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Drawing Lessons from the Culture Wars in England's Black Country

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Abstract: Reflecting wider national and international political trends and discourses around heritage and identity, an analysis of the controversies regarding the symbolism of the popular and widely-adopted regional flag of the Black Country in the West Midlands of England offer a case study in how the tactics of culture war media and politics have been developed and honed to shut down pluralistic and alternative opinions and interpretations to those fostered by institutional and statutory actors, particularly that reinforce uncritical understandings of legacies of colonialism and racism. The region's experience also highlights how institutional approaches within a neoliberal cultural, economic, and funding landscape must be tempered to avoid inadvertently creating divisive and alienating impacts for the wider community's relationship to, and participation in, our shared public history and cultural life.

Keywords: Black Country; culture wars; legacies of slavery; post-industrial identity

The experiences over the past decade in the Black Country, a post-industrial region in the English Midlands to the west and northwest of Birmingham, offer us an informative window onto the theme of this special section of *International Public History*, conservative public history.

Reflecting wider national and international political trends and discourses around heritage and identity, an analysis of the controversies regarding the symbolism of its popular and widely-adopted regional flag offers a case study in how the tactics of culture-war media and politics have been developed and honed to shut down pluralistic and alternative opinions and interpretations to those fostered by institutional and statutory actors, particularly that reinforce uncritical understandings of legacies of colonialism and racism. The region's experience also highlights how institutional approaches within a neoliberal cultural, economic,

and funding landscape must be tempered to avoid inadvertently creating divisive and alienating impacts for the wider community's relationship to, and participation in, our shared public history and cultural life.

Black by day and red by night, it cannot be matched for vast and varied production, by any other place of equal radius on the surface of the earth.¹

The 1868 words of the US consul to Birmingham, Elihu Burritt, have become something akin to a foundational maxim or baptismal rite for the Black Country. Those first seven words, unnatural and unearthly, herald a world where the natural order of things is reversed – turned upside down, like the ground itself, into the service of some new, profane god. It was the first landscape anywhere in the world wholly expropriated and turned over to the system of extractive fossil capitalism. It started here, folks!²

The site of existing metalworking industries, workshops and pioneering experimentations of smelting with coke prior to the 18th century, the proximity of coal, limestone, and iron seams made the area ideal for iron production (Figure 1).

The population grew rapidly into the 19th century, with migrants attracted to the burgeoning industries driven by improvements in technology and transportation and access to Britain's colonial and global markets.

Its very name was coined, imposed, and perpetuated by literate Victorian outsiders in revulsion and shock at the catastrophic environmental and social impacts of the very industrialization their prosperity and power were built upon. Its “blackness” was elaborated in every sense: the black coal which it lay upon and generated its wealth and production, the shocking and unprecedented pollution of the air and ground, the poverty, as well as the lack of education and morality, of the region's working people, and the

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1 Elihu Burritt, *Walks in the Black Country and its Green Borderland* (London, 1868), <https://archive.org/details/walksinblackcou00burrgoog/page/n7/mode/2up>.

2 Matthew Stallard, “Environment and the Invention of the Black Country – the ‘Shock Landscape’ of Extractive Fossil Capitalism,” *The Blackcountryman* 54, no. 4 (2021), 17–22 <https://inventingtheblackcountry.org/environment-the-invention-of-the-black-country/>.

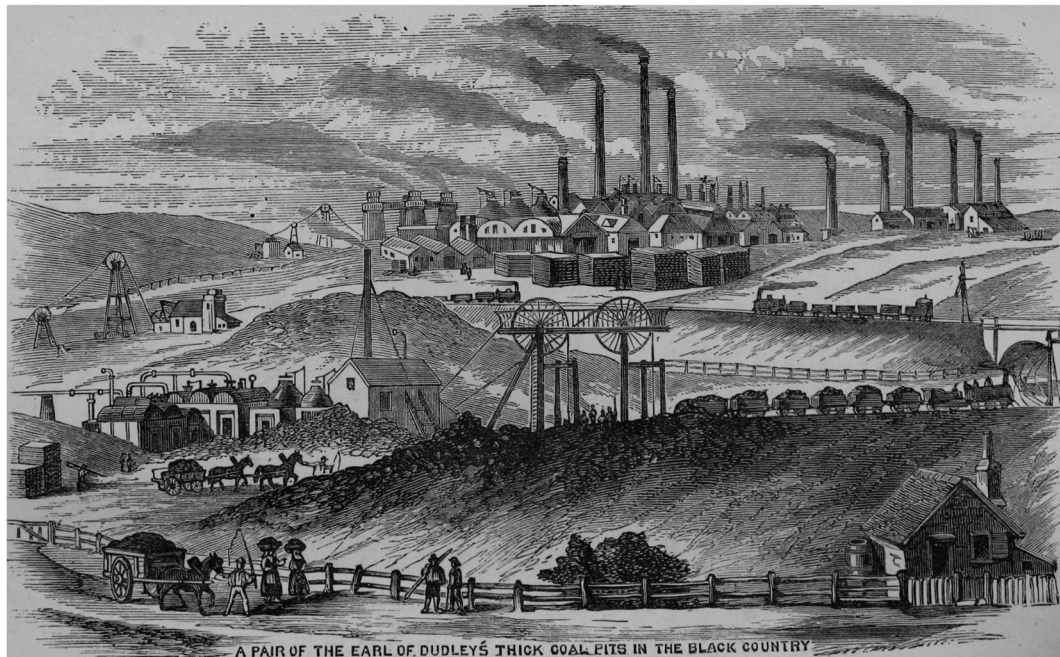


Figure 1: Coal Pits in the Black Country, image from Samuel Griffiths' *Guide to the Iron Trade of Great Britain: An Elaborate Review of the Iron & Coal Trades for Last Year* (1873). Credit: Wikimedia Commons, uploaded from <https://archive.org/details/griffithsguideto00grif/page/57/mode/1up?view=theater>.

construction of eugenicist ideas about class and race, as the supposedly “savage” inhabitants of the Black Country were equated with colonized and racialized peoples subjected to conquest and expropriation by British imperialism across the globe.

Those layers of condescension continued to build well into the twentieth century and beyond. Lonely Planet in 2009 decided to grab some headlines by unkindly naming Wolverhampton as the 5th worst city in the world to visit, while a 2015 UK Office of National Statistics survey named it as the least prosperous and satisfied place in Britain. The long-term impacts of deindustrialization, loss of jobs, and economic decline as well as environmental legacies of dereliction continue to impact the region's development and cultural life.³

Concerted efforts to preserve and commemorate this globally significant industrial and cultural history began in the 1960s. The flagship Black Country Living Museum was founded in 1975 to preserve objects, buildings, working machinery, and intangible cultural heritage, allowing the public to explore and commemorate our industrial past, to

raise the local profile, and capitalize economically on a growing demand for industrial heritage tourism.

Building upon decades of activism and organizing, in 2012 the Museum launched a competition to design a new flag for the region. Submissions were invited and initial entries were narrowed down by a judging panel to six finalists. This selection was then put forward to public vote with the winning design, inspired by Burritt's “black by day, red by night” maxim, being that submitted by 12-year-old schoolgirl Gracie Sheppard garnering 1,500 votes (Figure 2).

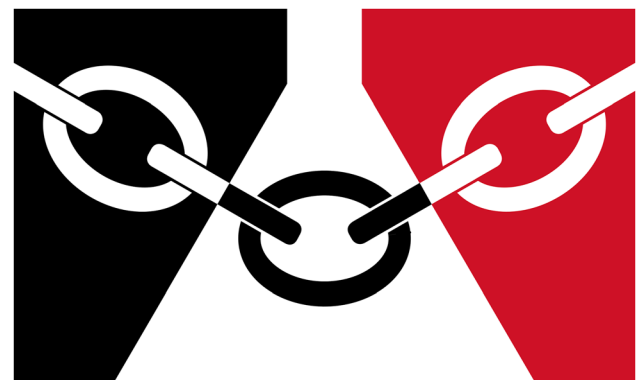


Figure 2: Flag of the Black Country, uploaded by Hogweard, November 29, 2012. Credit: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Black_Country_Flag.svg.

³ “Wolverhampton named fifth worst city in world,” BBC News, December 31, 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/west_midlands/8435823.stm; “Wolverhampton the least prosperous place in Britain, says study,” *The Independent*, October 27, 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/wolverhampton-the-least-prosperous-place-in-britain-says-study-a6709611.html>.

Dudley Council, followed by the three other regional local authorities, were quick to ratify and legitimize the flag, and the popular response and adoption of the motif has been hugely impressive. Its design and subsequent launch tapped into the deep pride in regional industrial

heritage and a growing desire for greater recognition (Figure 3). It quickly became the biggest-selling regional flag in the UK, and you can now see it all over: adorning people's homes, on car stickers and t-shirts, particularly prominent outside pubs, clubs, and local businesses of all



Figure 3: Black Country merchandise on sale at the Black Country Living Museum. Credit: Matthew Stallard.

kinds, at music festivals, football matches and other sporting occasions, and prominently on social media profiles and groups.⁴

The speed and scale of the flag's adoption very much seemed to outstrip even the most optimistic predictions of the competition's organizers and, to initial appearances, crystallize a positive and uniting branding in a way previous campaigns could never have hoped. Here was a fantastic example of how heritage and public history drawing on local identity can help to change narratives, renew damaged local pride, and spur regeneration. Well, not quite.

Fast forward to 2015, and historian and activist Patrick Vernon, MBE, a native of the region, wrote an article for *The Voice* newspaper ahead of the annual Black Country Day celebration, expressing his discomfort with the chains which take a prominent place in the flag. He argued strongly that the use of this imagery indicated a total lack of awareness of the region's links to slavery and the alienating and upsetting impact of its inclusion, particularly for those of Caribbean and African ancestry.⁵

This theme was picked up again in summer 2017 when Eleanor Smith, newly elected MP (Member of Parliament) for Wolverhampton South West, and the first Black Country MP from a Black background, also publicly raised the problematic nature of the flag's design. While Vernon and Smith have generated the most attention for the issue, their interventions as prominent Black figures from the region have voiced the views of large numbers of people from the Black Country from all backgrounds who have previously lacked either the platform or courage to make public statements on this subject.⁶

The reaction to these expressions of discomfort and dislocation were expressed in a conservative backlash and pile-on – our very own Black Country culture war. The biggest selling regional newspaper, the *Express & Star*, was quick to pick up on the gift the issue offered in terms of viral coverage to set up a highly polarizing public discourse. Capitalizing upon the insecurities and resentments that two centuries of condescension, and recent post-industrial abandonment, have generated, most press coverage

framed Vernon and Smith's comments as a direct attack on reinvigorated local pride and identity, helping fuel a massive Twitter and social media furor which built an overwhelmingly strong and vociferous reaction against the comments on both occasions.⁷

The most foregrounded commentator in press coverage was West Midlands United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) MEP (Member of the European Parliament) Bill Etheridge, a man with a history of xenophobic comments who wrote a book celebrating the history of golliwog dolls.⁸ With great toxicity, he claimed that: "At the end of this rainbow there is not a pot of gold, just another barmy MP who is more concerned with political correctness than the area she represents," and that, "[t]his is political correctness garbage. The chains represent the chains built for the Titanic and in that spirit, Mr Vernon's comments should be condemned to the bottom of the ocean."

Dudley South Conservative MP Mike Wood said of Eleanor Smith's comments that, "[w]hile we need to be sensitive, we should not be trying to re-write history... She is demonstrating a complete lack of understanding of the identity of the Black Country and its proud industrial heritage... for her to say that representing it on a flag that was designed by a child is absolutely nuts," From the Labour side as well, Dudley North MP Ian Austin said of Vernon: "This is ridiculous nonsense. The Black Country Festival brings everyone from our diverse communities together. If he had come to Stone Street Square this weekend, he would have seen people off all races and backgrounds enjoying the fun. It was an example of what makes our society something to celebrate,"⁹

7 Matthew Stallard, "The Black Country flag row shows Britain is still blind to its colonial past," *The Guardian*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/21/black-country-flag-britain-colonial-past-slavery>.

8 Golliwog dolls are a racist caricature drawing on minstrel-type imagery in the form of a rag doll, popularized in the United Kingdom during the twentieth century as a branding exercise and in literature. See "The Golliwog Caricature", *The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Imagery*, <https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/golliwog/homepage.htm> "I've been 'aïve': Controversial UKIP MEP Bill Etheridge speaks out in wake of 'Rivers of Blood' controversy," *Express & Star*, December 9, 2015, <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/local-news/2015/12/09/ive-been-naive-controversial-ukip-mep-bill-etheridge-speaks-out-in-wake-of-rivers-of-blood-controversy/>.

9 "Black Country flag is 'racist' and should be scrapped says Wolverhampton MP Eleanor Smith," *Express & Star*, July 15, 2017 - <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/politics/2017/07/15/black-country-flag-is-racist-and-should-be-scrapped-says-wolverhampton-mp-eleanor-smith/>; "Black Country flag 'offensive and insensitive' says leading racism campaigner," *Express & Star*, July 13, 2015, <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/2015/07/13/black-country-flag-offensive-and-insensitive-says-leading-racism-campaigner/>.

4 "Stourbridge schoolgirl's new Black Country flag flies high at museum," *Stourbridge News*, August 6, 2012, <https://www.stourbridgenews.co.uk/news/9854775.stourbridge-schoolgirls-new-black-country-flag-flies-high-at-museum/>.

5 "Fury Over Black Country 'Slave Chains' Flag," *The Voice*, July 10, 2015, <https://archive.voice-online.co.uk/article/fury-over-black-country-slave-chains-flag>.

6 "Black Country flag is 'racist' and should be scrapped says Wolverhampton MP Eleanor Smith," *Express & Star*, July 15, 2017, <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/politics/2017/07/15/black-country-flag-is-racist-and-should-be-scrapped-says-wolverhampton-mp-eleanor-smith/>.

There was yet another reprise of the controversy picked up by the local and national press in summer 2020, during a wave of protests across the UK as part of the global reaction to the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, United States, which included the prominent toppling by Bristol protestors of a statue of slave trader Edward Colston. The local Fire Service temporarily stopped flying the flag from their stations while they reviewed its design and connotations, following concerns raised by some staff members, which saw the flags reinstated after a few days.¹⁰

As local ire was whipped up during all three occasions when concerns were publicly raised, within the thousands upon thousands of votes in online polls, posts, shares, and comments were a sizeable minority of downright trolling, insulting, or abusive posts. One Wolverhampton man was eventually prosecuted for racist and threatening messages sent to Smith, initially sent in response to media reports about the flag controversy.¹¹

It was as if an entire new regional mini-industry grew up overnight on both occasions to target and shut down two prominent Black voices who dared to voice their wholly factual historical arguments and deeply considered and rational personal feelings and opinions (and those of thousands of others across the region) as “barmy,” “ridiculous,” and “nonsense.” To compound this offence and insensitivity, an eminent Black historian and the first Black secretary of the UK’s largest trade union were groundlessly accused by a host of clearly historically-illiterate politicians and commentators as not understanding the region’s working-class history.

The development of the discourse over ten years tells us much about how conservative public history can work. Some of the initial reactions from politicians and members of the public to Patrick Vernon’s comments in 2015 display a sense of bemusement and confusion. Much of the anger, fragility, and resistance was a reactive, knee-jerk response, indicative of deep structural issues. This meant that a large proportion of the public were unfamiliar with, indeed oblivious to, the deliberate or convenient amnesia to the historical facts about the industrial Black Country’s role in

underpinning and benefitting from colonialism and enslavement.

Seeing the reaction and the viral gold generated by their initial coverage of Vernon’s invention the *Express & Star*, in particular, doubled down into extended coverage for days following, encouraging eager politicians into making statements defending local pride and soliciting reaction from local residents blindsided by a challenging issue they had never fully considered. Smith’s intervention two years later, however, came in the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum, during which UKIP leader Nigel Farage had turned up to campaign in Dudley wearing a Black Country flag lapel badge, and the indecisive 2017 general election.¹²

As an archetypal example of what the national media and political establishment might condescendingly describe as a “red wall,” “left-behind” region in need of “levelling-up,” the strongly Brexit-voting Black Country found itself at the forefront of a wider political realignment based around values, education, and identity rather than class, where the cultural battle lines pitching pluralistic and open definitions of identity versus more narrow and nationalistic conceptions were emerging more clearly.

The stakes and profile of the culture war were also raised higher in 2017 as the same concerns were now being raised by a sitting local MP and were voiced in her maiden speech in the House of Commons, giving heightened significance and potential impact to the challenge to the strong allegiances developed to the motif.¹³

In this new context, we can see how the playbook honed in the 2015s row was immediately rolled out with an online vote quickly set up that eventually gathered 40,000 responses, 95 % of whom disagreed that the flag was “racist.” Taking inspiration from the 2015 row’s virality, a flurry of new articles and content were created on a daily basis and driven through social media as the perfect clickbait taglines for a media outlet impacted considerably over the previous decade and a half by the growth of the internet and the decline in demand and commercial support for local news, driving clicks, views, eyeballs, and, most importantly, advertising income. In December 2017, the flag row was announced as the paper’s most popular story of the year.¹⁴

¹⁰ “Official Black Country flag that was designed by a 12-year-old schoolgirl is BANNED by fire chiefs for fears it is linked to slavery,” *Daily Mail*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8529281/Black-Country-flag-BANNED-fire-service-fears-linked-slavery.html>. The statue of Edward Colston, a slave trader, was toppled by activists in Bristol, UK on 7 June 2020.

¹¹ “Man given suspended sentence over racist emails to MPs,” *The Guardian*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jun/04/pensioner-given-suspended-sentence-over-racist-emails-to-mps>; “Pensioner sent vile threats and sick abuse to politicians”, *Express & Star*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/crime/2018/06/04/pensioner-sent-vile-threats-and-sick-abuse-to-politicians/>.

¹² Nigel Farage says UKIP will play a vital role if Britain votes leave,” *Express & Star*, May 25, 2016, <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/local-news/2016/05/25/brexit-referendum-nigel-farage-says-ukip-will-play-a-vital-role-if-britain-votes-leave/>.

¹³ Stallard, “Black Country flag row,” *The Guardian*.

¹⁴ “From the Black Country flag row to a gangster’s groin gun shot: 2017’s most read stories,” *Express & Star*, December 25, 2017, <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/2017/12/25/from-the-black-country-flag-row-to-a-gangsters-groin-gun-shot-2017s-most-read-stories/>.

While the first chapter in the row might (over-generously) be construed as a bolt from the blue in terms of the lack of preparedness and awareness of the region's institutions, politicians, and citizens for hearing uncomfortable truths about their history, perhaps for the first time; the second time around, neither the newspaper, politicians, museum, or population could claim these historic facts were news to them. What we saw instead was a doubling-down on white fragility and the feelings of unfairness and unjustifiable attack and a weaponizing of the issue for media attention and political purposes in the post-Brexit climate of polarization.

The controversy-driven commercial imperative of stoking and platforming of conservative public history views pushed the reactions of many politicians further into a performance of ethnocentric and local-pride-defending virtue signaling, with the considerable pro-Brexit referendum majority across the region indicating that much of the Black Country was now very much up for grabs and culture war identity politics feeling like a potential vote winner.

1 Drawing Lessons

In the midst of the fallout of the wider controversy, a look back at the process of creating the flag in the first place can also help us to draw lessons for the public history and heritage sectors in how to avoid future division and inform future work in defining positive and pluralistic rallying points and shared ground around local identity and championing of local tradition, culture, and heritage.

The original competition was devised as a branding exercise by the Black Country Living Museum and local politicians as part of a wider project to cultivate a tourism hub and its attendant benefits for the wider local economy, as well as encouraging a positive rallying point for local enterprise and vital investment in much needed jobs and infrastructure. One might argue that the manipulation of febrile regional identity into the service of a neoliberal and financialized marketplace for investment and the choice of a flag competition and the attendant potential for leaning towards ethnocentric impulses which that potentially generates was, in itself, an exercise in conservative public history.¹⁵

¹⁵ "Flying the flag for the Black Country," *Express & Star*, March 17, 2008, <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/2008/03/17/flying-the-flag-for-black-country/>; "Black Country Day 2014: There's so much for us to be proud about," *Express & Star*, January 21, 2014, <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/2014/01/21/black-country-day-2014-theres-so-much-for-us-to-be-proud-about/>.

Local branding exercises are an internationally prevalent competitive practice that the region is not alone in pursuing and attempting to compete for investment and attention in. Vexillologists have led a concerted attempt to set up flag design competitions for towns, cities, and counties across the UK which generate similar concerns about who and what is represented and what democratic processes of ratification and scope for future alteration have been considered.¹⁶

Trying to be fair to the sponsors and organizers of the original competition, we perhaps should ascribe some of the deep structural and institutional blind spots to naivete rather than projecting bad faith motivations. 1,500 votes were cast, both online and in-person, for the winning flag design. The subsequent huge success of the flag was probably beyond the wildest dreams of the organizers. In 2013 Dudley Council decided to start flying the flag on public buildings and the other three local authorities to some extent ratified the flag, but the way its 'official' adoption has grown on an ad hoc basis means there was never a concerted plan about gaining universal consent.

Seemingly, a single institution in a huge region overreached themselves with their aspirations in this regard. 1,500 votes sounds like a decent number of votes for a museum's new logo competition, but in choosing a flag for a region of over 1.1 million people, it was actually less than 0.14 % of the population. The vast majority of people in the region had no idea the competition was happening. The electorate essentially selected itself based on factors such as an existing interest in 'traditional' local heritage, visiting the museum during the voting period, or reading or watching a news story and being interested enough to find out more or vote. Without any demographic data on the voting constituency, I think it is fair to say that the actual voting electorate was probably not entirely representative of the region.

We have not had a region-wide discussion and conversation, in all localities and with people from all of the diverse groups that make up the Black Country, about what the area's identity and heritage means to them. The competition essentially took place without widespread and ongoing community participation, within a small network of interested parties. If the networks and legacies of the great foundational work which took place across the region to mark the 2007 Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade had had the capacity to be preserved and built upon, and a proper coming to terms with and open discourse about

¹⁶ Matthew Stallard, "Representing Everyone? What Can We Learn From the Black Country's Divisive Flag-Making Experience?," *Flagmaster*, Issue 164 (Summer, 2022), <https://inventingtheblackcountry.org/representing-everyone/>.

these difficult aspects of our shared past had been had before any idea of a competition were mooted, I am certain that we would never have ended up in this position.¹⁷

With blinkered thinking from the organizing institution about whose voices and representation mattered, we ended up with a situation, exacerbated a hundredfold by the press reaction, where it would appear to many that this group of people get to decide what the history and identity of the region are – if you are not part of that group, and if you disagree with what they think, you do not actually have a say. Worse than that, you will be called “barmy” and “ridiculous” and have your right to assert your voice undermined.

The long-term damage done here through the failure of the organizers to recognize their own limited range of experiences, perspectives, and constituency of supporters and audience has been considerable. It is now much, much harder to open up conversations about our region's deep and inseparable ties to slavery and colonialism than it otherwise would have been. The repeated and concerted efforts to stamp down and intimidate alternative viewpoints and relationships to regional heritage and platforming and emboldening of highly conservative and ethnonationalist opinions has built up resistance and trepidation for many people on either side of the debate to even engage with discussions.

We are stuck with a flag that alienates a considerable proportion of the population from regional history and heritage and there has been incalculable upset and dislocation caused for thousands of proud local Black Country people, particularly (but by no means only) from Black backgrounds, who have had to see their experiences and viewpoints denied and derided.

Heritage, identity, and local and regional pride are essential and important facets of our shared cultural life as citizens and therefore are not forces to be played with and taken lightly by institutions, curators, academics, or politicians. They are not simply a neat branding exercise to boost tourism, and they are not a canvas for individuals or small interest groups to play with for their own political ends.

This by no means lets off the right-wing and populist politicians and journalists who will jump on any clickbait

culture war issue to boost their own agendas in the slightest. If we accept, however, that there is a strong potential for the opportunist, toxic, divisive, or racist back-lashing, re-tooling, or manipulation of our work, we in the public history and heritage sphere need to be very careful about avoiding the arrogance and assumption that we are the experts, that we know everything, and that we can assert our own version of local identity and pride because of that.

The cultural and heritage model around us pushes us towards the big capital investment project, the time-limited funding for an engagement or community project, the creation of a new exhibit or gallery which is then fixed in aspic until the long-awaited next funding round, or the attention-grabbing statue, flag, or public intervention. This kind of blinkered, short-term approach to public engagement and branding has turned out to be irresponsible and poorly considered, particularly in the way it eschews the hard research, listening, and engagement work to build a proper regional heritage context and meaningful relationships with the institution that everyone can see themselves reflected in and that are a part of a constant project of renewal and refresh.

We should endeavor to eschew the structural and institutional impulse towards production – the same impulse which led to the utter despoliation of the Black Country's landscape through extractive fossil capitalism, whose myriad legacies we are still struggling to understand and repair – and lean, wherever possible, towards care and maintenance by investing as much as possible in being reliably, steadily present at the service of the community, in as broad a sense as we can.

Only then can we hope to patiently build the context layer-by-layer through presenting our research, objects, and histories in accessible and varied ways that people can interpret, reflect on, and react to in their own ways, slowly and cumulatively, to generate those public interventions, exhibits, strategies, and identities collaboratively and collectively through open and inclusive conversation.

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¹⁷ For a record of 2007 Bicentenary projects across the UK see the Anti Slavery Usable Past archive, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/>; DI Callahan, “The Black Presence in the West Midlands, 1650–1918,” *Midland History* 36, no. 2 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1179/004772911X13074595848997>; John Oldfield and Mary Wills, “Remembering 1807: Lessons from the Archives,” *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 90 (Autumn 2020), <https://academic.oup.com/hwj/article/doi/10.1093/hwj/dbaa016/5924562>.