one of the selected figures. This visual stimulus emphasizes the importance of materiality in my approach and helps to create a more engaging audience experience by offering multiple points of entry.

With an understanding that outside interpretation is a crucial part of the exhibit experience, labels have become the norm; however there still remains the question of how they should be written. Label writing styles vary widely from institution to institution though the general consensus is that labels should be between 75-150 words, as any longer decreases the likelihood they will be read, and they should be written at 7th-9th grade reading level to help ensure they are accessible to wide audiences. In my own work, I have adapted these guidelines to better the content and aims of the exhibit, thus labels tend to be 200-300 words in length and written for a slightly higher reading level. Still, they are not intended to be comprehensive and typically highlight one to two relevant points which serve as a beginning to contemplation and analysis rather than an end. Throughout the label writing process I have come back to a singular idea: "The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction—but provocation." [28] The power of a self-guided experience and a, largely, unbounded interpretation is that there are infinite unique experiences to be had. Allowing people to think about the content on their own terms leads to more longevity in their engagement and a more personal connection to the content presented. This principle is further emphasized by the inclusion of a reading list which will serve to credit my sources as this is not typical in label writing. It also functions as a resource to direct interested readers to potential avenues for further exploration.

[28] Freeman Tilden as quoted in Raney Bench*, Interpreting Native American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Site*s, 81, *Interpreting History*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

More recent attempts to invite a wider variety of interpretation into the exhibitionary space have included community curated projects, reworking content to embrace decolonial perspectives, and attributing labels to specific writers rather than the omnipotent voice of the institution. While the exact translation of such objectives is difficult given the nature of my project (which exists outside of a museum, though it may still be perceived as an offshoot of an institutional voice due to its association with the University of Chicago) I have attempted to preserve the guiding principles, and do not seek to present my own interpretations as the end all be all. A central tenet of decolonialism is the importance of 'truth-telling,' essentially representing the stories of colonized people rather than shying away from them or perpetuating colonial perspectives through selection bias and uncritically repeating colonial ideologies. Museums and other exhibitionary outlets have often overlooked 'controversial' topics because they wish to be apolitical spaces; however, the choice to obscure the truths about colonialism is as political as the choice to include them. The phrase 'truth-telling', widely applied by Amy Lonetree in her seminal 2012 book *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums,* asserts the validity of colonial perspectives which have historically been absent from these spaces or otherwise misrepresented. [29] In line with these principles, I have directly confronted the truths of colonialism and imperials, been conscious to include a diversity of representations, and taken care not to represent any community as a monolith. It is crucial to understand that decolonization is a process and not a destination. As such I am sure there are elements of this project which could be altered to further align with the principles of decolonization whether that be through further expansion or some other means.

Conclusion

[29] Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

In preparing parts of this project, I reread my undergraduate thesis and found a quote I believe to be relevant here, "National identity relies on the fabrication of personal connection to collective identities. Folk heroes have a profound influence on how people interpret their national history and apply it to the present."[30] Throughout my research, I have had to take a step away from verifiable truth in favor of storytelling and rhetorical significance. While this may seem at first to be an ahistorical approach it is in actuality more aligned with how much of a public audience engages with history on a day to day basis. Historical fiction series, personal histories, and oral history all rely on memory and feeling over the accepted historical canon, and it is these types of engagement which are often the most impactful. The study of folk heroes, their biography, mythology, and representation, all point to what makes history compelling and such a pervasive force in the formation and perpetuation of national identities. *Folkheroes, the Imagined Past, and the National Future* compels audiences to consider the stories of four figures, but woven within it is an invitation to consider the venerated figures of their own cultures and how their memory is employed in the present.

[30] Lillian Eells, "Boudica and Boadicea: The Memorialization of an Ancient Queen in Late Victorican and Early Edwardian Britain," Unpublished manuscript, 2021.

Bibliography

Abrahams, Roger D. "Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics." *The Journal of American Folklore* 106, no. 419 (1993): 3–37. https://doi.org/10.2307/541344.

Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London ; New York: Verso, 2006.

Bennett, Tony. "The Exhibitionary Complex." In *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. Culture : Policies and Politics. London ; New York: Routledge, 1995.

Ciurea, Cristian, Paul Pocatilu, and Simona-Vasilica Oprea. "Attractiveness of Virtual Exhibitions in Cultural Institutions in the Post-Pandemic Context: A Case Study." *Procedia Computer Science* 221 (2023): 308–15. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2023.07.042.

Eells, Lillian. "Boudica and Boadicea: The Memorialization of an Ancient Queen in Late Victorian and Early Edwardian Britiain." Unpublished manuscript, 2021.

"Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive / Works / BOADICEA, AN ODE. (William Cowper)." Accessed July 28, 2024. https://www.eighteenthcenturypoetry.org/works/o3794-w0400.shtml.

Gottlieb, Karla Lewis. *The Mother of Us All: A History of Queen Nanny, Leader of the Windward Jamaican Maroons*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000.

Irish Legal News. "'Historic' Irish Language Law in Northern Ireland Receives Royal Assent," December 7, 2022. https://www.irishlegal.com/articles/historic-irish-language-law-in-northern-ireland-receives-royal-assent.

Jensen, Lotte. "The Roots of Nationalism: Introduction." In *The Roots of Nationalism*, edited by Lotte Jensen, 9–28. National Identity Formation in Early Modern Europe, 1600-1815. Amsterdam University Press, 2016. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv8pzcpr.3.

"Language and Identity Laws Could Spell Significant Change." December 11, 2022. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-63923308.

Lonetree, Amy. *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Morgan, David. "Museum Collection and the History of Interpretation." In *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Gretchen Townsend

Buggeln, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate, 117–27. London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing PIc, 2017.

Sheikh, Asad Salīm. *Dulle Di Bar: Dulla Bhatti and His Homeland*. Lahore: Izharsons, 2008.

Smith, Anthony D. *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*. London ; New York: Routledge, 2009.

"The Origin of Nationalism – The State of Nationalism." Accessed July 28, 2024. https://stateofnationalism.eu/article/the-origin-of-nationalism/.

Thiesse, Anne-Marie. "National Identities: A Transnational Paradigm." In *Revisiting Nationalism: Theories and Processes*, edited by Alain Dieckhoff and Christophe Jaffrelot, 1st ed., 122–44. CERI Series in Comparative Politics and International Studies. New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Uí Ógáin, Ríonach. *Immortal Dan: Daniel O'Connell in Irish Folk Tradition*. Dublin: Geography Publications, 1995.

Wilson, William A. "Herder, Folklore, and Romantic Nationalism." In *Marrow of Human Experience, The*, edited by Jill Terry Rudy and Diane Call, 107–23. Essays on Folklore by William A. Wilson. University Press of Colorado, 2006. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt4cgkmk.11.