

The story of the ship-in-a-bottle: encountering strangeness and familiarity through a globalised object

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Abstract

This paper speaks to Chris Rumford's thought on globalisation and strangeness, as well as to the colonial encounter and its presence in the current day. It also reflects his influence and encouragement to use storytelling as a mode of drawing out analysis, especially that of objects. The 'story' of the ship-in-a-bottle will unfurl via ethnographic vignettes – a seaside town resident who longs for the days before immigrants arrived, and a Chinese manufacturer keen to gain the best profit margin from sales to the West. These will ground a discussion of the place of strangeness and familiarity in the current globalised and globalising era. Specifically, this discussion will focus on the multiple experiences of globalization embodied by one single object, thus challenging the 'one-world' hypothesis by allowing a view from China in to the (typically) Eurocentric debates on globalisation. It will also question what best to do with experiences of strangeness, and to what extent the comfort of familiar things is acceptable in a globalised world.

Keywords

Strangeness, familiarity, empire, kitsch, seaside

Introduction

The ubiquitous ship-in-a-bottle (SIB), now most often an inexpensive seaside trinket, was once the highly-crafted pastime of sailors on long voyages of discovery and conquest. It was present at the very beginnings of globalisation, and it is present now, in an era of ever-present globalisation. Its meanings however, have changed, adapted, and re-surfaced in different ways over time, providing it with the ability to reveal the multiple and diverse layers of strangeness (and familiarity) encountered as a result of globalisation. First, there is its presence (even in cheap trinket form) as a ghost form of those earlier hand-crafted SIBs that helped make sense of the immensity of the world's as yet unmapped oceans in the era of early sea journeys, when encountering global strangeness was sometimes a genuinely dangerous pursuit. Then, there is its ability to offer comfortingly familiar connotations of the Victorian heyday of the British seaside town; an era in which social values are

often perceived to have been more consolidated and stable (less ‘strange’) than those in the globalising times that have since followed. Then, there is its status as a vehicle for economic success on the part of (mainly) Chinese manufacturers who, putting to one side an all too familiar colonial history that had disastrous consequences for their own nation, engage with the forces of globalisation for financial gain.

Alongside the hugely useful and apposite nature of his work on globalisation more generally, one of Chris Rumford’s biggest influences on me personally was his enjoyment of, and encouragement to continue using, what he called my ‘storytelling form’. Unlike many more traditional academics who had asked where the demographic rigour was, and why anthropological ‘case studies’ were being treated as ‘vignettes’, Chris understood the potential for such work to trigger *different* thoughts to the usual discussions of the global. So, in this chapter, and by way of celebrating his influence and openness to new ways of thinking and doing academia, I tell a story - unapologetically.

Chapter one - The ship on the windowsill

This story starts sat with Donald at the bay window of his small flat in an English seaside town. On the windowsill sits a small SIB – a classic sailing ‘clipper’, in full sail, on blue-green choppy seas. ‘Clippers’, were trading vessels, so-called because they could ‘clip’ days off the usual time for a sea voyage. Throughout the height of the British Empire they carried cargos of exciting new products back to the West from India and China - spices, silk, and much sought-after tea from China. They became potent symbols of British trading power, new global adventure, and the prowess of empire. Models of clippers, which typically had three masts, square-rigging, and a sharply pointed hull designed to slice through the water, were made by sailors on board the ships they represent, during the long periods of inactivity that came about as a result of the lack of wind.

Donald’s SIB is a mass-produced replica of the most typical hand-crafted SIBs. He bought it at one of the many inexpensive souvenir shops in the town, fully recognising that its appeal for him was pure nostalgia for his childhood seaside holidays staying with grandparents. He recalls energetic days playing in the sand and windswept evenings during which his grandfather would regale the children with stories of shipwrecks and pirates. He too, had a SIB on *his* windowsill – a large hand-made one, Donald recalls; again a classic clipper with its sails a-flurry. As his grandfather told the tales of adventures on the high seas, Donald would often gaze at the SIB and try to imagine the sailors heaving down the sails, and calling to each other in rough voices against the crashing sounds of the waves.

For him, it was an object that captured the excitement of seaside holidays (rather than Empire adventures), and his own mass-produced SIB still captures something of that excitement, as well as something of the ‘Great British seaside’ in its heyday¹.

However, Donald speaks of these childhood memories not only as part of an era of ‘the Great British Seaside’, but also as part of ‘more innocent times’, explaining when questioned further, that people had not travelled as much and the British seaside holiday was still something looked forward to by many across the country with a sense of excitement and glee. ‘Donkey rides, sandcastle competitions, and ice-creams were enough excitement ... we felt lucky and happy just to have those things ... simple things really compared to what you can do on holiday nowadays’. This was late 1950s Britain, before the ‘traditional’ seaside holiday had fallen from favour due to changing social tastes and norms and the availability of affordable holidays abroad, which meant that even those on a moderate income could afford to fly to warmer climes, abandoning the British seaside’s bracing waters (Walton, 1983:67-68). What had effectively happened was that the seaside holiday created in Britain had become a victim of its own success, as resorts began to crop up in other (crucially, warmer) countries. As Walton argues, these countries own cultural mores surrounding pleasure, display, and the mingling of the sexes in turn came back to British shores and changed norms: ‘sunshine, swimming and hedonism displaced fresh air, control and formality as the dominant seaside resort idioms’ in the decades following the Second World War (Walton, 1983:67-68). Donald’s attitudes are representative of a wider sentimentality about the seaside; they represent a clinging on to the positive aspects of the quintessentially *British* seaside holiday – healthy, un-glamorous, family fun.

What is that particular version of Britishness for Donald though? Why was knowing *less* about, or at least having less direct experience of, other places and cultures, part of an ‘innocence’ that he

¹ As John Walton writes, the origins of the ‘Great British seaside’ began to emerge in the first half of the nineteenth century when sea-bathing became popular among the higher strata of English society as part of a fashionable concern with the pursuit of health (Walton, 1983:16). According to Walton, the origins of the British seaside town lay in a belief the British shared with much of Catholic Europe that the sea had prophylactic powers. Then, the growth of the railways from the 1840s onwards greatly aided the development of seaside towns, and made it possible for middle- and lower-class people to afford the trip to the seaside (Walton, 1983:16). Blackpool became the world’s first working-class seaside resort in the late nineteenth century, while Margate earned its reputation as a ‘great day at the seaside’ for working-class Londoners. During this period, the seaside was seen as counteracting the impact of the industrial revolution in much the same way as the countryside, but with the addition of ‘pleasure’ and ‘luxury’ as powerful connotations. Queen Victoria’s love of the seaside contributed to this development too, and the sea became very much about holidaying, as opposed to something perceived solely as connected to trade and ships.

has a fondness for? ‘It was simpler’, he explains, ‘people knew what was what ... there were rules in society, and people, on the whole, kept to them ... and knew their place ... there was an order.’ Asked whether he means a hierarchy in the sense of class, he agrees that was *part* of it, but that it was a somehow less tangible order than that; ‘it was about being decent and respectable in the way you could be, considering your situation ... about behaving properly based on who you were and your role in society.’ Crucially of course, for this to be possible, it was about a sense that the majority of people in British society understood what ‘properly’ entailed and indeed were able to understand their own ‘role’ as map-able against a set of understood roles. In many ways, Donald is echoing the sense many had of living in British post-war consensus society in which social cohesion felt stronger than it does today (which is not to suggest that it necessarily was). Yet he is also expressing something of what Chris Rumford meant when he wrote about the past surety of the categories of ‘them’ and ‘us’; and of the fading sense that ‘we’ are definitely not the strangers in ‘our’ own society (Rumford, 2013).

For Donald then, the SIB is an object that connotes the ‘Great British seaside holiday’, but that on a deeper level somehow embodies the ‘innocence’ and ‘simplicity’ of (in his view) more cohesive social times. Importantly though, it also harks back to an age before the repercussions of Empire had become a fully embedded part of life in Britain (and indeed other ex-colonial countries); before new groups of ethnic minorities had become perceived as an established part of its history and fabric, and before its sense of self in the world had become specifically nuanced by being a *former* colonial power. Such imaginations of ‘simpler times’ are undeniably beset by cultural myths surrounding an era when ‘Britain ruled the waves’; days before the onset of pluralism, when values were (apparently) more unified; a time before post-colonialism had changed the face of sceptred Europe and post-colonial guilt dulled its gilded edges. Whether intended or not, Empire, as Eric Hobsbawm puts it, ‘became part of the sentimentalised literary and cinematic memories of the former imperial states’ (Hobsbawm, 1995: 222). The seaside as object of communal nostalgia was about days when Victorian mores meant rules were rules and those who broke them were punished; when fun could be innocent and culture was (apparently) not yet sexualised and self-conscious; and when the stucco-fronted buildings of seaside towns (now crumbling facades) provided grandiose settings for the drama of their times. The cohesion Donald refers to in the later era of his childhood was of course to some extent an illusion built on the remnants of the British Empire, just as the ‘heyday of the seaside’ was really a remnant of Victorian seaside culture.

The tales that Donald’s grandfather told, of shipwrecks and pirates on the high seas, were in many ways tales of Empire. At least, they were tales of times when the seas were less chartered and

more perilous than they are today. They were tales whose characters stemmed from types and roles that emerged due to colonial explorations and encounters. From a non-European viewpoint, they are tales of foreign invasion and forced trade. Yet for Donald, these tales are simply elements of the ‘classic seaside holiday’, rather than evidence of the empire-desires contained inside the bottle. It is as though the Empire has been emptied from the bottle. This is interesting in terms of the function of early SIBs, which were actively created in order to render the oceans less fearsome. The miniature worlds of SIBs were often made by sailors for their wives and sweethearts. In many ways they can be seen as objects that served to reassure and enable comprehension of adventures whose scale and level of danger was at this stage beyond the experience of most people, and therefore unimaginable and frightening. Miniaturization served to render real-life perils less frightening, not only for the maker, but for those close to him. Indeed, alongside this miniaturization was also a process of abstraction, through which ‘real-life’ ships were removed from their perilous habitat of the sea and enclosed in glass, rendering the unknown manageable, controllable, and able to be studied and understood. (See figure 1, below.)

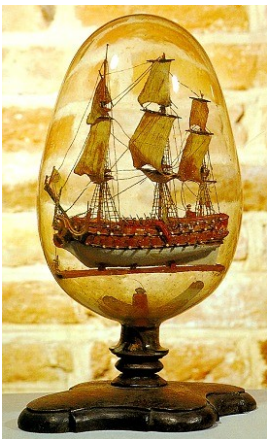


Figure 1: Earliest known SIB. Made by Venice ship Captain, Giovanni Biondo. Dated c.1784

In fact, even before miniature ships, the art of creating scenes in bottles had begun precisely as an exercise in enabling comprehension, with early makers tending to create explanatory scenes of the processes involved in extracting resources from the earth. These semi-educational artefacts, often made in Germany or Eastern Europe, tended to have different ‘layers’ of scenes in order to explain the different parts of the process (Aubry, 2010: 6-8). (See figure 2, below.)



Figure 2: Explanatory scene of fossil fuel extraction. Made by Johann Christian Preust. Dated c.1745

This enclosing of the unknown in glass environments was typical of the Victorian era, during which the new discoveries of the British Empire, such as previously un-seen flora and fauna, were frequently brought home and arranged under glass domes for the educational benefit of the middle-classes. The natural wonders of empire were effectively a fashionable learning tool and display of knowledge in the parlours of the Victorian affluent. As Thad Logan (2001) points out, many twentieth-century commentators cite fruit or flowers modelled in wax and preserved under glass domes as the most characteristically ‘Victorian’ items in the typical well-to-do parlour (2001:174). In addition, she insists that the objects in parlours ‘articulated and mediated Victorian social tensions such as ... issues arising around empire, industry, urbanity, and science (Logan, 2001:106). Along such lines, SIBs captured the sense of adventure and danger felt by a nation which in many ways still felt itself to be on the crest of a wave of global pioneering. They would sit in the cabinets of wealthy Victorians alongside tropical butterflies pinned to velvet, taxidermic wonders and other exotic curios typical of the age, and as such were objects intricately embedded in the meanings of imperialistic relations. Indeed, James Bunn argues that such objects were linked to the mystifications produced by the imperialist economy throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Bunn, 1980: 319). To collect them, was to perceive of oneself as a ‘citizen of the world’ who could not be tied to ‘a single region’ or ‘the limited learning of one era’ (Bunn, 1980: 313). Similarly, in the essay, ‘Unpacking my Library’, in *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin argues that the collector places objects in a kind of magical arrangement which enables a ‘renewing of the world’ as the collector comes to life in the objects. Using stamp collections as his example, he says collecting can also capture the power of great

states (Benjamin, 1999). Interestingly then, the aspirations and self-perception in these colonial times, strike notes with the new kind of ‘stranger’ Rumford’s work tried to explain, who feels themselves to be at home, and yet, not at home, everywhere.

However, miniaturization was not simply about learning and abstraction; it also involved a negation of the details and political machinations of empire that can be likened to what Susan Stewart (1984) refers to as an erasure of history by the miniature. The SIB, encased and made small and manageable unlike its full-scale counterparts, could hide the darker side of the global networks it was enmeshed in. As she argues, ‘the function of the miniature is to bring historical events to life, to immediacy, and thereby to erase their history, to lose us within their presentness’ (Stewart, 1984:60). The SIB can be understood therefore as *fossilized* by its glass surrounding; captured as a *moment* in time as well as an object – a singular moment that has lost the context of the moments that led up to it, or indeed resulted from it. As Stewart argues, the miniature presents only a spatial transcendence, which erases the productive possibilities of understanding through time, and which therefore ‘erases not only labour but causality and effect’ (1984:60). It is precisely this lack of visibility of the processes involved in empire, the obscuring of colonial relations, the bringing of vast swathes of historical events into something immediate and accessible, which made the SIB an object that embodied empire whilst creating a lie about its nature. As an object, the SIB took no responsibility for the exploitative processes involved in empire - it simply captured a moment of grandeur on the high seas.

For their recipients in the colonizing countries, SIBs stood for the majesty of the age of sail, negating the looming presence of colonial backlash such as the opium wars and the ever-brewing tensions in the South China Sea. For British people of the late nineteenth century, the idea of overseas territories was still a source of national pride and had not yet become a guilty embarrassment. As Jeremy Black (2004) argues, ‘morality shared with remembered triumph in a potent psychological brew’ when it came to imperialism, and commentators of the day often saw divine sanction in the greatness of the British Empire, William Wordsworth for example speaking of Britain as a ‘favoured nation’ in his *Ode for the Day of General Thanksgiving* (1816). In addition, as Black argues, the abolition of slavery in 1833 across all British colonies had provided a sense that Britain stood on firm moral ground compared to other imperial powers and was therefore superior (2004:179-180). Indeed, even in 1901 when Queen Victoria died ‘there was much talk of Britain as the uniquely successful imperial power’ and despite the fact the Empire was in flux,

opposition to imperial control was limited due to the notions of community, identity and democratisation embedded within it (Black, 2004:247). Therefore, late-nineteenth century people lived in an age in which the sheer scale of the journeys undertaken, the ships that made them, and the weird and wonderful things they brought back, had created a sense of (as yet un-tainted) wonderment. SIBs, then, for the British subject, were objects linked to a sense of one's country's expanding place in the world.

Donald's mass-produced SIB however, does not serve to domesticate the sense of the gargantuan, threatening nature of the oceans—these are now mapped and 'conquered'. Rather, it enables a celebration of the seaside with just a touch of nostalgia. As Jeremy Black (2004) argues, after the First World War, although pride in empire was strong, the psychological draw of the sea changed in nature: '...the popular imagination was far more engaged by the car and the plane. The ocean now had less of an impact than the *seaside* [my italics] ... those on the beaches, promenades and piers eyed each other up, rather than gazing out to consider the nation's maritime destiny' (Black, 2004:281). The trials of empire expressed in the earlier SIBs had also become 'trinketized'—to use John Hutnyk's (2014) term— rendered acceptable, un-threatening, and above all, buyable as seaside souvenirs. The very fact they were becoming mass-produced souvenirs, suggests that they had become in some sense 'safe' objects that commemorated agreed upon values of wholesome family fun by the sea. Their connection to memories of colonial adventures on the high seas was fading.

It was precisely this sentimentalizing of the seaside as part of a golden age, not only of Empire, but also of Britain's social history (the 'Great British Seaside'), that led to the market for mass-produced seaside trinkets such as Donald's SIB. They became kitsch pieces of cheap frippery on the windowsills of seaside cottages, to be smiled at with nostalgic but knowing looks in which the looker recollected some vague and now mismatched ideas from various eras – exploration, Empire, bathing carriages and donkey rides - in a manner very much akin to what Henri Lefebvre terms the 'blending of memory, recollection, the imaginary, the real' that the kitsch object can possess (2008 [1981]: 133). This 'blending' led to an object that many, Donald being one of them, find deeply comforting. It speaks not only to a time when 'you knew where you were' and 'there was an order' as he says, but also when (to put it in Rumford's terms) you knew if you were a stranger or not. You knew who 'us' and 'they' were, unlike in what he calls the 'generalized

condition of societal strangeness' in which such differentiations are increasingly problematic (2013).

The great era of sail declined towards the end of the nineteenth century, as steam ships gradually overcame the advantages enjoyed by clipper ships—such as relying on free wind power rather than coal, and not needing to lose time on refuelling stops. Even before they were rendered obsolete by steam, the 1869 opening of the Suez Canal drastically shortened sailing times from Europe to Asia and decreased the necessity of sail ships designed for speed. Trade journeys were no longer the epic voyages they had been throughout most of the nineteenth century and there was no time for sailors to make models. In addition, the onset of mass production and containerization of global trade saw huge container ships traversing the same historic sea routes as their sail predecessors, bringing hundreds of factory-made SIBs to be sold as nostalgic tourist paraphernalia in the seaside souvenir shops...

...and there, on the bottom of Donald's SIB, imprinted in the glass, are the words 'Made in China'...

Chapter two - The ship that was made in China

In a small display booth, about two metres square, on one side of a never-ending wholesale market in the Chinese city of Yiwu, sits a small, mass-produced SIB, identical to the others around it – sailing clippers, sails at full mast, on choppy green seas, just like Donald's. The stall-holder – Mr W – explains that manufacturers of SIBs tend to mainly make models of the tea clippers as they are considerably more popular amongst wholesale buyers (and consumers) than those depicting more contemporary scenes¹. When asked sensitively what historical meaning such ships have for Chinese people, he states plainly that they are recognised as British vessels that played a large part in trade with China – especially the tea trade. Pushed a little further, he acknowledges that the era of the clippers is sometimes seen as a 'painful memory' in terms of China's history.

What Mr W is implicitly referring to is the damage inflicted upon China during the Opium Wars – two wars from 1839-1842 and 1856-1860 between Britain and China. The disputes arose

¹ These informal interviews with Chinese manufacturers were carried out over the course of two months in the city of Yiwu, China, as part of an AHRC-funded research project. The interviews were with various manufacturers, not only those of SIBs. The project forms the bases of the author's book *On the Commodity Trail* (2015).

due to Britain's increasing demand for tea, alongside the strict control of trade with foreigners through the Canton System¹ (1757-1842), the lack of interest in British goods, and the fact that China would only accept Silver, not gold, as payment. This situation led to huge trade deficits between the two nations, and in response British merchants began trading in opium from India – a move that not only saw them finally find a product the Chinese wanted to buy, but had the added benefit of enabling profit to be made from the Indian colony which had up to that point been money-losing. The importing of opium was initially tolerated by the Qing government - in fact opium smoking was not unusual amongst even the highest in Chinese society. The problems began in the early nineteenth century when Britain stole tea plants from China, and took them to India where they started their own tea plantations and no longer needed to buy tea from China, meaning that China was paying Britain for opium and not recovering that money by Britain buying tea with it. In addition, China was beginning to realize just how disastrous the effects of opium addiction were becoming for its economy and society. The drug was destroying the lives of huge numbers of the Chinese populace and its sale was creating vast profits for the British merchants. John Fairbank refers to the British opium trade as 'the most long-continued and systematic international crime of modern times' (1992:35) and the opium wars that ensued as a result of it have rightly gone down in history as some of the most morally contentious.

Despite the obviously immoral behaviour of the British towards China, and the strong sense of being bullied, there was in China at the time, a public feeling in many quarters that regardless of the moral rights and wrongs of the opium trade, its handling by the Chinese was proof of their own 'weakness' and should be blamed on the dynastic leaders as much as the Western powers. Others still, went further in their self-critique, formulating a kind of self-essentialised version of 'the Chinese character' in order to explain events, and promoting emulation of the West and all things Western as the solution to standing up to the West. This was the philosophy of the New Culture Movement in the 1910s and 1920s which saw Confucianism as totally incompatible with the new state of China and believed what China needed was to import certain Western values – equality, human rights, progressive science, freedom – and use them to combat the West. Indeed, Julia Lovell asserts that Chinese writers in the nineteenth century tended to use the memory of the Opium War more as a spur toward modernization, seeking answers for why China was weak, rather than dwelling on anger

¹ The Canton System was a single port system in which all external trade had to pass through Canton (Guangzhou) and was required to be managed by one of thirteen Chinese merchants known as Hongts.

toward Britain. In fact, she argues, it was not until the Nationalist regime of the 1920s and 1930s that the Opium War began to be taught as a moment of great national shame and humiliation that all citizens should work together to counter (Lovell, 2011).

The attitudes of Mr W are certainly far more in keeping with this counter-movement (and indeed the way in which such nationalism has been promoted throughout the reform era (1978-present) in China. He emphasizes that Chinese manufacturers cannot afford to care what they make, and are solely concerned with finding products that make financial sense and a good profit margin – ‘if this is making models of British colonial ships, so be it’. So, Chinese factories churn out bottled versions of the very tea clippers that brought opium to Chinese shores causing a huge percentage of the population to become addicted and the economy to fall into ruin. There is little place for sentimental reactions to history in Mr W’s world. His attitude is purely instrumental – history and its ironies stand firmly in second place for him, when profit is at stake. ‘China today is about getting on, improving things... I make whatever works. I have many Western buyers who come to me for these model ships. Last year I was making different products. Now I am making these. It doesn’t bother me – I just do good business.’ Effectively, manufacturers such as Mr W have re-appropriated the role such vessels played in the British colonial exploitation of China and forged them as part of their own current-day production prowess. They are owning their own colonial experience in order to sell it back to the West; making historical events that are often presented as part of a history ‘done to’ China, part of a present in which such events are sold back to those who ‘did to’. This therefore presents a particularly interesting example of grapples with the question of who is globalising and who is being globalised. For Mr W, a globalising world is as much, if not more, about his ability and agency to sell history back to whoever is happy to buy it, as it is about histories and culture from elsewhere forcing their way into his everyday life.

Furthermore, Mr W is embedded in his country’s own historical trajectory within a globalising world - a trajectory that, precisely, has enabled him to operate in the way he does in business. The existence, or rather, creation of the city of Yiwu has enabled manufacturers and wholesalers such as Mr W to reconfigure their relationship with both the colonial histories of their nation, and the current-day globalising processes they find themselves, and make themselves, part of. Yiwu is famous for its wholesale markets, in fact it was built around them, transforming itself from a small village to a global hub over the past three decades. Most of its companies are small family-owned enterprises that manufacture small, inexpensive commodities such as socks, toothbrushes, plastic cups and cheap ornaments and has become a huge economic driver for the whole of the Yangtze River Delta region.

This success is due largely to the adoption of a specific economic paradigm - the Wenzhou model¹ – based on numerous small-scale private enterprises, facilitated by highly mobile traders who utilize various forms of informal finance. This means that the Wenzhou model works to maintain low costs in return for low profit margins, which in turn means scale is required in order for the low profit margin per unit to still deliver economic viability overall. Therefore, typically, the Wenzhou model relies on small family businesses, making low-value products, in great numbers. The model is historically specific to Wenzhou city in south-east Zhejiang province, and has existed for centuries despite struggling to be accepted under both Confucian and Maoist rule. However, it was with the coming to power of Deng Xiao-ping in 1978 that the Wenzhou model began to gain clout. Deng’s reform and opening policies saw a new national rhetoric of creating individual entrepreneurs of all Chinese citizens – Mr W was one of this new wave of entrepreneurs who ‘leapt into the sea’ (as it was called) by setting up his own business and giving up his state-funded job. He became part of China’s manufacturing revolution, and its (then) newly burgeoning engagement with a globalising world. For him, this was the point at which China took charge of its own history, and he expresses pride in being part of that historical moment. He recognises that the success of low-end Chinese products, or ‘Made-in-China’, changed consumptive habits in the West, causing Western consumers to expect a low price. The SIB in Yiwu is part of a globalised and globalising process, and is typical of the type of product required as part of this, as Mr W knows only too well. It is indicative of the changes in China, the changes in Mr W’s own life, and the changes in attitudes towards history (with all its globalising forces).

Chapter three - on what to do with strangeness

There are implications in the folds of the pages between Donald’s story and Mr W’s story about the ways in which we might view strangeness and the stranger. One of the points Rumford makes in *The Globalisation of Strangeness* is that the stranger still needs to be visible in order to exist, but tends to ‘arise from within society’ as opposed to from outside of it (2013:7). This manufacturing ‘stranger’

¹ The Wenzhou model originates from Yonjia county (in which Wenzhou is situated) in Zhejiang province. Unlike other proponents of neo-Confucianism, Yonjia thinking placed emphasis on business, arguing that traders, not only officials, could be the backbone of society. Therefore, unlike in other provinces, in Wenzhou, commercialism was celebrated, and went largely unnoticed by the emperor as the region was quite cut-off geographically. If the Wenzhou model was viewed with suspicion under Confucianism, it was positively controversial under Mao and indeed banned even before full collectivization began to take place. Under Maoist logic, it was deemed to be particularly capitalistic in nature as it was seen to rely upon individualism and small-scale entrepreneurship (i.e. at the level of the family unit). However, following the coming to leadership of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the reform and opening policies initiated saw Wenzhou become the first city to set up private enterprises and shareholder cooperatives.

(Mr W) who made Donald's SIB then, is invisible to Donald, as he is far away and does not physically enter Donald's world. (Of course it was this urge to reveal the unseen others and, importantly, their labour, that led David Harvey to extol the virtues of following things in order to uncover their production and defetishize them.) Indeed, when Donald is asked about where his SIB was made he has not really thought about it, being more caught up on the familiarity of the object than its strangeness. At this stage at least, it is more a comfort to him than a trigger for a minor version of what Rumford called a 'globalization moment', in which an individual suddenly feels the forces of globalisation 'bearing down' on their lives' (2013: 10). He sees it as capturing something explicitly 'national' and 'British', rather being a container for concepts with far wider impacts – such as colonialism, or globalisation.

Globalisation in this chapter has emerges in many guises - current-day waves of immigration bringing 'strangers' to our shore in (according to Donald) 'ever-increasing numbers'; the globalisations of Victorian adventures on the high seas and the impact of such colonising missions for non-Europeans; and the globalisations of the Chinese manufacturing revolution bringing tourist trinkets for rock-bottom prices. There are many layers and many different strangers here. There are many points at which a ubiquitous object such as the SIB is rendered strange and familiar in different ways. In fact, the story of the SIB from the eighteenth century to the present day, and the impact this history had on this object's status as a cultural artefact in Britain, is in some ways the story of making the strange familiar, and the familiar strange. It first existed to make the strangeness of the oceans more familiar and reassuring; it then took on aspects of a familiar and 'cosy' seaside, only to be used to re-expose the strangeness and pain of Empire. From its function as a collectible in the age of empire, to its transition into kitsch souvenir as the British Empire began to fade and containerization brought mass versions of previously hand-crafted objects into ubiquity, the SIB has skipped in and out of a story about colonial power, globalisation, strangeness and familiarity.

In becoming mass-produced, and therefore kitsch, SIBs came to be an object that could be viewed ironically, and enabled the subversion of its previous meanings, leaving it open to multiple interpretations and associations. As Sam Binkley (2000) argues, 'the uniqueness of kitsch is a distinct style, one which celebrates repetition and conventionality as a value in itself' (2000:133). He notes the ability of kitsch to topple old assumptions about cultural hierarchies based on the supremacy of 'high culture', and agrees with those theorists (such as Lawrence Grossberg, John Fiske and Stuart Hall) who posit consumers as intrinsically creative and critical in their choices. Kitsch, for him, must be seen as a distinct category that deflects creativity and innovation whilst celebrating routine,

sentiment, and banality, revelling in a repetition of the familiar and a resounding affirmation of the everyday (Binkley, 2000:133). With the SIB, this affirmation of the everyday is done with a knowing nod to the past and to its reinterpretation in the present. While it does indeed spurn creativity as Binkley argues, the kitsch SIB is, on a subtle psycho-social level, creative in itself as it exists to encourage enjoyment in recreating the past in the present.

The kitsch-ing of the SIB has also enabled the subversion of its previous meanings, leaving it open to multiple interpretations and associations. Therefore, in many ways the kitsch-ing of the SIB is an opportunity. Empire is neither emptied out of the bottle nor rendered harmless by the kitsch SIB; rather, kitsch enables the SIB to play upon its own connotations and subvert previous meanings. The kitsch SIB does precisely that—it recreates its own past as an object, sea-bathing pasts, and colonial pasts of all nations. It is quintessentially post-modern, and as a post-modern object it leaves itself open to multiple interpretations and associations. If the ‘trinketizing’ of the ship-in-bottle has made it a comforting object that affirmed social norms, then the ‘kitsching’ of it in the era of mass-production has opened it up to ironic interpretations and uses. The advent of the SIB as mass-produced kitsch object also makes it a contested object—one that carries multiple associations from its various pasts. It is perhaps the familiar made strange that Rumford speaks of; there is something unheimlich about the return of these histories. So, if the mass production of the ship-in-bottle in the seaside era has made it a comforting object that affirmed (by-gone) social norms for some (like Donald), then it has also opened it up to ironic interpretations and uses - an object that carries multiple associations from its various pasts. It can then, as well as rendering the strange familiar, render the familiar strange. It can take the connotations of ‘seaside holidays’ and force a re-recognition of the colonial origins of the SIB.

A recent example of how this contestation can manifest itself is the work of the British artist of African descent Yinka Shonibare who has re-asserted the colonial nature of the SIB by making a 1.30 metre replica SIB of Nelson’s HMS Victory. (See figure 3, below.) First displayed on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, it now sits permanently outside the Greenwich Maritime Museum in London. Shonibare, who was born of Nigerian parents, describes the inspiration for his work as his awareness of the part the colonial process (including the HMS Victory itself) played in the formation of his own identity: ‘If Napoleon’s fleet had won that battle, I might be speaking to you in French because victory at Trafalgar enabled the British Empire to expand further. The French would have had control of the seas if that hadn’t been the case’ (Hoult: 2014). It is the sails of the model ship that have particular

meaning here. They are made from wax fabric - batik - that in past eras was sold to West Africa as part of colonial trading. While culturally associated with genuine African identity (at one time being worn by African nationalists as a sign of solidarity), the cloth has actually accrued many complex, and often ambivalent associations, in addition - those of colonialism, industrialisation, emigration, cultural appropriation, and the invention (and reinvention) of tradition. As Shonibare explains, 'It [the cloth] was made in Hyde, near Manchester, and I buy it in Brixton market. I like the fact that something seen as being African is actually the product of quite complex cultural relationships' (Hoult: 2014).



Figure 3: Yinke Shonibare's SIB on its pedestal at the Greenwich Maritime Museum.

Shonibare's artwork is one example of the ways in which British postcolonial relationships can be played out via objects with contested memories and is typical of the beginning of an era in which such kitsch-ed objects can be appropriated using the as-yet (still) less seen and heard interpretations of post-colonial subjects. So with the advent of the SIB as a mass-produced kitsch object, it also becomes a contested object – one which, now carrying associations from various parts of its past, can be discussed precisely as its parts, rather than as a single object with a unified meaning. This is then an object that represents strangeness very well. This lack of unified meaning had its base not only in the postmodern nature of the images now associated with the SIB, but also in the more tangible fact that in a post-colonial era, 'meaning' was no longer agreed upon. History itself was a contested realm – whose history, of what, where, when and defined by whose agenda? The post-colonial subjects of Britain's former empire, now citizens, could not entirely accept the trinketizing of 'their' historical experience and 'their' 'collective' memory of colonial times, and began to compete with the other 'collective' memory of the British seaside, making the ship-in-a-bottle a contested object, whose

meaning deserves to be fought over. The ‘strangers’ are refusing to allow a simple reading of the SIB by the ‘non-strangers’, because these strangers are actually joint owners in the story of the SIB and all it stands for. They challenge the normative view of the SIB, making visible its layers, and rendering untenable its status as a comfortably familiar object.

The twenty-first century SIB then, is an object that in many ways acknowledges various past versions of itself and yet contains none of them, re-forging of itself a discursive site for contesting the truths of empire and the experience of living in the globalised and globalising present-day. The SIB, interpreted as an object of high-globalisation, captures the layers of belonging that means the stranger must be seen within ‘us’ as well as within ‘others’. The mass production of the SIB has enabled it to operate as an object with the potential to awaken the realisation that ‘we are all strangers now’ (as Rumford said). And perhaps as such, the best potential reaction is to take such objects and subvert them as Shonibare has, rendering them proof (and more to the point) *celebration* of the ways in which ‘we’ are no longer ‘we’, and ‘we’ are not quite sure who ‘they’ are. In this way, objects can become vehicles for discrediting and disabling the rhetoric of other powerful ‘stranger makers’ (Trump, Farage, May, Brexit, Fascists – the link is intentional!). After all, the strangers that ‘came today’ and didn’t ‘leave tomorrow’, are the strangers that are all of us, and objects such as the SIB capture the layers of history that went to create of the stranger a less definable and far more challenging subject through which to view the processes of globalisation.

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