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.

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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.

susan pui san lok / susan lok pui san
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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.

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 decolonal 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 4: Interpreting Artworks

27 April 2021

This workshop focused on interpretation practices in art museums and galleries. It was moderated by Hammad Nasar (scholar and curator) and opened with presentations from Miles Greenwood (Curator of Legacies of Slavery and Empire at the Glasgow Museums) and Khairani Barokka (artist and writer).

Questions for discussion included:

How can we produce interpretation materials that meet the desires of both established and historically excluded audiences?

How can suppressed narratives and the voices and experiences of historically marginalised people be privileged when we produce object labels, talks and other interpretive material?

How can we be transparent about histories of colonial violence and racial oppression when interpreting artworks, whilst also encouraging art-appreciation and enjoyment?
A Dangerous Balance: Critical Reflections on the Interpretation of Artworks
by Khairani Barokka

Museums and galleries are becoming increasingly interested in the urgent need to change colonial interpretation strategies and curatorial practices, but how this is discussed and approached in practice is often not straightforward. The fourth workshop in the ‘Doing the Work’ series focussed on interpreting artworks and how museum workers might embed decolonial or anti-racist approaches within interpretation practices, and here I offer a critical and discursive synthesis of the discussions that took place in it.

The workshop began with an introduction by curator Hammad Nasar, followed by two short presentations by Miles Greenwood and myself. Greenwood spoke about his remit as Glasgow Museums’ first Curator of Legacies of Slavery and Empire, including specific examples of addressing previous curatorial strategies that erased the city’s involvement in, and profiting from, slavery. I then revealed the ableist tenets of colonial visual cultures through a discussion of my Annah, Infinite series of work on Gauguin’s Annah la Javanaise, which presents the possibility that Annah la Javanaise was disabled.

After this, the participants were split into five breakout groups for more focussed discussion on the challenges they are facing with respect to developing interpretations that engage decolonial or anti-racist practices. Their interlinked areas of discussion can be categorised as: membership and funding pressures, media and public perceptions; curatorial and interpretation strategies, including those involving visitors or ‘constituents’; and performativity and responsibility.

Membership and funding pressures, media, organisational identity, and public perceptions

Various participants across the breakout groups described finding it ‘very difficult’ to alter their approaches to interpretation in the context of an organisational culture that wanted to maintain perceived allegiances to older, whiter audiences. One participant confided that an older, whiter demographic formed the majority of their institution’s current audience, and typically shared opinions with the right-wing tabloid press, which has been highly critical of cultural institutions attempting to engage in the decolonising agenda. This participant noted that their organisation had been losing members, which they felt was a consequence of skewed perceptions of recent work that might be regarded as antiracist and decolonial, and that there was now a feeling of acute anxiety within the organisation, which relies on membership subscriptions for survival. Another participant expressed a desire to expand membership at their institution beyond its traditionally more conservative demographic, but explained that they did not know how to do so, and that current strategies for audience and membership development where they work are short-term, reactive, and focussed on avoiding the attention of the right-wing press.

Relatedly, one participant mentioned that they found ‘a lot of the stuff around wanting to be better quite challenging, because that’s considered being political’. Here, the notion of being ‘political’ is clearly seen as a negative, and, as something that is not already an inherent quality of all institutions, whether or not they acknowledge it. Another participant explained that a year ago, their organisation was among many others quick to announce that they were ‘going to do something about the racism in our practice and our collections and our displays, and addressing the colonial history and the slavery associated with our stuff’, spurred by George Floyd’s murder and Black Lives Matter protests. The participant explained that, following an enthusiastic public response to this over the summer of 2020, their institution produced a report on the above-mentioned issues within their collections ‘and suddenly, the press went crazy and we were accused of being very political’. I would argue that considering the right-wing media has consistently put forth racist and xenophobic headlines and viewpoints on a variety of issues, it is difficult to trust that an audience or readership conditioned by such biased reporting would regard even accurate portrayals in a positive light.

It is not only the right-wing press and certain established audiences that have responded negatively to cultural institutions engaging in decolonising practices by labelling such efforts as somehow ‘too political’. Cultural institutions are also facing a similar backlash from their funders, particularly those that operate in connection with, or ‘at arm’s length’ from the UK government. One participant reported that
one of their institution’s funders had threatened to limit and/or withdraw its funding because it was being ‘too political’. 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, it was heartening to witness an ongoing, albeit notional, commitment to engaging with decolonial practices among the workshop participants, with one poignantly questioning ‘where is culture not political’? 1

Just as cultural institutions adhere to the questionable notion of being apolitical, there is also an attachment to taking a ‘balanced’ approach to representing histories and perspectives, so that one perspective is not favoured over another (although usually this approach is only enforced when the centring of whiteness is challenged, and not the other way around). One participant uncritically commented that it is ‘very tricky to find that balance’, to which another aptly responded, ‘I think “balance” is a really difficult word, but that is what we’re being told—everything has to be “balanced”. We have to not upset anybody... but it’s just not [possible].’ That this is not naturally understood by cultural organisations is a barrier to change. In a context where, as one participant put it, challenging racism ‘in a very little way’ has proven ‘to be too controversial for a lot of people with very loud voices’, it may be that cultural institutions have to be prepared to offend and possibly even lose some of their existing audiences and members if they are seeking to diversify them, and moreover, if they are truly committed to anti-racism and decolonial or anti-colonial work. In a politically and socially polarised cultural climate, appealing to some people is sometimes necessarily about not appealing to others. 2

Issues of scale, location and remit were discussed in relation to the ability of an institution to embark on anti-racist and anti-colonial work. Participants considered that large-scale, London-based institutions face the most scrutiny as a consequence of their proximity to Westminster and the head offices of many funding bodies and media organisations. Smaller, ‘regional’ organisations were discussed as being under slightly less scrutiny, with one participant commenting that they have ‘that balance of being big enough to do interesting things whilst being small enough to not have the same kind of pressure and scrutiny as bigger organisations’. Expanding outwards from London, and England, some participants representing organisations in Wales and Scotland considered their workplaces as being less pressured than England-based ones. But one participant commented on their experience of ‘people telling me that Scotland had nothing to do with slavery, because it was all the English people’ (which is obviously untrue), when describing opposition to decolonising work occurring across the UK, and not just in England. University museums were discussed by the participants as having more freedom—in terms of fewer threats to funding than more explicitly government-linked organisations—though the participants considered that such museums nonetheless face public opposition and attempts to discredit academics.

The reappraisal of curatorial methods, as will be discussed next, has also prompted what one participant observed as a kind of identity crisis, whereby questions are being raised about, for example, whether an institution should define itself as an ethnographic museum, a university and research museum, or ‘more into the fine arts route’, rather than embracing a more interdisciplinary, pluralist identity.

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Curatorial and interpretation strategies, including those involving visitors/constituents

Overall, the participants were keen to review and reappraise past curatorial strategies at their respective workplaces, especially in the aftermath of the re-ignition of the Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall movements in 2020. One participant described the benefits of an un rushed, consultative and ‘staged approach’ that their institution had trialled, involving workshops with academics, museum professionals, curators, artists, and other workers in their sector, focussed on sharing multiple interpretations of an artwork. Following these workshops, a summary and internal guidance were presented in a draft report, underscoring the need to acknowledge complexity, broader social movements, the need for inclusive language, the addressing of stereotypes, and the ‘emotional appeal’ an historical artwork would have for viewers. Multiple forms of media, learning resources, and digital engagement for different audiences were also mentioned with regard to this organisation’s interpretation strategy, and that they are planning to trial a ‘narrative timeline’, which I took to mean presenting a timeline of different, but simultaneous narratives. Ostensibly, this is encouraging. However, I have doubts as to whether this particular institution will actually be transparent about how the UK benefited from slavery and colonialism in their future interpretations of colonial-era artworks. This is because the participant describing the approach noted above was also

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1 Further, it is important to note how the term ‘identity politics’ is both negatively invoked in criticisms levied against cultural institutions and only attributed to the lives and perspectives of Black people and people of colour—who I refer to as majority world. White, male perspectives that are enforced on culture as the only valid perspectives are also examples of identity politics. It is important to recognise how whiteness is equated with ‘neutrality’ in curation and interpretation practices, and that this is not a ‘natural’ outcome, but a socially enforced norm of a particular kind of identity politics itself.

2 For guidance on institutional change, one might look to the work that Christopher Bedford is doing at the Baltimore Museum of Art. See: Kenney (2021).
keen to ‘find that balance’ and ‘avoid it being a history lesson’. In other words, they prefer, or are under pressure from above to adopt, a so-called apolitical, uncritical approach in which whiteness remains centred and existing hegemonies continue to be privileged.

This sentiment was echoed when another participant discussed the presentation of multiple narratives within curating and interpretation in terms of ‘balancing or negotiating those different ideas’. The idea of ‘balance’ may give a sense of gentleness and of avoiding bias to museum workers who subscribe to the idea, but is actually a highly dangerous concept and approach when on one side of the scales lies the uncritical, unmediated presentation of violent and exploitative histories (and present day contexts). In such situations, ‘balance’ should not be an objective at all. But as one participant explained, speaking ironically, as if on behalf of all cultural institutions, ‘we don’t want balance, we want to maintain a certain narrative which isn’t balanced and we just want to pretend it’s balanced. […] We want continued inequality.’ The invocation of ‘balance’, then, is a euphemism for maintaining the status quo through deceptive methods in many cases, and is indicative of an institution not wanting to abandon long-standing but problematic perspectives in order for other perspectives to have visibility.

Closely related to the idea of ‘finding balance’ within curatorial and interpretation strategies, as one participant described, is the approach of ‘looking at different individuals who represent unities’. This could mean focussing on individuals who can represent the experiences of multiple and varied audiences, thus creating a sense of unity rather than difference. Although such an approach may prove useful in terms of improving representation, those producing interpretation must remember that no population is monolithic. We contain multitudes, and there is a danger of tokenism when particular individuals (artists or those depicted in artworks) are highlighted by museums because they may ‘represent unities’.

One issue that came up was that of having to excavate histories in order to flesh out the narratives of underrepresented peoples within the museum. I was shocked when one participant stated, ‘we couldn’t find enough material to tell a story about a woman of colour in history’. This is plainly absurd, and suggests that curators are relying on white-dominated sources, and do not know where to look or do not look hard enough for the material they need to do this work right; there are women of colour histories everywhere, including in the whitewashed medieval ages. Not being able to ‘find enough material’ points towards a probable combination of not having appropriate specialist knowledge, not having adequate research skills, not having the time to research properly, and not collaborating with specialists working outside the museum.

Another issue raised by the participants in their discussions of curating and interpretation practices was that funders, and even some senior collections managers, wanted interpretations to be as ‘authentic’ and ‘factual’ as possible – two concepts that the participants considered problematic. For example, one participant noted that their institution had subtly manipulated ‘facts’ about its history in order to present itself, and the city it is in, as having been abolitionist, when this was in fact ‘an untruth that’s been added on afterwards’. Part of the task for museum workers involved in curating and interpretation is to consider that histories are constructed with truths, untruths and subjective memories, that histories typically privilege the memories and truths of those in power whilst erasing the truths of those who are not, and that the related notions of ‘truth’ and ‘facts’ are highly questionable in themselves. There are other concepts that should be taken into account when producing interpretation, including ‘justice’, ‘care’, ‘reparation’, ‘transparency’ and ‘multiplicity’.

With regards to the pace at which changes in curating and interpretation should happen, one participant strongly advocated for a slow, gradual, and accumulative process, while another reflected that they had ‘gone’ in too fast, too much and realised society, overall, was not ready for us to do that. Echoing this, another expressed that they wanted to ensure the ‘paces are respectful’. One participant responded to this sentiment by asserting that conferences on ‘diversity and inclusion’ had been going on for decades, and questioned ‘is it good enough to say “well, over the next ten years, we’ll very slowly make a change towards not hating other people”’. I mean, it’s really not good enough. I agree with this latter point wholeheartedly and am troubled by views expressed by some of the participants about the use of discriminatory language in the past: ‘these things weren’t really so urgent and in the foreground so much’. To this I ask, for whom? What parts of society are we speaking about here? In terms of people of colour, our societies have been deeply impacted by discriminatory language used to describe us, or against us, all along and have been waiting for reparations this whole time.

Participants considered strategies for accelerating change, including enacting a ‘season of listening’, which would involve recruiting Black people and people of colour to help develop celebrations of ‘origin culture’ and underrepresented histories, for which there is a clear hunger. However, I would caution against an over-reification of supposedly distinct, disparate ‘cultural histories’. In the participants’ discussions of this approach, one suggested that Black and Asian diasporic audiences be asked what looted objects of Empire mean to them now, but did not raise the question of repatriation or restitution. That is, they thought it acceptable to ask audiences descended from former colonies what meaning they now derive from looted cultural artefacts but had not considered that such audiences may simply wish for those objects to be returned to the place they were stolen from.

Intertwined within the imperial project are the legal constraints and guidelines around repatriation/restitution and removal from public
display, even when, as one participant noted, audiences are asking for their removal because of their depiction of, or connection with violent histories. With the current diktat from the UK government being ‘retain and explain’, the participants considered other solutions for interpretation, including presenting ‘counter’ artworks alongside the problematic artwork in question. This is an interesting strategy, analysis of which would have to be done on a case-by-case basis, looking at both literal and metaphorical labelling and positioning.

One of the participants reported having extensively audited ‘every single property’ in their organisation in terms of ‘connections to colonialism, connections to slavery, where the money came from’ – an approach that should, in my opinion, be taken by all institutions. Along with these artworks, they found violent portrayals as well as racist language regarding slavery and people of colour. In a proactive move, they removed some of these items ‘before the retain and explain guidelines came in’, and included content warnings with others. Other participants had yet to take such a bold approach, admitting that (in terms of backlash), ‘it’s been easier for us to look at sexual diversity than it is for us to look at racial diversity and colonialism’. Interestingly, there seemed to be little understanding within this particular discussion that the repression of gender and sexual diversity around the world is a tenet of colonialism, as the feminist philosopher and activist Maria Lugones has explicated. Lugones posits ‘that gender itself is a colonial introduction, a violent introduction consistently and contemporarily used to destroy peoples, cosmologies, and communities as the building ground of the “civilized” West’ (Lugones 2007). The fact that the ‘male/female’ gender binary is not universal, and is in fact a ubiquitous and deliberate form of colonisation (for instance, indigenous cultures in North America and Southeast Asia have hundreds of terms for genders that do not equate with the ‘male/female’ binary) was not acknowledged during the conversation.

Authorial conventions with regards to interpretation are also changing. One participant noted that they had been advised by a colleague to put the curator’s name on the interpretive text. They said they initially met this idea with horror because ‘you’re supposed to be impartial’, and were also concerned that it would reveal how white the staff were, which then raises questions about transparency and underrepresentation of people of colour in staff, as well as indicating presumptions about names indicating race. In response, another participant asserted, ‘If that is the truth, then why are we hiding it?’ The need to understand positionality, and how whiteness and coloniality are already embedded within cultural institutions was also raised by another participant: ‘The whole idea behind museum interpretation is this kind of abstract, curatorial voice, but often with kind of a white Eurocentric normative framework. So that is already there, whether or not you put your name to it.’ A way forward that was suggested is to present conversations between people in wall texts, and also to provide opportunities for audiences to create their own object labels. Similarly, one participant noted the strategy of conducting creative writing workshops with ‘constituents’ in response to an artwork. In my view, many more ‘constituents’ are needed within curatorial staff itself, as well as an understanding of co-authorship, repatriation and restitution that does not instrumentalise said ‘constituents’ in a way that diminishes them, that is, an understanding of the literal ownership of objects by those outside the institution. And, as someone said in one breakout group, the right of people of colour to be engaged in interpreting works by white, male artists as well – a point which refers back to the need to think beyond discrete cultural histories in a framework that may elide colonial histories.

In the participants’ discussions about what to include and exclude in interpretation texts, they questioned whether or not an artist’s country of origin should be stated and what eliminating that piece of information does for interpretation. In terms of authorship, one ethnographic museum employee noted that their institution housed half a million artefacts for which only 5% have ‘known makers’ documented, most of whom are European. In this situation, I suggest that museum workers consider how they might be invested in the fetishisation of individual authorship, and how this may not be appropriate for ‘origin communities’ or even present-day ‘stakeholder communities’ for whom acknowledging communities and cultures may be more important than acknowledging the individual maker. Additionally, they should also consider highlighting the realities of theft within ethnographic institutions, and what knowledge is lost and looted. However, as Edouard Glissant notes with regards to the right of opacity, naming is not always empowering. Many indigenous communities refuse to translate their cultural knowledge into English because naming and translating for Eurocentric audiences is in itself a form of colonial capture, especially, as Blas notes, under surveillance states. Relatedly, the very naming of buildings that house art itself, as was pointed out in one breakout room, can be steeped in histories of violence and capture.

Another issue the participants discussed was that of the word limits for interpretive wall texts and object labels in displays and exhibitions – a limit put in place by museums because research indicates that audiences do not engage with lengthy wall texts. The participants explained that they found it difficult to address the multitude of issues, histories and perspectives that are being called for within the confines of the word limits they are given. They were not, however, especially forthcoming

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3 One participant spoke of a ‘balance of representation, whether that’s by gender or community’. This wording reveals how ‘community’ can become a shorthand for ‘race’, which is highly problematic.


5 Edouard Glissant cited in Blas, 2016, p. 149.
with ideas to deal with this. One participant spoke about hiring freelance writers to produce interpretations that are not beholden to the word count of small object labels, as a way of getting around word count limitations.

It was not clear to me whether there is any resistance among museum workers to limited word counts, or whether museums are exploring the possibilities of accessible, multimedia interpretative strategies. There are opportunities here for thinking about design, user interface, outside-the-box configurations, multi-layering, the multimodal, and the multisensorial within interpretation.

As part of discussions about the challenge of addressing numerous issues and aspects within a single object label, one participant commented, ‘When you have an artwork that is so loaded with history... how do you talk about it as an artwork?’, implying that an artwork cannot be interpreted both in terms of its aesthetic qualities and the histories that are imbued within it. Here, the word/notion ‘artwork’ is framed in (and reinforces) a false, Eurocentric and Enlightenment-informed binary between the notions of ‘art’ and ‘artefact’, whereby the histories associated with an art object are erased, even if those histories, if foregrounded, still very much concern the aesthetic or creative dimensions of the object., i.e. the object ‘as an artwork’.

**Performativity and responsibility**

The final broad area of discussion among the workshop participants revolved around the performance of solidarity and representation, and also around the need for institutions and the individuals that work in them to take personal responsibility for making change. Naturally, as with so many of the workshops in the ‘Doing the Work’ series, participants commented on the disingenuous nature of the publication of ‘black squares’ on cultural institutions’ social media platforms in 2020 and how the grand claims made by the UK’s museums and galleries regarding their solidarity with social justice movements are not in any way backed by real, meaningful changes in practice, operations and structure. An issue that I would like to draw out in relation to performative solidarity and representation is that of tokenisation (or as one participant described it, the ‘instrumentalisation of an artwork or an artist’).

This typically takes place in lieu of larger changes within the institution. Participants noted how particular, well-established artists of colour were being highlighted by their institutions in social media posts in a bid to demonstrate representativeness – which might be better described as ‘virtue signalling’. Then, a further issue within tokenisation is the problematic practice of extraction, that is, drawing out knowledge, experience and expertise from underrepresented, minoritised or oppressed people (in order to improve curation and interpretation) but without offering something equal in return to the extent that it can be exploitative. The issue of extraction was briefly discussed by one participant in relation to the increasingly popular approaches of co-curation, hiring in ‘guest artists’, and co-production of interpretation.

I place the issue of performativity in direct dialogue with that of responsibility; responsibility for funding change, for implementing change in a sustained and embedded way, for ensuring that employment is representative and equitable – in short, for institutional change. Within this, there is the issue of who should be responsible for institutional change versus who the burden of implementing change is actually placed on. Some of the participants expressed anxiety about enacting change ‘as a white person’ and how being white might predispose them to ‘doing the wrong thing’. In my opinion, just starting this work one way or another is crucial, as is museum workers making an effort to understand the issue of positionalitity, and what their individual positionalitity is and does.

What are the internal power dynamics of our public art institutions, and what mechanisms are there for institutions to shift responsibility for institutional change from those who have the least influence and power to those who have the most? As one participant shrewdly observed, ‘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’. That ‘somebody’ is often on a short-term contract, but tasked with an enormous remit, as evidenced by Miles Greenwood’s current role at Glasgow Museums. Some of the participants noted that knowledge from all corners of the institution needs to be incorporated into practice, including the knowledge, experience and expertise of gallery assistants, who often bring astute political understandings; ‘they know much more about audiences than we do’. Other participants highlighted that there is a total lack of consensus within institutions about ‘how to deal with questions of imperialism and colonialism’, which ultimately contributes to the placing of responsibility on temporary staff, thus reducing the probability of meaningful, sustained adoption of that person’s recommendations and changes in the long run.

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6 Readers may wish to explore the work of historian and archivist N.A. Mansour, who argues that devotional texts need to be used by communities of origin and should not be in museums, and that of artist Gala Porras-Kim, who looks at the continuation of ritual practices for artefacts within museums. The work of both these individuals indicates that the question is not simply about presenting objects’ histories, but also about repatriation, restitution, and various ways of acknowledging an object’s animus.

7 Readers may be interested to read Sylvia Theuri’s summary of the second workshop in the series, which focussed on ‘Interventionist Practices’.
Conclusion

The absence of any real consensus about how cultural institutions should address imperialism and colonialism within their operations, structures and practices (including their interpretation practices) possibly stems from a lack of consensus on what the term ‘decolonisation’ itself means – how it is used often differs from person to person. Among the workshop participants there was no mention of restitution or repatriation; ‘decolonising’ was regarded in terms of epistemic change within what are, overwhelmingly and ultimately, colonial institutions. It seems apropos, therefore, to conclude this workshop summary with a definition of ‘decolonisation’ offered by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012). Tuck and Yang write from a North American context, but their observations and assertions are widely applicable, and in my view, their definition is one that we should all hold in our minds when considering and discussing what ‘decolonisation’ might mean, and how it might be implemented within museum work.

‘Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. The easy adoption of decolonizing discourse by educational advocacy and scholarship, evidenced by the increasing number of calls to “decolonize our schools,” or use “decolonizing methods,” or, “decolonize student thinking”, turns decolonization into a metaphor. As important as their goals may be, social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches that decenter settler perspectives have objectives that may be incommensurable with decolonization.’

As the term ‘decolonising’ gains currency in the museum and gallery sector, it is important to understand how practices and conversations surrounding the term contribute to—or delay—the urgent cause of decolonisation, as defined in Tuck and Yang’s description, for the majority world.

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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).


Recommended Readings


Interventionist practices


**Interpretation**


**Collecting**


**Engagement**


