

Academic Profiles

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Alasdair Pinkerton, Geography, Royal Holloway

Key Words: Environment

Alasdair is a political geographer whose research explores the history, heritage and geopolitics of some of the world's most intriguing and contested places. He has worked with communities around the world to enhance their capacity to tell their own stories of the places in which they live or have been displaced from, accounting for issues of war, conflict, environmental change, diplomacy, nationalism and colonialism.

Using immersive storytelling techniques, Alasdair has collaborated with other academic colleagues, Google Arts and Culture, ScanLab and StoryFutures to develop experimental approaches to the digital 'capture' and reconstruction of spaces that are abandoned, inaccessible or which no longer exist. In his most recent work, Alasdair has explored how immersive story techniques and technologies can, themselves, be displaced from the hands of media and professionals and academics and placed into the hands of communities to take control of, and curate, their own stories and (in)tangible heritage(s).

Alasdair has an expertise in the British Overseas Territories and global geopolitics, and is keen to explore how the audio-visual archive can be accessed, reinterpreted, put back "in place", and used to critically re-examine the UK's global relationship with its former Empire as well as its continuing relationship with its own Overseas Territories. The BFI, for example, hosts the archives of the Empire Marketing Board, as well as a considerable collection of historic news reels. In so doing, there are opportunities here to think about how VR and immersive storytelling can be used to decolonise the archive, and to bring the archive into closer and more intimate contact with the places and communities from which they originally came.

Amy Tooth Murphy, History, Royal Holloway

Key Words: LGBTQ+, Celebration

The story of LGBTQ+ people in the UK is, like all human stories, one of joy and pain, hope and fear, celebration and struggle. VR technologies allow us to centre these universal human emotions so as to present the histories of LGBTQ+ people in accessible and engaging ways, challenging prejudice and building understanding in the process.

The road to equality is long and winding. Huge progress has been made, yet homophobia, biphobia and transphobia remain a reality for many LGBTQ+ people. Despite increased rights and legal protections, in recent years hate crime against LGBTQ+ people has gone up, not down, with reported attacks increasing by 147% in the months following the Brexit referendum, and doubling overall since 2013.

Amy Tooth Murphy is a queer historian who uses oral history to uncover, explore and share the lives of LGBTQ+ people, as told in their own words. Amy is passionate about the power of storytelling to build communities, challenge prejudice, and create a more empathetic and compassionate society. She is excited about this opportunity to use immersive technologies to engage new audiences in LGBTQ+ lives and histories, and is keen to explore approaches such as:

- The use of point of view to give audiences the chance to experience a day in the life 'in someone else's shoes', allowing a deeply experiential insight into the richness of LGBTQ+ lives.
- Oral history testimonies to create relatable but impactful scripts for the characters participants would meet along the way.

Overall, Amy would welcome collaborations that adopt an ethos that is neither a 'sob story' nor didactic nor haranguing but instead adopt an approach that is ultimately joyful and uplifting, tying in the central theme of universal human emotions. In such an approach VR could enable audiences to ask important questions about belonging, identity and mutual understanding.

Anica Zayen, Management, Royal Holloway

Key Words: Work, Technology, Disability

Disability is ubiquitous, yet often unseen and misunderstood. Over 14% of the UK population have a registered disability; a number that is likely to increase due to long-Covid. The UK has been a central part of the global disability rights and empowerment movement: from the birth of the Paralympic games, to its key role in pushing forward the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to being one of the first countries to professionalize the training of guide dogs.

Despite this, disabled people are twice as likely to be unemployed than the non-disabled.

Anica Zeyen is an expert in the link between disability and work or entrepreneurship. Anica is specifically interested in how disabled people create meaning at work for themselves despite structural and interpersonal discrimination and how disabled people navigate the disability-ability nexus. She is further interested in how disabled people shape their work, use assistive technologies or other support systems.

Anica's research is especially well suited to supporting VR explorations of archive that embrace and celebrate the histories and lived experience of disabled people. Anica is interested in helping companies showcase the contributions of disabled people to society through their unpaid and paid working lives

Anica is a disability advocate and activist herself. She is a guide dog owner and active in various disability organizations.

Armando Garcia, Media Arts, Royal Holloway

Key Words: Celebration

Armando Garcia's research explores how new technologies such as 3D real-time production techniques, spatial audio and ray tracing can help us reconstruct and engage with spaces that no longer exist. He is also interested in the way that VR experiences bring a spatial and temporal perspective that has the power to connect with the audience. His research aims to help audiences reconnect with the past, and experience reconstructed spaces using archives such as video, photographs or other materials.

Below are two ideas for possible focus for this collaboration, and Armando is open to other suggestions.

Music, escapism, and nostalgia: music plays a huge part in our lives. Music venues are often special places: our first kiss, first drink, dancing like no one's watching. Many of these venues such as the Hacienda, Manchester, the Wigan Casino and The Shire Horse Inn in St. Ives Cornwall, home to a huge 1990's rave scene are now housing developments. One idea would be to find a special venue which is no longer with us and tell its story in VR.

V.E. Day through the lens of history: another idea might be to recreate a V.E. Day Street party that spans many generations and that could lend itself well to visual cues and documentary audio with changes in aesthetics as we move towards contemporary times as we walk down the street with a big, long central table as the main concourse. We begin in Sepia on the first V.E. Day – move to Black and White as we move down the busy terraced houses – to a VHS Deeley Bopper 80's video aesthetic and end with modern day photoreal graphics. Bunting, flags, spitfires and Lancaster Bombers parading overhead, becoming Red Arrows as the experience develops.

Claire Lynch, Brunel University London

Key Words: LGBTQ+

Between 2015 and 2019 the Office for National Statistics reported a 40% increase in UK families led by LGBTQ+ parents. Today's LGBTQ+ parents were raised and educated during the years of Section 28 (1998-2003) in which schools were banned by law from presenting 'homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. How do the queer stories these parents grew up with ('where did we come from?') contrast with those they are able to share with their own children ('where are we headed?')

Section 28 was inspired, in part, by the controversy surrounding the children's book *Jenny Lives With Eric and Martin*. What stories can we tell about LGBTQ+ families now so that all children can see themselves represented positively and realistically?

Claire Lynch's research focuses on the ways people represent their experiences in writing, our attempts to capture memory, and the effort towards (and challenges of) telling the 'truth' about our own lives.

Examples of her media work can be found via the National Childbirth Trust, and the Washington Post, BBC Radio 4's Four Thought and Some Families Podcast. Claire's latest book, *Small: On Motherhoods*, was published last month.

Frank Keating, Law and Social Work, Royal Holloway

Key Words: Health, Race

Frank Keating's research over the last decade focused primarily on issues of race and mental health. In particular, he has been interested in understanding the situation for racialised minorities across the UK in relation to disparities in mental health. These groups have more adverse pathways into mental health, experience the harsher end of treatment and have poorer mental health outcomes.

These are challenging stories that need to not simply be heard or seen via traditional media, but *experienced* via the opportunities of Virtual Reality. The opportunity to link archive to experience is of particular interest to Frank.

His most recent research, 'Breaking Circles of Fear', explored what supports mental health recovery for African and Caribbean men from a social perspective. The study, based in Leeds and London, showed that there are four pillars of recovery: safe spaces, identity, relationships and agency.

Helen Littleboy, Media Arts, Royal Holloway

Key Words: Covent Garden, London, Documentary

Helen Littleboy researches authorship in non-fiction filmmaking and synthesises industry practice as an executive producer in television documentary with the writing of critical theory.

As an executive producer her recent work includes the award-winning BBC2 series *Hospital*, Royal Television Society best documentary series (2018), the single BBC1 film *Surviving the Virus*, currently shortlisted for a Grierson (2021), and *This is Our Family*, four intimately authored longitudinal portraits of family life currently streaming on Sky Atlantic (2020).

Helen is particularly interested in the ways in which devices including character construction and dramatic story telling can be used to encourage strong audience engagement with difficult or challenging issues and content but more broadly

explores how new practices and technologies are impacting on the authoring of digital stories.

Helen is excited to collaborate on the creation of a VR piece that takes as its starting point London's Covent Garden and the history of public place. The history of Covent Garden, a site that has always attracted "all sorts" from all over the world, includes a deep seam of vice and criminality. Yet how much does the authoring of its story - from newspaper prints of panicked street cleaning during one of the 19C's own pandemic, cholera, to 1960s newsreel of the 'chirpy' Cockneys of the fruit and veg market - reflect an authentic history of this space? Which of its stories can best be told to grip VR users and engage new audiences with immersive experiences across the UK?

Helen Nicholson, Theatre, Royal Holloway

Key Words: Health

Attitudes to ageing have changed over time, and this is reflected in how older adults are represented in the arts and culture. Many people have active and productive lives well into their eighties, challenging societal perceptions of later life. There are also currently around 850,000 people living with dementia across the UK, and indications are that this figure will rise incrementally.

Helen Nicholson is an expert in cultural attitudes to ageing and dementia care. Many archival films in the BFI represent the lives of older adults and their care, opening creative opportunities to explore how everyday experiences of ageing have changed over time.

Helen's research challenges associations between dementia and failure or loss, showing that all people - including those with advanced dementia - can learn new creative skills when they and their carers are attuned to their cultural heritages, tastes, physicality, sensory memories and their everyday lives. This is a wide-ranging topic and she welcomes collaborations that explore questions about age and ageing such as: What does the world look like for someone living with dementia? How have care and caring relationships changed over time? How do people with different faiths, cultures and heritages regard old age? What places, objects and journeys tell stories of later life? Opportunities also exist to build on Helen's extensive experience of theatre with young people and in community settings to explore questions that affect the younger generation. What will today's ten-year olds experience when they are 90 in 2101? How do they imagine old age?

Jessica Boyall, Media Arts, Royal Holloway

Key words: Celebration, Race, Class, Gender

Jessica's research specialises in twentieth century experimental filmmaking, particularly how it links to histories of minority groups, women and the working

classes. Having previously worked on experimental archive projects at the V&A and other museums, Jessica is excited by the possibility of re-animating film and television archives in VR via projects that bring past traditions, celebrations and communal practice to life.

With this in mind she's really open to different possibilities on the kind of subjects that might be explored but some examples of topics that she is interested in include (but are not limited to):

- The development of West Indian sound system cultures and carnival traditions in the late twentieth century which took place across different urban contexts including in Notting Hill and Leeds (where major carnivals took place) as well as in clubs located in smaller towns such as Huddersfield.
- Music collectives such as minings choirs and folk groups which evolved throughout the UK as a means of preserving and celebrating working class culture and heritage.

Jessica brings a deep understanding of art, music and performance in the history of minority groups to any collaboration.

Jon Hughes, Media Arts, Royal Holloway

Key Words: Sport, Migration, Race, Class

Jon Hughes researches the history of sport and leisure. His work explores how sport connects cultures and people, helps form national, community and class identities as well as how it is used as a tool of ideology and propaganda. Jon's interest in sport is as diverse as the people who play it, ranging from work on the German heavyweight boxer Max Schmeling, the 'craze' for sport in Europe that followed the end of the First World War, through to the cultural significance of mountaineering and literary depictions of cycling.

For this collaboration, Jon is keen to help companies explore topics that challenge some of the pre-conceptions about sport and broaden the horizons of visitors. Some examples of such an approach include:

- the impact/legacy of black and Asian citizens, immigrants and exiles on sport in Britain, e.g. Andrew Watson (the first black international footballer, the first black player to be selected for Scotland); Walter Tull (professional footballer and the first black officer in the British army to command white troops); West Indian cricketers who played in Britain from the 1950s, such as Gary Sobers and Viv Richards;
- the story of women's football in Britain – it reached a peak of popularity during and after the First World War when women's teams such as Dick Kerr's Ladies attracted larger crowds than many men's teams, before the FA effectively banned it and put the women's game back by many decades
- the emergence of cycling (the bicycle was popularized and perfected in Britain) in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries as both affordable

means of transport and competitive sport; the empowering effect for women.

- The fight for the right to roam – the ‘mass trespass’ at Kinder Scout in the Peak District in 1932, co-ordinated by young, working-class, Jewish Mancunian Benny Rothman and the British Worker Sports Federation. People have benefitted massively from these efforts during the recent lockdowns, mostly without knowing it as the existence of public rights of way and footpaths is taken for granted. It’s a dramatic story!

Nick Lee, Media Arts, Royal Holloway

Key words: Class

Traditionally class has been a barrier to entry into the cultural institutions of the UK. Few of Britain’s most lauded writers and artists come from working-class backgrounds. For the cultural institutions of the UK to be relevant to the population of the country, they need to reflect it – both historically and in the present. The stories of working-class writers and artists are often closely linked to specific locations and local industry, and to family struggles as a result of poverty and insecurity.

One possible story that explores such themes is that of Archie Hill (1928-1986), a near-forgotten working-class writer and television presenter from the Black Country. Hill’s books recount his experiences of growing up in the Black Country, and the working practices of those around him. His story provides the opportunity to explore this particular theme in detail through rich archive material.

Nick edits a special collection on working class artists and writers and would welcome collaborations that explore the relationship amongst class, culture, creativity and belonging.

Rachael Squire and Harriet Hawkins, Geography, Royal Holloway

Key words: Environment

We live in an era of environmental crisis: from climate change and sea level rise, to the destruction caused by mining, polluting microplastics, and the mass extinction of species around the world. Stories have been recognised as a very powerful way of engaging us with such environmental concerns. Yet often the stories we tell about environmental damage and its effects are stories of far off places or future times; epitomised in images of polar bears or drowning islands in the South Pacific. While all these stories have a vital place, they can suggest to those living in the Western World that environmental damage happens in other places, and in the future, rather than ‘in the here and now.’ Furthermore, a series

of environments - such as the sea bed or the subsurface are often overlooked in these stories- out of sight, out of mind. Such disconnections can act as a barrier to empathy, to building concern for the environment, and to bringing about much needed behaviour change.

Rachael Squire and Harriet Hawkins are excited by the possibilities that VR offers for telling stories that might challenge such disconnections. As geographers working on themes of environment, people and place, they are fascinated by how storytelling offers can help people understand, engage with and value their local environments and their connections to our global world. They are interested in how VR might tell stories of overlooked or hidden places and the environmental damage that occurs in such 'out of sight' places, such as the deep sea or the underground. They are also keen to explore the value of telling stories of the solutions people have found to environmental concerns.

Sometimes these stories might feel more like science fiction, proposing innovative ways of living, new ways to grow food, or new forms of cars. But other stories might focus on local community resilience, emphasising for example how a local community remembers and adapts to flooding, or exploring histories of local environmental activism.

They are interested in making links between stories of past, present and future environmental engagements, and between local and global stories, in order to shape current environmental attitudes; this might include exploring;

- Past visions of the future and solutions to environmental problems – these may be quite realistic (e.g. the growth of wind and solar energy) or they might be more akin to science fiction.
- Local memories and first-person accounts of catastrophic environmental events in the UK- e.g. floods, oil spills
- Local stories of environmental activism
- Links between local stories of UK environmental change with experiences elsewhere around the world
- Stories of local but overlooked environments where damage happens 'out of sight', such as on the sea bed or underground.

Selena Daly, History, Royal Holloway

Key Words: Race, Migration, Food, Seaside, Celebration

Selena Daly is a historian of 19th- and 20th-century Europe, focusing on Italy. She has a particular interest in the history of Italian migration and in the creation of Italian communities around the world, including in the United Kingdom. Linked to this is an interest in exploring how Italian migrants have influenced and shaped the social and cultural life of the UK. The kinds of stories that Selena is excited to explore include:

- The British love affair with Italian food: Although virtually every town in the UK can point to an Italian culinary influence whether through the existence

of a Pizza Express or a Caffè Nero, most Britons know very little about the people who first introduced these now ubiquitous foods into this country and how they came to dominate our high streets.

- While some might have heard of 'little Italy' in London's Soho, few will be aware of the Italian ice-cream parlours that served up treats to mining communities in south Wales in the early 20th century or of the fact that it was Italian migrants to Glasgow who first popularized the quintessentially 'British' supper of fish and chips.

Selena is keen on collaborations that explore a celebration of the multicultural fusions and new experiences European migration has brought to Britain.

Simone Gigliotti, History, Royal Holloway

Key Words: Race, Migration, Seaside, Celebration

Seaside resorts feature extensively in the BFI Archive and symbolize how everyday Britons saw themselves, their leisure, and right to access public places. One such place for an immersive adventure into re-visioning identity is the quintessential British seaside resort of Blackpool. Its glimmering seaside is seductive, playful, and therapeutic. The resort town provides compelling options to explore the expressions of ethnic diversity, featuring a user-led re-visualization of Blackpool, transporting them from wherever they are in the UK into this iconic resort. This VR idea repurposes piers, promenades, beaches, dunes, resorts, cafes, and transport hubs captured in home movies and British Transport Films (as hosted in *Britain on Film / BFI Player*) as immersive spaces to re-animate trails of togetherness and cohesion.

Relevant footage: Britain on Film (BFI Player) There are around 50 films which feature Blackpool as a central or minor focus. An indicative selection is below:

- ["My Holiday Blackpool 1939" \(1939\)](#)
- ["A Holiday Call" \(1946\)](#)
- ["Happy Sea side holidays" \(1956\)](#)
- ["Holiday" \(1957\)](#)
- ["The Boys on Blackpool Beach" \(1966\)](#)

Simone Gigliotti is an historian and an expert in the histories and impacts of racial injustice and migration trajectories from and to Europe. Simone is interested in exploring and disrupting archival futures and broadening their contributors' origins. She believes that the archive *Britain on Film / BFI Player* is not only a momentous mirror of social activism and urban and industrial change, but on closer inspection, it also discloses an unsettling under-representation of ethnic minorities in the nation's collecting practices and visual heritage.