THE MUSEUM AS A SPACE OF CARE: PARTICIPATORY PROJECTS WITH REFUGEE AND MIGRANT BACKGROUND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Participatory museum projects with refugee-background young people

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ABSTRACT

Museums in the Global North have turned to participatory practices with traditionally marginalized groups in response to social and political pressures to become more inclusive and relevant and to confront their colonial pasts. One group which museums are increasingly seeking to engage is refugee-background young people, located at the intersection of two groups traditionally excluded from contributing to museological practice. However, while a wide range of participatory projects with refugee-background young people are being delivered with museums, there is limited published research and evaluation of these projects. This constrains opportunities for knowledge sharing about and across the sector. Responding to this situation, this article reviews the existing literature, focusing on key opportunities and challenges it identifies for refugee-background young people, museums, and audiences. Additionally, it attends to the limits of this literature, calling for wider critical engagement with such projects to support ethical and effective practice across the museum sector.

KEYWORDS

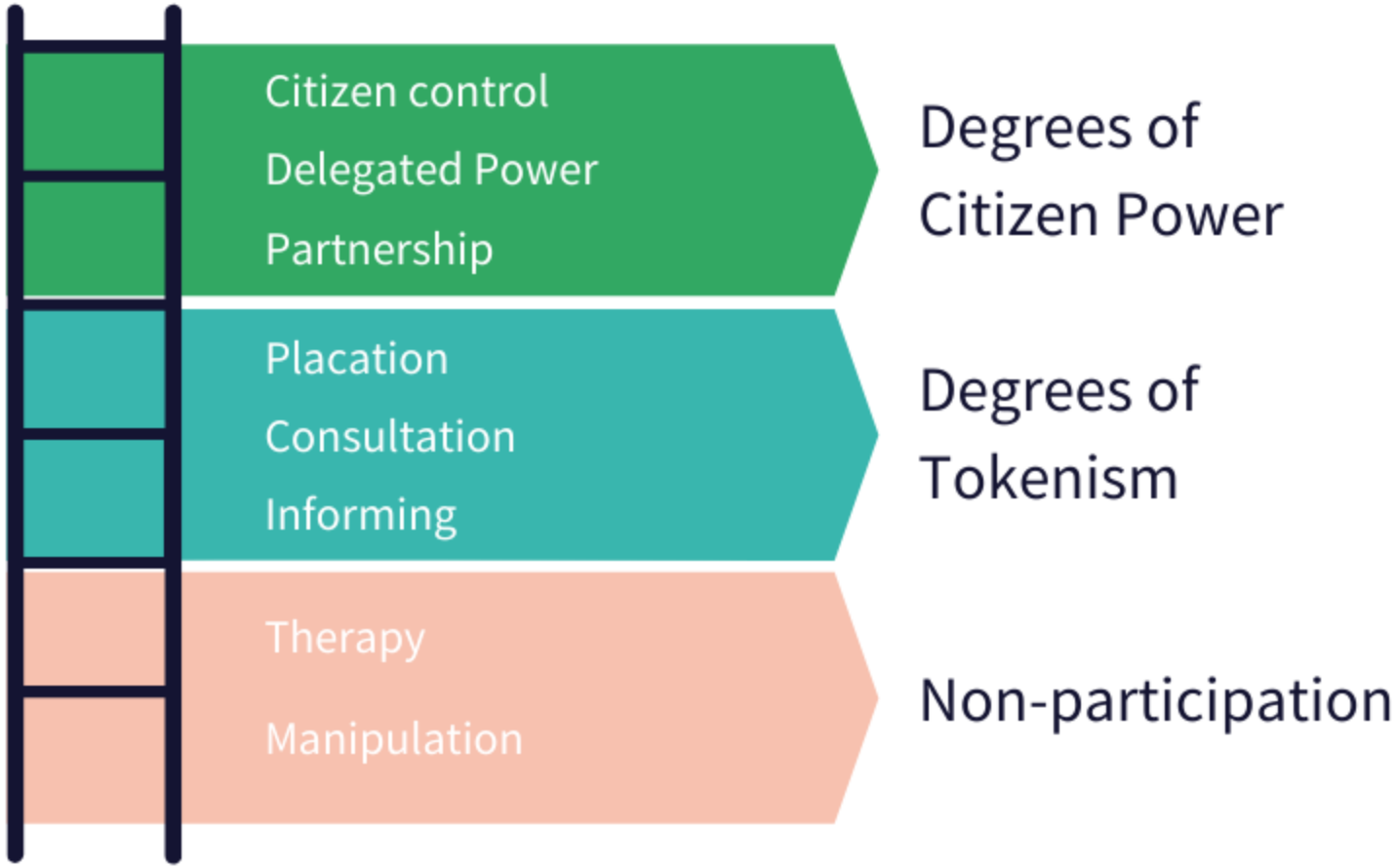
Refugee-background young people; youth; museums; participatory practice; social inclusion; co-production

Space of care

‘To talk about care work in the museum invites us to recognise care as an orientation and an embodied, relational and emotional practice with social and materials dimensions (Morse, 2022, p 150)

Participatory practice

Arnstein's Ladder of Public Participation



Why refugee & migrant background young people?

- Critical stage of identity formation
- Experiences of adversity & resilience
- Knowledge exchange & capacity building
- Transcultural capital: Boundary-spanners

Critical stage of identity formation

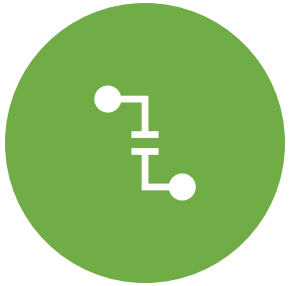
UN definition of a young person: 15 – 24 years old

Emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000)

Opportunity to develop lifelong involvement and interest in heritage and cultural appreciation & exchange

Adversity & Resilience

Traumatic & unsettling experiences and encounters



Disconnection from family & community

Asylum & settlement

New responsibilities, roles and identities

Transcultural Capital: Boundary Spanners

The strategic use of knowledge, skills and networks acquired by migrants through connections with their country and cultures of origin that are made active at their new places of residence’ (Triandafyllidou, 2009, p. 102)

What role can museums play?

- **How can we work effectively, considerately and compassionately** with refugee and migrant background young people in cultural institutions, as spaces of care, and **what creative and boundary spanning possibilities might emerge from these collaborations?**

Ancient History
Contemporary Belonging

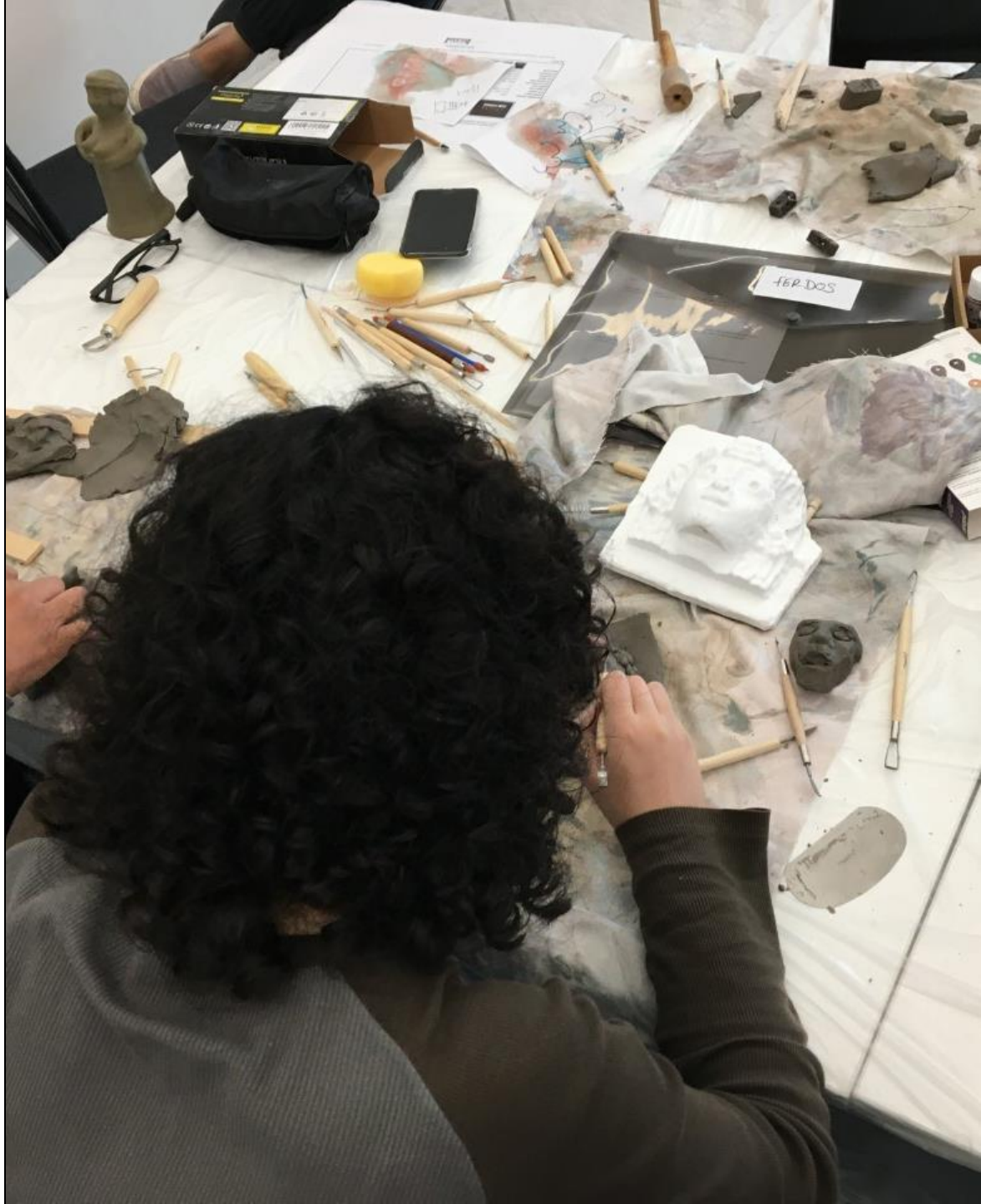
Unprovenanced Map, Jina Lee
Based on ideas and stories from the Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging youth research team

Through starting from the premise
of interconnection
between places
over time, rather than
separateness, we
are able to get at the
actual complexity of
the world, at the same
time as taking seriously
the legacies of
colonialism in
the present'

Mayblin and Turner 2021:86

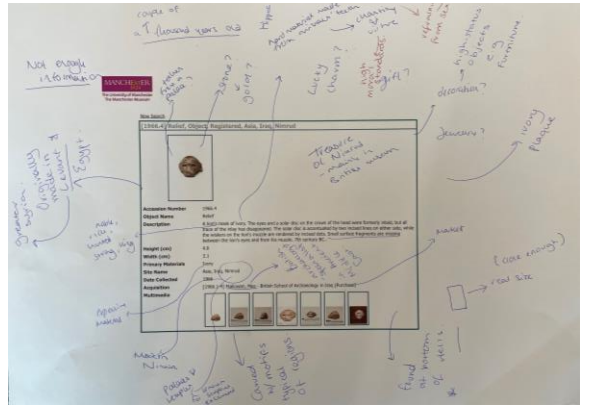
Project Aims

- To collaborate with migrant-background young people to critically and creatively research the biographies of ancient historical objects from Manchester Museum.
- To use art techniques to explore the biographies of ancient historical objects and to share the outcomes in an exhibition at Manchester Museum and online.
- To use the long history of the migration of objects and people to encourage wider societal discussion about colonialism, migration and belonging in the UK.
- To work with youth researchers to develop skills, knowledge, and networks.
- To show how projects like this can build bridges between communities and the heritage sector and help create new knowledge and understandings.



Youth Researchers

- 16 people engaged, with 10 participating in the exhibition
- Mostly young women
- Aged 15-22 at the commencement of the project
- Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian, Kurdish and Palestinian heritage, most of whom have spent all or most of their lives in the UK
- Recruited through migrant and ethnic organisations and educational institutions in Manchester



Methodology

Co-production, incorporating:

- archival
- (auto)ethnographic
- arts-based methods

Phases

1. Exploratory workshops: arts, museums, ancient history, migration

2. Development of art work & object itineraries

3. Exhibition

The history of the world is a history of movement.

The migration of people and objects – both voluntary and forced – is an important part of our histories. Yet migration is presented too often through colonial narratives in which people and objects from outside the UK are viewed as 'other'.

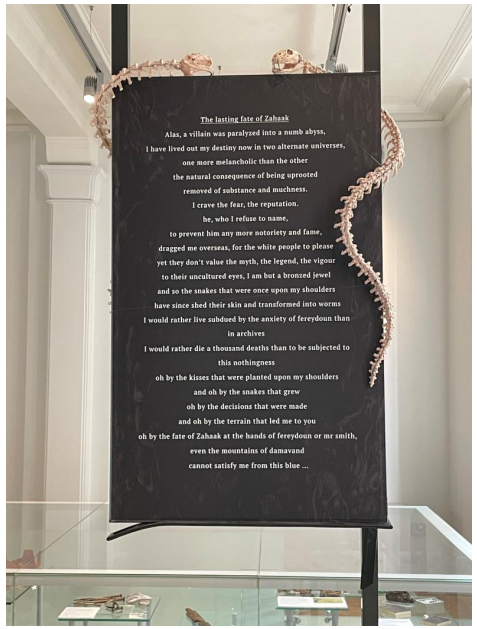
Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging **shows us that we are all connected.**

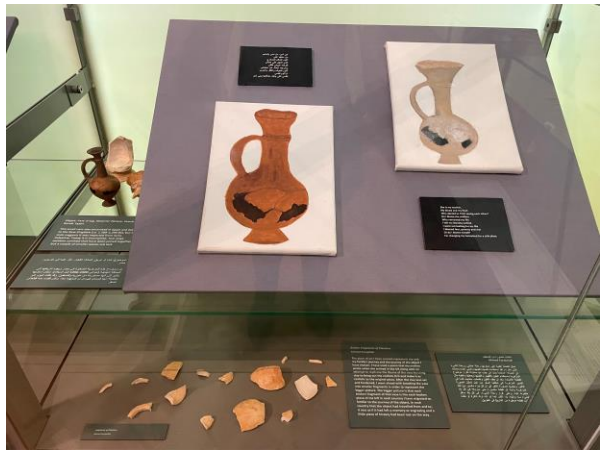
This installation is a creative exploration of the migration of ancient historical objects by young people with migrant heritage. Drawing on archival research and their own lived experiences, they re-create the stories of the objects on display.

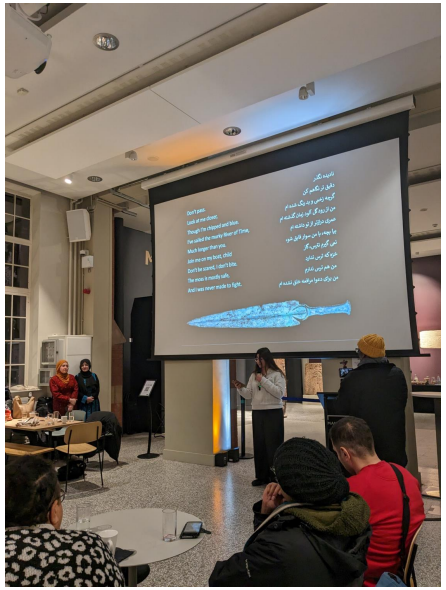
By exploring interconnected histories and inheritances, these works produce new perspectives about the migration of both contemporary young people and ancient historical objects.

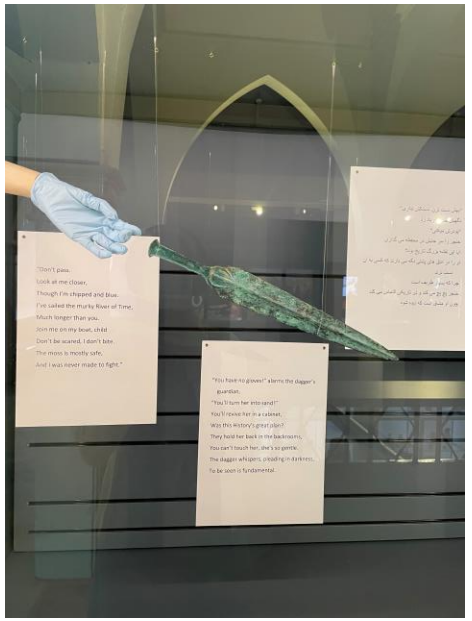
The project is a collaboration between Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester Museum, Sheba Arts, and local young people from Iranian, Iraqi, Kurdish, Palestinian, and Syrian backgrounds.

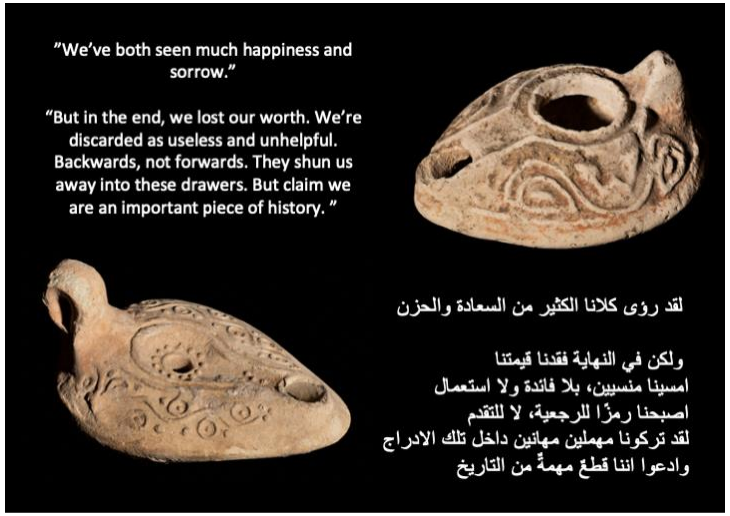
Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging











"This map invites viewers to encounter the world from the unique perspectives of these people and objects, who have arrived in this place across shifting eras and borders, and in doing so, created new pathways to belonging."

Jina Lee

Unprovenanced Map, Jina Lee
Based on ideas and stories from the Ancient History, Contemporary Belonging youth research team

ary
CTIVITY
Workshop Session at Manchester Met Campus
Workshop Session at Manchester Met Campus
Visit to Manchester Museum
Visit to Liverpool: World Museum, Slavery Museum & Tate
Workshop Session at Manchester Met Campus
Workshop Session at Manchester Met Campus
Workshop Session at Manchester Met Campus
ORANGE
JUICE DRINK

‘If [museums] are not open and transparent with [communities] about the colonial origins of those institutions, if [communities] discover that by chance, or if they feel that that information is in some way is being concealed, **it can do irreparable damage to trust and cause misunderstanding.”**

‘[I came to the project] to explore more of my heritage from a historical point of view and [to see] how we are portrayed in museums.’

‘The history at my school was basically Eurocentric. It was never about my country or my area.’

Knowledge generation and knowledge exchange

The untraceable Barlekin

ahcbteam 4th Apr 2023 Museum, Youth Researchers Balekin

By Senna Yousef

My introduction to Barlekin was one of curiosity, as myself and another youth researcher, Goldis Gorji, stared at the Manchester Museum's log of an object from Iran from a region named Barlekin. Having never heard of it, we turned to google for help but quickly realised that this place had never been recorded and did not exist on any internet records. After attempting to look at various locations within Iran with similar sounding names and attempting a google search in Arabic and Farsi, we decided to try and get our hands on a copy of archaeologist T. Burton-Brown's book *Barlekin*, named after the site.

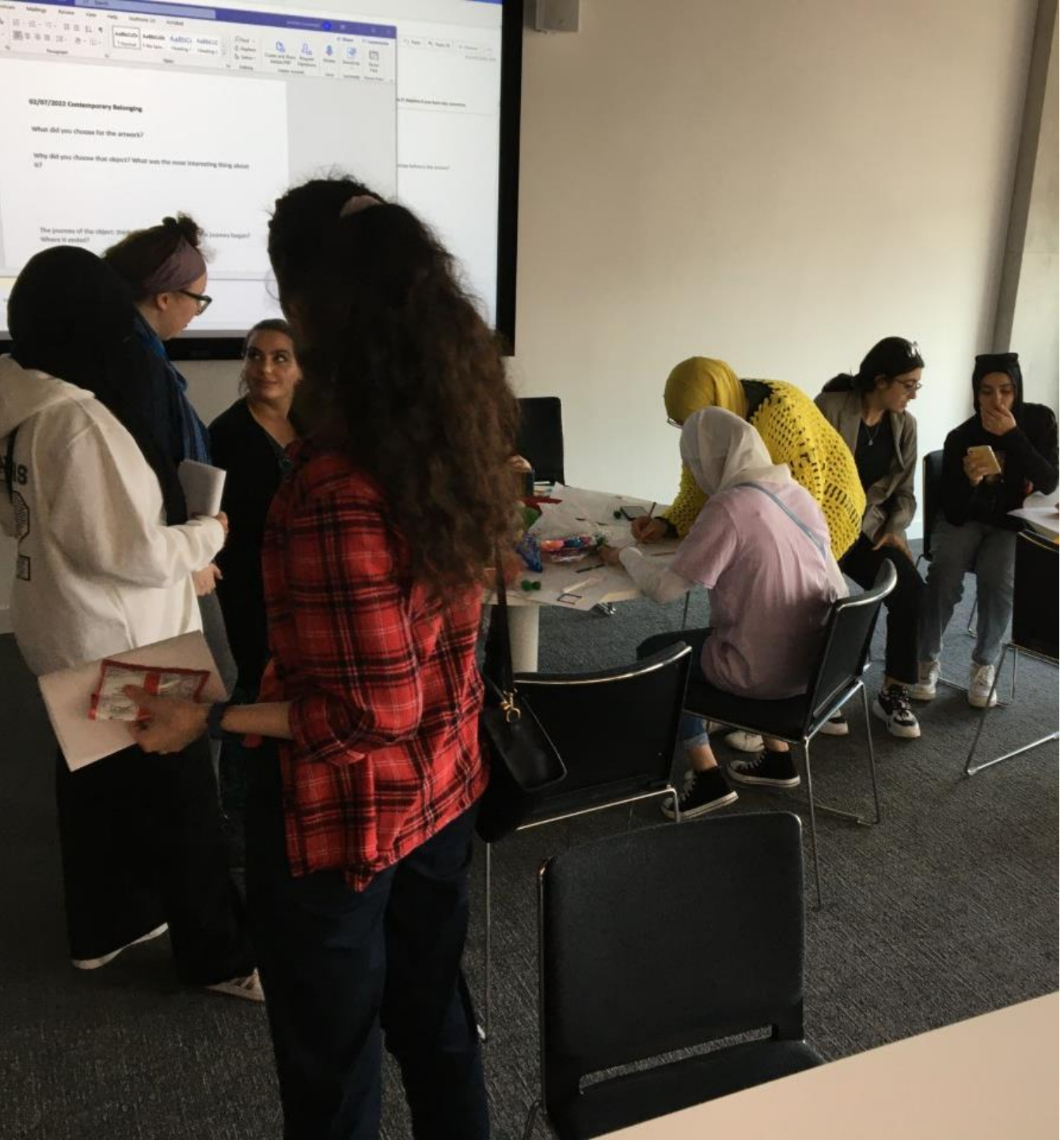
‘…you know how you go to another country on vacation, and you go to a gift shop and buy a souvenir. I feel like that's what museums are, but on a bigger scale…’

‘I was around these objects, and they are like five thousand years old. And I was thinking: They have just been through so much, and even though technically they can’t tell their own stories, like maybe we in a way can.’

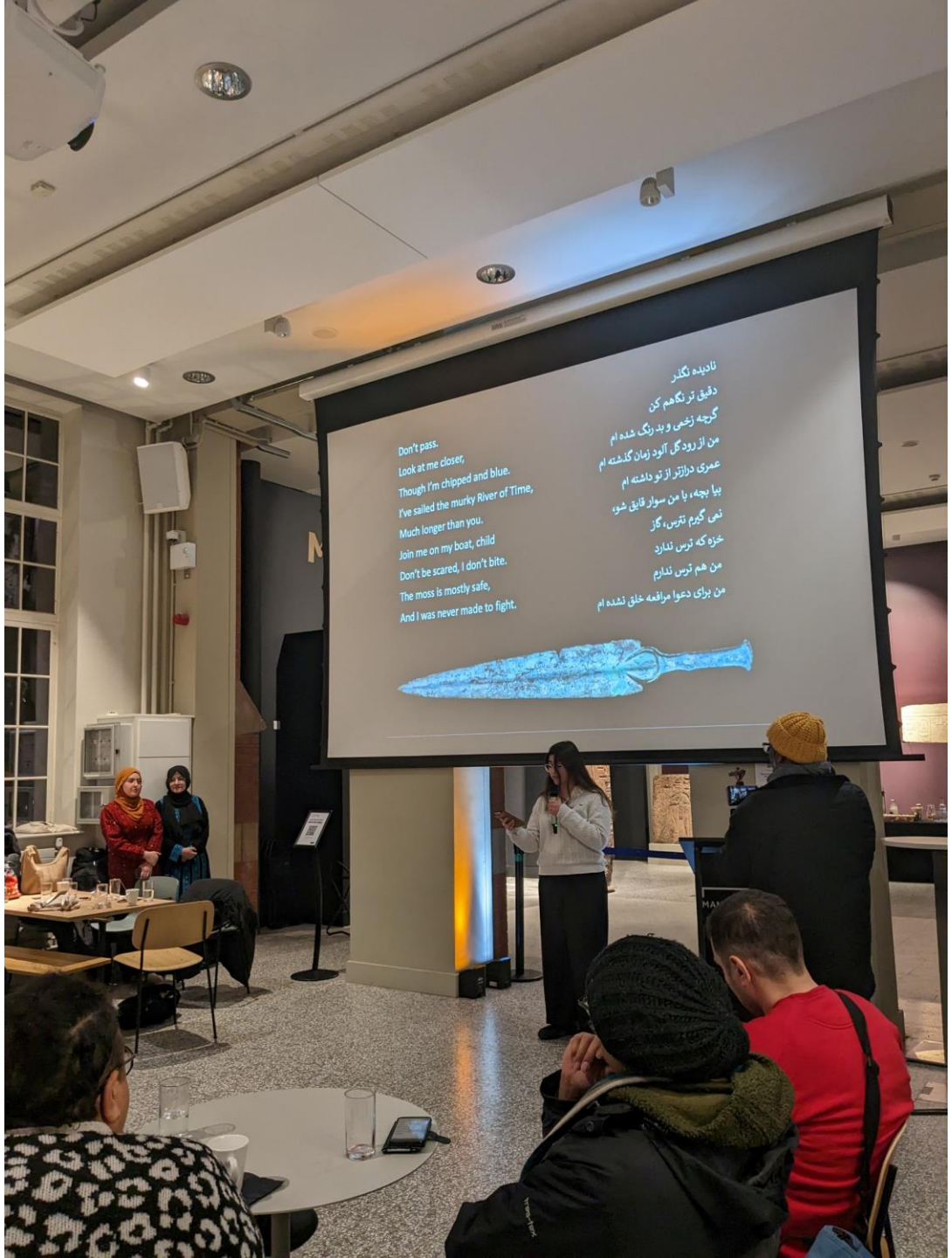
- Everybody was friendly. And it felt like a family more than job partners. It was really nice.’

- ‘I feel like Alex [curator] was, like, very on our side. I'm not saying that [youth researchers] and the museum were not on the same side, but it felt that Alex was our bridge in between’

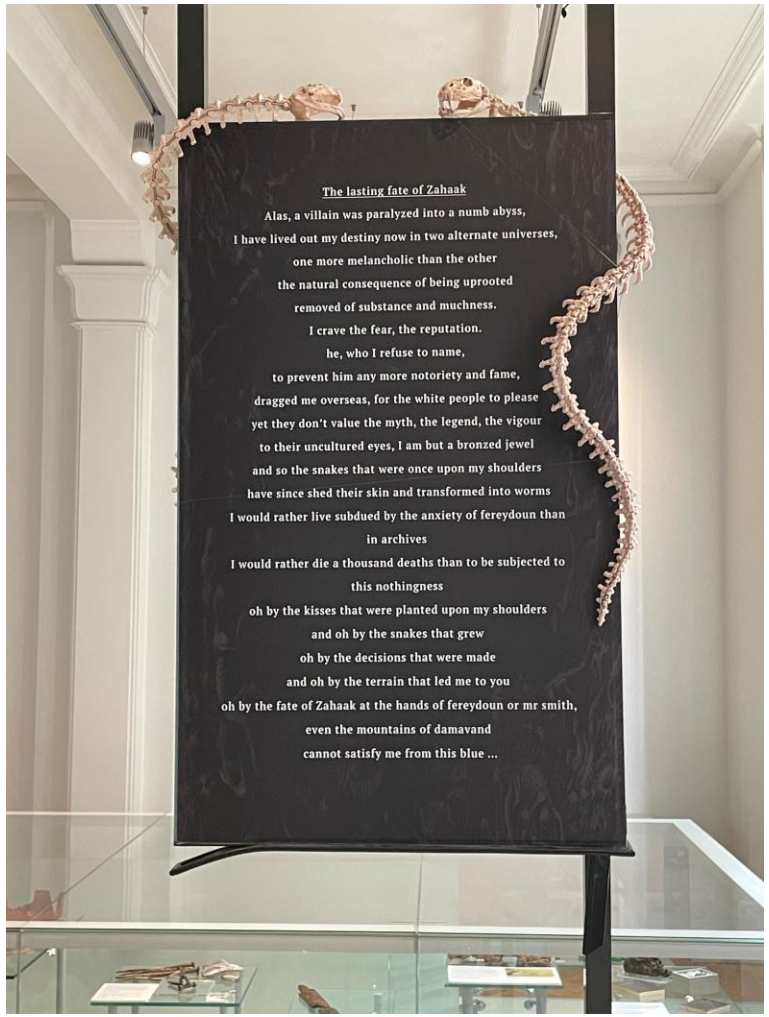
- ‘I was really comfortable working in the museum. No one ever made me feel like my requests were too annoying…Campbell put up with my millions of questions and my 6 million visits to the museum, so I'm appreciative of that’


02/07/2022 Contemporary Belonging
What did you choose for the artwork?
Why did you choose that object? What was the most interesting thing about it?

MUSEUM


Don't pass.
Look at me closer,
Though I'm chipped and blue.
I've sailed the murky River of Time,
Much longer than you.
Join me on my boat, child
Don't be scared, I don't bite.
The moss is mostly safe,
And I was never made to fight.
نادیده نگذر
دقیق تر نگهم کن
گرچه زخمی و بد رنگ شده ام
من از رود گل آلود زمان گذشته ام
عمری درازتر از تو داشته ام
بیا بچه، با من سوار قایق شو،
نمی گیرم نترس، گاز
خزه که ترس ندارد
من هم ترس ندارم
من برای دعوا مراقعه خلق نشده ام

Golden Mummies of Egypt


The lasting fate of Zahaak
Alas, a villain was paralyzed into a numb abyss,
I have lived out my destiny now in two alternate universes,
one more melancholic than the other
the natural consequence of being uprooted
removed of substance and muchness.
I crave the fear, the reputation.
he, who I refuse to name,
to prevent him any more notoriety and fame,
dragged me overseas, for the white people to please
yet they don't value the myth, the legend, the vigour
to their uncultured eyes, I am but a bronzed jewel
and so the snakes that were once upon my shoulders
have since shed their skin and transformed into worms
I would rather live subdued by the anxiety of fereydoun than
in archives
I would rather die a thousand deaths than to be subjected to
this nothingness
oh by the kisses that were planted upon my shoulders
and oh by the snakes that grew
oh by the decisions that were made
and oh by the terrain that led me to you
oh by the fate of Zahaak at the hands of fereydoun or mr smith,
even the mountains of damavand
cannot satisfy me from this blue ...

‘When the project was done and my artwork was in and the museum opened, I went and told everybody: ‘Hey, listen, my artwork is in the museum’…It’s a great opportunity for me. And I love that people actually went afterwards to the museum. I feel like it was a promotion.’

‘The gathering we had in the museum [was] when my brain was fully comprehending what was happening… “My work is in a museum”, and I've visited this museum when I was a kid before…it was very overwhelming…because at first, I was like, “oh, not a big deal.’

‘[The exhibition allows the museum to say] “Oh this is us: we are open, we work with people from the community”. You know it’s a bit like [the museum] put us at the front, like we are ok to exhibit these [objects] But…it’s not our choice for them to exhibit [these objects]. If it was our choice, we would send them back to our country.’

Iraq
Iran
Azerbaijan
Byzantine
Manchester
Germany
Kemet
Amarna
Egypt
Turkey
Palestine
Jordan
London
Nimrud
Kurdistan
UAE
Romania
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History
ary Belonging

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