

## Book review: *Native Americans in British Museums* by Jack Davy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021)

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### Keywords

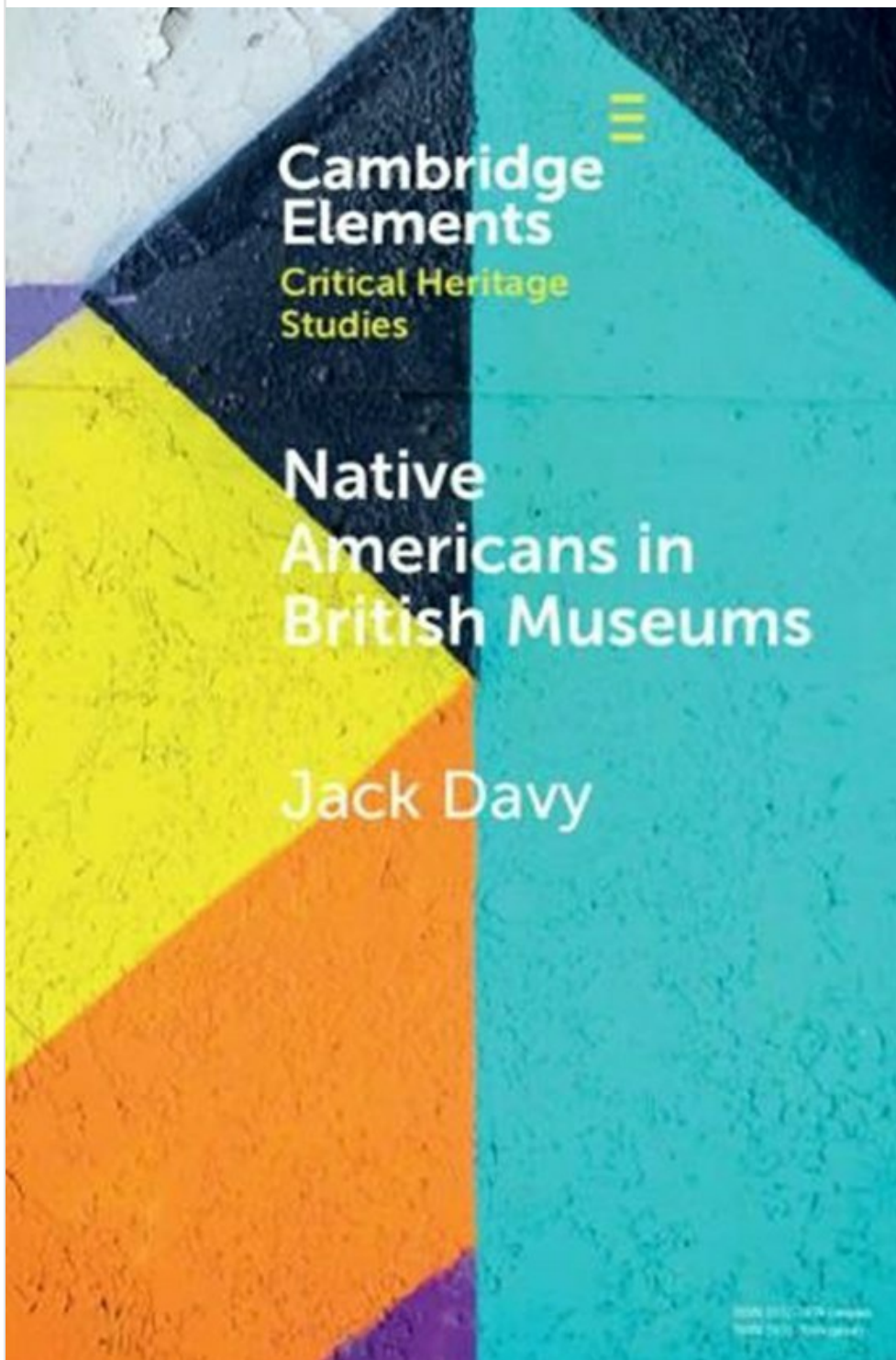
Native North America, Indigenous, decolonisation, UK museums, collections research, colonial history

### Native Americans in British Museums by Jack Davy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021)

Recent years have seen tense debates around how to engage with Britain's colonial inheritances steadily developing, with the gulf between sides ever-deepening. Museums, no strangers to calls to return artefacts as part of the project of relinquishing imperial control, have once again found themselves at the heart of these cultural wranglings. Such critiques are not altogether new and neither are the legislative and museological means to address them. In the United States, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) that makes provision for the return of cultural patrimony to federally recognised tribes is now into its third decade of implementation. On the continent, renewed commitments to the restitution of African cultural heritage are also progressing, and innovative directions taken by specific institutions in the UK and abroad have sparked long-term relationships with Indigenous nations and organisations from around the world. Yet despite these long histories and more contemporary applications, the level of popular debate in Britain remains relatively static. Sharply segmented into simplistic accusations of 'erasing history' and 'emptying galleries', media pundits seem to refuse any possibility that redressing the glaring absence of critical colonial histories within our museums might offer a welcome strategy through which to counter precisely such historic erasures.

Published by Cambridge University Press in 2021 as part of the Cambridge Elements: Critical Heritage Studies series, Jack Davy's [Native Americans in British Museums](#) is a refreshing contribution not only to current conversations within the field, but also in how it imagines the practical methods that might accompany them.

Figure 1



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Jack Davy, *Native Americans in British Museums* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021)

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Based on research conducted as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project *Beyond the Spectacle*, which ran from 2017–2020 and sought to amplify stories of Native North American travellers to the UK, Davy highlights the significance of UK museum collections to contemporary Native American visitors.

**Figure 2**



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Warriors of AniKituhwa (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians) retracing the steps of The Beatles at Abbey Road, London, January 2019. Inspired by 'London Calling 1762', by America Meredith

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The first of the thematic chapters are consequently structured around a series of interviews with Native American visitors that reveal a range of perspectives in response to the question of representation. Ranging from profoundly traumatic experiences, mild 'irritation and annoyance' (Andersen, qtd. in Davy, 5) to more positive examples of collaborative practice, these perspectives highlight the work already being done by specific (often regional, rather than national) museums, but, in their range, demonstrate that 'the situation remains unacceptable' (Davy, 2021, 3). A particularly stark illustration of the potential reputational risks to museums is offered in the introductory chapter. Recounting Mohegan playwright Madeline Sayet's 2019 performance of *Where We Belong* at the Globe Theatre, Davy recognises his own remarks – given on a tour of the British Museum where he previously worked as a curator – being spoken back to him from the stage. Sayet's one-woman performance features an encounter with a dismissive curator that provokes intense feelings of traumatic pain in Sayet. Although the character is not based on Davy, but is rather a caricature of British paternalism, the anecdote nevertheless illustrates how museums must do better, lest risk the damage of public and artistic critique.

**Figure 3**



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Madeline Sayet, *Where We Belong*, 2019

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At the heart of the problem facing museums is a twin crisis of both *representation* and *expertise*. From demonstrations in-gallery to leadership within the sector that is prioritising critical perspectives, the question of how to memorialise colonialism – and recognise the uneven world that it has bequeathed us – shows no sign of receding. Calling attention to these increasing pressures on museums to provide ‘greater and more meaningful representation’ (p 27) to marginalised peoples, Davy identifies how the push and pull between ‘progressive and conservative factions’ (p 27) in this long-standing debate has deeper roots in another, structural quandary. This, Davy suggests, is a direct result of a political landscape that has fundamentally and unprecedentedly reshaped the nature of curatorship and collections management since 2010. As argued in Chapter 3, over ten years of cuts to the cultural sector has resulted in a ‘crisis of expertise’ whereby institutions have departed from the appointment of subject specialists to manage and curate collections and increasingly had to prioritise more generalist staffing models in response to diminishing funding pots. This is a bold argument, supported by recent examples of museum management that have followed the model Davy outlines (Davy, p 40), often in spite of criticism from staff and sector leadership alike. This perspective considers the roots of the current representation crisis within a political and economic context and offers a sharp indictment of the ideological landscape that created the conditions that museums now find themselves in. Notwithstanding Davy’s sharp assessment of neoliberal Britain and the climate it has created in the cultural sector, his arguments’ defence of specialist models of collections care and curatorship at times mask the inequities inherent in these systems. In particular, the idea of the sole, academically trained curator in a permanent or long-term position neglects the gate-keeping mentality and reinforcement of epistemological hierarchies that these staffing paradigms can harbour. Moreover, as the sector is currently rapidly responding to (in Davy’s terms) the ‘crisis of representation’, this analysis misses the fact that the sector as a whole seems to be undergoing yet another shift towards a fused model of appointing specialists with more general responsibilities and alternative expertise, rather than exclusively formal training. Examples of this shift can be seen in the creation of specialist responsibilities via the ‘Indigenising Manchester Museum’ programme, the plethora of short-term research posts in critical colonial history across various academic and cultural institutions and the Museum Association’s own ‘Decolonisation Working Group’, launched in 2019.

The fourth thematic chapter turns to offer a more promising proposal for addressing these crises through the means that are available to us. Taking the case of Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, where Davy worked from 2019–20 to design an ‘Indigenous Engagement Policy’, as an illustrative study, the final chapter considers how collaborative methods can transform museum

practice in ways that anticipate the future of collections care and audience engagement. The policy advances a model for working with Indigenous communities and collections that recognises Indigenous peoples as uniquely positioned to help address the twin crises at the heart of Davy's argument. In acknowledging the limited specialist expertise of many UK collections staff, the policy seeks to connect equitably with community members, experts and traditional knowledge holders in order to understand alternative and/or supplementary epistemological understandings of items in UK collections. Simultaneously, in engaging more proactively with Indigenous peoples, UK collections can begin a more thorough examination of how best to represent Native North American peoples and material cultures through collections-based research and engagement programmes. Although the closing case study is necessarily limited to describing a single example, the template Davy provides presents a neatly adaptable method for other organisations to put into practice. The concluding reflections reiterate this ambition and stress the urgency of acting responsibly and respectfully – lest face risking the kinds of highly public critique Davy recounts in the book's introduction. This return to the idea of reputational risk, whilst not the main caution of the book, nonetheless constitutes a compelling prompt with which to close Davy's argument, suggesting that perhaps the spectre of public and creative critique has a vital role to play in maintaining pressure on those within the sector who remain stubbornly mired in discourse of the so-called culture wars. Overall, *Native Americans in British Museums* is an excellent introductory text for a wide range of academic and professional audiences interested in decolonising practice. As public debates on how best to memorialise our problematic inheritances seem set to continue, Davy's analytical and practical proposals offer solid ground from which to begin implementing critical and creative solutions to our current, shared crises.

*Native Americans in British Museums* by Jack Davy is available to buy from the [Cambridge University Press website](#) (RRP: £15.00).

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## Tags

- [Decolonialism](#)

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Shelley Angelie Saggar is a CHASE funded PhD researcher and museum worker based in the School of English at the University of Kent. Her project examines representations of the museum in Indigenous literature and film from North America and Aotearoa/New Zealand, asking how methods drawn from Indigenous literary studies can contribute to decolonial heritage practices both within and beyond the museum. She also works as a researcher at the Science Museum, where she focuses on managing culturally sensitive items in the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum collection. She is the founder of The Decolonial Dictionary (<https://decolonialdictionary.wordpress.com/>), a project aimed at unpacking postcolonial theory for museum professionals and examining problematic terminology in heritage spaces