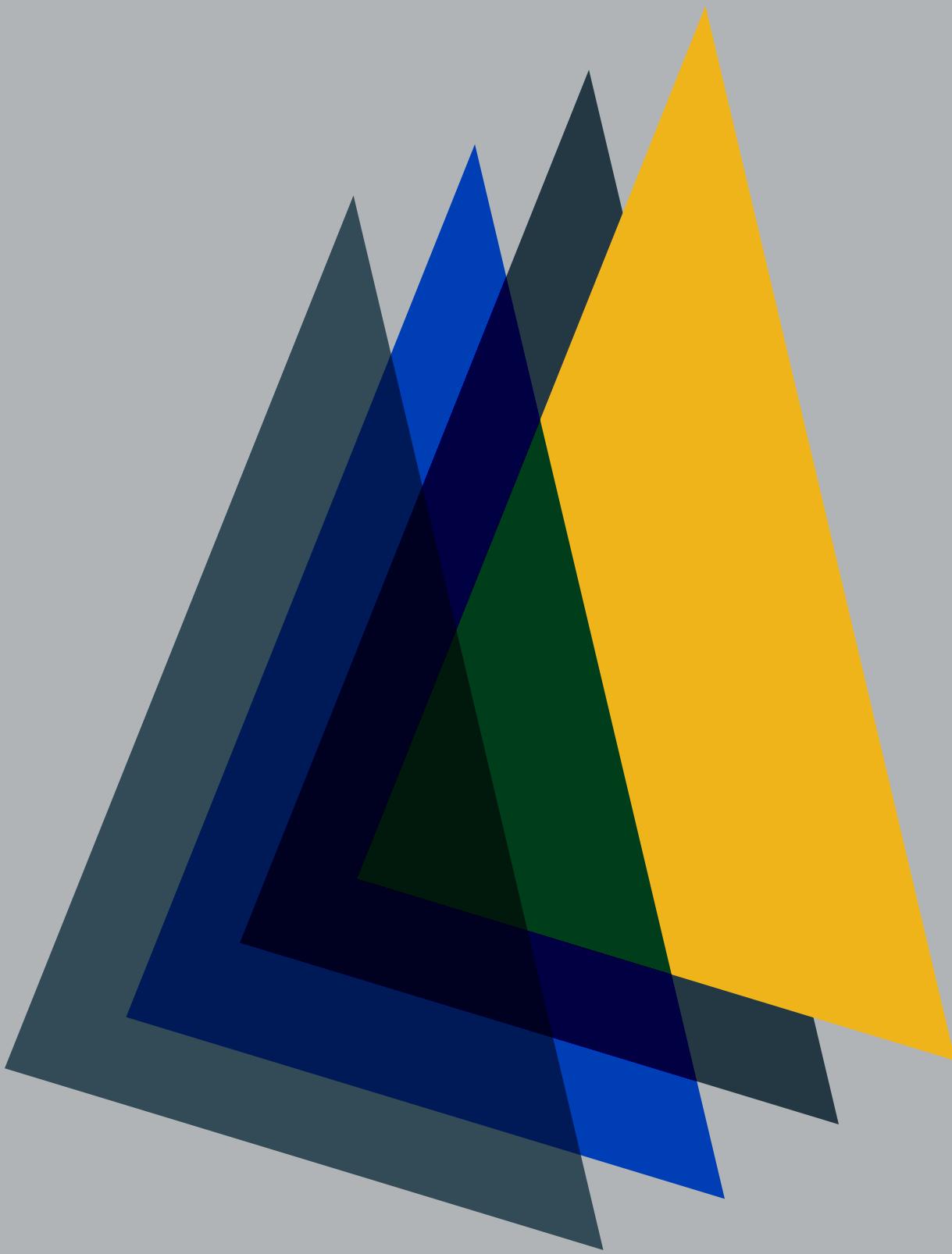


BAD HISTORY 3/3

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SPORT SLAVERY SILENCES



The Commonwealth Games gets an Empire Café

ROSIE SPOONER

This summer the city of Glasgow will host the twentieth installment of the Commonwealth Games. Working within the now ubiquitous model of twinning sport and culture—a relationship played out in Vancouver and London, and being planned for Toronto’s hosting of the Pan Am Games—Culture 2014 is a nationwide programme of cultural events. One of the projects selected for inclusion, and scheduled to take place during the Games themselves, is the Empire Café, an inter-disciplinary and collaborative project organized by Jude Barber, an architect with *Collective Architecture*, and Louise Welsh, a Glasgow-based writer and author. Last month I met Jude and Louise at the Briggait, the building that will house the Empire Café for a week in July and August, and sat down with them to discuss the project.

In working with artists, writers, playwrights, academics, social advocates and community groups from Glasgow as well as further afield, Jude and Louise have positioned the Empire Café as a platform for “looking at history through different filters.” The project involves a number of practitioners including the artist Graham

Fagen, curator Richard Benjamin, authors Chris Dollan and James Robertson, and academics David Archibald, Graham Campbell and Stephen Mullen. The history of Glasgow’s connections with the Atlantic slave trade, the object of their focus, is an inherently and infinitely complex subject, and one that takes on added significance when attentions and emotions are focused on the upcoming referendum on Scottish independence. Although unquestionably about Scotland’s future, the vote also concerns the history behind its relationship with England, and by extension the workings of the former empire both were agents of. Over the course of our conversation, a selection of which follows, we talked about the at-times forced bonds between art, sport and commerce, and the role all three have played in mediating evolving colonial and postcolonial relationships. The project is ambitious in scope, in terms of the range and number of events the Empire Café will host, and with regards to the idealistic hopes Jude and Louise have for the project’s impact. The duo betray an awareness of these issues however, and seem to be building the project in part through a—some might say characteristically Scottish combination—of impassioned curiosity and self-deprecating drive.

Rosie Spooner

I initially became interested in the Empire Café because it seems to want to engage with problematic histories, particularly postcolonial histories, through a range of creative mediums. As an art historian, I'm drawn to the project for the way it's trying to interrogate difficult histories through contemporary practices.

Louise Welsh

It sounds kind of zeitgeist-y. You think you're doing something solo, but actually there's so much coming together at the same time.

Jude Barber

I think we got here at the right time. It's the right time to talk about this particular period in Scotland's history. It feels comfortable to talk about uncomfortable subjects.

RS So as a starting point, perhaps I could ask you to introduce the Empire Café project, and discuss how it has come together and been formalized?

LW Jude and I had worked previously on a series of sound projects, *Merchant City Voices*, which explored Glasgow's relationship with the North Atlantic slave trade. We were coming from a point of knowing rather little, but wanted to look at the complexity of that relationship in terms of the way the city profited, particularly with respect to the histories of the buildings that exist in Glasgow largely because of that wealth. But also we wanted to think about the enslaved peoples who were not passive victims, but were people who often fought

hard and strongly against the slave trade. That project was part of the genesis, and then Jude heard about the call. And it was really you who had the idea for a café.

JB It was a conversation between us really. We saw the call for the *Culture Programme* for the Commonwealth Games, and we felt that after finishing the Merchant City Voices project we'd only started to get a sense of the subject. As a place where there was going to be this major cultural festival it felt amiss that there wasn't something addressing Scotland's relationship with the broader Commonwealth through trade, so when we sat down to talk about ideas we were thinking about produce, peoples and place. One of the things that struck us was the idea of a tearoom, which we think of as quintessentially British, but which when broken down into its constituent parts—tea, sugar and historically tobacco—is actually an international concept. To create a place, a tearoom, where people would be invited in to talk about this subject matter—or choose not to talk about it, but be aware of it—was something we were very keen to do. So it started with the notion of a tearoom. Since being selected for the Cultural Programme, however, the project has really grown partly because we have realized there's been a breadth of work carried out on the subject already. So I suppose what we're doing is bringing all that work together into one place, and all those people into one place for a week to talk about it.

The project has developed various strands. There's the poetry anthology for which we're commissioning twenty poems, ten from Caribbean writers and ten from Scotland-based writers. There's the café itself which has a food and outreach program associated with it, through which we'll be working with various community groups. And then there are the events.

LW Most of which are free. Things like the Commonwealth Games cost a lot of money for people to go to. We're organizing a couple of the events in tandem with other organizations who have to charge, but everything we're doing solo is free. The idea is that you don't have to buy a cup of coffee to come in and be a part of it. We want to invite academics, we want to invite artists and writers, we want to invite people who don't know anything about the subject. We want conversations to begin in the café and then carry on during the walk home.

JB One of the things we're doing over the next wee while is thinking about how to bring all that into a formula that's clear and legible for people.

LW And make sure we get audiences as well.

RS Yes, how are you going to gather together and integrate the different components?

JB We're hoping to structure it so that the café will open in the late-morning. There will be smaller lunchtime events and workshops in the afternoon, then the evening will have the key speaker events. This allows us to see the day in three clear parts, which then repeats for seven days. What started with the idea of a small tearoom, maybe with some poetry readings, has grown really due to the generosity of *Wasps Studios* who manage the Brigait, and who have let us have the freedom to think about how we might use the space.

I suppose we haven't talked about how important this building is in the sense that it was originally a tobacco merchant's house, and more recently been the former fish market. Being located immediately on the water, on the Clyde, and with a Grade-A

listed façade means there is a *gravitas* to the building itself, which is rooted in the subject. It's also on one of the key walking routes of the Commonwealth Games since it's in between the two major sporting venues. There's something quite nice about how, on this promenade between sporting events, there's an opportunity to come in to this space, and get to the heart of the matter in terms of the Games and its origins.

RS I'd like to pick up on the connections between sport and slavery since the relationship between the Commonwealth Games and the Atlantic slave trade are not immediately apparent. Why do you feel the Commonwealth Games is an appropriate occasion to have a discussion about Glasgow's ties to the slave trade?

LW In many ways it's because the money was available. We probably would have put an application in to any big event that had a constellation of other cultural events around it, but it's especially fortuitous because the Commonwealth Games used to be the Empire Games. We see it from our perspective, but I think increasingly in Scotland there's an uncomfortableness with the idea of Commonwealth. I don't know how countries within the Commonwealth feel—maybe they're quite happy about it—but I guess because of the relationship between Commonwealth and empire and our role in empire, which is not always one to be proud of, there's that uncomfortableness with the association of exploitation and so the two do fit.

JB I can understand the benefit international sporting can bring, but it's important a cultural programme sits alongside any major event, and offers to look at it through a different filter. It's easy to get swept along in the mass celebration of sporting excellence, or commercialism or whatever it is that will sweep you along, so there should be a place to have a moment where you

do actually take stock through something that's free, accessible, thoughtful and mindful. We're hoping this will become a place of discussion, debate and dialogue, as well as warmth and conviviality. We don't really know exactly what's going to happen, but in a way what is good about being involved in arts and culture is that you're used to that, whereas if you're involved in sport and the delivery of commercial events you don't want surprises. We want there to be an element of uncertainty, and engagement we're not entirely in control of.

RS Do you see there being potential challenges with regards to creating a space that will hopefully foster dialogue and critical discussion, while at the same time being part of a cultural programme that is officially connected to a major international sporting event?

JD Do we see any contradictions there?

RS Yes. Do you feel that presents challenges? Or maybe those are issues to play off of?

LW We have complete artistic freedom and that would be the deal breaker. There are no restrictions in that sense. But I guess we're working with the British Council as well, which has its own histories, so we're working with organizations that some artists would choose not to work with. But that's a decision you make.

JB We had to make a judgment. We are doing an event about Scotland and North Atlantic trading and were given the opportunity through *the British Council* to bring artists over to give their perspective on that. But if someone had said "you have to do x, y, z" it would have been different. It suited what we are trying to do. I think Louise is right, we've been very fortunate with the people we've been dealing with through the Cultural Programme in terms of their openness. They've seen the things we're

hoping to do, they've seen the types of events, they know who's coming, and they're not making any...

LW ... They don't seem to be scared.

JB By commissioning us they knew it was never going to be just good stories. That was something we highlighted in our application. This is not a topic people have historically wanted to hear about but there now seems to be an appetite to talk about it, and we owe it to people to talk about the subject—we owe it to ourselves—particularly at this time when Scotland is questioning how nations conduct themselves, and asking what kind of nation we want to be. Where the border ends up lying is not really part of this particular project, but to go forward you need to reconcile yourself with the past and have an understanding of your role at particular times in history.

LW Part of being a maturing nation is taking responsibility. To not view yourself as completely colonized, but to recognize we're colonizers as well, and look at the reasons for that. Why would somebody like Burns—a good socialist like Burns—think of going to the Caribbean and getting involved in the plantation system? What might have happened if he'd done it? We need to think about those alternative histories. He might have come back, as many people did, and become an abolitionist, or he might have got stuck in and made a lot of money. Who knows?

RS You have described the Empire Café as a way to explore Scotland's historic connections with the slave trade through tobacco, sugar, tea and cotton. Is it really possible to examine such a complex system through an exchange based on the serving of tea and cakes, as was suggested in an article recently published by *The Herald newspaper*?



LW I guess the message... Well I guess we don't really have a message. As Jude was saying we're more interested in dialogue, conversation. We have a great deal of faith in people's abilities to make connections themselves. We're not an educational project per se, but part of your job as a writer, an artist or an architect is to help people see familiar things in different ways. Things like tea and cake are such a part of our lives, part of our childhoods, so seeing them in a slightly different way can in and of itself be a realization of the project.

JB It's not as if there are going to be any clear answers—or even any clear questions—but we're bringing as many brilliant people as we know together, and bringing their incredible bodies of work together in one place and seeing what happens. It makes you realize how artists and writers can address these subjects in ways that history books might not, and connect with people in different ways. I don't know; we're not quite sure. Sometimes we're not quite sure what we're doing.

LW To put an artist together with a historian, together with a poet and just see what happens next. That's quite thrilling. But it's a bit scary because you're worried you're going to drop all the balls.

RS The question of audience is one you have alluded to. Who do you see as the project's main audiences, and how do you position that in relation to the official aim of the Culture 2014 Programme, which is to "enhance the experience of the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games for Scotland's communities, spectators, and visitors"?

JB We're trying to think a bit beyond our comfort zones in terms of audiences. We know who is likely to come because of their interest in the subject, so it's trying to think beyond that to the broader community, nationally. The food program is working with seven different

community groups, one for each day, to produce and prepare food for the café. We're also hoping, although we're still in early discussions, to team up with one of the major Housing Associations who are already planning to bring people to the Games. We're hoping to link up with them, and issue the poetry anthology in advance along with a tea-for-two voucher. Those organizations have the funds to bring people in, something we don't have within our budget but which we really want to do. The question of audience requires thinking of the different ways you can bring people in. More city-based and younger people might be using the internet, but maybe at sheltered accommodation out in East Kilbride or Sighthill, it's through working with Housing Associations that you can get groups to come in for particular events.

LW We have also made a connection with *Inverclyde Libraries* who are located where the big sugar sheds were, where Tate & Lyle had their headquarters. The head of Inverclyde Libraries is arranging for reading groups to read Chris Dolan's *Redlegs*, and since Chris is doing an event with us and showing a film the reading groups will be helped with transport to come into Glasgow. There is also a visually impaired disability group I've worked with before, so when we firmed up the program I asked them whether there were any particular events they'd be interested in attending. We have also talked to smaller groups like the Association for Scottish Literary Studies and Scottish PEN who can't really give us much money, but can tell their networks. BBC Radio 4 is also commissioning a series of short stories from several of our poets and then organizing a live recording of them reading their stories in the café. Something like four million people hear those segments. They have an amazing reach. We're also hoping the proximity to the route between sporting venues will bring in people who might not have heard of the project. We want the accidental traveler as well. There's all sorts of things, but you're right that we need to work for audiences as well.

RS The name still reflects the original idea of there being a tangible, physical space although from how you have both discussed the project it sounds like the Empire Café has increasingly become more like a conceptual framework. What is the resonance of the name, and were you deliberately referencing any historical *precedents* or *paradigms*?

LW Definitely playing with them. If you google Empire Café you'll find cafés with that name all across Britain. There's an *Empire Bar* around the corner.

JB The name also doesn't need explaining very much. When we say to people that we're doing a project called the Empire Café, which explores Scotland's relationship with trans-Atlantic slavery, it immediately registers. The notion of going for tea, for cake, it's something everybody has done at some point in their life, so it's not unfamiliar territory in terms of what people might anticipate. When we were putting together the bid we weren't sure whether we would run it as a café, or whether it would be an exhibition built around the appearance of a café. We weren't clear about that ourselves but one thing we've always been clear on is that it should at least *feel* like a café. It was fundamental that visitors get the sounds and smells of the tea-room, because it creates a convivial environment. So in the end we made the decision to actually have a functioning café space.

LW And that's maybe the riskiest strategy because people really complain about their cups of tea!

JB It's such a national pursuit and people have strong opinions on it.

LW People could come in, they could have a free discussion from top international names, they could receive

a poetry anthology, they could hear music, see a couple of free films but if the cup of tea is sub-standard that's it. That idea of conviviality is an important one. It needs to be a place where anyone feels they can enter regardless of class, ethnicity, or anything like that. I think something that will come up over and over again is the issue of class. We're a very class-based society, increasingly so rather than less so, and that is partly due to our engagement with the slave trade. Not everyone benefited, although in many ways Scotland benefited hugely. We went from being what we'd call a 'developing nation' into a wealthy nation very, very quickly but it did not affect everybody in that way, and the level of privilege it entrenched is a blight on our society. I think that's something that will be discussed.

RS The notion of playing with the familiar to incorporate alternative narratives appears to be an important thread.

JB Yes. One of the things I've particularly enjoyed about the cross-disciplinary nature of this project, and others we've worked on together is that it takes you out of your comfort zone, out of your typical way of behaving, speaking or knowing. To be confronted by a poet—or someone you've never heard of but who is critically acclaimed within their field—and to hear them is a powerful experience. Everyone we have seen so far are people who are working at an incredibly high level, and yet are all very generous, engaging characters. When you actually see someone sharing their work, it's a true privilege. I think that even if you don't fully understand everything they're doing because you're not trained in that particular way, you can still understand their passion and their skill. And get a sense of their take on history or culture. I think that's what we're really hoping for; that there's a kind of power to the events, which you can't help but be impressed by.

RS Going a step further then, perhaps the concept of comfort and moving outside of what one is most comfortable with brings together the project's main themes. For myself, I see that as reflective of the way Scotland has dealt with—or not dealt with—it's connections with the slave trade. Why do you think there has not been an attempt to engage with this challenging history, particularly when other major port cities like *Liverpool* and *Bristol* have initiated public conversations about the subject? Why has there been a silence in Glasgow, and, more widely, Scotland?

LW Our historians, the ones we're working with, might answer that question with more expertise. I wonder if the history of Scotland has been subsumed by the history of the UK, which has to an extent let us off the hook. As a child in school I certainly did not get taught much Scottish history, which I think means there has been a lack of education. That's not enough of an excuse, however, because Scottish people are very good self-educators. That's a massive generalization of course, but there is a strong element of that within Scotland. I'm not sure why. Perhaps the way the trade happened here was also a factor. The triangular aspect of it means we do not really know how many slaves were physically brought here. It was easier to not see it because it wasn't around you. But, again, that's not an excuse.

JB I similarly do not know enough about it. However, there are parts of our history we're very happy to talk about like our industrial past, and our involvement in the textile and shipbuilding industries. Those activities benefitted society by creating sources of labour and wealth. Whether recognizing where those came from somehow diminishes its significance? Perhaps it's discomforting to be critical of the origins of something you're quite proud of? But until we talk about that we cannot think about some of the issues in our current society, like our attitudes towards people from particular countries and those liv-

ing in our communities, people who have maybe lived in our communities for generations. Attitudes to those issues are inherently linked to an understanding, or lack of understanding, of our social and cultural history. There's a complexity to that question of silence.

LW It doesn't fit with our narrative that we're left wing, we're working class...

JB ...we were downtrodden, we were brought to battle.

LW The concept of slavery comes into Scottish literature and Scottish song but it is usually us. We're the ones who are enslaved. We don't think of ourselves as enslavers. We are not pointing the finger—it's part of our history, we're both from Glasgow—the project is saying we shouldn't be scared. We should recognize it.

JB The more you know, the more you can take an informed position relative to things that might be presented to you through the media, through education, through people you meet and the conversations you have. You can start to discuss issues from a more informed position. I feel a part of the early stages of that conversation, and we're hoping that by the end of August we'll have an even more enriched and nuanced understanding of the subject and then take it from there.

LW And then book a holiday.

JB To the Caribbean.

LW I guess this project is for us as much as anybody else really. We are the audience.

JB We're not experts, we're just finding our way.

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