

Creating typecasts: exhibiting eugenic ideas from the past today

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(Received 15 March 2012; final version received 5 September 2012)

This paper reflects on the experience of curating the exhibition and events programme around *Typecast: Flinders Petrie and Francis Galton* at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London during 2011. *Typecast* explored ideas around race and archaeology, heredity and eugenics in the early twentieth century. After independent consultation, I decided to write about the exhibition from my own perspective and publicly identify myself as curator. As part of my own response, I drew parallels with contemporary events and issues today. This paper incorporates a discussion of:

- the implications of using my personal identity; how situations could have been handled differently,
- the myth of neutrality, especially around contentious issues, within museum and media institutions,
- anonymous responses from visitors and identified critical voices; ethical responsibility in dealing with provocative issues,
- how wider discussion in a public realm was facilitated.

Keywords: Francis Galton; Flinders Petrie; racial theory; race and Egyptology; Petrie Museum; eugenics; exhibitions; history of museums

Introduction

The exhibition *Typecast: Flinders Petrie and Francis Galton* was displayed at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology from 29 March to 22 December 2011.¹ It was part of a range of activities programmed by University College London (UCL) around the centenary of the death of the scientist, explorer and eugenicist Francis Galton in 1911. *Typecast* explored the relationship between Galton and the museum's founding archaeologist Flinders Petrie. Through this exploration of their relationship, it considered ideas around race and archaeology, heredity and eugenics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The exhibition had been informed by an interdisciplinary committee at UCL that was set up to try and coordinate plans for the Galton centenary (McEnroe 2013). The committee was motivated not to celebrate the work of a 'great man', but to attempt to address the legacy of eugenics, a term that

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This article was originally published with errors. This version has been corrected. Please see Erratum (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2013.776805>)

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Galton coined, through public discussion. Beyond academic expertise and the enthusiasm of a small group of library and museum staff, there were few resources to mount an exhibition or events programme around the Galton centenary. The more controversial side of Galton's legacy in eugenics and race theory was explored in the exhibition and a series of events at the Petrie Museum.

The legacy of eugenics and its impact on groups of people across the world makes the Galton Collection and that of the Eugenics Laboratory at UCL part of 'challenging history'. The objects and the archives that preserve eugenic ideas and advocacy for these ideas, such as the photographs made in the late nineteenth century of different 'types' of people, attest to 'scars of history' (Logan and Reeves 2009, 1–2). The history of eugenics is thus a difficult topic to address, both for its painful legacy and for the lack of knowledge many people have of its widespread practice and advocacy. An exhibition in California in 2005, *Human Harvest: The Hidden History of California Eugenics*, at California State University in Sacramento, addressed the hidden legacy of eugenics in that US state. The exhibition organisers have detailed the problems with a lack of collective memory around eugenics in California, the hidden history of the practice and the official embarrassment around its legacy (Brave and Sylva 2007). The approaches taken by the 'challenging history' group in creating resources and exhibitions were useful in planning an exhibition and series of events around such a contentious area (Kidd 2009).

Petrie's advocacy of eugenics and his emphasis on race informed his analysis of the ancient world and collecting practices. Therefore the Petrie Museum is, in part, a legacy of racial science and eugenic ideas. However, there is little comprehension of the legacy of eugenics in Britain, and Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie are not high-profile figures beyond their respective subject areas. The relationship between Galton and Petrie and the legacy embedded in the museum (of which few people have heard) was a difficult, even obscure, point to get across in an exhibition.

My original intention in planning *Typecast* was to run traditional focus group sessions before the exhibition to get feedback on difficult issues and on the exhibition more generally. In this I set out with a constructivist approach to audience feedback and incorporating people's responses in the exhibition. I sought to engage a range of audiences as active participants in the exhibition process and interpretation. For example, I ran a workshop at the Jewish Museum in London, at which four participants discussed the issues around an object described by Petrie as 'Hebrew'. I also spoke to an established Black history discussion group about the concept of the exhibition. I had difficulty in attracting people to focus group sessions on the issue. The people I did speak to were concerned that, in order to incorporate all voices in the exhibition, I would have to take account of supporters of eugenics as well as supporters of a racial hierarchy that positioned white Europeans at the top. The process was further complicated because the definition of people by race was based on essentialist ideas about appearance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was as much about social class as ethnic identity (Bolt 1971, xi). I soon realised that a simple, constructivist approach would not allow the prejudice inherent in eugenic and racist thinking, and which Petrie's and Galton's ideas embodied, to be seriously challenged (Sandell 2007, 78). Therefore, the focus group sessions and conversations that I had about *Typecast* made me entirely reconsider how to interpret this exhibition.

In addition to rethinking the role of audience participation in the exhibition, my own identity and ideas were challenged in those formative meetings. A participant at

the focus group held at the Jewish Museum told me that she felt uncomfortable giving her views on the terminology Petrie used to describe the 'Hebrew head' (the object we were discussing), as she thought the head 'looked Jewish'. She observed that, by saying that, she was herself drawing on anti-Semitic stereotypes around the 'Jewish expression'. The group wanted to know what identity I would ascribe to the head and whether I would be worried about being accused of prejudice. It seemed wrong to ask people for reactions to objects and concepts that can cause strong reactions, while I remained neutrally above the debate (Lynch 2011, 443). It made me reconsider whether museums can be truly participatory, even through constructivist learning, if they always take a position loftily outside of the discussion. The 'dialogue diagram' for 'The Participatory Institution' in Nina Simon's *The Participatory Museum* positions the museum sitting above the audiences as an omnipotent being, controlling the physical space and framing the discourse (Simon 2010). A museum needs to concede that it has an opinionated voice, even voices, amongst its museum staff, and in its history, before inviting people in for discussion and critique (Gosden, Larson, and Petch 2007). It has long been recognised that museums are not neutral spaces; even if they attempt to be 'morally neutral' in principle, they cannot be neutral in their practice (Karp 1991, 14). Museums are constructed spaces that operate within a political and social apparatus of power (Bennett 1995). Arguably, university museums are doubly so given they also function within a larger pedagogic institution. Yet, there can be the potential for more freedom in a university since, ideally, universities are sites of research and a free exchange of ideas.

My interest in Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie had been informed by research for an academic paper on racial theory and the use of material culture from classical antiquity during the nineteenth century (Challis 2010). I am used to giving my point of view as an academic, but when writing as a museum professional I use a 'neutral' third-person voice in museum interpretation. Having thought about some of the consequences of writing in a different way and having sought advice from colleagues, I wrote the exhibition panels in the first-person narrative. In the first panel, I argued that eugenics was essentially about identity – the identity we create and the identity created for us by other people within society – and thus publicly identifying myself was important. I asked a series of questions about museum display and what actions we should take through the panels.

The exhibition was in many ways a traditional form of academic study presented to the public, in which I attempted to encourage dialogue through responses to the exhibition text, as well as programming a series of public events and discussions. I had no set event programme when *Typecast* was launched as I wanted to respond to peoples' comments. Obviously I recognise that in this approach power still lies with the museum as it leads a conversation with its audiences (Lynch and Alberti 2010, 14). However, I decided that a traditional approach, but one that embedded a critical pedagogy that laid bare the operations and history of the museum, would be a more honest method of presenting information about, and asking for, discussion on this challenging history (Lindauer 2007, 305).

My decision to identify myself as a curator and admit bias was partly in response to work I had carried out previously around areas of challenging history at another institution. The BBC aims to provide fair and balanced coverage across its entire broadcast media. Its editorial policy stresses a politically neutral voice. While I worked as a freelance researcher and writer on the *Life Under Apartheid* site at the

BBC Archive (2009), the emphasis was on presenting an objective voice that explained the mid- to late-twentieth-century history of South Africa and the racist views of apartheid without causing harm and offence. I wondered whether these latter aims were really possible. Correspondence in the archive from the 1980s illustrated that BBC staff reporting on the apartheid regime often took a point of view, one which was in my opinion most laudable, but was not in accordance with the BBC policy of neutrality. It was decided that this correspondence should not be part of the site, mainly as it did not fit in the historical narrative but also because it raised difficult questions about the corporation's neutrality. Caroline Bressey has shown how the reporting of a 'fun' news story about political correctness around the naming of the dog in the film *Dam Busters* showed little awareness of the BBC's own history and the offence the institution caused by using the 'N word' in the 1940s (Bressey 2008, 30). Bressey argues that if the BBC had bothered to look in its own archives the researchers for *Today* would have seen that fuss about the racially derogatory word was by no means new. However, much an institution presents itself as neutral and aims to be balanced, its own history often provides evidence to the contrary, particularly when describing emotive areas in history and conflict.

Typecast: the exhibition

Typecast: Flinders Petrie and Francis Galton focused on Galton's ideas about race and his definition of eugenics and how this influenced Flinders Petrie, his work and the museum. It was not the first time that such an exhibition had considered the work and ideas of the archaeologist Flinders Petrie around race. Both the Petrie Museum's touring exhibition *Digging for Dreams* in 2001 and *Myths about Race* at the Manchester Museum in 2007, which had a section on 'Black Egypt', had previously considered Petrie's racist views (Lynch and Alberti 2010, 24). The difference with *Typecast* was that the exhibition drew attention to the way in which these views were embedded within the collection of the Petrie Museum through the terminology on labels or the way in which objects were placed into typologies. It also placed Petrie's preoccupation with race in the ancient world in the context of his eugenic thinking about the modern. The exhibition aimed to show that the museum is not a 'static cultural institution' but is a constantly changing and complex political entity shaped by the society in which it is situated and the perspectives of its visitors (Knell, Macleod, and Watson 2007, xx). Visitor comment boards and references to the viewpoints of different museum staff attempted to people the museum and show how museums are shaped by personal as well as institutional identity (Gosden, Larson, and Petch 2007).

The poster for the exhibition used photographic portraits of Petrie and Galton to make a composite image of both men (composite photography being a form that Galton pioneered), and this was used with the definition of eugenics taken from the Oxford English Dictionary (Figure 1).

This combination of the image with the definition was intended to clearly signal what the exhibition was about. I use the term racist to describe Petrie and Galton as they subscribed to a biological concept of race and systematically used it as the main determining factor in explaining the actions and characteristics of a person or group of people; 'the workings of society and politics, the course of history, the development of culture and civilisation, even the nature of morality itself' (Biddiss

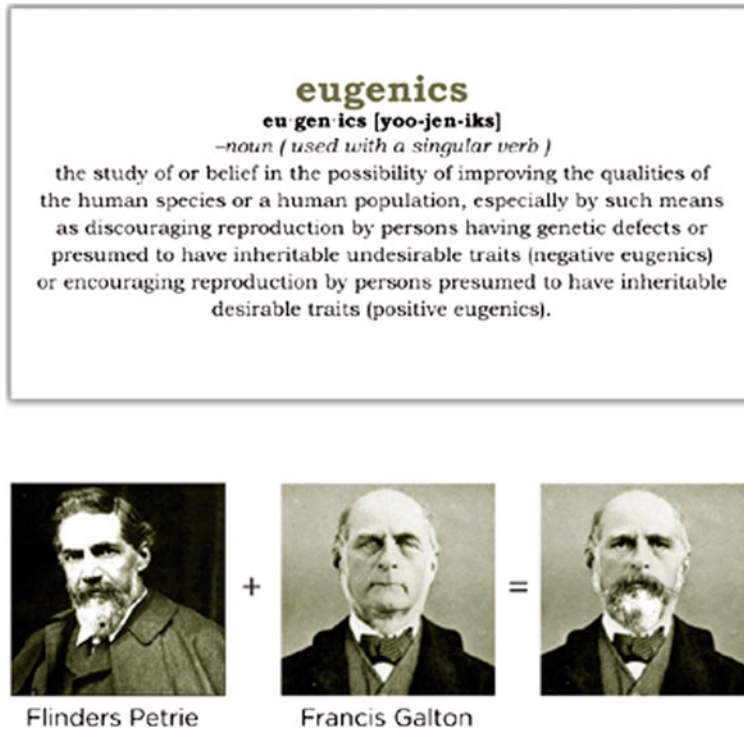


Figure 1. Typecast poster/Panel 1.

1976, 245). Their racism was often derogatory and ‘racist’ in the sense that we understand it today, but was not always defined by obvious forms of physical difference. I took the view that, “‘Race’, ‘national identity’ and ‘ethnicity’ are social and cultural constructions rather than being natural propensities of people born or living in particular places’ (Little 2005, 6).

The written part of the exhibition was composed of panels around the main room of the Petrie Museum. The panels covered terminology, eugenics, the relationship between Galton and Petrie and examples of Petrie’s eugenic and racial theories, with links to objects in the collection. Feedback opportunities were created through several means: ‘post-it’ notes on an exhibition board; a book that preserved older comments; a newspaper noticeboard and scrapbook for articles about race, genetics and stereotypes; an iPad-based interactive label next to a cast of a ‘racial type’ in the museum entrance, as well as public events and seminars. While writing the exhibition, I was working within a team of colleagues at UCL in a ‘Contentious Subjects’ group with whom I discussed the content. In addition, so that an independent person critiqued my writing, I asked a critical friend and historian, whom I trusted to confront my assumptions, to read through the text. A few months after the exhibition opened, in July 2011, I put all the panels online with more information and feedback from visitors on a Petrie Museum blog.

In order to make it clear that I was the curator and that the exhibition drew on my work and opinions, I wrote the following text on the introductory panel in Figure 2.

Typecast – An Overview

The Exhibition

2011 marks the 100th anniversary of the death of Sir Francis Galton, a key figure in the history of science and of University College London, the founder of modern eugenics, and one who provokes strong reactions in the academic community and beyond. UCL is marking Galton's centenary and examining his legacy with a number of events and exhibitions throughout the year.

Typecast explores the relationship between Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie, after whom this museum is named. In 1886 Galton commissioned Petrie to take photographs of 'racial types' on monuments from Ancient Egypt. This was part of Galton's research into human difference as well as the start of a lifelong friendship between Galton and Petrie. This exhibition explores contentious legacies in the museum's collection, examining and inviting comment on Galton, Petrie and the impact of racial theory on archaeology.

Identity

This exhibition is about identity:

- the identity of Galton and Petrie
- the identities of people represented on monuments and elsewhere in ancient Egypt
- the identities of people labelled or affected by the eugenics movement
- how we define heredity, identity and physical characteristics today
- your identity and mine, and how they shape our responses to history

My name is Debbie Challis and I am Audience Development Officer at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL. I have written this exhibition based on my own research interests and as a way of involving people in discussions around the museum's history, collection and display. I strongly believe that the society we live in still subscribes, if unconsciously, to many eugenic ideas and pseudo-scientific assumptions about inheritance. Nevertheless, I recognise that genetic research is one of the most important areas in science today. Museum displays rarely give the identity of the curator, but speak in a third person voice to be more 'objective' and 'neutral'. But who I am informs this exhibition. I have written the displays in the traditional 'neutral' and 'objective' 'third person voice'. However, I have tried to present quotations (or primary evidence) within some historical context and as free from interference with the text as possible.

Does this exhibition show my own, unconscious, assumptions about identity? Does it challenge yours? How can we define who we are – and who we are not?

I owe a great deal to other people's support: Tonya Nelson, Tracey Golding, Stephen Quirke, Natasha Mcenroe, Subhadra Das, Caroline Bressey, the Special Collections staff at UCL Library Services, Felicity Cobbing at the Palestinian Exploration Fund, Alice Williams, Simon Belcher, Will Howells, Simon Guerrier, Kevin Coward and Community Views, the staff of the Jewish Museum, and Gemma Romain for independent expertise and encouragement.



What's On When

Typecast changes throughout 2011. An interactive iPad on one of the casts of 'racial types' that Petrie made is on display in the museum entrance until May; a tray of types of racial heads from Memphis will be on display September to December; and public responses to the exhibition will be added June to August. There is also an exhibition in UCL's Main Library on Francis Galton ('An Enquiring Mind') until December.

A range of events include Dr Kate Sheppard on Flinders Petrie's eugenic ideas (5 May), and comedy writer Dan Maier on Ideas Man: The Stranger Notions of Francis Galton (7 June). In the autumn there will be pop-up object handling sessions

'The thing is... outside the museum; experts from different fields commenting on the 'Memphis heads'; and an exploration of re-understanding the museum's collections by Debbie Challis.

Keep updated with the website:

www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/galton/centenary



Figure 2. Typecast Panel 2 / Introduction.

This exhibition is about identity:

- the identity of Galton and Petrie
- the identities of people represented on monuments and elsewhere in Ancient Egypt

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- how we define heredity, identity and physical characteristics today
- your identity and mine, and how they shape our responses to history

My name is Debbie Challis and I am Audience Development Officer at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL. I have written this exhibition based on my own research interests, derived from my doctoral study, and as a way of involving people in discussions around the museum's history, collection and display.

I strongly believe that the society we live in still subscribes, if unconsciously, to many eugenic ideas and assumptions about inheritance, while recognising that genetic research is one of the most important areas in science today.

Museum displays rarely give the identity of the curator, but speak in a third person voice to be more 'objective' and 'neutral'. But, who I am informs this exhibition. I have written the displays in the traditional 'neutral' and 'objective' third person voice. However, I have tried to present quotations (or primary evidence) within some historical context and as free from interference with the text as possible.

Does this exhibition show my own, unconscious, assumptions about identity? Does it challenge yours? How can we define who we are – and who we are not? (Typecast Introductory Panel)

One of my colleagues suggested I added a picture of myself to the text panel, but I felt it would play to the same physiognomic assumptions that exhibition detailed and which informed eugenics. On the panel entitled 'The Hebrew Head', about an object in the display case opposite to the panel, I included conversations between myself and the Petrie Museum curator Stephen Quirke (Figure 3)

In this way I tried to include other voices from the museum alongside my own in an attempt to suspend the 'museum gaze', so that one voice was not presented as the voice of authority (Macdonald 2006, 20). Throughout the text I also asked direct questions about how the museum should address its racist legacies and the eugenic ideas of its founding archaeologist to stimulate conversation (Sandell 2007, 181). The responses to these questions and to *Typecast* in general were thought provoking and led to visitor conversations.

Critical comment

The most effective way of promoting discussion was through an 'old fashioned' comment board on which post-it notes were placed. Museum visitors used the board not just to give feedback on the exhibition, but also to respond to each other. One of the first conversations on the board, when the exhibition opened in March, was around the term 'Caucasian':

Please use quotes round 'Caucasian'. Caucasian belongs to the same racist naming as Mongol for people with learning disabilities. The proper term is European. It is accurate and it does not give offence. (Comment 1)

[Arrow pointing to above comment]. One cannot use "European" because it is not correct designation; "Caucasian" is scientifically "apt". Get over it (Comment 2)



Figure 3. ‘Hebrew’ head from Memphis, UC33278 © Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL.

[Written on post-it of Comment 2] Agreed. (Comment 3)

[Below the other 3 comments] V. interesting that these issues are still with us today in one form or another! (Comment 4)

[Written on above post-it] Fenomenal. Stephen Massa. (Comment 5)

The term ‘Caucasian’ was derived from the way geographical regions were tied to people with different ethnic identities in racial theory, specifically to the definition by the anatomist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s claim that Circassian Georgians, west of the Caucasus mountains, had the most beautiful skulls (Meijer 1999, 169–70). The term ‘Caucasian’ is considered as particularly offensive and allied to racial theory in the USA. My use of the term in a panel was not intended to cause offence and had been checked with my advisor, but it caused an interesting debate between unknown visitors.

Using my own name in the introductory panel provoked reactions that had I been anonymous may not have been framed in the same way or articulated at all. For example:

In her overview, the curator, Debbie Challis, notes to try to achieve an “objective” or “neutral” voice but I found that to be a misleading statement. The history and use of eugenics is factually based in many more negative and controversial ideologies than she provided. (Visitor Comment)

Writing in her column for the *Museums Journal*, Felicity Heywood noted my statement ‘who I am informs this exhibition’ and welcomed the personal approach.

However, she thought that ‘the exhibition skirts around the issue of the ancient Egyptians being Africans’ and picked up on the ‘Caucasian’ debate mentioned above:

I wasn’t aware that such discussions were exercising the white (probably safest to use here) community. That could be an interesting debate to draw out alongside the Galton exhibition. (Heywood 2011a, 19)

I posted Heywood’s critical viewpoint onto the comments board as a form of comment in its own right. One visitor wrote alongside it: ‘Having this sort of interactive criticism/commentary is exactly what all museums should be doing’. I noticed a shift in the feedback around the ethnic identity of ancient Egyptians as well as comments that more should be known about ‘how Egyptology has become Europeanised’. A debate about restitution began in response to Heywood’s column:

29/10/2011. Great relics - can you give them back to their rightful owners now please? (Comment 1)

[Written on the above] Ditto! (Comment 2)

[Post-it with arrow to above] How do you give something ‘back’ to a civilisation that no longer exists? to ‘give something back’ is to preserve them for all which is best done here. (Comment 3)

[Post-it with arrow to above] Hold Tight. Museums are as much a part of our colonial heritage as relics are of Egypt itself. (Comment 4)

There were more comments recorded that there is not space to explore here; many of these continued the debate on restitution, pointed to racial prejudice in scholarship, critiqued my ‘ambivalence’ on eugenics and requested to see more related objects. In response to this last point, my colleague Susie Chan made a bespoke display case in order to exhibit a drawer of the terracotta ‘Memphis “Race” heads’ that are usually kept in the cupboards. I did not feel that I had presented myself as ambivalent or as an ‘apologist’ for Petrie. I was attempting to place Petrie’s and Galton’s work in historical context while making clear my views on their ideas. Despite the oppositional readings, however, I do feel that using my own voice encouraged discussion and stimulated conversation.

The other part of *Typecast* was a public programme on different aspects of the exhibition and issues around eugenics. I curated this programme and so, again, it was led by the museum, but I put it together in response to the visitor comments and feedback from colleagues. When I was gathering feedback about the exhibition concept, a community group leader suggested to me that, rather than having a focus group, it would be preferable to have events that her Black history reading group could attend. I invited Sally-Ann Ashton (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) to speak on the ‘Memphis “Race” Heads’ and issues of racism in Egyptology more generally. A panel discussion on the ethics of looking at the photographs taken by (or for) Galton of patients at Bethlem Asylum was held in response to comments by Sarah Chaney, a PhD candidate at UCL in History of Medicine, who pointed out that personal responsibility in asylums was more complex than I had suggested. Another talk was given by Gavin Schaffer

(University of Birmingham) on immigration, politics and eugenics; Caroline Bressey (UCL) explored the ethical dilemmas in using ‘hidden’ archives; and a comparison between Galton’s and Florence Nightingale’s ideas around social reform was presented by Natasha McEnroe (Florence Nightingale Museum). Subhadra Das (UCL) addressed the legality and ethics of Petrie’s removal of antiquities from Egypt.

The idea behind putting the tray of heads on display in a bespoke case was to make public an unseen part of the Petrie Collection with, as far as possible, its original labels. This was also a response to visitor comments wanting to see more objects linked to *Typecast*. Sally-Ann Ashton had previously written about these terracotta heads that Petrie had collected in his excavations at Memphis (Ashton 2003). Ashton is conscious of the legacies of racial thinking around Ancient Egypt in her own practice as an Egyptologist and curator and reflected on this in her talk. Comments in response to Ashton’s talk included:

‘Excellent Speaker, Good Venue, Fascinating topics. Discussion too short’.

‘Thought provoking and modern discussion of ancient issues’.

‘It explained some of the difficulties I have been having with the old language of Scholar compared to the modern language.’

‘Good to be reminded about Egypt’s cultural connections and amount of racism in authorship.’

‘Would have been more interested in archaeological aspects, rather than ethnology’.

The debate within the audience after the talk was heated in places, as the last comment indicates. Some of the audience felt that Petrie’s interest in race did not matter as much as his archaeological practice, while others thought Petrie’s preoccupation with race was indicative of the racism prevalent in academic Egyptology. This heated discussion was picked up and commented on by Felicity Heywood in October’s *Museums Journal* who considered the ‘resistance’ to the critique of Egyptology mainly to be from ‘white, particularly older, members of the audience’ (Heywood 2011b). It should be stated that the audience segmentation that Heywood identified is not always the case at events; the debate after the talk on immigration was equally contentious amongst a wider cross section of the audience. Assumptions from visitors and the way they are stated often upset others in discussions, and there was a danger of reinforcing prejudice (Sandell 2007, 93). My role in these cases was not to be neutral but, when necessary, to try to make sure that dominant individuals did not talk over other people and to challenge racist assumptions. The speakers did this too. One of the outcomes from *Typecast* has been a decision to programme more time for discussion in events at the museum.

The most creative critical response I had to *Typecast* came in early June 2011 when artist Patricia Shrigley sent me a still from her film in an email:

I first learnt of Galton’s work at an exhibition “Spectacular Bodies” with his pictures of working class women and I thought that so could be me.

I read your scrapbook at the gallery and thought yes, someone has put together what I have thought of British society and some of its views.

Also, your YouTube mini lecture inspired me to think of another caricature for my short art/film, so thank you and I found the exhibition most interesting. (Personal email to Debbie Challis, Patricia Shrigley 7 June 2011)

Shrigley was generous enough to allow me to use some of her images in my *Typecast* blog posting of the exhibition (Figure 4). Her images made me reconsider how essential characteristics are still linked to social class today, through expressions such as ‘chav’ or perceptions expressed in the media of ‘good breeding’ and ‘bad blood’. I found Shrigley’s work humorous, while at the same time projecting a subversively perceptive mirror on British society and class assumptions. Shrigley made a short film, *estateface* (Shrigley 2011), that showed eight ‘types’ of women measuring themselves with callipers alongside a number and description based on anthropometric measuring and labelling of people (Figure 5).

The ‘No-31 delta worker obedience’ image (Figure 5) has resonance due to the popularity of the television series *Downton Abbey* and the ‘cultural necrophilia’ engulfing television viewing schedules (Schama 2012). Shrigley’s ‘No. 62 Single cell reproduction organ breeding pigeon’ (Figure 6) was ‘originally about the scapegoating of young single parents on benefits under the Blair government, whose attitudes were very similar to Lord Flight’s comments on the working class breeding in 2010’ (personal email from Shrigley to author). Shrigley asked me to contribute a short paragraph to *estateface*, which sums up my response to the interactions between the exhibition, visitor comments and contemporary events as a whole:



Figure 4. ‘No. 14 a Middleton propriety needed’ © Patricia Shrigley.



Figure 5. 'No. 31 delta worker obedience' © Patricia Shrigley.

From March to December 2011 I kept a personal scrapbook of contemporary articles related to class, race, health and eugenics for the *Typecast* exhibition. I expected that it would include articles about fertility, medicine and genetics and there are plenty of those...I did not expect to paste in comment around 'feral rioters'; or royal weddings and 'fresh stock'; 'bad blood' and breeding; or 'whites' becoming 'black'; or 'superstar genetics'.

I see more than ever the boxes into which we place ourselves and others; but understand even less why.

Shrigley agreed to a screening of *estateface* at the museum to mark the end of *Typecast* and a shortened version of the film is now online on Vimeo (Shrigley 2011).

Contemporary events

During the exhibition's showing I incorporated a changing display of newspaper articles on the wall of the exhibition, pasting the older articles into a scrapbook (which is what Shrigley responded to) along with visitor comments from the board. This was intended to present multiple perspectives and stories on how 'eugenic thinking' still plays a part in modern society (Black 2010, 138–139). The newspaper board was headed 'Contemporary news stories around genetics, inheritance and race'. In the first month of opening (mid-March to mid-April 2011) this board incorporated articles on genetic illness and fertility issues as well as a row about the television show *Midsomer Murders* depicting a 'whites only' England. Some of the articles are listed below to give an indication of what I pulled out from the mainstream news media as the exhibition opened:



Figure 6. 'No. 62 Single cell reproduction organ breeding pigeon' © Patricia Shrigley.

Hayden Smith, 2011. Whites-only 'makes Midsomer popular'. 15 March. *The Metro*.

Zoe Brennan, 2011. The family fortune of the minted Middletons. *The Daily Telegraph*. 19 March.

Anon. 2011. Faulty genes found in illness that kills 1,000 babies a year. *The Daily Mail*. 23 March.

Anon. 2011. 'I don't think you should have children'. *The Guardian Weekend*. 9 April.

About a month after *Typecast* opened the royal wedding of Kate Middleton to Prince William took place. In the media coverage of the event, I was naively astonished by the language used around the marriage. Family trees showing the genetic lineage of the couple and articles about Kate Middleton's heredity and social class were common in newspapers and on television, while language around 'new stock' was repeated on coverage of the wedding on the day. My observations on this and how eugenic ideas, though often framed differently, were still strong in society made up the focus of a short lecture for UCL TV on YouTube in May 2011 (Challis 2011). Sometime after this was put online I was accused by a blogger, who had problems more generally with UCL, of whitewashing eugenics:

Here Dr Challis of UCL brushes over the positive/negative eugenics debate and asks us to "interrogate our social assumptions" regarding eugenics!

WHAT ARE THEY PLANNING FOR US ALL IN BRILL PLACE? ARE THEY STILL AT WAR WITH THE WEAK? (Camden Sanity Brigade 2011)

Talking about eugenics and trying to understand where the idea came from as well as its legacy today was perceived in this blog and by some visitors as giving it the institution's stamp of approval (Arnold 1998, 191). Obviously I had no intention of my YouTube talk being read in this way and found the accusation that I was advocating the practice of eugenics distressing. I had tried to challenge assumptions around eugenics but had made assumptions myself about how the audience would respond. It is a salutary lesson that whatever the intention for an exhibition, you cannot manage the impact of your message, particularly on the internet, and there are ethical issues here that I should have considered in advance (Marstine, Bauer, and Haines 2011, 93).

As part of the wider Galton Centenary at UCL, Galton's unpublished novel *The Eugenic College of Kantsaywhere* was put online (Galton 1910) with an introduction by writer and broadcaster Dr Matthew Sweet, which placed the manuscript in historical context and commented on its relevance today. In his introduction Sweet made parallels with a recent government report on child neglect and eugenic ideas, arguing that, whatever we think about such ideas, 'averting our gaze from Francis Galton's extraordinary body of work will not assist in reaching the right conclusions' (Sweet 2011a). Sweet argued his point on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme on 19 November 2011 and explained:

[...] that there is a "direct link between Galton's ideas and many of the things that we continue to enjoy today" such as the welfare state, the IQ test or even the NHS. These ideas are "rooted in the Galtonean idea" of measuring the population, looking at its health and subsequently seeing how it can be improved. (Sweet 2011b)

We had thought carefully about the consequences of publishing Galton's novel, which was why we asked Sweet to write an introduction that would be provocative and thoughtful. Several blogs by the so-called 'race realists' welcomed the publication of *Kantsaywhere* but strongly condemned Sweet's introduction. Extreme Right bloggers and activists also reacted forcefully to my involvement in a letter criticising David Starkey's comments on race on *Newsnight* on BBC2 on 12 August 2011 (TLS 2010). My actions in signing the letter for the *Time Higher Education Supplement* and blogging about comparisons between Galton's comments on Africans and Starkey's on Black people were not directly part of the exhibition but both were linked to the themes of *Typecast*.

Both the reactions – to the YouTube short lecture and the Starkey blog/letter – demonstrated the difficulties of placing myself in a public position and my naivety in doing so. I had spoken to some of the staff involved in the 2008–2009 exhibition *Lindow Man: A Bog Body Mystery* at the Manchester Museum, where they received a similar mix of responses on a much larger scale, much of it highly critical and personal. Although I reflected on their feedback in putting this exhibition together, I did not realise how some reactions would affect my confidence and cause personal upset (Brown 2011, 146). If museum staff are serious about being truly participatory and opening their institutions, and by extension themselves, up to closer examination and critique, there needs to be support. None of us are rubber balls that bounce back after confrontations or difficult discussions, though we may welcome debate, and dealing with personally focused criticism can cause distress.

Analysis

One of the problems with planning the exhibition was the lack of resources; yet in many ways this was also a bonus. *Typecast* was funded entirely by the museum. The panels, design, iPad and new exhibition case plus a full events programme over 9 months came in at around £3000. Admittedly many people assisted me and gave their time for free. Having previously worked both for national museums and independently on grant-funded projects, I entirely identify with the comment by a museum professional around the ‘overriding pressure to represent the work to governing bodies and funding agencies in a purely positive light’ (Lynch 2011, 444). Putting on an exhibition that was internally funded and with the support of the museum’s management, and which opened up criticism and debate around UCL’s history and the role of our founding archaeologist, was incredibly liberating. Although the institution was ambivalent about the exhibition and centenary in terms of resources, the support of other UCL staff meant that it did make an impact in the media and within UCL itself. There was no pressure to position the museum or university in a positive manner. The exhibition aimed for ‘radical transparency’ on museum and institutional history as well as current practice (Marstine 2011, 14).

While talking about my personal voice in the exhibition, I was disingenuous. My main regret in retrospect is that I was not more honest about my feelings about eugenics. Although drawing attention to my identity, I still attempted to write objectively. This feeling is not just due to the reactions to *Typecast* but also because I was not entirely frank. I stated my belief that eugenic ideas are still prevalent in society, but not that I find the concept of eugenics abhorrent. I was unwilling to share my deeply personal reasons for objecting to Galton’s contention that nature has, at birth, already formed babies differently in terms of intelligence, characteristics and human potential (Galton 1869, 14). On a panel about Petrie and Eugenics I used a quotation from Flinders Petrie’s book *Janus in Modern Life*, in which he advocated eugenic practice, which reiterated Galton’s view:

England produces over 300,000 excess of births over deaths yearly, and perhaps a tenth more might be added to that by care of infant life. But would that tenth be of the best stock or the worst? We must agree that it would be of the lower, or lowest type of careless, thriftless, dirty, and incapable families that the increase of population by 10 per cent, more of the most inferior kind? Will England be the stronger for having one thirtieth more, and that of the worst stock, added to the population every year? This movement is doing away with one of the few remains of natural weeding out of the unfit that our civilisation has left to us. And it will certainly cause more misery than happiness in the course of a century. (Petrie 1907, 62–63)

Underneath this I wrote that ‘Petrie’s views are shocking; even gut-churning. But they need to be read in the context of their time, amidst a fear of socialism, political change and a general acceptance, if not an endorsement, of eugenic ideas amongst the political classes’. Now, following visitor reactions to the exhibition, I would explain more clearly that I disagreed with Galton and his contention that nature has formed babies at birth in terms of potential achievement and personality. I had considered including a photograph, taken a year after *Janus* was published, showing Petrie with his son John as a baby, along with text asking whether, in objecting to child welfare for the lower classes, Petrie would advocate the same ‘natural weeding’

treatment for his son. At the time, I thought this would be too emotive, but I have now included it in a book derived from the exhibition (Challis 2013). In hindsight, I was still clinging to the notion that I as curator should be objective.

I did not trace, in *Typecast*, the use of eugenics by the Nazis or other state systems around the world as I thought it would overshadow the history of eugenic thinking in early twentieth-century Britain. As Stuart Hall argues, 'like personal memory, social memory is highly selective' and there is a process of 'selective canonisation' which I feel has occurred with regard to thinking about the impact of eugenics in British society (Hall 2005, 26). The Nazis are cast as the obvious baddies, while British eugenicists were at best benign and at worst ineffective. The historian Alan Megill has outlined how the interrelations of state and identity are an important area of study for historians (Megill 2011, 505). These interrelations are key to understanding the legacy of eugenic thinking. The legacy of eugenics is more slippery and nebulous in Britain than the wholesale support of eugenics in Germany by the National Socialist regime and their practice of sterilisation, incarceration and mass murder of individuals considered 'unfit'. Dan Stone points out that though the eugenics movement in Britain did not enact legislative change, it was successful in the way 'eugenic ideas of decay, degeneration, struggle and selection pervaded social and cultural life' (Stone 2002, 100).

Social divisions and the manner in which they are inscribed and normalised as important to society are part of the story of eugenics. In many ways I tried to put across this point of view and encourage debate about it in the newspaper board of contemporary articles around heredity, characteristics, immigration, race and class. The 2011–12 exhibition at Musée du quai Branly, Paris, *Inventing the Savage. Exhibitions* considered the growth of racial theory and display of the 'other' (defined by race and physical difference) in western countries during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and drew on a range of critical voices within the exhibition. It was explicitly anti-racist in its mandate. *Exhibitions* used alternative narratives and ways of seeing, such as mirrors in one of the display areas showing different people on display so that the observers of the people on display were themselves being observed. This exhibition and its interpretation, on a large scale with proper funding, with a range of people involved and a long lead in time, could be used as a model for a larger exhibition than *Typecast* which considered eugenics and its legacy.

Conclusion

The *Typecast* exhibition was an extraordinary learning experience for me and for the Petrie Museum. After always considering myself to be audience focused, I realised that I had underestimated the capacity of visitors to respond and debate. Museums are performative spaces whether they recognise and encourage it or not; but they are only truly participatory if they engage with the performances, changes and learning carried out within their space. Objects, even objects that are thousands of years old, have a different set of experiences for different individuals and social groups that engage with them. There are, however, key important questions that have not been fully addressed and perhaps never can be, around the ethics of this practice and policy:

Are museums still about safeguarding objects? For whom and to what ends? What does safeguarding mean for diverse individuals and communities today? How does the notion of the museum as a performative space challenge our perceptions of the object? How can museums effectively represent people's feelings about objects, rather than fetishize objects in and of themselves? How does immateriality translate into the design of exhibitions and museum space? (Marstine, Bauer, and Haines 2011, 92)

I would also add, how do we deal with our own feelings about objects and the ideas we display in the museum? There are dangers of putting yourself in the public gaze as staff and visitors can feel 'personally and professionally expose' (Brown 2011, 146). Institutional support and the backing of colleagues is key in order to open up debate in the museum while acknowledging that there are both difficulties and rewards to being participatory. The expectations of staff and visitors around change need to be managed with full honesty about what is possible and what is not (Lynch and Alberti 2010, 28–29). Trust needs to be developed between all levels of staff as well as between staff and audiences. In his inaugural lecture at UCL as Edwards Professor, the curator of the Petrie Museum Stephen Quirke said that, after the events in Egypt during the 2011 Arab Spring with regard to museums, objects and cultural heritage, 'everything should be possible'. Museums and the people who work in them need to assist in making the impossible possible, while recognising the potential conflicts and problems that may happen. We can only do this in an environment that encourages critique while supporting visitors and staff in dealing with exposure and difficult debate.

Acknowledgements

Colleagues from the 'Contentious Subjects' group at UCL Museums and my team at the Petrie Museum made *Typecast* possible. Thanks to Dr Matthew Sweet, Dr Gemma Romain and Patricia Shrigley for their generosity with providing independent critical voices.

Note

1. Panels for *Typecast* and further information around the exhibition are on the Petrie Museum Digital Technologies blog: http://petriemuseum.com/blog/category/typecast_petrie_galton/ The Library Services exhibition 'Francis Galton 1822 – 1911' can be found on the UCL website: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Library/exhibitions/francis-galton/>

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