Doing the Work
Embedding anti-racism and decolonisation into museum practice

Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Ilaria Puri Purini
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Critical responses to the online workshop series devised by the Contemporary Arts Society and the Decolonising Arts Institute from January to July 2021.

Edited by Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Iliaria Puri Purini
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A recent scene: the only non-white person in the room (hereafter TONWPITR) holds the audience captive as they assert the importance of working continually, self-reflexively and critically on one’s individual positionality in any given space. They – the audience – listen intently. One person responds by praising the ‘strong’ presentation. He fails to recognise his ableist choice of language, singles out the issue of heteronormativity, and side-steps the wider charge of shared and internalised racist and colonialist conditioning. He then asks TONWPITR to share resources, while others express a keen desire to work ‘with communities’. There is talk of ‘flattening hierarchies’, ‘common languages’, ‘toolkits’, and concern about being ‘overly critical’ or ‘too negative’. After countless variations of such scenes over decades, TONWPITR hears all this as familiar rhetorical mechanisms for 1) Hiding power differentials while holding on to power; 2) Centering white Western European patriarchal and imperialist thinking and practice as universal; 3) Hoping ‘the work’ amounts to problems that can be ‘fixed’ as opposed to structures that need systemic dismantling; and 4) Thinly concealing cries of fragility – for fear of shame, humiliation, displacement and destabilisation – in the face of named and unnamed, undifferentiated ‘communities’ of ‘others’. Who is the ‘with’ with? Who and what is ‘the work’ for? TONWPITR minds the minefield of tropes and spectrum of stereotypes elicited by their every word and gesture, shifting stance from surprisingly articulate yet self-effacing assimilationist, to faintly exotic oddball/outsider/outlier, to angry, antagonistic witch. TONWPITR implores: Be open, be honest, take responsibility, act, and enact care. Can you listen without prejudice? Probably not. Can you listen without tone policing? Maybe. And what will you do then? Let’s see.
Introduction

‘Doing the Work: Embedding Anti-Racism and Decolonisation in Museum Practice’ was a series of seven closed, online workshops for museum professionals that took place in 2021. It was co-produced by Anjalie Dalal-Clayton at the Decolonising Arts Institute (University of the Arts London) and Ilaria Puri Purini at the Contemporary Art Society. They developed their idea for the series in 2018, recognising: a failure within the museum and gallery sector to dismantle its entrenched racist, imperial structures and practices; a nervousness or reticence by museum workers to ‘talk specifics’, especially in exposing, open forums; and a dire need to begin ‘doing the work’.

Bearing in mind certain contexts of opposition and resistance that many museum staff find themselves working in, and their need to also consider institutional idiosyncrasies, each workshop was necessarily small, providing participants with an intimate, safe space for focussed conversation where Chatham House Rule applied.

The series was premised on the understanding that it is not possible to produce a one-size-fits-all set of strategies or ‘toolkit’ for embedding anti-racism and decolonisation in museum practice. The onus to develop feasible approaches for doing this work must be on white professionals in the sector. Participants, drawn primarily from the Contemporary Art Society’s museum members, were therefore asked to come prepared to speak generously and candidly about their concerns and experiences, to discuss specific strategies they had trialled where possible, and to offer each other peer support through sharing ideas and offering feedback.

Each workshop focussed on a specific area of museum practice (curating, interventionist strategies, documentation, interpretation, collecting and engagement) and was framed by two presentations given by individuals who have an exemplary track record of implementing anti-racist and/or decolonial practice relevant to the focus of the session. Each workshop was also attended by an early career museum professional who was commissioned to write a discursive account that synthesised and critically reflected on the key areas of discussion, whilst offering anonymity to the participants and institutions involved. Recordings of the framing presentations are available to view on the Contemporary Art Society and Decolonising Arts Institute webpages, and this publication presents the accounts.

The accounts from the ‘Doing the Work’ series offer a unique insight into the specific concerns and experiences of the museum and gallery sector’s ‘frontline’ workers, surface key commonalities across diverse and wide-ranging institutions, and highlight the urgent tasks facing the sector’s leaders. It is hoped that staff working across all areas and levels within museums can use these reports to inform meaningful, embedded and sustainable changes that will, in turn, begin to dismantle the racist and imperial modes of thinking and doing that underpin most museum practices.

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1 ‘Doing the work’ is a refrain within anti-racist discourse that refers to the imperative to examine our individual, deep-rooted perceptions, to change our day-to-day habits, and to take meaningful action to contest and counteract racism in our personal, familial and professional lives.
Overview and provocations
— Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Ilaria Puri Purini

The ‘Doing the Work’ series was conceived as a space for generative discussion rather than one of instruction. Our contention was that museum workers have to grapple with the challenge of dismantling racism, colonialism and imperialism in museums for themselves – that this work must begin with the committed and self-informed individual alongside any sector-wide guidance and directives from funders and accreditors. We therefore asked participants to come prepared to discuss approaches they had tested in their workplaces and to prime themselves by engaging with a variety of readings and resources shared in advance. Although some participants arrived in the online spaces prepared to develop and debate different strategies, there were many who appeared to have only a rudimentary understanding of the notions of race, racism, anti-racism, colonialism, imperialism and decolonisation and how they intersect with the purposes and workings of the museum. On the one hand, this revealed a heartening interest and willingness to ‘do the work’ despite not having engaged with such work before, and on the other, either a naivety about the knowledge that is required or a lack of time to develop that knowledge. Overall, the participants seemed very much at the beginning of their ‘journey’. There was much discussion about the lack of clarity within the sector about what anti-racism and decolonisation mean and look like, and also about there being a lack of commitment and support from those working in leadership positions.

In consequence, our ambition for the series to provide a space in which ideas for feasible strategies could be developed remains largely unrealised. Nonetheless, the workshops were extremely illuminating in that they surfaced, through first-hand testimonies, the difficulties staff are facing in trying to do the work - difficulties they feel senior management and museum directors do not fully appreciate. This collection of reflective summaries on the workshops therefore ‘feeds information up’, making clear how staff on the ground are grappling with the imperative to ‘do the work’, and outlining the specific issues that need addressing, as seen through the critical lens of the early career practitioners who have written them.

Below, we draw out and summarise the key findings and related provocations from the reflective summaries.

1. Naming and framing the problem

Almost every breakout group in every workshop began with commentary on the performative allyship the participants had witnessed their institutions enacting in response to the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. Just as these gestures were quickly critiqued on social media for being hollow and for virtue signalling, the participants expressed the view that their institutions had simply not done enough since to live up to their claims of anti-racism and solidarity with the movement. They described this particularly in terms of museum workers not taking personal responsibility for making change, and in terms of museum leaders not instigating transformational change in institutional operations and structures. Sylvia Theuri comments in her summary that a prerequisite for enabling these types of change is not for institutions to make statements about needing to ‘do better’, but instead to name the problem - that is, to openly acknowledge that they are institutionally racist. Another vital prerequisite, as Kathleen Lawther points out, is for governing bodies and museum directors to genuinely frame this change-making (whether that be in terms of the diversity of museum boards or in the minutiae of object documentation) as critical.

Provocation: Name and frame the problem

Openly acknowledge institutional racism and frame anti-racist and decolonial change-making as critical.
2. White Fragility

The reason why institutional racism within the museum sector has yet to be widely and openly acknowledged, and why anti-racism and decolonisation have yet to be framed as central, critical work, may be due to the defensiveness and resistance that several participants described having witnessed in their workplaces. Jessica Lowe-Mbirimi’s summary identifies this as White Fragility and as a ‘system of disbelief’ that racist and colonial thinking continues to take place within the broadly liberal-minded workforce of the museum. Both Lowe-Mbirimi and Aksana Khan report that the workshop participants described feeling hyper-conscious about, and having to moderate the language they use when discussing, racism in the workplace for fear of how colleagues and line managers might react, and also that museum workers of colour find themselves absorbing the anxieties of their white colleagues. As Lowe-Mbirimi asserts, when there is White Fragility within the museum workforce, ‘honest and productive discussion about the challenges at hand cannot happen, and the status quo remains in place’.

Provocation: Don’t enact White Fragility

Accept that racist and colonial thinking is embedded in the museum and create an environment in which open discussion about it is encouraged.

3. Neutrality and balance

Another factor precluding anti-racist and decolonial work within museums, as identified across the workshops, was an ongoing commitment to neutrality and balance in the sector, whether that be in terms of museums taking a stand on political issues and social justice, or in how they present and interpret objects, history and the human experience. As discussed in Khairani Barokka’s report, numerous participants described finding it difficult to deneutralize or even alter their approaches in a context ‘where museums and cultural institutions are facing fierce opposition from the press, from funders and from certain audiences to even the most gentle of decolonising efforts’ and in a context ‘of an organisational culture that wanted to maintain allegiances to older, whiter audiences’. Barokka points out that even when museums do not explicitly claim to be neutral spaces, the question of ‘balance’ is often invoked. That is, museums assert that they should not privilege one perspective over another. She astutely notes that a supposed need for balance is only usually expressed ‘when the centring of whiteness is challenged, and not the other way around’, and that ‘balance’ is therefore a deceptive means for maintaining the status quo in the museum.

Provocation: Forget neutrality and balance

Take a position informed by ethics, justice and care.
4. Knowledge

Across the workshops, the participants identified deficiencies in knowledge, time and diversity as the urgent issues that need addressing in order for anti-racist and decolonial practices to be embedded within the work of museums. Numerous participants described not knowing what the terms antiracism and decolonisation mean, either in theory or in practice, and that there is rarely an agreed definition of these terms within institutions, let alone across the sector. When combined with what Lowe-Mbirimi describes as ‘the evident complexity of the work that needs to be done’, this lack of knowledge is “causing museum professionals to feel anxious, if not fearful, of “doing it wrong””, resulting in a failure to take action within their respective spheres of influence. But as Lisa Kennedy highlights, this lack of knowledge results from a lack of time and resources for museum staff to carry out the necessary reading and research to develop a sufficient understanding of these key terms and ideas. As Kennedy asserts, ‘within museums there is a disconnect between the two linked imperatives to do the pre-conditional research (e.g. knowing about collections’ connections to colonisation) and to take action (i.e. staging exhibitions and displays in ways that might be considered decolonial or antiracist). The lack of time and funds to support the former represents a barrier to the latter’.

Provocation: Gain the knowledge

Do the necessary research and define the terms.

5. Time

Numerous participants described having to read anti-racist and decolonial literature in their own time, highlighting how space is not made within the scope of their jobs to do this vital ‘pre-conditional’ research. This points towards a general perception within the sector that anti-racism and decolonisation are either optional or that they can be added onto existing work, rather than being understood as central and as a priority. Indeed, as one participant stated, ‘everything to do with diversity and inclusion is extra… we can’t lose any of the exhibitions we have about white male artists – we just have to do more exhibitions… [and that] is replicated in research as well’. Several participants also described how senior management had yet to fully grasp the amount of painstaking work that is involved in ‘doing the work’ and expected them to take on responsibility for decolonising efforts in addition to already full workloads. Describing this state of affairs as ‘shameful’, Lowe-Mbirimi explains, ‘without a demonstrable commitment to change, which involves carving out paid time for museum employees to educate themselves on the issues at hand and the methods with which to address them, significant change within the operating structure of the museum cannot happen’. But perhaps it is the operating structure of the museum that precludes the allowance of time for self-education and research to begin with. As Kennedy shrewdly asks, ‘how can decolonial modes of thinking and doing be adopted by museums if the colonially-rooted systems of our art institutions run counter-current to them, and if their neoliberal structures deny museum workers the time and space to develop such modes in the first place?’ The answer to this conundrum may lie in the total reconception of the form and purpose of the museum. Theuri considers the toppling of Bristol’s Colston statue a metaphor for the ‘significant fall and tearing down of historically problematic ways of working’ that is required in the cultural sector, involving a de-centring of whiteness and a much slower pace in programming that can allow all staff the time needed ‘to read and reflect on what genuine anti-racist and decolonial practices look like’, within their paid hours. But as Theuri asks, ‘how far are institutions prepared to go with radical acts of change that demand tearing down and rebuilding with others from the ground up?’

Provocation: Make time

Ensure that paid time is carved out of existing work schedules for all staff to develop sufficient knowledge about anti-racism and decolonisation.
6. Diversity

The third broad issue that participants across the workshops identified as needing urgent attention was, unsurprisingly, diversity. The issue of diversity was discussed in a variety of ways, namely diversity in the histories, narratives and perspectives that museums present, and also in terms of museum staffing. In fact, several white participants expressed a sense of unease about expanding the narratives featured in exhibitions due to their lack of lived experience of underrepresentation and oppression, and that they would therefore prefer colleagues of colour to lead this work. However, Theuri warns against bringing in new colleagues of colour through short-term interventionist projects, which ‘perpetuate and reinforce the erroneous idea that the only role people of colour can have within institutions is to “intervene” in them or to take up “temporary” space within them, and that it is unnatural/an exception/a deviation for them to be permanently installed in them’. Theuri posits that the only solution to this is for museums to offer permanent leadership roles specifically to people of colour. This sentiment is echoed by Lowe-Mbirimi, who emphasises the need for qualitative research undertaken in ‘collaboration with permanently employed curators of colour’.

Provocation: Diversify

Expand the histories, narratives and perspectives that museums present, and diversify museum staffing through permanent contracts.

7. Power and change

Diversification of the workforce, particularly in terms of management and leadership, is one way in which change can begin to take place, and it also constitutes a partial redistribution of power to the traditionally marginalised. But, as Theuri comments, a genuinely impactful redistribution of power must also involve divesting power away from the institution and putting it into the hands of ‘the very people they seek to engage’, that is, the audiences that most museum ‘outreach’ programmes are geared towards. For Aksana Khan, this necessarily involves the dismantling of long-standing institutional hierarchies and complicated operations, and for Khairani Barokka, it involves a shifting of ‘responsibility for institutional change from those who have the least influence and power to those who have the most’. As one participant commented, ‘somebody [junior] comes in and is made responsible for this huge set of questions that, actually, we are all responsible for, and we all need to make the changes around’. But the question is, to what extent are institutions prepared to radically change the way they function and to reallocate resources from other areas of museum work to do this? Alongside naming the problem and framing it as critical, this should be amongst the first questions that institutions ask themselves, internally, before embarking on anti-racist or decolonial changes in practice and policy.

Provocation: Redistribute power for a radical change

Divest power away from leadership and put it in the hands of staff working at all levels in the museum and share power with museum audiences.
...8, 9 and 10. Taking action, self-reflection and care

Across all the workshops there was discussion about how museum workers can actually reach a point of taking action. But before this, as Lowe-Mbirimi identifies, is the question of what constitutes action, because ‘intention can easily be mistaken for action’. Many of the participants described their institutions as being stuck in a cycle of discussion or a state of inertia with regards to implementing any kind of embedded practice that might be considered anti-racist or decolonial. Several put this down to individual and collective feelings of shame or guilt. The most effective way of moving beyond these feelings and towards a point of taking action is to engage in both individual and collective critical self-reflection on the topics of race, racism, whiteness, White Supremacy and imperialism. Kennedy recommends that ‘before museum professionals embark on any [practical] strategies…they first need to understand why they seek to bring about some of the changes discussed’. By reckoning with individual and institutional complicity in upholding systems of oppression, museum workers can move towards a state of feeling compelled to take action. But as Khan points out, there are numerous museum workers who have been ‘doing the work’ all along, including the hard emotional labour that comes with being a museum worker of colour, who struggles daily against the inherent forces of oppression that underpin the museum’s structure, whilst also having to be sensitive to, and absorbing, the anxieties of their white colleagues who are only now beginning to engage in the problems of racism and imperialism. To these museum staff, Khan advocates for care – and specifically, care for themselves.

Provocation: Take action, take responsibility and prioritise care

Encourage individuals to take responsibility for implementing anti-racist and decolonial approaches, and give them the tools to do this well – time, money, power.

Put aside feelings of shame or guilt and engage in critical self-reflection to inspire concrete action.

Care for others and for oneself.
Workshop 3: Documenting Collections

24 March 2021

The act of cataloguing impacts whether an artwork will be selected for inclusion in an exhibition or display, what other works it will be shown alongside, and how it will be interpreted for potentially wide-ranging audiences. However very few resources are given to this area of museum work, and it has yet to become the subject of serious and sustained scrutiny in efforts to decolonise museums and root out racist museal practices.

This workshop was moderated by Kathleen Lawther (Freelance curator, specialising in the documentation of museum collections) and began with presentations from Ananda Rutherford (Research Associate, Tate), and Marenka Thompson-Odlum (Research Associate, Pitt Rivers Museum).

The workshop was framed by this provocation by Rutherford:

“Documentation and collections management seems to be the last bastion of claims for a-political or neutral practices. We are still working with colonial era behaviours and understandings of the world, fitted into 19th century pseudo-scientific classification systems, in 20th century databases for a transnational global 21st century audience – why?”.
Documentation as a Site for Critical Decolonial and Anti-Racist Work

by Kathleen Lawther

Documentation in museums refers to information used internally to manage collections and the knowledge that institutions hold about them. It has largely avoided scrutiny in calls to diversify and democratise museum practice. In my work I have seen how poor the documentation of many collections is. I have advocated for the importance of completing inventories and basic documentation tasks in making collections more accessible. However, in doing this work, I have witnessed the ways that documentation practice has been problematic and harmful, as well as useful. It is important to consider how documentation might be categorised as colonial before starting to think about how we might decolonize it. Ananda Rutherford states:

‘Documentation and collections management seem to be the last bastion of claims for a-political or neutral practices. We are still working with colonial era behaviours and understandings of the world, fitted into 19th century pseudo-scientific classification systems, in 20th century databases for a transnational, global 21st century audience.’

Documentation practice is guided by the Spectrum standard. This includes nine ‘primary procedures’ for recording information about collections, which museums are required to follow under the UK Museum Accreditation Scheme. This standardisation has been introduced in recent decades, but documentation and information management practices have developed over centuries, with their basis in the Enlightenment. In the UK, museums and collecting trends developed in tandem with the British Empire. Many categories and divisions within collections today have their roots in colonial practice.

Rutherford’s presentation at the ‘Documenting Collections’ workshop addressed the need to ‘name the problem’ and resist the use of misunderstood and misappropriated buzzwords. She asserts that museums operate within a series of myths - of neutrality, of racial categories based in science, of ‘nice white people’. She outlined key questions which museum staff should ask themselves about their approaches and identified actions for change. Marenka Thompson-Odlum gave specific examples of the ties between the Pitt Rivers Museum and the British Empire. She dissected gallery labels to demonstrate how myths of universality and neutrality are perpetuated in object descriptions. She shared two artistic projects that reimagine what it means to document a collection, re-centring the objects in the cultures from which they originate.

Here, I summarise the four broad themes emerging from the presentations and subsequent breakout session discussions: terminology; myths, stories and facts; authority and expertise; and (ongoing) historical contexts. The concluding section details some practical takeaways from the workshop.

Terminology

Decolonisation and anti-racism

It is necessary to unpack the museum sector’s relationship to the two terms which are the focus of this series: decolonisation and anti-racism. Despite the framing of the session, one of the facilitators observed: ‘[the group] managed not to use the word ‘anti-racism’ at all’. In contrast, as another participant commented, ‘decolonisation’ has become a term that museums are quick to use, without having a clear sense of how to apply it in practice: ‘I’ve seen lots of statements about how museums and galleries are going to decolonise their collections…step one for us is deciding what that actually means’. The subject that participants referred

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to most often when discussing decolonial work was the Transatlantic Slave Trade. While slavery was of course part of the British Empire, museums seem more comfortable talking about empire in this period and context than about the height of the British Empire in the mid to late 19th century. Museums are even less likely to address the 20th century and the end of empire – actual decolonisation. This may be because museums had a precedent for addressing slavery during the 2007 bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, or that this history is easier to research, since information about individuals linked to slavery can be found through UCL’s Legacies of British Slavery database. It may also be that matters relating to the late 19th century (which is, not coincidentally, when many UK municipal museums were formed) and the 20th century (being in living memory) are too close to home and therefore more difficult to address. The term ‘anti-racism’ then, bringing today’s power structures into focus, can be even more challenging, as a participant confirmed: ‘…anti-racism feels, I think for a lot of people, much more about specific action taking place that they know they’re not doing.’ This is perhaps why so few participants in the workshop actually used the terms ‘anti-racist’ or ‘anti-racism’ themselves.

Describing people

Curators are rightly concerned with minimising the harm caused by racist language in documentation, both historic and contemporary, but some feel unable to act for fear of continuing to get it wrong. Participants acknowledged that similar issues exist around the representation of Deaf/disabled people and LGBTQ+ people in collections. While there are parallels, this is another instance of a tendency to move debate away from centring anti-racism. Examples given included terms that are widely known to be offensive in the way they have historically been applied (e.g., ‘Eskimo’), and those in contemporary usage that are not the preferred terms of the people they refer to (e.g., BAME). Once identified, these terms can be easily located in records through an audit procedure. Some terms are less recognisably offensive to a majority white museum sector, as Thompson-Odlum has found, noting: ‘some words that I think are really offensive a lot of people don’t know.’ These include archaic terms, but also words that people are not familiar with because they are not subjected to racialised language themselves.

Discussions raised the issue of the emotional labour that is involved in working through offensive records, particularly for people of colour.

There are more subtle ways that racist language can manifest in records. In my own experience, one of the most offensive historic records I have seen described a hair ornament from Sierra Leone as worn by women on ‘tufts of their wool’. This dehumanising use of an innocuous word, ‘wool’, would not have been picked up by a search for racist terms. Descriptions can also be offensive when they fail to recognise an object’s cultural significance. One participant gave an example of a Muslim colleague being ‘horrified’ by prayer beads being described in a database as ‘necklaces’. While audits are a good starting point, these examples support the case for careful attention to cataloguing on a record-by-record basis, by someone who has the cultural competence to describe collections accurately, appropriately and respectfully.

Myths, stories and facts

The terms ‘documentation’ and ‘interpretation’ are also worth unpacking. Both are essentially information about objects. Documentation is written for an internal audience, to manage the collection, and is assumed to deal in objective facts (e.g., physical features, measurements, location). Interpretation, as the name acknowledges, is subjective, written for an external audience, and often includes multiple perspectives and narrative elements which bring the object to life for visitors. The aim of documentation is long-term preservation of information about the object, while interpretation is often ephemeral. Participants talked about a need to formally capture interpretive text in the database, so that interpretations have a legacy. However, they acknowledged that this work has not been prioritised.

Documentation practice has been assumed to be unchanging and neutral. In fact, the development of documentation reflects the way the meaning and value placed on collections has shifted over time, whether as scientific evidence, ‘curiosities’, or art objects - a process detailed in Hannah Turner’s book, Cataloguing Culture (2020). Now, collections are valued for their narrative potential. While interpretation has been story driven for some time, documentation practice has not evolved to reflect this. This is perhaps because, without pausing to critically examine documentation history, we assume it to be objective, and fixed. We accept that if something does not fit into our system of data management, it does not merit preservation. Rather than reimagining the system, we discard what does not fit.

Reimagining what we record

The presenters and participants suggested ways of reimagining our approaches to recording information about objects and people. When recording demographic details about artists, it is preferable to allow the artists to self-describe. Participants discussed the idea that opening a dialogue with individuals about how they would want their identity to be recorded in relation to their work would likely be better received than sending out a census-type form. Historic collections bring different challenges. We cannot know how people would have described themselves and must be mindful that what has been recorded about them in the past may be inaccurate and/or derogatory.

Creative solutions provide ways of filling in gaps where information was never recorded and can never be recovered, by focusing on alternative ways of ‘knowing’ an object. Participants discussed how ‘working within the absence’ can occur within artistic practices but may seem antithetical to people who have trained as historians and museum practitioners. An example of using embodied knowledge to better understand collections was seen in Thompson-Odlum’s presentation of the work of artist Eiko Soga, who learnt from Ainu people to make salmon skin shoes of the type held in the Pitt Rivers collection, and documented the process in her video art.8

Many collections management systems (CMS) can store and/or link to digital files, meaning that creative work, oral histories or film can be included in the object’s records. That this is not common practice is down to a lack of resource for documentation work, rather than the technological capabilities of systems. One group suggested workshopping individual objects to explore the most meaningful types of information to record, and how that information would best fit into an organisation’s system(s). This work should ideally centre people with lived and inherited cultural knowledge related to the objects or artworks in question. Another participant described a ‘progressional’ conceptual artwork that their museum had acquired, which can be updated, added to and therefore have several iterations over time, involving different participants. The workshop participant described this evolving artwork as an inspiration for reimagining cataloguing as an iterative process.

Myths

Some participants discussed introducing colonial histories into their interpretation. While connections with empire were present in their collections, they felt that the links had been obscured by previous interpretation. One participant noted the importance of learning to recognise ‘the language which conceals’ within their records, such as ‘merchant’ as a euphemism for ‘slave trader’. The need for nuance was raised by participants developing interpretation in relation to individuals who are generally considered to be ‘local heroes’ but who were also slave owners: ‘we don’t know how to reconcile those two ideas. And I don’t think a database helps either…you have to pick from a list or you have to fill out a field a certain way.’ In such situations, local context is important. For staff working in port cities associated with the Transatlantic Slave Trade, there was precedent for talking about this history. But others working in rural settings felt their communities did not see links between their local history and that of empire and slavery. The notion that these were things that happened ‘elsewhere’ is one of the myths that museums can help to dispel. As one participant pointed out, this is an area where the collection can have value as evidence; ‘if you can show people that that evidence is there in the collections – and it will be there – then that’s a good starting point.’

Authority and expertise

There is a need to balance subjective and objective information, and one way this can be achieved is by making it clearer who has authored content. Discussions about who has the authority and expertise to describe collections reflected an awareness among the participants of the concept of positionality, and the need to de-centre academic expertise and instead place greater value on lived experience.

Who is an expert?

The curatorial and collections workforce remains overwhelmingly white.9 For museums with ethnographic collections, this can perpetuate

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a colonial power dynamic, whereby the former coloniser assumes the authority and expertise to best describe the material culture of the formerly colonised. However, funding cuts mean that curatorial specialisms are dying out. Participants described collections in their institutions for which there was no one with any expertise. National museums traditionally hire curators with expertise gained in academia, in addition to staff dedicated to collections management and documentation, yet with the economic impact of COVID-19, even larger museums are losing curatorial specialisms.12 Meanwhile, in smaller museums curatorial staff are small in number, but are responsible for all aspects of collections work, and across multiple types of collections. In the discussions, the participants recognised that within a decolonised system, those with academic specialisms would no longer be understood as the leading authority over material that is not from their cultural background or related to their lived experience. Indeed, one participant described a need to look outside the museum sector and academia for the expertise they needed to better understand their collections.

Collaborative working

Co-curation with people from outside the museum is becoming an increasingly popular approach, in which co-curators are often volunteers or paid a nominal fee. Participants were worried that museums were asking people to do skilled work without proper compensation. This raises ethical concerns that the model may replicate extractive colonial research methods. In 2006, the Collections Trust and the now defunct Museums, Libraries and Archives Council published a guide for recording community responses to collections titled Revisiting Museum Collections.11 A 2013 Paul Hamlyn Foundation report titled Is Revisiting Collections Working? found that while museums were using the toolkit to engage people with collections, community insights were rarely recorded in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in the Content Management System (CMS). Reasons for this included the time-consuming nature of the work and the need to modify systems, in


Changing roles

The question of what skills and expertise curators and collections managers can bring to a ‘decolonised museum’ is a source of anxiety for some in the sector, but as Thompson-Odlum commented, ‘You have to reimagine your role. It’s not that there might not be a space for you, you just have to rethink what it is about.’ Safia Umoja Noble (2018) argues for ‘ethical knowledge curatorship’ as a corrective to the commercially driven algorithms that govern how information is accessed online.13 Museum documentation practice could play a part in this if it were reimagined and properly resourced. Curators could become careful and respectful stewards of knowledge that belongs to everyone, just as they aim to be with objects. This reframing of the role would need to be sensitive to the fact that people do see museums as neutral and are sceptical of attempts to ‘politicise’ museum content (Kendal Adams, 2013).14 Done well, there is an opportunity for museums to demonstrate how myths, interpretations and documented facts have all shaped our shared ideas of history.

(Ongoing) Historical contexts

Object biographies, which narrate the ‘life’ of an object, are a popular way of framing narratives around material culture. However, there remains a tendency to focus on the moment of collection, despite the fact that, as one participant commented, ‘in fact the story continues. And how that person acquired the piece is part of the story, how they have subsequently treated it is part of the story. But it’s a part that is very rarely told.’ Understanding the specific contexts in which collections were acquired and how they were used in individual museums, beyond the simplified notion that museums are stores of loot, is key to decolonial work. Thompson-Odlum described how the Pitt Rivers
Museum’s collections closely replicate the geographic areas of the British Empire, and colonial officers-in-training studied at the museum to learn about the cultures they would go on to govern. One participant illustrated the importance of recording an institutional history of documentation to understand how racism is imbedded in cataloguing systems: ‘Our [1902] catalogue…organised people according to their race. So Europe is A, Egypt is B and then… of course Africa I think is E and Australia is F’. Without this institutional knowledge, the letter at the beginning of each accession number could seem random, but it is based on a racist hierarchy.

Ongoing divisions

The way that collections continue to be divided has an impact on resource distribution. Curators’ interests also dictate which collections receive more attention, as one participant described: ‘the curators who have subsequently come and gone over the last few years are people who are much more specialised in… the paintings or the local history side of the collection. So [the ethnographic collection] kind of exists in… limbo’. The objects museums deem important are those that the donors, who were often embedded in colonial systems, deemed important. Where current staff have no related specialism, there is no one to challenge the ongoing colonial interpretations of objects. But rather than addressing gaps in collections knowledge, museum activity often focuses on objects and works that already have a lot of information associated with them. Big name artists and collectors attract funding, but there is seldom funding available to deal with backlogs of poorly catalogued and under-researched collections. Resources are further stretched by an unwillingness to centre traditional subjects, as one participant described, ‘everything to do with diversity and inclusion activity often involves on objects and works that already have a lot of information associated with them. Big name artists and collectors attract funding, but there is seldom funding available to deal with backlogs of poorly catalogued and under-researched collections. Resources are further stretched by an unwillingness to centre traditional subjects, as one participant described, ‘everything to do with diversity and inclusion is extra… we can’t lose any of the exhibitions we have about white male artists – we just have to do more exhibitions… [and that] is replicated in research as well’.

Recording recent work

While work is needed to unpick historical documentation, participants also detailed more recent positive efforts that have also not been well documented. One participant described working with museums that had mounted exhibitions about slavery in 2007 but now had no records linking the exhibited objects to the subject. Similarly, another participant working in a national museum described a project to explore an under-researched collection by African artists that was dropped due to the museum believing there would be no interest in an exhibition. The curator was in contact with an African curator with knowledge of the works, but because there was no exhibition output, they moved on and the research was not recorded. Another participant spoke about a museum publication from the 1990s that documented the presence of Black sitters in their collections. This work had not previously been referenced in the CMS, but the museum had a hard copy and was now working to digitise and add the information. These examples show how project funding models fail to take into account the work needed to record a legacy for exhibitions and engagement work. They also suggest an ongoing racist attitude to collections, wherein work by Black artists, or objects related to Black history are less valued than those related to white artists and narratives. This has led to previous anti-racist work being forgotten about once it had fulfilled its use for the museum (such as commemorating an anniversary or generating content for Black History Month). The risk of this cycle repeating, and current decolonial and anti-racist work also being forgotten, was identified by some participants.

Conclusion and practical takeaways

Who is doing the work of decolonising documentation?

According to participants, this task often falls to one person within an organisation. In some cases, this complex work is expected of staff with little experience, and with little support. Participants described how senior management and colleagues did not grasp the amount of painstaking work involved and expected them to take on responsibility for decolonising efforts on top of their already full workload.

What is driving the work?

The reactive nature of the sector was noted by one participant, and several people referred to the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 as driving decolonial work in their museums. However, participants also noted with frustration that many colleagues had been trying to do the work for several years without resources or support from senior management. This frustration was exacerbated by what some saw as knee-jerk reactions to current events, which they saw as superficial solutions to a much deeper problem. Sometimes action was spurred by individual staff noticing and raising

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15 This pattern was also mentioned in regard to contemporary collecting initiatives, where participants worried that their museums were rushing to collect digital material
the existence of problematic terminology, which led to more systematic work to identify records that needed attention. In other cases, the drivers were external. According to one participant ‘the request to audit… came from the fact that I think [name of gallery] was expecting to get Freedom of Information requests after the Black Lives Matter protests.’ [my emphasis]. None of the participants described an intervention from a member of the public fuelling their work, but several described acting out of concern about what the public might say.

What is needed to do the work?

- **Guidance.** Several participants mentioned a lack of clear guidance for museums around decolonial cataloguing practice. One participant said that there was ‘currently nowhere’ that they could access useful support and information. Facilitators questioned whether guidance, such as the Museums Association’s Code of Ethics, could be useful, but participants wanted guidance that was more specifically focused on decolonial and anti-racist ethics. The Code of Ethics, Spectrum and accreditation standards are necessarily broad in their scope, acknowledging that different types of collections will need to make decisions based on their own contexts. Spectrum sets out what sort of information should be recorded about collections and suggests procedures to be followed but is not prescriptive. Participants commented that Spectrum did not yet accommodate decolonial practice. With reference to the need to better understand organisational history and contexts, it should be noted that the documentation manual template provided by the Collections Trust does include sections to record the history of the collection and past cataloguing practice. A reframing of this template as a more reflexive or analytical exercise could be useful. Spectrum and accreditation guidance emphasises that museums should create their own collections policies guided by the standards, but too often museums under pressure do not do the additional work to tailor templates to their needs. They simply do what is required for the Museum Accreditation Scheme return. One participant commented, when asked about their museum’s documentation manual, ‘it’s one of those things that’s always rewritten for accreditation, isn’t it? And we did our accreditation submission… and obviously it’s not been looked at, at all, since’. Guidance around what terminology is and is not appropriate was identified as a necessary resource. Growing awareness of the importance of positionality among a largely white British curatorial workforce means that staff want to make changes to the language that is currently used but are not confident that they are best placed to do so. However, the perceived need for more guidance is not simply due to a lack of confidence. One participant made it clear that staff are facing opposition from their management and governing bodies and believe that being able to cite published guidance from a professional body will help to support their case.

- **Networks.** Given the differing contexts for museums in different regions of the UK, it was suggested that staff from museums in similar settings could work together to share skills and research. Several groups remarked on the value of the session as a space to discuss, shared contact details and spoke enthusiastically about the possibility of an ongoing network.

- **Tools.** Museums’ existing database systems can be seen as a barrier to decolonial work. I would argue that there is flexibility to make meaningful progress within the structures that we have if museums are prepared to dedicate more resources to documentation work. At the same time, digital specialists should be working to explore new innovations that benefit the core work of recording, preserving and sharing the meanings of collections. Museum CMSs are a niche product dominanted by a few software companies, but developers are not unwilling to introduce new features, if the demand is there from museums.

- **Resources.** These discussions have clarified that what is needed in order to progress decolonial and anti-racist documentation is a reframing of the work as critical (in both senses). Museums need to recognise that it is essential to their mission, and staff need encouragement and training to think and act more critically when we do this work. A participant described their main takeaway from the session as ‘the understanding… that this is long-term, ongoing and needs to be fully integrated into core practice… [it needs] dedicated people, money, time and valuing it as important work’. A rebalancing of the value placed on work, and therefore the distribution of resources, will be the true measure of a decolonial and anti-racist museum.

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References


Afterword

The events of the summer of 2020 provoked an immediate and powerful response in arts organisations in the UK. An awareness of this, and of the acute emotional impact the events had on PoC colleagues, impelled us to make a radical change to the Continuous Professional Development programme we run for our Member Museums in 2021. Anti-racist and decolonial issues had been the focus of a number of influential events in our programme in preceding years, but by the autumn of 2020 it was clear to us that we needed to devote an entire year’s programme to examining them as pertaining to all areas of museum practice. As an almost entirely white organisation, we knew that we could not deliver such a programme alone, and we are profoundly grateful to Prof susan pui san lok and Dr Anjalie Dalal-Clayton for agreeing to collaborate on this, for us, ground-breaking endeavour. We went into the programme knowing we would learn alongside our colleagues from museums around the country, and indeed we have learned many and deep lessons.

We thank the workshop participants, speakers and hosts for sharing their concerns and experiences so generously with one another, and also the teams at the Contemporary Art Society and Decolonising Arts Institute for administering and managing the series with such care.

Finally, we are indebted to Khairani Barokka, Lisa Kennedy, Aksana Khan, Kathleen Lawther, Jessica Lowe-Mbirimi and Sylvia Theuri who took on the considerable task of synthesising the complex discussions that took place during each seminar. Their accounts are candid, personal and passionate. Individually and collectively the accounts map a broad terrain and surface many of the key issues that confront museums and their staff, trustees and governors.

Everyone involved would agree that the year’s programme constitutes a beginning. It is our hope that by publishing these texts we provide a stepping stone for further work, and that we may one day look back and see them as having contributed to real change in this country.

Caroline Douglas
Director, Contemporary Art Society

Recommended Readings

Curating


Burns, R. (June, 2020) ‘How can we approach Anti-Racist Curating?’. Available at: https://museumofhalftruths.co.uk/Anti-Racist-Curation (Accessed 23/3/22).


Interventionist practices


Noble Umoja, S. (2014). *How biased are our algorithms? (TEDx Talks)* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXxJ8yQf6dI (Accessed 31/03/22).


**Interpretation**


**Collecting**


**Engagement**


