

# THE (RE)PRODUCTION OF NEW FORMS OF NATIONALISMS IN MUSEUMS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE ROYAL ONTARIO AND THE GRAND EGYPTIAN MUSEUMS

UMBRIN BUKAN, PHD CANDIDATE IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT

*Umbrin Bukan (she/her) is a PhD candidate in Social and Political Thought at York University. She is a Graduate Associate with the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies. Her research areas are in comparative politics and international relations, focusing on nationalism and museums, and nation building.*

## **Tell us about your field and your professional experiences before starting your current studies.**

I completed both my undergraduate and master's degrees at York University. My BA was in the department of Politics with a focus on global politics and my MA was in the Social and Political Thought programme. For my MA thesis, titled "A Marxist Critique of Proudhon," I traced the development and relationship of Karl Marx and Pierre Joseph Proudhon's lines of socialist thought by examining their economic and philosophical polemics.

## **Tell us about your dissertation work and how it relates to the study of Canada.**

My dissertation examines the relations between nationalism and public museums in the 21st century. It examines the politics in and of museums, especially contemporary expressions of the politics of identity and nation building under the current neoliberal order. Through a comparative analysis of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and the Grand Egyptian Museum in Giza, it aims to identify new forms of nationalism that are emerging in museums and get a better understanding of the role of the museum in the nation-building project.

My research contributes to the study of Canada in that it attempts to understand the ways in which nationalism is expressed and produced in Canada, a postcolonial settler nation state that identifies as multicultural. Generally,

national museums, such as the Canadian Museum of History or the Canadian War Museum, are tasked with the responsibility of telling the public and the world about the nation's history and story. By examining the Royal Ontario Museum, an encyclopedic museum that has collections of and tells the story of the world rather than any one nation, I aim to get a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which Canadian national identity are produced and reproduced in cultural institutions under the aegis of neoliberalism.

## **How did you come to choose this topic? What inspired you to do this work?**

My research emerged from my interest in the study of nationalism and from my passion and interest in museums. I became interested in nationalism as an undergraduate student. The more I learned, I came to understand how it is a central force in contemporary politics and how it shapes and orders the modern world. Nationalism gives people a shared sense of belonging and identity and is, or can be, simultaneously intolerant and discriminating. It liberates and it suppresses, and it is a prevalent phenomenon insofar as it can be located in almost every global event or relationship. One would be hard pressed to try and understand the contemporary world and its politics without engaging with nationalism.

Meanwhile, museums were, when possible, one of my favourite places to visit growing up. They were never ending sacred spaces of plundered

objects, beauty, captured history, and constructed truths that were substantiated through the visible and the tangible. They allowed you to imagine what once was and what it now means. Museums play an important role in societies, not just as places of learning, but as places of enjoyment. They are generally perceived as holders of truth and history. They stand resolutely in the centres of cities, are part of the surrounding community; they teach, inspire, and are a point of discovery for many and will continue to be for generations to come.

My doctoral research came together from these two interests. I wanted to understand and learn more about the relationships between the two.

I feel it is an especially interesting time to be doing this research. Over the last decade there has been increased interest in the study of both nationalism and museums. Museums, in particular, are now witnessing a wave of change across Canada. They are increasingly being challenged to meet the needs of the current politically charged environment and pressured to represent histories and identities that go beyond nationally constructed narratives. It is an interesting time to see how this social and political rearrangement will unfold in museums.

### **Tell us what you enjoy the most about the work you do.**

One of the things I enjoy the most about my research is that I get to visit museums! Along with this I am very much enjoying the process of speaking with the people who work there and getting to know what their thoughts and opinions are about museum holdings, different galleries and exhibitions, and museum practices and processes in general. In what can be a very solitary journey, it is nice meeting people and speaking with them about their experiences and opinions and getting to know more about what it is like to be a part of the museum.

### **Tell us about the challenges that you as a researcher are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.**

One of the biggest challenges I have experienced in my research, aside from the pandemic, has to do with one of my sites being under construction. The Grand Egyptian Museum is still being built and is yet to be fully opened to the public. Apart from making it challenging to visit the museum regularly, this has made it logistically somewhat difficult to be able to get in touch with museum officials and administration for my research purposes.

### **What are 3-5 main takeaways you want others to come away with?**

1. Museums are not passive institutions that conserve, collect, display, and study objects. Rather, museums are institutions that produce and reproduce national narratives and dominant ideologies.
2. Similarly, the objects in museums are more than just objects. They have market value, which goes beyond their cultural and artistic values. They are also spaces of contestation. The holding onto of certain objects and artifacts by western museums under the premises of promoting cosmopolitan worldviews, research, and preservation, for example, are continuing forms of colonial relations of power and cultural appropriation. While for some peoples, the objects represent and are a part of their cultural heritage and beliefs, for others, notably western colonial nation states, they continue to represent prestige and power.
3. Modern western museums are intrinsically tied to and deeply entangled with the colonial process. In this regard, I hope readers will also consider the question of how museums can truly be decolonized. While several western museums are making moves towards

reimagining museums and beginning to confront their colonial legacies, what is really changing? Are master narratives truly being disassembled and ideologies deconstructed? Will museums really become inclusive truth tellers? Or are these changes simply concessional moves made to appease present political demands?

### **What advice/lessons/tips do you have for those starting their academic journey?**

I believe it is important to have a supervisor who you relate to well both academically and on a personal level. Fortunately, I have an incredible supervisor, Professor Anna M. Agathangelou, who not only has the expertise to guide and support my research but who has provided the mentorship and support that is needed throughout the PhD process. I think it is important to have a supervisor who knows the area you will be researching well, as their advice and constructive criticism allows your project to develop and mature.

The other important lesson that I can think of, is to know that while doing a PhD is an incredibly rewarding and fulfilling journey, it is also one that is long and can at times be an isolating and stressful one. It is important to try and remember not to lose sight of the things outside of academia that are important to you and make you whole, such as family, friends, your health, and other social interests. Know that life happens alongside your studies, and try and be gracious to yourself.

### **What are the next steps in your research?**

Apart from writing my dissertation, I am currently working on a book chapter that is expected to be published by next year, emerging from the dialogue at the Reconciling Multiculturalism in Today's Canada symposium held at the University of Alberta in 2021, around the fiftieth anniversary of Canada's

multiculturalism policy. In it, I examine the representation of Canadian multiculturalism in the Royal Ontario Museum.

Moving forward, after completing my PhD I hope to pursue a postdoctoral fellowship researching the representations of refugees, new immigrants, and Canadian citizenship in Canadian national museums.

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Read Umbrin's latest publication in *The Conversation* about decolonizing museums: "To accurately portray histories, museums need to do more than 'reimagine' galleries."

<https://theconversation.com/to-accurately-portray-histories-museums-need-to-do-more-than-reimagine-galleries-189109>