

Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster
English Department
Module: Culture and Communication (at home)
Lecturer: Dr. Romana Kopeckova
QISPOS registration: SS 2022

Intercultural Dossier

Experiencing English *Geschichtskultur* at Home

Name: XY

Matriculation Number: 123456

Study Program: ZFB, Anglistik/Amerikanistik – XY

E-Mail: XY@uni-muenster.de

Date of Submission: July 2, 2022

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1. Introduction

1.1 Intercultural Studies

When I started studying English here in Münster in 2018, I was very eager to go abroad and experience an anglophone culture during an extended stay. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I had to rely on my own resources to facilitate intercultural learning. I found a means to engage with English culture when I went on a holiday in Munich over New Year's Eve of 2021. I visited an art exhibition featuring artworks by the artist collective *The Blue Rider* and encountered an informational text about the groups' publication *The Almanac* which left me in shock:

“At the time, Europe was in the final stage of New Imperialism, and its museums were filled with works from Africa, America, Oceania, and the South Seas. Reception of so-called “primitive art” by the modern avant-garde [...] would not have been possible without their being aware of these works from colonial contexts.” (LENBACHHAUS)

There was no mention of the colonial crimes that have brought these pieces of art to Europe. This exhibition therefore reminded me of the colonial past which the Western European nations are entangled in, and it gave me the focal point for my intercultural studies here in Germany: how does the England deal with its colonial history and how does it compare to Germany?

1.2 Academics

This focus ties very closely to my academic background, as my second subject is XY. I choose my courses here in Münster accordingly, visiting the lecture on postcolonial studies held by Prof. XY and the lecture on English language teaching by Prof. XY. The first was the starting point for my experience in Munich. Although having briefly encountered post-colonial theory in my introductory courses, this lecture displayed the variety of postcolonialism and enabled me to reflect on the remnants of our colonial history more effectively. It provided me with new perspectives, and the bibliography which we were asked to hand at the end of the semester was an astounding opportunity for further reading on the topics of the lecture.

1.3 Expectations

My interest in this topic arose from watching a YouTube video of the German journalist and satirist Jan Böhmermann titled *Das Humboldt Forum – Raubkunst in Berlin?* in 2020. It is a journalistic inquiry into how Germany would neglect its historic responsibility regarding art-works stolen from the former German colonies in Africa. In the wake of watching this, I did my own research and discovered that *The New York Times* published an article on this topic. I realized that national strategies employed to deal with a countries' colonial past are perceived globally. A more global approach to dealing with Europe's history as a colonizer might help to develop multinational perspectives on the colonial past and postcolonial present. When I started

working on this dossier, I was positive that the Internet would provide me with enough material to educate myself on the English approach to developing a postcolonial identity.

1.4. Culture as a Concept

As a history student, I will rely on a concept from my studies in order to adequately reflect on my findings: the idea of “Geschichtskultur” (Rüsen 17). Jörn Rüsen (17) uses this term to describe the manifestation of a society’s perception of history in their collective memory. This includes teaching history in schools and universities, but stretches to public representations of history in e.g., memorials or the media. (Rüsen 17) *Geschichtskultur* is differentiated into three categories: the aesthetic, the political, and the cognitive dimension. (Rüsen 18-19) The first defines the visual representation of history and encompasses things like school-book texts or monuments commemorating specific historic individuals or events. (Rüsen 20) The second dimension connects political actions to historical perception by implying that, for example, national memorial days contribute legitimacy to the contemporary governments and thereby stabilizing the balance of power. (Rüsen 20) The third category is mostly concerned with the academic research of history based on methodical principles enabling a coherent research approach. (Rüsen 21-22) I am aware of the narrowness of this subcategory of culture, but the lack of an experience abroad made me very doubtful whether I can critically experience English culture in a broader sense of the word. This narrower approach enables me to scrutinize detailed facets of England’s relation to its history and the political and societal responsibilities emerging from this relationship more effectively.

2. Main Part

2.1 Commemorating Colonialism? Memorial Politics in London

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of visiting another city or country are the statues and memorials integrated into the city- and landscapes. They are highly visible public demonstrations of what parts of history are present in the perception of the societies that have erected them and are keeping them in place. Similarly, they are features of everyday life for those people who pass by them whether because of a commute to work or meeting up with friends at these prominent locations.



Figure 1, retrieved from: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d0/Nelson%27s_Column_Looking_Towards_Westminster_-_Trafalgar_Square_-_London_-_240404.jpg

When I sat in front of my computer using *Google Earth* to “stroll” through the streets of London in the search of such statues and memorials, I ended up in Trafalgar Square. My eye was caught by *Nelson’s Column* (Figure 1), a monument commemorating the British victory over Spanish and French troops in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Unmistakably, it is a reminder of British imperial power in the 19th century.

Doing research on this national memorial, I discovered an article by journalist Afua Hirsch in *The Guardian*, which one of the most influential left-wing newspapers in the UK. (“The Guardian”) In this commentary, she argues that Nelson was a defender of the British slave trade and that there would be, in stark contrast to the US, no debate about such statues commemorating pro-slavery personalities in England. (Hirsch) However, many things have changed since 2017. The death of George Floyd has sparked the *Black Lives Matter* movement anew and ensued global anti-racism protests. These demonstrations have started a national debate in England about whether to keep such monuments in place or not – especially after the takedown of a statue in Bristol. (“Edward Colston”) Following these demonstrations, the *City of London Corporation* published an online survey which served as a tool for the citizens of London to vote on memorials such as street names and statues linked to England’s colonial past. (“Have Your Say”) Last year, the report of the city’s *Tackling Racism Taskforce*, which was also established in the wake of the *BLM* demonstrations, concluded:

“to set up a working group to oversee the removal and re-siting of statues of William Beckford and Sir John Cass – two figures linked to the Transatlantic slave trade – from its Guildhall headquarters” (“Landmark Report”)

Despite these recommendations, Stewart Home, author at the esteemed international contemporary art magazine *ArtReview*, accentuates that the council is negligent of most of the memorials which have a colonial background and calls for more actions to be taken. (“London’s ‘Square City’”)

This research showed me how intricately linked the aesthetic and political dimensions of the *Geschichtskultur* truly are. Global protests against racism started a debate about the commemoration of those historic personalities who horrifically brutalized the slave population and political acts followed on a local level. Alarming, conservative members of the English society, most prominently the English Prime Minister, who condemned the takedown of the statue in Bristol as an act of “thuggery” (Johnson), are not in favour of such change. The debate in England, as well as the rest of the world, is still ongoing and the progressive and conservative members of society are divided on the issue.

Similarly, initiatives trying to remove memorials saluting individuals in favourable connection to colonial policies are also active in Germany – with success. Berlin issued a new law

allowing to rename streets memorializing those who committed colonial atrocities (“Koloniale Straßennamen”). Notably, both the English and the German society reacted to the global *BLM* protests by starting a debate about the memorialization of historic figures and calling their colonial heritage to attention. Both the English and the German *Geschichtskultur* changed in reaction to this civil movement, confirming my expectation that national strategies to create historic awareness are reviewed by other states and influenced by global events.

2.2 England’s Colonial History at the *British Museum*

Having done further research on the role of the museum as an institution in postcolonial societies for the bibliography in Prof. Stein’s lecture, I wanted to apply my gained knowledge by looking at the distinguished *British Museum* and its position in England. In general, the museum can be understood as an intersection of the aesthetic and the cognitive categories of a societies’ *Geschichtskultur*: the objects displayed contribute the visual, aesthetic element while the setup of the exhibition is based on museological principles. Academic trends can therefore be reflected in the presentation of the museum’s collection, which allows it to influence the public perception of history. The *British Museum* is thus crucial in calling attention to the colonial past of the England in its capital.

Firstly, I wanted to find out how the *British Museum* defines itself and I found answers to this question in the *About us* section on their website. They acknowledge that the British Empire had an enormous influence on the collecting practices of the museum, but more importantly, they point towards the atrocities by which numerable items came into its possession. (“Collecting histories”) This fact is again pointed out in a blog article dealing with the same topic, which states: “The British Museum’s history and collection are intimately linked to the history of the British Empire and the era of European colonialism.” (“Collecting and Empire”) The *British Museum* is obviously aware of its origins and the resulting responsibilities of informing the public and raising awareness to these aspects of England’s history. However, not only the museum influences the public, but this relationship is mutual. For instance, an episode of the *British Museum podcast* (“British Museum”) is dedicated to the *International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition* (“International Day”) in which the hosts discuss the impact slavery has on society today. I was truly surprised about the amount of work done by the *British Museum* to provide material on their own history and how they plan to make themselves more reflective of England’s colonial past. In contrast to many German museums, such as the *Humboldt Forum* in Berlin, there is an abundance of material on the *British*

Museum's website whereby it is not only possible to learn all of this when visiting London, but also when one is at home because of a global pandemic.

My research also revealed critical voices about the *British Museum*. Emily Duthie (23) points out that the institution was still a symbol of British imperialism and that it needed to be rebranded to have a place in a postimperial world. The institution might be under suspicion of being a symbol of historic British imperialism, as Britain itself faces the question of whether to integrate itself into multinational coalitions like the EU or to face the continuously globalizing world alone, as the BREXIT referendum in 2016 showed. It is struggling with the loss of its imperial status in the last century and must create a new identity. The progress the *British Museum* made in the last years might be an indicator that Britain is on a way to find an identity that is more reflective and inclusive.

2.3 History on Demand – Postcolonialism at the BBC

I listened to *BBC Radio* while I did my research on England's *Geschichtskultur* using the *BBC Sounds*-app on my smartphone. When I realized that there are several radio series on the topic of colonial history and museology, I chose to listen to them in order to get a grasp of how English public broadcasting deals with (postcolonial) identity. The most interesting finds were the series *The Museums That Make Us* hosted by art historian Neil MacGregor, who is now one of the directors of the *Humboldt Forum* and said to be one of Europe's most innovative museologists (van Laak 2015), and *Britain's Black Past* hosted by Gretchen Gerzina, professor for Victorian literature at the University of Massachusetts Amherst ("Gretchen"). I was pleasantly surprised that I could listen to such radio shows covering my research aspects produced by the BBC through which I could get input for this dossier. One episode of the latter series included a segment on *Nelson's Column* in Trafalgar Square, and it was only then that I learned that a Black sailor is portrayed in a relief at the memorial. I realized that such series are very essential for calling attention to the Black participation in English history and that even memorials which are criticised for their glorification of colonialists sometimes hint at the historic Black experience. This aspect is really driven home by the host's aim to bust the myth that the multicultural society in England began as late as 1948 by showing that Black people were participating in the English society as early as the 18th century. (Gerzina)

Listening to these shows I reminded me of watching some videos covering Germany's colonial history by German public broadcasting on YouTube. In difference to the English productions, the German ones are more aimed towards educating viewers on the fact that Germany was a colonizing nation in the 19th and 20th century. ("Deutscher Kolonialismus") This, so it feels to me, may be due to fact that Germany neglected its colonial history for the longest time.

The thought of a colonizing/imperialistic state is not defining our national identity as much as that of England. Yet, public broadcasters in England and Germany are similarly trying to contribute to the *Geschichtskultur* by accentuating the colonial history of the nations.

3. Conclusion

My research on the English *Geschichtskultur* has helped me to get a better understanding of how England deals with their colonial past. My most striking finding was that the English national identity is considerably more defined by their imperialistic past than the German. The movement towards a more progressive and postcolonial national identity is met with criticism by conservative parties, but, as the *British Museum* exemplifies, even institutions of earlier imperialistic ideology may change towards a more reflected and postcolonial self-image. This indicates that the English national identity may similarly change in the future as well.

My intercultural studies have also provided me with a new research interest in the English *Geschichtskultur* and I will focus my graduate studies on multinational approaches to postcolonial identity. I very much hope to go abroad during my graduate studies in order to engage with English *Geschichtskultur* first hand and not only via my computer here in Germany.

(Word Count: 2436)

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I hereby declare that this assignment

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is my own work, that I have not used any sources or aids other than the ones listed, and that those parts of the assignment which are based on other works – including electronic media – in wording or content have definitely been marked as such and are accompanied by a bibliographical reference to the source.

Münster, den 01. Juli 2022
Place, date

Signature