

- Arjun: [00:14](#) Welcome to the fourth episode of Anthropological Airwaves. My name is Arjun Shankar, postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania, and I'm really pleased to introduce this episode, which is our first on museums and museum studies. In this episode, you'll hear from Monique Scott of Bryn Mawr College and Salam Al Kuntar, currently a visiting assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania, both of whom are really engaged in thinking through and researching the changing nature of museum and museum curation in the 21st century. I have really three major questions. The first has to do with how museum curation is changing in a post-media age. What kinds of new installations might we be witnessing, might be being constructed at this moment, and how does it change the kind of knowledge we acquire when we enter these spaces? Secondly, how are museum curators effectively engaging with a very diverse set of publics, including youth and adults, during this current political climate, and indeed what Monique and Salam are deeply invested in thinking through problematics of race and migration, as they're imbricated in how museums are constructed. And third, and that's the attention to pedagogy, what ideas and stereotypes to individuals entering museum spaces with and how curators facilitate process of unlearning and relearning. And with that I'll pass it over to Stephanie Mach graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. Please enjoy.
- Stephanie: [01:51](#) So I'm Stephanie Mach. I'm a third year in the department of Anthropology here at Penn and I study the politics of display and collecting and research in museums, particularly that of Native American collections. I am also the collections assistant in academic engagement here at the Penn Museum. And we are here to speak with Monique Scott. Monique is an anthropologist who has studied museums and also works as a museum professional. She received her PhD at Yale in Anthropology and spent 10 years working in museum education at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Monique is now director of Museum Studies at Bryn Mawr College, which is a pilot program that teaches both museum theory and practice. So it seems like you've come from one of the most old school parts of the field of anthropology and moved into this kind of newer burgeoning museum anthropology field, that is still in many ways considered kind of up and coming and becoming itself.
- Monique: [02:59](#) At that moment in graduate school when I was making the shift, it was around 1999-2000, and I didn't know that there was this kind of museum anthropology, the anthropology of museums. And so I just started cobbling it together. I started really

engaging with race studies, media studies, that sort of thing. And then I became familiar with the work of some museums, scholars like Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, and the folks at Leicester, and Stuart Hall, the people that we're really thinking about how media, all forms of media, museums included play a really critical role in how people understand themselves. Also, borrowing from my anthropological training, more cultural anthropological training, I was very interested in interviewing people, talking to people, actually listening to how diverse visitors make meaning from these African origins exhibits in natural history museums at each museum. I did about a hundred surveys at each museum, like around 500 total, but the really powerful interactions happened kind of off script and casual conversations and I soon realized that the museum institution itself was a barrier to what people were to what people felt comfortable sharing with me.

- Monique: [04:30](#) So I started having interviews off-site, outside of the museums. I also know that my own identity as a black woman influenced the interview space, and I became really intrigued with that. So I started changing the way that I interviewed and made it a casual conversation, I would own up to my identity, why I'm interested in this. I recognize that these interviews are not sterile spaces, you know, obviously. And so I just owned up to the way that these interviews were biased. I'm going to share a little bit about who I am and what I'm interested in and that I identify as black and I'm interested in representations of blackness. And then, I mean, it was like the floodgates opened and it, you know, I heard much more kind of nuanced and complicated and critical responses of the museum and its representation of race and blackness
- Stephanie: [05:31](#) for those of our audience members who have not read your 2007 book "Rethinking evolution in the Museum: Envisioning African Origins" since you mentioned it. Can you just recap it a little bit?
- Monique: [05:43](#) Sure! It was the findings that I came up with from doing all of these interviews and conversations and my own observations of the exhibitions, and acknowledging the exhibition histories as well... the biggest finding was that yes, there are indeed residues of 19th-century racial hierarchies that persist in museum exhibitions and persist as color-coded narratives of progress. Most of these human origins exhibitions begin in Africa and end in Europe, intentionally or otherwise creating a progress narrative. And the other thing I was really interested in was that museums and their visitors cope produce knowledge about the past. So museum visitors aren't coming in as Tabula

Rasa as they're coming in with all sorts of preconceptions that they've built up from their own previous schoolwork. Popular Culture, for sure. Planet of the apes came up way more often than I expected it to in my interviews. You know, all of these things inform the visitor before entering these exhibitions of human origins. African origins.

Stephanie: [07:09](#) How much do you think museums need to respond to what we presume that people are bringing with them into the museum?

Monique: [07:19](#) It is difficult, first of all, just acknowledging that people are coming in with previous conceptions of race and culture. I think that it can be tricky, you know, if an exhibition is kind of just engaging with stereotypes, but if an exhibition is too experimental, too visitor-focused, then you lose out on the kind of educational or didactic opportunities. So I think it's just acknowledging that, you know, the museum is not a sterile space and that there are, first of all acknowledge there are a diversity of visitors with a diversity of backgrounds and they're going to experience this in these exhibitions in different ways. I found the most powerful intervention to be through public programs because while the exhibitions are static, what we could do through public programs is give new tours. I would give tours that are about the history of the institution, the history of representing Africa in museums, owning the existence of that exhibition as an artifact of the past.

Stephanie: [08:34](#) So we've talked about exhibitions being included with race, but I'm wondering since you brought up programming, if that is ever an issue for public programming, kind of falling into the same old trap.

Monique: [08:48](#) Yeah, I'll share. You know, some of the challenges that we faced at the American Museum of natural history. So there may have been a sense that the public wants a certain form of cultural spectacle in performances. So doing that much more carefully. I mean, I remember having a conversation with my supervisor about an attempt to have costumed natives, quote unquote, perform in front of one of the Pacific peoples dioramas. And I was like, no, we can't do this or we can't do this in this way. And then museums are so complicated. So there's the interest of the Anthropology department, the education department, the administration...

Stephanie: [09:34](#) You need to draw in audiences to be able to teach them, but how do you do it in a respectful way? Your new work is talking a bit about how artifacts and contemporary art in museums... the way that they're being displayed as kind of encoding racially

encoding African bodies and in different with different display techniques.

Monique: [09:57](#) Yeah, so I've moved in into, or I moved away from, kind of thinking of representation of Africa in kind of the nature culture binary into thinking about this age old art artifact debate. And I've been really influenced by the work of Jennifer Gonzalez in thinking about how, even with the display of African artifacts, as she says, we're invited to imagine the missing body that is overturned, I'm sorry, overdetermined, by the objects used to signify its absence. So even though the artifacts might be in the context of an art museum or an anthropology museum, um, and it's not the same as a pygmy diorama... I think there's still kind of socially legible of representing something inferior or primitive or the past. So yeah, I'm beginning to think to think about that. And I've been doing a little research here in Philadelphia with Penn Museum and with a show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art on creative Africa.

Monique: [11:09](#) So yeah, I'm beginning to think about kind of the slippage between art and artifacts and how anthropological ideas are still placed upon new African art. I am just blown away by the work of various conceptual artists who are reframing the museum. I mean Fred Wilson has been like such a guru and inspiration for me and kind of recontextualizing how race is represented in museums and powerfully recontextualized in things to make new meanings, outside-the-box ways of representing recent culture that really make you think. It's so much exciting work happening and exploding what visitors can expect from a museum. I've been interested in this research for so long, but it has taken on a new currency for me with what's happening in the country and the Black Lives Matter movement as long as black lives are being devalued, that is partially connected to what anthropologists did -- what we did, in anthropology by dehumanizing and bestializing the black body. And I think that in this current moment, we have to think more strategically in museums, in anthropological conversations of, you know, we helped create this idea of kind of the inferiority of the black race. And now we need to undo that and work really hard to undoing it, not just in our closed, you know, Ivy Towers, our academic journals, but working really hard and the public sphere, to confirm that black lives do matter.

Stephanie: [13:18](#) I absolutely agree with you. And thank you for saying that. We are actually doing this interview in Philadelphia where the scientific racism was founded and expounded over many decades. So it's very important that you say that and it's very

important that museums respond to that history and contemporary realities.

- Monique: [13:39](#) I couldn't agree more
- Stephanie: [14:12](#) All right, so we are talking with Salam Al Kuntar, who is a Syrian archaeologist and a research fellow at the Penn Museum. She co-directs the Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq project. And she's also the curator of "Cultures in the Crossfire, Stories from Syria and Iraq," which is a new special exhibition that opened up the Penn Museum. And will run through November 2018. Can you tell us what the exhibition is about?
- Salam: [14:38](#) The exhibit starts with the destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq that has been very much a focus of media attention recently
- News Clip 1: [14:48](#) In the spring of 2015, the extremists meticulously documented their destruction of the ruins of the ancient city of Nimrud.
- Salam: [14:57](#) It brings together current events and past histories and archaeology. It also highlights the importance of heritage and preservation of heritage for the identity of the people from these two countries. How is that going to impact future generations getting to change these places, you know, the cultural landscape, monuments of historical significance. And also it focuses on the movement of people and the whole refugee crisis. This exhibit also, in the way it's designed, it's to bring these artifacts from the Penn Museum that have not been in on display before, with modern art intervention that reflects on the four themes of this exhibit. So in this way will bring the past and contemporary issues on heritage together. So this exhibition is directly addressing a topic that is headline news.
- Stephanie: [16:01](#) Why is it important for museums to address contemporary events or politics?
- Salam: [16:05](#) Of course it's important because I think the primary function of a museum is to serve the public even if it, you know, in the case of our museum, is a research museum, a university museum, but we also have a strong message and reaching out to the public. So it's part of our message, our primary function, especially with things that people care about and, you know, they need to learn more about, and see it from the perspective of the specialists who work at the museum. So it serves the wider community. In the case of our museum, we were very

happy to engage also segments of the Syrian and Iraqi refugees who live in the area.

Salam: [16:50](#) It is very important also, in this time of messages of bigotry and racism and exclusion to focus on issues that bring both the host communities and the refugee communities together, more exposing general American audiences to these cultures and also giving the refugees some comfort and appreciations of their places of origin and in their culture.

Stephanie: [17:20](#) And that's something that archaeologists are becoming more aware of is that we can only talk about the past, we have to be aware of the contemporary situation. And so one of the great things that we've seen happening, are American archaeologists who are working with Syrian and Iraqi archaeologists and heritage workers, because that's something, a passion that we share, protecting this history and protecting these artifacts. But often the discourse about partnerships between Middle Eastern and Western cultural heritage professionals plays into this white savior trope. How does your exhibition attempt to revise this narrative?

Salam: [17:57](#) Our approach here at the Penn Museum generally, and Pen Cultural Center, is actually to work with local archaeologists and heritage professionals, in a way that they reach out to us. But then we also, before anything, we just try to listen to what they see, I mean, to problems or initiatives they want to pursue. So it's a bottom up approach. We are not there. They are there, they are facing all these dangers in risking their lives. So we have to rely on their identifying what can be done and how it can be done. And then we see how, how we can possibly help. I think the conflict situation, in a way it hasn't settled the issue of say, you know, the, the white savior trope you were talking about, or you know, the patronizing pattern of asymmetrical relations, it's more about opening up this discussion in how to deal with heritage through the eyes of the local professionals in society as a wider stakeholder in this heritage protection issue.

Stephanie: [19:15](#) What do you want the public to walk away with when they leave this exhibition? What is your main message?

Salam: [19:21](#) Well, first I'd like them to think that Syria and Iraq are not only places of darkness and violence, and to look at them in the course of history. It is like, this is even, no matter how hard and how, you know, devastating current events are, in the course of history they tend to be short. And we had brighter periods in history.

- Salam: [19:49](#) So these places are often called the cradle of civilization. They are called that for a reason, because they had this very vibrant civilization. They were places of enlightenment and education. Scholarship. Art. Traditions are still living among the people who are there in this multilayered identity of people. So, also, I want people to know the people of Syria and Iraq are very diverse. They carry different elements, cultural elements, from different historical periods and cultures.
- Salam: [20:27](#) And also I want them to relate to the current events and to stuff that brings actually the entire world together. Stuff that, you know, items that people can relate, you know, we have a whole theme on the Abrahamic religions and identity. We have about like the land, the Syria and Iraq were cross-cultural lands and you're bringing the east and the west and this Hellenistic culture, it used to be to Baghdad and Aleppo as cities that the entire world was connected to somehow. Also see like, we could do something in the time of war, we could work to preserve heritage that gives hope to the people who are trying to cope with the atrocities of the war, and then for, you know, future generations, that we're not giving up on that.
- Stephanie: [21:24](#) I absolutely agree. I love it. A story about action and what we can do. And and preservation and also really humanizes the material heritage that is related to this history.
- News Clip 2: [21:46](#) So here it is, Uruk, the mother of all cities. Nowadays there is not much to see, but thousands of years ago, this was home to 40 or perhaps 50,000 people, a population density without precedent in human history. In the mythology of Mesopotamia, Uruk was built by Gilgamesh, two-thirds god, one-third human, the great epic poem contains a proud description of his city.
- Arjun: [22:24](#) Thank you all so much for listening in and I hope you'll tune into our next episode, which is about the state of immigration policy, past and present, the border, the meanings of the law, and it really asks us to think about how anthropology and anthropologists should situate themselves within these current debates. Diego Arispe-Bazan will be speaking with Jason De Leon of the University of Michigan, and Hilary Parsons-Dick of Arcadia University. So the discussion should be incredibly generative and really help us think through some of these current issues. Hope you'll tune in, but until then, goodbye and thanks for listening.