

Institution: University of Exeter		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 28 History		
Title of case study: Influencing heritage management policy and practice, enabling community agency, and delivering new cultural products through Indigenising community engagement		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012-present		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Professor Bryony Onciul	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Associate Professor of Museology and Heritage Studies	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2012-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015-present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>There is widespread recognition of the need to decolonise collections and to adopt community engagement approaches within the heritage sector to better represent Indigenous communities. These efforts, however, can overlook the subtleties of power dynamics and unintentionally reproduce structural inequalities. Onciul's original 'engagement zone' model, based on her research with Indigenous communities and heritage professionals, created an approach to Indigenisation through rich community engagement and the building of reciprocal relationships. It has been widely adopted and adapted in two main areas of Onciul's research – heritage in post-colonial contexts, and heritage in the context of climate change – resulting in the following impacts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amplifying community agency and ownership of heritage in the UK and Kiribati. • Influencing the practices and policies of heritage management organisations, professionals and funders with audiences of over 2M in the UK, Germany, Greece and Australia. • Co-creation of new cultural products, including films and art exhibitions reaching at least 80,000 people that give legacy to this shift in thinking and approach. 		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Onciul's 'engagement zone' is an original model of Indigenous engagement in the heritage context, which emphasises spaces that facilitate moving beyond colonial power relations and enable the Indigenisation of community engagement processes [3.1; 3.2]. The model was based on Onciul's research with Blackfoot First Nations Confederacy and heritage professionals in Alberta, Canada. This research, consolidated in her 2015 monograph [3.1], explored Indigenous communities' participation and self-representation in museums and other heritage sites, and explored why, despite extensive reform and changes in policy and practice, relationships with museums continued to be problematic and resulted in unintended negative consequences. Onciul found that communities – in particular those whose heritage had been oppressed by colonial rule – wanted acknowledgement of agency, right to self-rule, corrections to official historical records, and responsibility and action from the nations and organisations that contributed to these issues. The engagement zone model emphasises the importance of recognising Indigenous expertise, for example by incorporating Indigenous ontology and epistemology, and using protocols such as reciprocity, long-term meaningful and respectful working relations, and non-extractive approaches to research that honour voice and agency. The model considers the institutionalisation of engagement, and focuses on ways to enable representation to be accurate and respectful of cultural protocols while being accessible to different audiences by layering interpretations.</p> <p>Onciul extended the methodology of engagement zones to other research contexts, such as heritage in times of accelerated climate change. In 2015-16, at the invitation of the National Trust coast and marine adviser, she conducted a case study on Durgan, Cornwall, a National Trust village (17 properties) at risk of inundation and increased storm impacts as a</p>		

result of climate change. The research included interviews with local communities whose homes and way of life are at risk of loss and involved a collaboration with a local artist to assist local community expression and effective dialogue with heritage professionals. This work was supported by an AHRC grant and marked the beginning of a collaboration with researcher and film-maker Sara Penrhyn Jones (Bath Spa) and museologist Anna Woodham (King's College London) [3.3]. This collaboration was then taken further afield and supported by two further AHRC grants (November 2016-April 2018), which led Onciul to research the post-colonial setting of Kiribati, a low-lying Pacific nation at risk of rising sea levels. There, she worked with the environmental NGO KiriCAN to raise awareness among Indigenous communities and international policymakers of the human impacts of climate change, and to create space for local communities to voice their own meanings of heritage. The latter also included reconnecting the Kiribati people with artefacts in UK collections and repatriating their historical knowledge, images and records, the absence of which, Onciul found, presented practical, spiritual and psychological obstacles to mounting an effective response to climate change. She and her collaborators practised reciprocity by inviting a Kiribati heritage expert, community member and artist, Natan Itonga, to visit six UK museum collections in 2017 [3.3; 3.4].

The three AHRC projects, although conducted in two remote localities, similarly highlighted that it was heritage and historical identity, in addition to livelihood and lifestyle, that were threatened by environmental challenges (from loss of listed buildings to wholesale loss of land). In both places, Onciul's research identified a mismatch between policy intentions and ground-level needs and practice, with these dynamics impacting wellbeing and presenting barriers to action and healing – these findings echoing her earlier insights from Canada. Thus, the research underlined the necessity for meaningful engagement between local communities and heritage professionals and policymakers, to define the meanings and value of heritage. Utilising her reciprocal, non-extractive community engagement methodology, Onciul and her collaborators worked with stakeholders to create outputs that introduced community voices and meanings into heritage conservation, interpretation strategies and policies [3.3; 3.4].

3. References to the research

- 3.1 B. Onciul. 2015. *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonising Engagement*. New York: Routledge. Submitted to REF2021.
- 3.2 B. Onciul. 2013. 'Community Engagement, Curatorial Practice, and Museum Ethos in Alberta, Canada.' *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration* edited by V. Golding and W. Modest. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp.79-97. DOI [10.5040/9781474215299](https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474215299)
- 3.3 S. Penrhyn Jones, A. Woodham, B. Onciul, K. Rigby. 2016 'Troubled Waters' <https://vimeo.com/130445697> (Shortlisted for an AHRC award for Research in Film in 2016) with footage and ideas from 'Troubled Waters' featuring in S. Penrhyn Jones. *Timeline* (2017). [29.57min online film]. <https://vimeo.com/172669824> (which won the 2017 BAFTSS Best Practice Research Award).
- 3.4 A. Woodham, S. Penrhyn Jones, B.A. Onciul, M. Gordon-Clark (2018). 'Enduring Connections, Heritage, Sustainable Development and Climate Change in Kiribati.' *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 31, 199-211. Available on request.

4. Details of the impact

Onciul's reciprocal community 'engagement zone' methodology has had an impact on both local and Indigenous communities and on heritage organisations, professionals and artists working with communities with threatened heritage. It has facilitated better understanding, representation and communication of meanings of heritage, as well as the communities' needs in terms of its preservation. Local communities and heritage organisations in the UK, Kiribati, Greece, Germany and elsewhere have used her model to create effective reciprocal

relationships, setting an example of best practice that is informing the agenda for funding bodies. In the process, her research agenda also produced award-winning cultural artefacts.

Enabling community agency and ownership of heritage

In her work with the National Trust and the residents of Durgan, Cornwall, Onciul used her engagement zone model to identify and address issues of communication, trust and competing priorities. Whereas the NT wanted to implement a Coastal Adaptation Strategy to combat climate change, residents first needed their immediate concerns to be heard and addressed. Onciul brought the groups into productive dialogue, culminating in a collaborative art installation which articulated local concerns and gave residents greater agency. This has produced a “step change” in how staff approach community involvement in the strategy.

“It has just been quite transformational ... we are engaging more deeply with all sorts of people on a much more long-term basis.” – Durgan site manager [5.1]

In Kiribati, Onciul’s approach enabled her to identify a similar mismatch between policy actors’ agenda and local concerns. Communities felt unable to act on long-term issues until more immediate environmental concerns were tackled, such as the dangers posed by rubbish and pollution, as pointedly expressed by one community member: “We will drown in rubbish before we drown in water.” The project funded a community initiative to provide educational workshops and buy two trucks to remove rubbish that was polluting the water supply and presenting a danger to children in three villages (Nanikai pop. 803; Banan pop. 1,170; Ambo pop. 1,688) on the Island of Tarawa (pop. 40,000). In order to empower the community, KiriCAN helped establish a new waste collection strategy utilising these trucks:

“When we talk about waste [the villages] really want to do something to solve it ... The project with the trucks will give them hope.” [5.2]

The reciprocity of the relationship continued through Natan Itonga’s visit to UK museum collections. This enabled the introduction of Indigenous knowledge and expertise, leading to reinterpretation of collections and enhancement of records in six UK museums: the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter (RAMM); the Manchester Museum; the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford; the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology in Cambridge; the Horniman Museum in London; and the British Museum [5.3; 5.4]. It also allowed these institutions to begin a deeper process of decolonisation. The curator at Pitt Rivers praised Onciul’s approach for building “strong relationships and networks” and starting to heal “problematic pasts inherent in the collections/collecting practices”. The Manchester Museum gained a greater appreciation of how it could work with the Kiribati community to safeguard its heritage, with items “held in trust” in the face of climate change risks to Kiribati. [5.4]

“As a result of the Kiribati project, further research has led to an improved understanding of the historic collection held by the museum. This material culture is additionally being examined in terms of the effects of climate change.” – RAMM curator [5.4]

Onciul has also ensured the long-term legacy of this exchange through creating a catalogue documenting all major Kiribati collections in the UK, which was gifted to the museum in Kiribati and managed by Itonga to support community members conducting research and repatriation [5.2; 5.5]. The visit produced an opportunity for Itonga to establish a spiritual connection with Kiribati artefacts, “a kind of attaching yourself to your... original identity”. He highlighted the mutual “positive learning” resulting from the project and noted his intention to communicate to the ministers of internal affairs and education in Kiribati the importance of being able “to refer back to these ... collections and use them as part of the resources” [5.5].

Influencing heritage practice and policy

Onciul's research in Indigenous heritage and environmental change in Kiribati is informing UK funding bodies' and policymakers' approach to Indigenisation and decolonisation of heritage. Her Enduring Connections project has been cited as an example of best practice: it was part of an exhibition displayed in UK Parliament in February 2019 and the project report [5.2] is being used by AHRC/UKRI to inform UK research and funding approaches to Indigenous-focused research so that they are non-extractive, maintain relations and are suitably funded. Likewise, her research in Durgan was showcased as an example of best practice in the 2017 edition of the National Trust's *Views* magazine (readership of 4 million+). More recently, Exeter City Council invited Onciul as an expert witness to inform the 'Review of General Buller Statue Task and Finish Group' on decolonising Exeter in July 2020. Council director Jon-Paul Hedge said her "expertise really assisted – without it I think we would still be debating now" [5.6].

In the international museum sector, Onciul's methodology has been applied to efforts to Indigenise ethnographic collections. She gave a keynote at the first LindenLabs (November 2019) for the Linden-Museum (one of the largest Ethnographic Museums in Europe) in Stuttgart, Germany, which acknowledged her work as "important inspirations" for thinking and practice in its collaborative projects with Indigenous communities, principally the Kayan (pop. 20,000) and Kayaw communities (pop. 21,000) in Myanmar. A consultant curator at Manchester Museum (~500,000 annual visitors) recognised Onciul's methodology as "instrumental to the way we are developing our thinking" in its approach to working with Tibetan communities. The curator of ethnography at RAMM (~250,000 annual visitors) said the method provided "other ways of thinking in regards to fair collaboration" with Blackfoot communities and is helping the museum to "renegotiate its approach to power sharing" [5.7]. The senior curator of the Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa (national museum ~1.55 million annual visitors) cited Onciul's 2015 monograph [3.1] as informing his learning on "how we can make museums more useful spaces for indigenous people" [5.7].

The engagement zone model has also been adapted by international heritage institutions to inform work with underrepresented and disempowered groups more widely, with the focus on creating space for their accurate (self-)representation. Onciul gave a keynote for HERITAGE in Elefsina, Greece (6-7th Dec 2019), where her approach was applied to citizens' groups and public participation in Greek museums. In Australia, the model was hailed for offering "a very useful theory" for the Queering the Museum project (2017-20), which brings LGBTQ communities into dialogue with heritage organisations [5.7].

Building on her more recent work on heritage in the context of climate change, Onciul and her collaborators used the model to create a toolkit that was disseminated at the workshop 'We Need to Talk about Climate Change', held at the Manchester Museum in 2017, and which included participants from the Science Museum, Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, Historic Scotland and Historic England. Participants appreciated "having a forum to think about climate change with passionate and knowledgeable professionals", noting that they would be "looking at museum collections in a different way" and were "genuinely much more excited about the possibility for talking about climate change and heritage" [5.8].

Co-creating new cultural products

Onciul's AHRC projects have led to the co-creation of films and art installations with local communities. Her research in Kiribati contributed directly to two documentary films directed by Penrhyn Jones. *Troubled Waters* (2016) was shortlisted for an AHRC award for Research in Film and shown at the UN Climate Change Conference in 2016, while ideas and footage relating to Onciul's work in Kiribati were also used in Penrhyn Jones' subsequent film *Timeline* (2017), which was awarded a Best Practice Research Award by the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies and was screened at several major climate change and heritage conferences in 2016/17, including the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg (220,000+ annual visitors) [5.9].

In Cornwall, community agency was positioned at the heart of cultural production. There, Onciul co-commissioned an artist to create the Boat Shed Gallery sculpture. Promoted as “Cornwall’s smallest art gallery”, this displayed artworks by villagers, NT staff and members of the Fox family who had donated the land now at risk. The artworks responded to the theme of environmental change and brought the different perspectives into dialogue in a positive, reliance-building way. This was amplified by the success of the exhibition as a tourist attraction: it received ~80,000 visitors between July 2017 and July 2018, bringing the local discussion on heritage and the environment to a much wider audience. Visitor comments showed recognition of the significance of this: “Little gallery – big impact.” [5.10]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1 Recordings from Glendurgan Heritage and Climate Change Symposium (25/05/2016): Jon O’Donoghue, NT Site Manager (transcript and audio).
- 5.2 S. Penrhyn Jones, B. Onciul, A. Woodham, with KiriCAN, N. Itonga, R. Gott, and M. Gordon-Clark, ‘Indigenous Engagement Case Study: Forging Enduring Connections in Kiribati’ AHRC Report (2018); Kiribati Climate Action Network Facebook post (05/12/2018).
- 5.3 Changes to collection records: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (screenshots); British Museum (before/after screenshots).
- 5.4 Curator testimonies relating to Natan Itonga’s visit (e-mails): Henry McGhie, Curator, Manchester Museum (17/01/2018); Ali Clark, Research Associate, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (07/02/2018); Kayte McSweeney, Community Partnerships Manager, British Museum (13/02/2018); Nicholas Crowe, Assistant Curator, Pitt Rivers Museum (22/10/2018); Tony Eccles, Curator of Ethnography, RAMM (28/03/2019).
- 5.5 Catalogue of the UK collections containing i-Kiribati heritage (2017); interview with Natan Itonga (transcript, 05/11/2017).
- 5.6 Enduring Connections display in UK Parliament (photographs, 08-26/02/2019); GCRF Indigenous Engagement programme online news post (screenshot, 29/05/20); [email from AHRC Head of International Development and Area Studies]; National Trust *Views* magazine article (Autumn, 2017); email from Jon-Paul Hedge, Director of Exeter City Council (28/07/2020).
- 5.7 Curator testimonies relating to Onciul’s research: Georg Noack, Senior Curator at Linden-Museum Stuttgart (letter, 10/12/19); Emma Martin, Consultant Curator, Manchester Museum (emails, 05/05/2018, 13/05/2018); statement from Tony Eccles, Curator of Ethnography, RAMM (10/04/19); online interview with Sean Mallon, Senior Curator Pacific Cultures, Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa, on the museum’s website (screenshot, 2018); Aris Anagnostopoulos, organiser *1st International Hub: Fostering Communities* conference (emails, 16/09/2019, 07/12/2019); Craig Middleton, Curator, History Trust of South Australia (email, 20/01/2019).
- 5.8 Workshop facilitation pack and summary from ‘We need to talk about Climate Change’ workshop, Manchester Museum (07/04/17).
- 5.9 AHRC Research in Film Shortlist (2016); *Troubled Waters* screenings, AHRC Heritage website (screenshot); Best Practice Research Award 2017, British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies website (screenshot); Timeline screenings, Screenworks website (screenshots).
- 5.10 Boat Shed Gallery (photos); emails from Tamsin Henneh, NT Senior Visitor Experience Officer (13/12/17, 28/03/2019).