

The bloodstains behind the glitter

CITY LIVES
BY JOHANN HARI



AT FIRST glance, it looks like just another flashy, trashy exhibition, only with added bling. The Natural History Museum has gathered together the world's most expensive diamonds and promises to "trace their incredible story — from deep within the Earth to the red carpet".

So far, so blah. But over the past month, this show — thanks to human-rights protesters outside who wouldn't shut up — has morphed from being a glib display of stones to a parable about London life in the early-21st century. It has laid before us, with glittering, glass-cutting clarity, two Londons.

There is the London that wants to gather up the world's riches and unthinkingly revel in the shiny substances we can seize. And there is the London that wants to look beyond the sparkle to the price paid by the rest of the world for our riches — and feels obliged to point out the bloodstain on the carpet.

It all began with a letter from a Kalahari Bushman, Roy Sesana. He is one of the San tribesmen living (and dying) in Botswana — and he knows that diamonds often come at a terrible price.

Just over 150 years ago Cecil Rhodes founded the industry in its modern form by cleansing areas he thought might contain diamonds of the local "niggers", taking them back only as slaves to work in his mines.

Roy believes that not much has changed. After diamonds were

found on the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana in the early Eighties, his people have been driven from their 20,000-year-old homeland with guns, tear gas and attempts at starvation, and diamond companies have snapped up the rights to mine there.

Roy's letter asked for something very simple: for his people's story to be included in the exhibition alongside fawning advertisements for diamond companies.

The museum — which is supposed to use its public funds to educate us honestly — refused, pointing out that the diamond industry claims the Bushmen were ethnically cleansed to make way for tourism, not diamonds. The exhibition's visitors have not been given the information to make up their own minds. Instead, they have been served up a brazen advertisement for De Beers using public money.

When Rhodes's diamonds first flooded into London, the "niggers" who paid in blood and sweat for them were unimaginably distant. Not today. I picked up the phone and called some Kalahari Bushmen to ask what they would like to say to the people attending the exhibition. Jumanea Gakefebona, 30, who has been driven from the land he loves and now lives in a "resettlement camp", said: "We are the victims of diamonds. Please, remember us and do not go. Do not visit the Natural History Museum and support the people who are persecuting us."