Disentangling the History of Blood and Othering: A Relational Materialist Approach to Decolonising Medical Museums

WRoCAH funded Collaborative Doctoral Award between School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds, the Department of Sociology, University of York and Thackray Museum of Medicine

Lead Academic and Partner Organisation Supervisors

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Project summary

Blood occupies a special place in the history of medicine and racism, from racial blood grouping to the genetic screening of blood disorders. Focusing on Thackray Museum of Medicine’s collections around blood technologies, this project takes a relational materialist approach exploring the potential of medical objects in unsettling historically rooted racial imaginaries. Combining collections-based ethnographic research at Thackray, oral history gathering and co-creation work with local minoritised communities on memories and experiences of specific blood technologies, this project aims to open new pathways for decolonising medical museums.
PhD Project description

The history of blood technologies, from blood grouping and transfusion to blood stem cell transplants, points to the continuing power of racial imaginaries in treating and regulating blood-borne diseases and inherited blood disorders. While we have a rich body of literature interrogating medicine’s controversial history of blood-based racial othering, such as racial labeling of donated blood and targeted genetic screening of inherited blood disorders, insufficient attention has been given to the process of othering that takes place in representing the history of blood-related medical objects and practices in museums. Drawing on Thackray’s rich repertoire of collections on blood technologies, this exciting project aims: 1) to provide a systematic understanding of how Thackray’s collections on blood technologies are currently being interpreted, displayed and received by the staff and visitors and 2) to engage with local minoritised communities to incorporate their memories and experiences of blood technologies into the Museum’s space. Informed by the recent theoretical developments at the intersection of anthropology and museum studies (Gosden, Larson and Petch 2007; Law and Mol 1995; Maurstad 2012), this project takes an original approach of relational materialism to interrogate the role of museum objects in reconfiguring social relations and identities. Accordingly, the project develops an innovative method, tending to the relational processes through which museums engage memory work to highlight and address racial injustice and marginalisation. Focusing on Thackray’s collections on blood technologies, the studentship will explore key research questions such as:

- How do medical objects evoke racial imaginaries and identities in telling a controversial history of racial othering within medicine?
- How can we theorise the effects of othering or empowerment generated by medical objects on display?
- What are the possibilities and challenges of collaborating with underrepresented, minoritised communities to co-create museums’ programmes and multi-voiced interpretations?

The successful candidate will be offered a period of placement at Thackray to access collections and to conduct ethnographic research and interviews on-site. The student will be further supported to complete the training workshops offered by the Oral History Society, so that they can conduct oral history interviews with local minoritised communities engaged in blood technologies, with an eye towards developing a method of redesigning blood collections to represent their multiple, critical voices. While the student is expected to pursue the outlined research programme, they will have the opportunity to draw on their existing expertise and develop their own theoretical and empirical interest within the broader theme of blood and othering (e.g. race and
intersectional identities, including patients with blood-borne diseases and inherited blood disorders; the choice of focal blood technologies from transfusion to blood stem cell therapy).

The student will be registered at the University of Leeds, with a work base at the Thackray. The two academic supervisors, Dr Jieun Kim and Dr Sangeeta Chattoo, are medical anthropologists with research expertise respectively in blood banking in East Asia and racialised blood disorders in South Asia and the UK. They have extensive experience of conducting ethnographic research among minority ethnic groups, interrogating the relationship between social marginalisation and claims to health rights and citizenship. As members of the White Rose Vital Circulations Network (vitalcirculations.org), Dr Kim and Dr Chattoo will facilitate the student’s integration into the network, so they can benefit from the peer support for research development, dissemination and public engagement from the wider community of scholars in the White Rose universities.

Thackray’s co-supervisor Dr Ranmalie Jayawardana is the Community Co-Producer, overseeing Thackray’s community space and programme. She is experienced in collections-based co-creation, devising collaborative projects with community members on and off gallery. Her academic interests in colonialism, marginalisation and storytelling, and her expansive community network across Harehills ideally situates Dr Jayawardana to supervise the student and support their research across the museum. In addition to the supervisory team, the student will be further supported by a dedicated team at Thackray, who will aid in the student’s development of transferable heritage skills for interpretation, object handling, programme management, and community engagement. The supervisory team and the wider support network will offer unique opportunities for the student to contribute to the theoretical debates and methodological innovations in the study of racial othering, while also help bringing Thackray to the forefront of the move towards decolonising medical museums.

About Thackray Museum of Medicine

Containing over 50,000 objects, and some 23,000 written works covering all aspects of the history of medicine, Thackray is the UK’s largest independent museum specialising in medical collections. The museum has its origins in a small family-run chemist shop, opened in 1902 by Charles Thackray, who developed the business into a major medical supply firm, supplying drugs and medical instruments and equipment around the world. The business was finally sold to a multi-national company in 1990 and Charles’s grandson Paul, a company director, and major shareholder, established the museum to enable the wider public to learn more about the story of medicine. The museum’s location, immediately adjacent to St James’s Hospital within the ethnically diverse East Leeds inner-city community of Harehills, has inspired its mission of opening the world of medicine and healthcare to underrepresented communities. The appointment of the Community Co-Producer in 2021 speaks to Thackray’s renewed commitment to community engagement and co-creation with the ultimate aim of growing 'Medical Capital’, or the public’s capacity to understand and influence medical development for better healthcare.
Thackray has a strong history of working with academic partners to produce outcomes both in research and public engagement. Thackray’s collection of surgical and pharmaceutical equipment is historically significant, holding many rare and fascinating artefacts which offer multiple insights into the history of blood technology, which can be searched through its online catalogue: [http://collections.thackraymuseum.co.uk/home](http://collections.thackraymuseum.co.uk/home). The studentship extends and enriches the museum’s recent explorations of the theme of blood and stigma, from the collaborative initiatives with Dr Kim and Dr Chattoo (‘Bloodsuckers!!: Extraordinary History of Blood’, 23-31 Oct 2021 and ‘Blood and Othering in Medical History Workshop’, 12 Jan 2022) to the on-going ‘Periods: A Brief Jaunt Up North’ exhibition and workshops (8 Jan - 10 Apr 2022). On the whole, the studentship will make a timely contribution to revamp Thackray’s commitment to action-led and collaborative community research for greater equity, justice and diversity.

**Engagement, outreach, dissemination and impact initiatives**

Working closely with the three supervisors, the student will have rich opportunities to contribute to the Museum’s community co-production and public engagement activities. In particular, the research has high potential to lead to collaborative initiatives, such as:

- developing new and multi-voiced interpretations of blood-related collections to be inclusive and represent diversity;
- co-creating a programme of activities along with research participants, utilising Thackray’s community space, the Core;
- co-producing digital contents for Thackray’s new platform #ThackrayOnline and for Thackray’s blog;
- co-authoring a report to share with the UK Medical Collections Group and host a public online symposium with other member museums of the group to showcase best practice in decolonising medical collections.

The student will be further supported by the White Rose Vital Circulations Network to scale up the project’s impact, drawing on the extensive experience and expertise of the network’s members in engaging with policy makers, healthcare providers, patient advocacy groups, and the media, among others.
Financial support

Studentships for doctoral research are 40 months in duration for full-time study. Awards are subject to satisfactory academic progress. Awards must be taken up in October 2022; no deferrals are possible. Awards will comprise fees at Research Council rates and a maintenance grant (£15,609 in 2021/22). The grant pays the fees at the Home/UK rate; international students are, however, eligible to apply for this Studentship and the difference between the Home/UK and International fee will be met by the University of Leeds for a successful international applicant. Awards may be taken up on a part-time basis if a student is eligible to undertake part-time study; international applicants may be required to study full-time by the terms of their visa.

Qualifications

Strong applicants will have a good first degree in an appropriate subject (anthropology, sociology, Science and Technology Studies, medical humanities, museum and heritage studies, history or a related field), as well as a Master's degree (or be working towards one). We are also happy to consider applications from students with professional or personal experience relevant to the scope of the project. We particularly welcome applicants from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Requirements of the Studentship

WRoCAH students are required to undertake a bespoke training package and to complete a Researcher Employability Project of at least a month, a Knowledge Exchange Project, and to engage with Internationalisation.

All WRoCAH students must submit their thesis for examination with the funded period. This is a requirement of the Arts & Humanities Research Council, which provides the funding for WRoCAH, and is a condition of accepting a Studentship.

Before applying for any WRoCAH Studentship, please first ensure that you have read the WRoCAH webpages about the WRoCAH training programme and requirements, as well as other funding opportunities

http://wrocah.ac.uk/
How to apply

By 5pm Wednesday 9 March 2022, applicants are required to submit to WRoCAH an Expression of Interest, which should include:

1. A CV with details of academic qualifications

2. A covering letter comprising a two-page statement to convey your motivation and enthusiasm for the project, and to demonstrate your suitability for your intended PhD studies with the University and Project Partner.

   The covering letter should specifically highlight the following:

   ■ Your interest in the project and details on why you have chosen that University and Project Partner.

   ■ How you will apply your current skills, knowledge and experience to undertake a PhD and the approach you would take to develop the project.

   ■ How the project fits into your career plans and ambitions.

- 16 March 2022: decision on short-listing
   The short-list of candidates to be invited for an interview will be announced on Wednesday 16 March 2022. Short-listed candidates must complete a PhD programme application before interview. If you are short-listed for an interview you will be sent details of how to apply for a place at the University of Leeds. At that point you will need to submit the names and contact details of two referees, copies of transcripts of your academic qualifications and (if applicable) an IELTS certificate.

- w/c 11 April 2022: interviews

   Interviews will involve the academic supervisor, Project Partner supervisor and a member of the WRoCAH Studentships Committee. They will be conducted online.

For more information about this project contact

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