

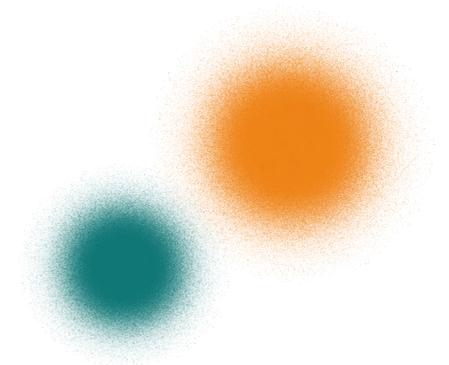
Doing the Work

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 Ilaria Puri Purini

Contents

Preface	7
susan pui san lok / susan lok pui san	
Introduction	8
Overview and provocations	10
Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Ilaria Puri Purini	
Workshop 1: Curation and Display — Wednesday 20 January 2021	21
Who and What Narratives are on Display?	22
Lisa Kennedy	
Workshop 2: Interventionist Practices — Wednesday 24 February 2021	41
From Institutional Racism to Duties of Care: Moving Interventionist Practices Away from Racism and Colonial Dominance	42
Sylvia Theuri	
Workshop 3: Documenting Collections — Wednesday 24 March 2021	55
Documentation as a Site for Critical Decolonial and Anti-Racist Work	56
Kathleen Lawther	
Workshop 4: Interpreting Artworks — Tuesday 27 April 2021	71
A Dangerous Balance: Critical Reflections on the Interpretation of Artworks	73
Khairani Barokka	
Workshop 5: Collecting Practices and Acquisition Strategies — Wednesday 26 May 2021	85
Towards Radical Acquisition Futures? Forging Meaningful Change in a Climate of Fragility and Underrepresentation	86
Jessica Lowe-Mbirimi	
Workshop 6: Rethinking ‘Engagement’ — Tuesday 6 July 2021	97
Collective Care is Different from Self Care: Rethinking Engagement in Art Museums and Galleries in 2021	98
Aksana Khan	
Afterword	114
Caroline Douglas	
Recommended Readings	117

Preface

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

Director, Decolonising Arts Institute,
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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'.¹ 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.

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.

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.

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.

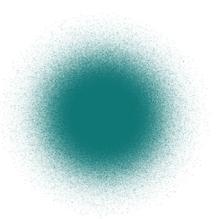
Below, we draw out and summarise the key findings and related provocations from the reflective summaries.

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 1: Curation and Display

20 January 2021

This first workshop in the *Doing the Work* series focused on curation and display in museums and galleries. It was moderated by Professor **Paul Goodwin** (Chair of Contemporary Art and Urbanism, University of the Arts London) and opened with a discussion between **Nikita Gill** (Iniva Curatorial Trainee, Manchester Art Gallery) and **Kate Jesson** (Modern and Contemporary Curator, Manchester Art Gallery).

Questions for the discussion included:

What curatorial strategies might be considered decolonial or anti-racist in approach?

What questions, approaches and behaviours should curators be embedding into their day-to-day practices?

How can an anti-racist or decolonial approach be developed in relation to collections that are ethnically diverse, and conversely, in relation to collections that are not?

Should artworks depicting violent colonial histories ever be included in exhibitions and displays, and if so, why/how?

What curatorial models can be used when displaying work by artists whose biographies and attitudes are deemed problematic/racist/colonial?

How can anti-racist and/or decolonial curatorial approaches be developed in contexts where such approaches are resisted or even discouraged?



Claudette Johnson, *Standing Figure*, 2017. Acquired by the CAS for Rugby Art Gallery and Museum through the Rapid Response Fund, 2020. © Claudette Johnson. Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London. Photograph: Andy Keate. Presented by the Contemporary Art Society through the Rapid Response Fund, 2020.

Who and What Narratives are on Display?

by Lisa Kennedy

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as global protests against racial inequalities have highlighted glaring societal problems that have long histories of being part of (and even embedded within) the structures of museums, galleries, and cultural institutions. Within the UK's cultural sector, the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 caused museums to question how they can respond to a global movement, and how their responses can be entwined with displays of objects and artworks within collections. British art institutions have responded to this in different ways, some of which have garnered critique from museum professionals, activists, the general public and politicians. There is further complication when we consider what role curation and display play in all this.

The first 'Doing the Work' workshop focussed on practices of curation and display, and particularly on how curation produces narratives. It began with a joint presentation from Kate Jesson, Curator at Manchester Art Gallery (MAG), and Nikita Gill who was the Iniva Future Collect Curatorial Trainee there at the time. Jesson critically discussed how exhibitions demonstrate institutional values to the general public, and how curators traditionally focus on geography, chronology and the lens of identity when displaying work by artists of colour, which can skew the way we engage with, and come to know, the works they produce. These foci are typically deployed to shape our understanding of works by such artists as being situated outside the standard narratives of art's histories, and Euro-American cultural history more broadly. Jesson described MAG's recent collaboration with the artist Jade Montserrat as a way of disrupting this tendency within curation. A newly commissioned, multi-part work by Montserrat titled 'Constellations: Care and Resistance', is interspersed within the permanent collection display, and situated in dialogue with a variety of different artists. As the website explains: 'These dialogues reveal new stories, expand existing ones, and explore multiple narratives'.¹

¹ Manchester Art Gallery website. Available at: <https://manchesterartgallery.org/exhibitions-and-events/exhibition/constellations-care-resistance> (Accessed 20 September 2021)

Gill described Montserrat's work as exploring how care is enacted within institutions and also within the field of activism. In relation to this, Gill discussed how Black bodies are represented by artists in their work, and often without regard for, or sensitivity to, histories and contexts of trauma and violence, and also about the responsibility to centre care within curating, not only for artworks but also for artists, audiences, histories and futures.

Here, I provide a critical summary of what participants at this workshop discussed. I note where current pitfalls exist regarding the representation of staff and the voices that steer curatorial outputs, as well as the issues that exist within collections, artworks, and curatorial narratives themselves. The workshop sought to create a space for participants to instigate anti-racist and decolonial strategies, and with that in mind, the participants' discussions can be characterised as revolving around six key issues in the museum sector: gaps in knowledge; stretched resources; displaying problematic objects; performative acts; diversity (of artists represented in collections, and amongst staff); and neutrality.

Gaps in knowledge

Gaps in knowledge were discussed across the various breakout groups as being a significant barrier to broadening the narratives that curators present in exhibitions and displays. Four different types of gaps were identified: first, gaps in institutional memory about past exhibitions or commissions resulting from poor archiving or a complete lack thereof; second, a perceived absence of information about the colonial histories that are connected to collections, artworks and museum buildings; third, incomplete artwork and object provenance (history of ownership); and fourth, limited knowledge of a broad range of histories amongst museum curators due to hegemonic, western-derived narrations of history in art history curricula and museums. From the discussions, one pertinent example combines all four types of gaps in knowledge, and evidences their complex and problematic convergence: it was noted that there are areas in the UK (and by extension, the institutions in those areas), such as the south west of England, that do not acknowledge where the wealth of their cities comes from historically (in contrast to cities such as Liverpool, which do), in this case ignoring connections between the region's lace industry, its use of cotton, and its links to the Transatlantic Slave Trade.² This is likely the consequence of not thinking about and/

² Lucy MacKeith explores the link between Devon and the Slave Trade in *Unravelling Devon* [sic] involvement in *Slave Ownership*. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/media-new/pdfs/devonandslaveownership.pdf> (Accessed 17 June 2021).

or refusing to acknowledge links between artworks and collections and local industrial and financial histories, and the links between those histories and colonial or imperial history. Some of the participants reported that the institutions they work for wilfully disassociate their collections from their physical locations and wider contextual histories, whilst favouring singular, authoritative narratives and centring the 'powerful, epoch-defining individual'.³

To fill gaps in knowledge, researchers look to archives and other historical records, especially since digitised resources are growing in number, allowing them to excavate bottom-up, multi-vocal stories. However, as several participants asserted, curators are rarely able to engage deeply with the types of information that can be found in historical records (in a bid to nuance the narratives they present within exhibitions and displays) due to standard curatorial timelines in museums that do not allow the time and space needed for thorough research. While more time should of course be given for thorough research within the curatorial process, in my view, it is not simply about filling gaps in knowledge, but also about learning to pivot one's perspective on the information and material that is readily available within the museum so that new narratives can be brought out. As Lucy MacKeith notes in her essay about the county of Devon's involvement in the Slave Trade, 'if we look at materials we already have from a different angle than earlier historians, we will uncover new threads in the history'.⁴ This is already happening, to an extent, in many museums in the UK, through the privileging of perspectives and histories of individuals represented in artworks but traditionally ignored within museum interpretation, or by involving those not usually involved in museum work to develop readings of objects and artworks. The success and ethics of such initiatives is another matter, but the key point is that lack of time for research to plug gaps in knowledge does not entirely prevent curators from challenging and broadening established narratives in the museum.

Several participants described having a gap in knowledge in relation to what constitutes a decolonial or anti-racist perspective and set of practices, and many of them again put this down to a lack of time to engage in the multitude of anti-racist resources that have become available in the past year or two. Developing an understanding of what decolonisation and anti-racism actually mean, and from a variety of different perspectives, learning not to conflate the two, and thinking about what related practices in the museum might actually entail are all

³ This centring of 'powerful, epoch defining individuals' is discussed in the following article, which readers may wish to consult: Sean Lang, Diarmaid MacCulloch, Lucasta Miller and Jane Ridley, 'Is There Still Value in 'Great Man' History?' in *History Today*, Volume 69, Issue 9, September 2019, Available at: <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/head-head/there-still-value-%E2%80%98great-man%E2%80%99-history> (Accessed 2 November 2021).

⁴ MacKeith, as above.

imperative, and museums must ring-fence adequate time for museum professionals to research and reflect on this before they consider how the two agendas can be authentically embedded into museum practice. Indeed, as one of the moderators asked, 'we're using...[the term] decolonial – what the hell does that mean?'. While definitions around this and other now popular terms are constantly in flux, I put forward the following working definitions. First, to engage with decoloniality is to decentre the idea that knowledge production and perspectives can only stem from Western knowledge systems, an idea that either omits, co-opts or views other knowledge systems as illegitimate and inferior modes of understanding past and present contexts (or a combination of all three).⁵ Second, anti-racism actively dismantles ideas, policies, laws, societal norms, and ways of thinking that reinforce superiority/inferiority complexes between racial groups. Anti-racism involves advocating for and actioning equitable treatment between racial groups and expanding on the modes mentioned above.⁶

The participants discussed working with artists and/or community groups as a way of addressing the institutional gaps in knowledge described above, and from a non-exploitative stance. Ivan Muñiz-Reed argues that artists 'are better positioned to criticise the institution—working with collections that have perpetrated some of the most interesting examples of epistemic disobedience'.⁷ Sonia Boyce's 'Six Acts' intervention at Manchester Art Gallery in 2018 and Fred Wilson's 'Mining the Museum' installation at the Maryland Historical Society in the US in 1992-3 are two key examples of this.⁸

⁵ My definition draws from Walter D. Mignolo (2018) definition of decoloniality: 'In the decolonial frame in which I operate, the major and vital move is to delink from the Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP), a machine that generates injustices, disavows, silences at all levels. Delinking from coloniality (shorthand for CMP), means delinking from the enunciation in which knowledge is fabricated and managed (languages, institutions, actors) to legitimise dispossession and control in all the domains of the instituted (politics, economy, knowledge, racism and sexism, and the ontologisation of nature, all of which impinges on land dispossession)'. Available at: <https://www.afterall.org/publications/journal/issue.45/thinking-and-engaging-with-the-decolonial-a-conversation-between-walterd-mignolo-and-wanda-nanibush> (Accessed 17 June 2021).

⁶ My definition draws from Ibram X. Kendi's (2020) definition of anti-racism in his 2019 book, *How to Be an Antiracist*. An excerpt can be found on the Penguin website: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/june/ibram-x-kendi-definition-of-antiracist.html> (Accessed 20 June 2021).

⁷ Ivan Muñiz-Reed, 2017, p.102.

⁸ *Six Acts* was a night-time group takeover of the Manchester Art Gallery 'exploring "gender trouble" among the gallery's 19th century painting displays and wider culture'. See: <https://manchesterartgallery.org/exhibitions-and-events/exhibition/sonia-boyce/> (Accessed 17 June 2021). Co-curator of the Mining the Museum exhibition, Lisa Corrin writes about Fred Wilson's intervention using objects from the Maryland Historical Society to critique the role of the curator in a museum environment, emphasising how curatorial practice affects our interpretation and perception of collections. See: https://historyinpublic.blogs.brynmawr.edu/files/2016/01/Curator_Mining-the-Museum.pdf (Accessed 17 June 2021).

Both Boyce's and Wilson's interventions successfully challenged institutions by reframing objects and artworks as a dialogue (rather than a transmission of information), consequently fostering institutional self-reflection. Other scholars and advocates of anti-racist approaches such as Elena Gonzales (2019 and 2020), Natalie Bayer and Mark Terkessidis (2017) note the importance of collaboration as a way of going beyond representation and enabling the genuine inclusion of different perspectives and meanings that can, in turn, enrich displays.

Although collaboration is a useful way of addressing gaps in knowledge with museums, several participants commented that artist/community interventions and collaborations require careful consideration and need to be ethically managed. One participant questioned how institutions can avoid being tokenistic when establishing collaborations with artists, and also, how institutions can shoulder the burden to 'decolonise' instead of placing the responsibility solely in the hands of artists and artworks. A consistent and timely approach to remunerating artists or community members for their labour is also lacking within the museum sector as a whole. Many artists report via social media that they regularly receive late payments from museums, leaving them struggling to pay bills. A conversation about remuneration needs to happen *with* artists and communities in order to ascertain which processes of remuneration are ethical, fit for purpose and mutually beneficial. As part of this conversation, institutions would do well to consider how payment can adequately compensate external collaborators for the skills and knowledge they provide, how both physical and intellectual space can be shared (e.g. use of museum spaces by communities and artists or shared authorship of content that is produced), and how museums can offer access to training and development opportunities.

This brings into question the value that is placed on the labour and expertise of artists and communities when they are 'brought in' to plug gaps in knowledge for museums. Museums often look to artists to conduct work that critiques or challenges the institution, to 'do the work' of decolonisation for the institution, but have yet to establish an approach to paying artists that allows them to make a sustainable living doing such work. One might argue that attempts to include more voices and narratives within museums and galleries have therefore paradoxically contributed to the ongoing undervaluing and exploitation of BIPOC people and artists, whilst being disguised as a benefit to the BIPOC audiences that museums seek to engage. In my view, what compounds this situation is a lack of transparency regarding both the shifting of responsibility of institutional critique and 'decolonisation' onto BIPOC people and artists, and the payment processes that are employed by museums. A drastically improved approach to remunerating artists, community members and other external stakeholders who share their knowledge, expertise and labour with museums is urgently needed for this work to continue ethically.

Stretched resources (time, money, organisational support)

The issue of stretched resources was widely discussed by participants as a factor hindering changes to curation and display practices. One participant noted 'a lack of organisational support, sometimes isolation, and lack of structure within which we are operating due to the multiple cuts to service'. Time was another factor, initially highlighted in the opening presentation, and later expanded on by participants. For example, one participant commented that research on their institution's collections had to be done on top of their normal duties. This highlights the pressure that is placed on museum professionals to do the in-depth research required to meaningfully engage with decolonial or anti-racist practices, whilst also organising and maintaining an already busy and complex exhibition and display programme, and the lack of budget allocation (or funding for a separate position) to support the investigation of links between objects/artworks and empire. As one participant cautioned, 'without the research, we have half the tools that we need to really unpick the situations and decolonise the collections'. Evidently, 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. to stage exhibitions and displays in ways that might be considered decolonial or anti-racist). The lack of time and funds to support the former represents a barrier to the latter.

Ways of dissemination / How to display problematic objects

There has been an ongoing discussion within the sector about best practice for being transparent about the violent, colonial histories that provide the contexts for, or are even depicted in, artworks in public collections, as well as approaches to dealing with problematic, outdated, offensive and racist language in object descriptions. Two prominent examples are the projects 'Labelling Matters' (Pitt Rivers Museum, 2019 - present) and 'Words Matter' (Troddenheim Museum, 2021). Unsurprisingly, several participants spoke in rather general terms about these dual challenges but did not proffer any possible strategies to deal with them.

In a similar vein, participants also discussed the challenges of addressing the connection of objects and artworks to the history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, particularly if there is no immediately obvious link between this history and the chosen display theme. One of the facilitators asked the participants, 'what modes of curation might you test out to enable those stories to come through in a way that feels very connected?'. Whilst this was a provocation for participants, a facilitator for another breakout group stated that 'colonial histories touch every context' and suggested there could be ways to 'find the connections of that theme, and then that opens up a way for you to talk about individuals, [such as] portrait sitters'. In these discussions, participants seemed attached to the notion that colonial histories and contexts can only be explored in exhibitions or displays that are explicitly organised around that topic, whereas the facilitators were proposing that colonial connections can be found in many, if not most, contexts and themes, and that exhibitions and displays can address multiple topics in subtle ways.

Some participants discussed different approaches to identifying narratives that widen the discussion around colonial histories. For example, one participant mentioned provenance research they were undertaking via a partnership with an international university that focused on those who were enslaved as a counterbalance to the information being provided about the family that owned the estate. Another participant discussed how artists' commissions can aid in ensuring that it is not only the curator's voice that features in the reinterpretation of sites and collections built on wealth that was accumulated through the Transatlantic Slave Trade. By opening up curation, interpretation and display practices to a broader range of people, voices and perspectives, these sorts of approaches have the potential to widen discussions about colonial histories.

Interestingly, while the workshop participants discussed a variety of different approaches that could be taken to develop more inclusive and challenging narratives within displays and exhibitions, several participants also expressed concern over the possibility of visitors reacting negatively to such approaches. For example, one participant said, 'we're always thinking of how to negate any particular criticisms that we might get for exploring this topic'. Reactions to the National Trust's *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties* (2020) in the press and from the public were noted by several participants as a cause for concern within the sector.⁹ How can this fear of criticism be overcome?

In addition to this concern around visitors' responses, there was a parallel discussion amongst the participants about negative responses to changes they want to make to long-standing interpretations and displays of collections that have links to colonial histories. One participant described feeling 'suffocated' by the idea of having to remain silent about colonial historical contexts for collections and artworks. The case for presenting more nuanced, transparent, inclusive and holistic narratives or histories in museums is certainly not new, but it has gained traction since the Rhodes Must Fall movement began in 2015, followed by the reignition of Black Lives Matter in 2020, so much so that the current Conservative government has weighed in on the debate, taking the stance of 'retain and explain' which firmly rejects the approach of removing problematic artworks or monuments from display.¹⁰ A useful response to this conundrum of having to keep problematic works on display but not wanting to gloss over precisely why they are problematic can be found in the work of the 'Labelling Matters' research project at the Pitt Rivers Museum.¹¹ In this project, older problematic object labels and interpretation texts remain in place alongside problematic objects, but those labels and texts are critically examined as part of the display, and new modes of interpretation are placed alongside them, enabling

⁹ See *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* (<https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/documents/colonialism-and-historic-slavery-report.pdf> (Accessed 20 June 2021) and *Charity Commission finds National Trust did not breach charity law* (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/charity-commission-finds-national-trust-did-not-breach-charity-law> (Accessed 20 June 2021).

¹⁰ See Historic England (2021) *Contested Heritage* <https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/statements/contested-heritage/> (Accessed 20 June 2021) and UK Government (2021) *New legal protection for England's heritage* (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-legal-protection-for-england-s-heritage> (Accessed 20 June 2021).

¹¹ 'The intention of the project is not to destroy any of these unfortunate archives, but to in fact activate and mobilise them to address some of the problems that lie at the root of racialised stereotypes and other problematic systemic colonial legacies that linger in the present.' Led by Dr Laura Van Broekhoven (Principal Investigator) and Marenka Thompson-Odlum (Research Associate) Available at: <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/labelling-matters> (Accessed 14 June 2021).

audiences to both reflect on museum practices and past attitudes, whilst also engaging with the object from a new, more holistic, multitudinous perspective.

Performative acts

The Black Lives Matter global protests during 2020 elicited responses and claims of solidarity with the cause from most cultural institutions across the sector, which subsequently led to a discussion about (and criticism of) performative acts of allyship (or performative allyship) by institutions. Such performative acts give the appearance of support for a cause, but behind them, there is nothing more than a surface-level engagement with the cause, and little or no intention to meaningfully reflect on the issues at hand or, most importantly, to initiate actual, impactful change. One participant discussed how the museum they work at conducted consultations with audiences on the removal of problematic artwork, and commented that doing so seemed pointless given that the institution in question was not actually willing to consider removing the artwork from display. Another participant noted that, at their workplace, they were 'asked to think of "colonial examples" within the house or family [to whom the house had belonged], just in case we were asked by members of the public about how we were responding as an organisation [to calls for museums and heritage sites to decolonise]'. Both examples demonstrate that museums and museum professionals are aware of current discourses on inequalities but are consciously choosing to engage with them via a performative approach rather than undertaking the real reflection and unlearning that is necessary to initiate internal change. The sector's preoccupation with optics (i.e. being seen to be doing something), rather than taking concrete action, presents a significant barrier to change. How can both institutions and individuals be made accountable for the public statements they make? In theory, many institutions are accountable to a board of trustees, but is this mechanism sufficient for monitoring and reviewing accountability, especially given that the boards of museums and heritage institutions are widely acknowledged to be lacking in diversity and unrepresentative of the populations they exist to serve?

Neutrality and brand control

The supposed neutrality of museums has been a subject of debate for many years, and has become more prominent since the US-based 'Museums Are Not Neutral' campaign was initiated by La Tanya Autry and Mike Murawski in 2017.¹² The campaign's hashtag (#MuseumsAreNotNeutral) is often invoked, either on social media or verbally, when museums fail to respond to key moments of societal/cultural/political shift or to social injustice based on their arguable neutrality. The pursuit of neutrality is problematic because it maintains the colonial era, Enlightenment-informed illusion that the museum was created for disseminating 'factual' and 'objective' knowledge. As Suay Aksoy, President of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), put it at the 2019 annual meeting for the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, museums are not neutral, they never have been and never will be:

'They are not separate from their social and historical context. And when it does seem like they are separate, that is not neutrality - that is a choice. Choosing not to address climate change is not neutrality. Choosing not to talk about colonisation is not neutrality. Choosing not to advocate for equality is not neutrality. Those are choices, and we can make better ones'.¹³

Despite such a powerful statement from the ICOM President, there are still many UK museums that hold on to the idea of neutrality very firmly, particularly those in receipt of public or government funding. As one participant reported, they are 'working in a space which hasn't... accepted that non-political isn't something that exists'.

On the topic of how neutrality or objectivity relates to curation, Bayer and Terkessidis argue that curating 'can only develop a mode of representation that fractures the allegedly "objective" perspective (that turned out to be one-sided and completely wrong) on the basis of unconditional inclusion of the parties that had hitherto been erased and silenced'.¹⁴ In other words, authentic intentional inclusion of multiple perspectives is central to ensuring that more authentic modes of representation are embedded within curatorial practices and displays. But how can Bayer and Terkessidis's challenge to so-called objectivity

¹² The Museums Are Not Neutral Campaign. Available from: <https://www.museumsarenotneutral.com> (Accessed 20 June 2021).

¹³ Suay Aksoy, speaking at the annual meeting for the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art in 2019. Available at: <https://icom.museum/en/news/museums-do-not-need-to-be-neutral-they-need-to-be-independent/> (Accessed 20 September 2019).

¹⁴ Bayer, N. and Terkessidis, M. (2017), *Beyond Repair: An Anti-Racist Praxeology of Curating*. Available at: <https://red-thread.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/4708874.pdf> (Accessed 15 June 2021).

be taken on board in a context where the perspectives of individual staff members and institutional brand identity are not aligned? One of the breakout group facilitators pointed out that institutional brand identity and control over that brand identity may preclude individual staff members from developing and testing radical approaches to curation, display and interpretation. They added that job precarity in the sector (fixed-term contracts, low wages and the prospect of being made redundant) may also deter curators and other museum workers from challenging the curatorial orthodoxies of the museum. Another participant similarly noted that ‘we talk about our museums as radical places but actually [they are only] radical with a very small r and a very small p and it’s often very risk averse and brand managed’. Feigning neutrality is a key element in many museums’ careful management of their brand identity.

Diversity

A key talking point amongst participants was the way colonial hierarchies manifest in museum work, ranging from institutional structures and modes of operation, to the content of exhibitions and displays, and also the histories, perspectives and people that are represented in them. Several participants discussed the make-up and diversity (or lack thereof) of institutional staff and the impact this has on who and what is included (or omitted) within displays. In relation to this, one participant explained that they were attempting to foreground the stories of individuals within artworks to evidence the histories of, for example, Black Victorians – i.e. an attempt to de-centre whiteness within the museum they work in. Another participant underlined the importance of considering how one might be utilising or underscoring established but problematic colonial hierarchies when displaying objects and artworks. It was refreshing to know that some of the participants were questioning their role in reinforcing hierarchies and negative stereotypes and not simply relying on the inclusion of staff with ethnic minority backgrounds to resolve such problems.¹⁵

¹⁵ Elena Gonzales has outlined a useful overview of the following terms equity (proportional fairness to build trust with institutions), inclusion (welcoming all types of audiences, including those not engaged with museums) and diversity (representation on the broadest scale, from a non-tokenistic perspective) for anyone who wishes to view them within an inclusive curatorial framework and to expand upon the rhetorical questions mentioned above. See the section of her essay subtitled ‘Diversity Equity Accessibility Inclusion (DEAI): The framework for inclusive curation’ in *View From the Field: Equity-Oriented and Anti-racist Curatorial Practice*. Available at: <https://inclusivehistorian.com/view-from-the-field-equity-oriented-and-anti-racist-curatorial-practice/> (Accessed 15 June 2021).

Ultimately, decisions about what artworks and objects are displayed depends on who is in decision-making roles. One participant expressed the view that many curators have avoided the task of expanding the narratives and kinds of people featured in the exhibitions and displays they produce simply because they do not know how to go about it. However, another participant observed that organisations are judged by the number of people of colour they hire for senior, decision-making roles, and that one solution to the inaction or paralysis described above is to actually place more people of colour in roles where they can determine both the themes or subjects of exhibitions, and, how those themes are addressed, especially with regards to implementing decolonial or anti-racist curatorial practices. This could not only help to broaden the narratives and kinds of people that are represented in exhibitions, but also the kinds of objects and practices on display. As one participant commented, ‘within the world cultures collection there are a lot of works, that if you decentralise the Western lens, are [in fact] modern and contemporary artworks but are brought in [to collections] under the [moniker] of ‘other’ or ‘folk art’ or ‘world cultures art’’. On the same topic of broadening the range of perspectives included in exhibitions and displays, another participant discussed a collaboration with an artist who, instead of ring-fencing ‘Black art’ in social or political contexts, as has been the typical approach in museums for decades, focused on the joy, intimacy, and aesthetics found within such art. This evidences the importance of working with artists, and particularly underrepresented artists who can open up new possibilities for framing, comprehending and engaging with artworks, including through a decolonial or anti-racist lens. Diversity – of staff, of narratives, of perspectives, of practices – clearly has a central role to play in how exhibitions and displays are conceptualised.

Peer suggestions

This workshop ultimately served more as a sounding board than as a space for participants to form concrete actions to take forward on an individual basis. However, some participants did suggest practical ideas in response to other participants' predicaments, which I summarise below:

- Using the online space to archive temporary exhibitions, as a way to mitigate against the loss of institutional knowledge of previous work.
- Thinking beyond Western knowledge systems and delinking from colonial knowledge systems.
- Bringing the wider team on board to explore and interrogate histories within the institution. This ensures that there is buy-in across the whole organisation, so that 'doing the work' does not rest on only a few staff members.
- Editing existing interpretation by adding more sentences to provide more context to the display.
- If colonial histories/slavery is not the main focus of a display, signposting visitors to additional information online e.g. the institution's website, online collections database, QR codes or apps such as Smartify. This would provide opportunities for visitors to explore those links themselves rather than the museum omitting or denying them altogether.
- Creating blogs that explore the colonial histories of objects within collections. This idea would be particularly useful in cases where such links are not immediately obvious, such as household objects that contained sugar or coffee, or objects made of cotton or lace (all of which were products of the Transatlantic Slave Trade).

Whilst these suggestions could serve as starting points for museum professionals seeking guidance on how to address violent colonial histories through display, none of these suggestions are particularly radical or transformative, in my view. Many of the institutions represented by the participants may already be using the approaches suggested. Arguably, the most revolutionary idea amongst them was that of identifying and adopting other knowledge systems. However, doing so requires careful consideration of the ethics involved, particularly in terms of extraction, exploitation and respect. To adopt different knowledge systems ethically and effectively, museum staff need to engage in processes of unlearning the deeply entrenched Western knowledge systems that govern their work and lives, and this requires conscious

commitment and time. Is the UK's museum sector prepared to carve out this time for their staff in order to impact meaningful change?

There is clearly an appetite to unlearn and engage in the issues at hand, as proven by the abundance of anti-racist reading lists circulating on social media and in museum spaces. Indeed, this workshop, and the series as a whole, was devised as a response to an evident need amongst museum professionals for dedicated space and time to think through and discuss exactly how to 'do the work'. But how can the knowledge gained from reading anti-racist literature and attending online talks and workshops move beyond theoretical and circular conversation and translate into concrete action? Can new ways of thinking and doing realistically be embedded in museum practices in the near future if museum professionals have barely begun to engage in the critical self-reflection required to 'do the work'? Moreover, how can decolonial modes of thinking and doing be adopted by museums if the colonially-rooted systems of our art institutions run counter to them, and if their neoliberal structures deny museum workers the time and space to develop such modes in the first place?

Conclusion

I have critically summarised the key discussion points of the participants of the first workshop in the 'Doing the Work' series, which focussed on practices of curation and display. The key areas of discussion were: gaps in knowledge; stretched resources; displaying problematic objects; performative acts; diversity (of collections, artworks and staff); and neutrality. All six discussion points were linked by the issue of being able to speak and people actively listening, underscoring the importance of dedicated time and space for these conversations. However, much of the discussion pointed to the fact that the development of radical or transformative approaches, or even drawing (however lightly) on well-established decolonial or anti-racist thinking, is far from being widespread within the sector.

The participants correctly noted a variety of genuine barriers to change, such as institutional resistance, obstructive systems, legislation, lack of resources, job precarity and fear of negative responses and penalisation. However, one other significant barrier they failed to acknowledge, or even recognise, was their own individual, and personal (rather than professional) commitment to 'doing the work'. I would argue that before museum professionals embark on any of the strategies discussed in the workshop, they first need to understand why they seek to bring about some of the changes discussed within this summary. Why do they think

this work is necessary right now? As part of this critical self-reflection, it is imperative that museum professionals consistently check in on their intentions and how they enact them. Participants' comments about working with artists and community groups indicate that exploitative practices persist, which could potentially undermine attempts at decolonisation or anti-racism if they are not urgently addressed.

One of the key strengths of the workshop was in allowing museum professionals to be challenged (in a safe setting) and in placing accountability not only on the institution but also on the individual. In the same vein, my intention with this summary has been to question and challenge both the practices and the personal intentions of curators. Paralysis, inertia and inaction are no longer acceptable. Individuals, and by extension institutions, must now have strength of conviction, be willing to take risks and start 'doing the work' one way or another. None of the approaches suggested in the workshop and noted in this summary are perfect solutions for the issues at hand. Each one will necessarily involve difficulty and draw criticism, but all should be understood as open opportunities to instate positive and much-needed change in the long run.

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Sonia Boyce, *Six Acts*, 2018. Performance documentation at Manchester Art Gallery; performer: Lasana Shabazz. © Sonia Boyce. Courtesy: the artist and Manchester Art Gallery. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2022. Photograph: Andrew Brooks. Presented by the Contemporary Art Society, 2018/19.

Workshop 2: Interventionist Practices

24 February 2021

This workshop considered the role of artist residencies and interventionist projects staged by independent curators and organisations. It was moderated by **Fatoş Üstek** (independent curator and writer) and began with case studies from **Dr. Sylvia Theuri** (artist/curator/educator/researcher) and **Priyesh Mistry** (Associate Curator Modern and Contemporary, National Gallery).

Questions for discussion included:

What short and long-term impact can interventions by artists and external curators have on problematic but long-standing institutional practices, orthodoxies, and attitudes?

How can interventionist voices and practices be embedded into museum and gallery work?

How can relationships with artists and external curators be meaningfully and ethically sustained after interventionist projects end?

From Institutional Racism to Duties of Care:

Moving Interventionist Practices Away from Racism and Colonial Dominance

by Sylvia Theuri

The tearing down of the Colston statue in Bristol in June 2020 was a significant and pivotal moment in British history with its effects felt both nationally and internationally. As Dorothy Price has commented, 'The fall of the statue of Colston and the subsequent symbolic drowning of his effigy in the waters from whence his profits arose were prompted by a far more urgent necessity than scholarly debates on the rights and wrongs of public monuments'.¹ The death of George Floyd, less than two weeks earlier on 25 May 2020, which was watched by the world through social media, was the catalyst for the tearing down of the statue.

This significant moment can be seen as an example of the ways the arts and those who engage with them should be thinking in relation to anti-racist and decolonial practices. Within the arts there needs to be a significant fall and tearing down of historically problematic ways of working in order to bring forth new ways of working. On 24 February 2021, museum and gallery colleagues from across the UK came together online for a workshop looking at 'Interventionist Practices'. This event was part of 'Doing the Work' – a series of workshops co-produced by the Contemporary Art Society and the Decolonising Arts Institute, taking place across 2021, and which focused on the challenges of embedding anti-racism and decolonisation in a range of different museum practices. Here, I synthesise and discuss the conversations that happened in that workshop.

¹ Price, DC, (2021), 'Binding Trauma' in *Art History*, 44 (1), p. 9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12572>.

What was the objective of the workshop?

The objective for the series as a whole was to respond to the needs of a wide range of museum colleagues wishing to engage meaningfully and practically in anti-racist and/or decolonial practice. This particular workshop considered the role of artist residencies in museums and galleries, and interventionist projects staged by independent curators and organisations, and focused on drawing out their short term and long-term impacts. The workshop proposed wider questions for discussion such as: How can interventionist voices/practices be embedded into museum and gallery work?; and How can relationships with artists and external curators be meaningfully and ethically sustained after interventionist projects end?²

The day began with presentations by two curators who critically reflected on and discussed interventionist projects that they had engaged in. Priyesh Mistry, Associate Curator of Modern & Contemporary Projects at the National Gallery, London, discussed the Artist Residency programmes and contemporary commissions, with a particular focus on the exhibition 'Rosalind Nashashibi: An Overflow of Passion and Sentiment'. I was also one of the presenters, and I reflected on my curatorial residency at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum focusing on my experience of being a Black curator engaging with sites and strategies of resistance as a curatorial endeavour.

Participants were then placed in various breakout rooms and offered the space to discuss anti-racist and decolonial practice with other museum colleagues in a more intimate setting. The conversations in these smaller groups raised a number of key issues and many more questions than answers, giving food for thought to those that attended. The three most prevalent discussion topics were: barriers to long-term change; legacies of interventionist projects; and duties of care. I detail and discuss them below.

² Contemporary Art Society (2021) 'Doing the Work: Interventionist Practices' [workshop video recording]. Available at: <https://www.contemporaryartsociety.org/event/work-interventionist-practices/> (Accessed 06 October 2021).

Barriers to long-term change

The tendency within arts institutions to favour temporary engagement in decolonisation and anti-racism instead of investing in long-term organisational change was explored in various ways across the breakout groups. The first of these was in terms of where decolonisation happens in the museum, and through whose initiative. Several participants highlighted that most of the work around equality, diversity and inclusivity was being undertaken by women staff members and/or younger staff members who have less agency and power to enact change. Some participants acknowledged that decolonisation was happening predominantly with audiences in mind rather than staff and organisations themselves. There was a sense that learning and engagement around anti-racism and decolonisation was focused on exhibitions, programming and public events with limited focus around the learning that needed to happen for staff as part of their professional development.

Participants questioned how institutions could move beyond superficial action, beyond simply talking about the anti-racist work they were prepared to do and truly engage with transformative justice. Transformative justice prioritises the agency of individuals and process over outcome, and challenges unequal power relations; for art institutions this means centring the internal work needed to change racist structures and seeing this as lifelong work. Engaging fully in this requires institutions to change the way they work, to significantly slow down their pace to allow *all* their staff time to read and reflect on what genuine anti-racist and decolonial practices look like for their organisation. As one participant commented, 'We can't just call up other people to come and do the work that we should be doing'. This comment identifies that the work of eradicating racism in arts institutions is the work of all staff members; institutions should not be relying on temporary staff (predominantly staff of colour) to carry out this work in isolation.

As was the case in all the workshops in the series, discussion amongst the participants did not always remain focussed on the workshop topic. In this workshop, the participants talked at length about institutional racism and Eurocentric thinking being a barrier to long-term change and how, if these two issues remain unresolved, short-term interventionist strategies will have little to no impact in ridding art institutions of racism and colonial attitudes and practices.

Acknowledging the existence of institutional racism within the arts was identified by some of the participants as an important first step in moving beyond talk towards action. The term 'institutional racism' came into prominence in 1999, following the racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1997. The UK Home Secretary at the time called for a public inquiry into Lawrence's death, resulting in the 1999 Macpherson report, which concluded that the Metropolitan Police was institutionally racist.

The report also identified that institutional racism was rife in all major institutions, not just law enforcement, and that as a result, minoritised groups were being significantly disadvantaged. One participant questioned whether art institutions could openly admit to being institutionally racist, even though twenty years have since passed. As one exasperated participant questioned, 'Why can't they make a commitment and actually admit and say what Black artists have been saying for many, many years?...These are institutionally racist institutions'.

One participant shared an example of how they saw their organisation working to make changes to their institutionally racist practices, primarily through fundraising to buy artworks created by artists of colour. The participant acknowledged that their institution should have collected these artworks many years ago but had failed to because of institutional racism. Conversations then arose around how museums and galleries make decisions about new acquisitions. Some participants questioned how and why art institutions determine what constitutes 'good' contemporary art and how they decide which artworks are 'worthy' of collecting. They discussed the Eurocentric thinking that underpins notions of 'good' art and which guides decision-making when collecting. The consistent use of a Eurocentric knowledge base within this process has resulted in a widespread and collective failure by institutions to acquire artwork by artists of colour. Research shows that artists of colour are significantly underrepresented in public art collections.³ The impact of Eurocentric thinking within museums was also discussed in terms of the way artworks are interpreted. One participant discussed the importance of abandoning 'the so-called neutrality principle' that is embedded in curatorial work, often leading to a refusal to see, or a dismissal of, the wider socio-political framework affecting artworks.

Some of the participants acknowledged that Eurocentric thinking remains embedded in the curriculum presented to art students on university courses. Students tend to be taught a primarily Eurocentric curriculum by predominantly white educators, with little space given for non-Western ways of thinking. This is further perpetuated and ingrained in the system as students graduate and enter the art sector where Eurocentric practices, ways of being and ways of thinking continue to be centred. This points towards the notion that knowledge itself – how it is constituted, by whom, and for whom, and also how it is diffused – needs to be decolonised in order to bring about long-term change. By engaging in the practice of decolonising knowledge systems, museum workers in

³ Dalal-Clayton, A. (2020), 'Developing more representative art collections could not be more urgent'. Available at: <http://www.thedoublenegative.co.uk/2020/10/developing-more-representative-art-collections-could-not-be-more-urgentdr-anjalie-dalal-clayton-on-the-need-to-diversify-the-narrative/> (Accessed 06 October 2021). In the 31 collections that were audited by the Black Artists & Modernism project in 2016, works by Black artists represented less than 4% of the collections at best, and at worst, less than 1%.

decision-making roles would begin to make genuine space for diversity in exhibitions and programming, thus negating the need for interventionist practices in the first place. There was also discussion about the need to actively listen to communities of colour and to genuinely respond to the changes they are asking of institutions by opening up museum spaces to engage with non-European knowledge systems. Relatedly, an important point was raised about what institutions should be doing in response to communities of colour demanding radical changes to organisational structures, including a collapsing of existing structures altogether. Whilst the workshop participants did not suggest what radical change could look like, it might involve white staff members in leadership positions stepping down from their roles and handing over that leadership to people of colour. But how far are institutions prepared to go with radical acts of change that demand tearing down and rebuilding with others from the ground up?

The points raised in this section identify some of the deeply embedded institutional problems that exist within art organisations and which staff are grappling with. Long-term institutional change is difficult and complex work and must be undertaken alongside any short-term interventionist projects that art organisations engage with and produce.

Legacies of interventionist projects

Interventionist projects, when undertaken well, can leave powerful, lasting legacies within art institutions. For example, one of the participants talked about an artist residency having a long-term impact on their institution. They identified several ways the artist challenged and interrogated issues of gender, sexuality and race within their collection, which in turn prompted a whole strand of new work that the institution was still engaged in during the time the workshop took place. This also led to larger, longer-term questions being asked within the institution about who makes decisions, and how to work more democratically with external people.

However, and rightly, criticism has been levelled at projects that are used by institutions to give the appearance of engaging in decolonial and anti-racist work, when such work is short-term and when little thought is given to issues of sustainability and embedded, lasting impact within the institution. In her self-published essay, 'This Work isn't For Us', Jemma Desai (2020) provides an excellent critique of short-term interventionist practices in art organisations that do not result in long-lasting change.⁴

⁴ Desai, J. (2020), *This Work Isn't For Us*, Google Docs.

In the essay, Desai discusses the performative nature of temporary professional development programmes, residencies and public programming 'targeted' at people of colour. Her argument is that they only benefit the institution by providing 'colour' to white spaces, whilst the deeper, systemic issues around racism and discrimination, which staff and/or audiences of colour face on a daily basis, continue to be left unaddressed.

The extent to which interventionist projects are or are not embedded in art institutions after such projects end was a key topic of discussion in many of the breakout sessions. In particular, the participants reflected on what the legacies of short-term projects framed around anti-racism/ decolonisation should be, focussing on the related factors of temporary change, staff turnover or movement and institutional memory. They raised questions about what happens to knowledge when staff or practitioners involved in anti-racist or decolonising projects leave, taking their knowledge with them, and what impact their leaving might have on anti-racist work being embedded in an institution. They also identified the archiving of previously undertaken anti-racist and decolonial short-term, interventionist work as key to creating a lasting legacy. Archiving not only preserves such work within institutional memory, but also creates a research resource that can enable staff who were not involved and future staff to take it forward, thus broadening and lengthening the impact. In relation to this, the participants also spoke about permanent staff not always being invested in temporary projects, but that such involvement needed to be fostered because of the ability of permanent staff to continue the work in different ways after projects end. Whilst each institution is different, generally the pace at which art organisations move from one project to the next leaves limited time for permanent staff to invest in thinking through legacy initiatives that can come from interventionist projects.

One possible way of encouraging investment amongst permanent staff working on temporary, interventionist projects, as one of the workshop participants described, is building in time for curatorial reflexivity and reflection within them. They gave an example of a strategy now in place in an organisation they had worked for: staff are coming together for dialogue and reflection near the end of a project in an attempt to embed staff learning and potentially initiate change in the institution's practices before the project ends, rather than after, thus ensuring a more impactful legacy for it. However, because projects often do not go to plan, time for reflection and learning, when placed at the end, is often dropped. One way to counteract this would be to build in reflection at a number of key points *throughout* the project - making it a fundamental and routine element, and thus improving the chance of impact and legacy.

Available at: <https://sourceful.us/doc/337/this-work-isnt-for-us--by-jemma-desai> (Accessed 07 October 2021).

Another participant discussed the challenges of undertaking a curatorial traineeship and artist intervention in their institution's collection. The institution was aware that the temporariness of the project was problematic and was looking for funding to provide a long-term post for the trainee (who was a person of colour) that would last beyond the project. Part of the reason for this was an awareness that the majority of the institution's staff is white. Many participants spoke of their awareness of the lack of diversity of (permanent) staff in art institutions and within the arts industry more generally, and how their own workplaces are no exception. However, there was little discussion during the workshop about making changes in this area, and what that change could look like. Interventionist projects are often the way that people of colour are afforded opportunities in and are able to find work in art institutions, but they rarely lead to longer-term or permanent roles. The resulting problem is that, by using temporary interventionist projects to notionally 'shake things up', institutions 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. The only way to dismantle this idea is to ensure permanent roles are offered to people of colour, and this might need to involve positive action over several years until there is drastically improved representation in museum staffing.

Duties of care

How do art practitioners of colour have agency in institutions? How do institutions honour the voices of people of colour? What value and challenges can this bring? How can art spaces belong to all? These questions, which arose during the breakout session, focused on notions of care and the duty of art institutions to look after the people they collaborate with on interventionist projects. One participant questioned how one can work with community groups in 'the right way'. Another talked about wanting to devolve curatorial decision making and curatorial control and to transfer agency to others. Another participant expressed that they were keen to think through methods of working on interventionist projects that did not require asking people of colour and queer people to continuously rearticulate their lived experiences. They were interested in keeping a dialogue active and keeping artists who have been marginalised by institutions involved in discussions around their work and projects, as well as ensuring that all staff in institutions had an understanding of the artists' practice and their reasons for creating their work. The participant was interested in thinking through working with artists in ways that were not exploitative but centred on enabling agency and prioritising care. Interestingly, whilst these various

desires were spoken about in the session, the participants did not offer any specific strategies that they could put in place.

One participant discussed what it meant to be better aligned with their gallery's audience who were predominantly university students and from culturally diverse backgrounds but did not feel that the gallery was representative of them. The participant wanted audiences to come in and feel that it was their space. This conversation brought to the forefront questions around what it means to care for the audiences that enter art institutions. Zahava Doering and Andrew Pekarik (1996) have written about the entrance narratives that museum audiences bring with them when they visit exhibitions, stating that, 'museum and gallery visitors are not blank slates on which we write'.⁵ Audiences come to these spaces with entrance narratives, which are the fundamental ways that audiences 'construe and contemplate the world' and the 'personal experiences and memories that verify and support their understanding as they engage with art'.⁶ If museum workers genuinely seek to welcome more diverse audiences and, moreover, to offer 'care' in the process, they must develop an understanding of this concept of 'entrance narratives' and then apply it in audience research and when devising visitor service strategies, exhibitions, displays and public programmes.

There was also discussion within the breakout session about the ways art institutions do or do not hold space for people of colour when certain subject matter, artworks and projects have the potential to cause pain and bring up trauma for audience members. Participants asked: How do institutions do this well or not? How can institutions create healing spaces? How does one centre audiences who have historically been marginalised in art spaces? How do institutions bring people into their spaces safely? These questions foreground the importance of institutions privileging practices and acts of care, since significant damage can be done when this does not happen.

A problematic example can be seen in relation to the 'Steve McQueen: Year 3' exhibition at Tate Britain in 2019. The exhibition comprised group photographs of Year 3 children across London's primary schools and was described by Tate as offering 'a glimpse into the capital's future'.⁷ A key criticism surrounding the exhibition was that care was not taken in relation to audiences of colour that engaged with it. McQueen's exhibition was placed in close proximity to the 'British Baroque: Power and Illusion' exhibition, which included the *Portrait of Hortense Mancini, Duchess of Mazarin, as Diana* (c.1674-1688) by Benedetto Gennari

⁵ Doering, Z. D. and Pekarik, A. J. (1996), 'Questioning the Entrance Narrative', *Journal of Museum Education*, 21:3, p. 20.

⁶ Doering & Pekarik, (1996), p. 20.

⁷ McQueen, S. 'Year 3', exhibition page. Available at: Tate website <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/steve-mcqueen-year-3> (Accessed 17 September 2021).

which depicts Mancini surrounded by four young Black ‘attendants’ and two dogs. Three of the Black ‘attendants’ wear silver collars which mirror those of the dogs, and mark them as being enslaved. They are depicted as being the property of Mancini and under her control. Discussions subsequently arose on social media about the trauma and pain that Black audiences experienced after having visited the McQueen exhibition.⁸ Situating the Steve McQueen exhibition in close proximity to an exhibition that included such a deeply problematic artwork was a huge failing in Tate’s duty of care to its audiences, and not only Black audiences, because *all* people should be triggered by the sight of enslaved children, no matter what their race is. However, it is important to consider how many Black children came to see themselves represented in McQueen’s exhibition, only to walk into an adjacent exhibition and see children who looked like them depicted as slaves. What does this communicate to Black children and their families about their place and value in British society? Some have argued that trigger warnings should have been in place, while others have questioned why such an image was considered fit for display in the first place. Perhaps if Tate had considered the ‘entrance narratives’ of its audiences in this instance, this shocking failing could have been avoided. The duty of art institutions such as Tate to look after their audiences should be a priority in all areas of museum work.

Conclusion

The three key issues raised throughout the workshop were barriers to long-term institutional change, legacies of interventionist projects and duties of care. These are important and significant areas impacting the working practices of museum staff and the institutions they work for.

The use of interventionist strategies by art institutions to engage only temporarily with racism and decolonisation, rather than prioritising and investing in long-term change, was a major topic of discussion during the workshop. Participants questioned who is currently invested in the issues of equality, diversity and inclusivity, and talked at length about institutional racism and Eurocentric thinking being a barrier to long-term

⁸ The White Pube (the art critics Gabrielle de la Puente and Zarina Muhammad whose content is shared largely on social media) identified and highlighted this issue via Twitter stating, *‘Tate Britain investing time n money in revamping their image as Not Racist, and then exhibiting a painting of a white woman surrounded by dogs and black kids all wearing shiny collars, in the middle of an exhibition you can only get to past Steve McQueen’s portraits of year 3 kids’*, Available at: <https://twitter.com/TheWhitePube/status/1231902251263897602?s=20> (Accessed on 3 November 2021).

change, highlighting that these two issues needed to be resolved in order for short-term interventionist strategies to have any impact in relation to anti-racism and decolonisation. Participants also expressed their desire to engage in practices of care for staff, collaborators and audiences, and to ensure this was practiced within interventionist projects. The example of the ‘Steve McQueen: Year 3’ exhibition at Tate Britain in 2019 highlights very clearly the harming consequences of art institutions failing to fulfil their duty of care to the people of colour they seek to engage.

I have discussed radical change and transformative justice as being central to the *ongoing* work of museum workers (of all types and levels of seniority) if they are seriously committed to embedding anti-racism and decolonisation in their institutions. It is essential that art institutions create space within their core for the work, perspectives and agency of individuals of colour, that they give as much energy to process as they do to outcome, and, that they work continuously to redistribute power (both externally and internally) to the very people they seek to engage, *alongside* any temporary interventionist projects they may choose to put in place. Engaging fully in this requires institutions to work differently, to work more slowly, more carefully, to build in time for reflection so that interventionist projects can initiate genuine change in institutions before they end, ensuring their legacy for decades to come.

Some of the workshop participants identified that acknowledging institutional racism within the arts is the necessary first step in moving away from simply talking and towards action. However, art institutions have yet to openly admit that they are institutionally racist, despite twenty years having passed since the term first came into prominence. If we are seeking radical change in museums and galleries, and if we are seeking to tear down old and problematic structures, this admission is a minimum requirement and starting point.

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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?”



Matthew Krishanu, *Corvus*, 2019. Installation view at The Stuart Hall Library, Iniva, London, 2019. Photograph: George Torode.

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'.¹

Documentation practice is guided by the Spectrum standard.² This includes nine 'primary procedures' for recording information about collections, which museums are required to follow under the UK Museum Accreditation Scheme.³ This standardisation has been

¹ Rutherford, A. (2021) Ananda Rutherford speaks on museum and gallery systems, documentation and cataloguing. 29 January. *Curatorial Research Centre*. Available at: <https://curatorialresearch.com/decolonising-practice/ananda-rutherford-speaks-on-museum-and-gallery-systems-documentation-and-cataloguing/> (Accessed 07 September 2021).

² Collections Trust (2017) *Spectrum 5.0*. Available at: <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum/spectrum-5/> (Accessed 07 September 2021).

³ Arts Council England (2018). *Accreditation Standard*. Available at: https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Accreditation_Standard_Nov2018_0.pdf (Accessed 07 September 2021).

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.⁴ 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

⁴ Rutherford also published these questions on her blog – see: Rutherford, A. (2021), 'Documentation and Decolonisation', 24 March. *Museum Data Laundry*. Available at: <https://museumdatalaundry.com/2021/03/24/documentation-and-decolonisation/> (Accessed 07 September 2021).

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.⁵ 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 (D)eaf/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).⁶ 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.

⁵ Legacies of British Slavery - UCL Department of History (2021) *Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery*. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/> (Accessed 07 September 2021).

⁶ Inc Arts UK (2020) #BAMEOver. Available at: <https://incarts.uk/%23bameover-the-statement> (Accessed 07 September 2021).

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)*.⁷ 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.

⁷ Turner, H. (2020). *Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

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.

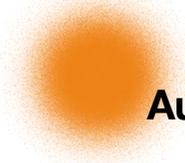
Creative solutions provide ways of filling in gaps where information was never recorded and can never be recovered, by focussing on alternative ways of 'knowing' an object. Participants discussed how 'working within the absence' can occur within artistic practices but may seem antithetical to people 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.

⁸ For more on Eiko Soga's video work 'Autumn Salmon' (2017). Available at: <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/eiko-sogas-autumn-salmon-2017>. (Accessed on 9 March 2022).

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

⁹ The most recent ACE diversity report states that museums had the lowest proportion of Black, Asian and Ethnically Diverse people across the disciplines they support, at 7%. See: Arts Council England (2020) *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case*. Available at: https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality_Diversity_and_the_Creative_Case_A_Data_Report__201920.pdf (Accessed 07 September 2021).

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.¹⁰ 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, as well as some resistance to adding external voices.¹² Gatekeeping around records can persist, even when resources are available. Indeed, Thompson-Odlum described museum staff 'correcting' the work of

¹⁰ Somers Cocks, A. (2021), 'V&A to say goodbye to departments by material—woodwork, metalwork etc—and 20% of its curators', *The Art Newspaper*, 26 February. Available at: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/radical-restructuring-of-london-s-victoria-and-albert-museum-due-to-the-effects-of-the-pandemic-will-lead-to-curatorial-job-losses> (Accessed 07 September 2021).

¹¹ Collections Trust (2009) *Revisiting Museum Collections* Available at: <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Revisiting-Museum-Collections-toolkit.pdf> (Accessed 08 September 2021).

¹² Reed, C. (2013), *Is Revisiting Collections Working?* Available at: <https://www.phf.org.uk/publications/revisiting-collections-working/> (Accessed 08 September 2021).

makers and practitioners who had been invited to contribute to the database at Pitt Rivers Museum. Some participants were also concerned about gatekeeping within communities, and the challenge of ensuring different voices and views within communities were represented.

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 storehouses of loot, is key to decolonial work. Thompson-Odlum described how the Pitt Rivers

¹³ Noble, S.U. (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: New York University Press.

¹⁴ Kendall Adams, G. (2013) 'In museums they trust', *Museums Journal*, 01 April. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2013/04/01042013-news-analysis/> (Accessed 07 September 2021).

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 decentre 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.¹⁵ Sometimes action was spurred by individual staff noticing and raising

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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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

around the COVID-19 pandemic without proper consideration for how it would be preserved and documented.

¹⁶ Museums Association *Code of Ethics for Museums* (2016). Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/code-of-ethics/> (Accessed 08 September 2021).

¹⁷ Collections Trust (2019) *Developing a documentation procedural manual*. Available at: <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Guidance-on-developing-a-documentation-procedural-manual.pdf> (Accessed 08 September 2021).

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 CMS are a niche product dominated by a few software companies, but developers are not unwilling to introduce new features, if the demand is there from museums.¹⁸
- **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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¹⁸ Balboa Park Online Collaborative (2020), *Dreaming of a New Collections Management System: Episode 1* [Webinar]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMzxR0A5eI4> (Accessed 08 September 2021).

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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?



Yinka Shonibare, *Earth*, 2010. © Yinka Shonibare CBE. All rights reserved, DACS 2022. Purchased with assistance from Art Fund, the Arts Council England/Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund, the Contemporary Art Society and the Friends of Wolverhampton Arts and Heritage, 2018.

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,

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 – people 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).

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.

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 unrushed, 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 benefitted from slavery and colonialism in their future interpretations of colonial-era artworks. This is because the participant describing the approach noted above was also

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.³ 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).⁴ 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

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.

⁴ Lugones, 2007, p. 186.

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.⁵ 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

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 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'.⁶

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').

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.

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.⁷

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 positionality, and what their individual positionality 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 an 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.

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'.⁸

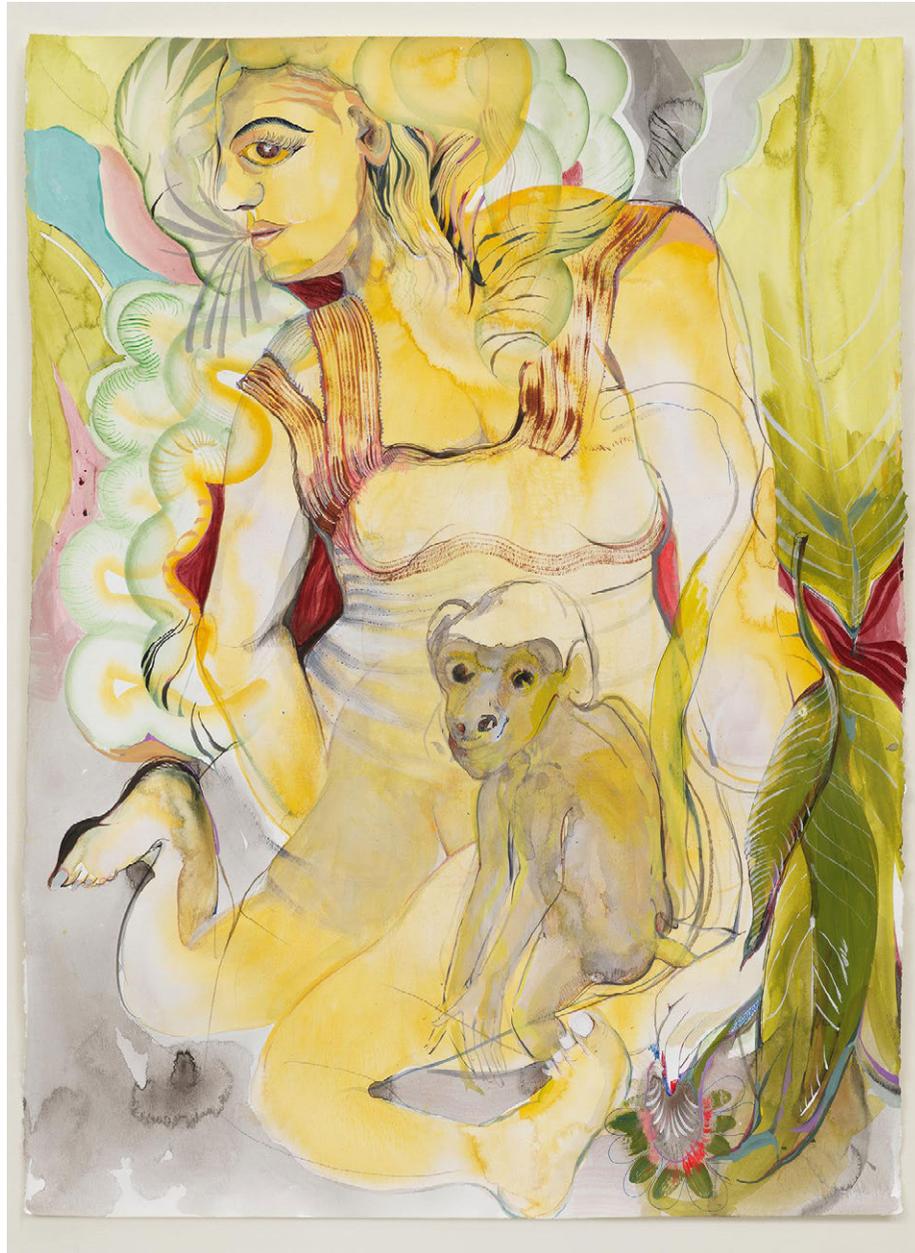
As the term 'decolonising' gains currency in the museum and gallery sector, it is important to understand how practices and conversations surrounding the term contribute to—or delay—the urgent cause of decolonisation, as defined in Tuck and Yang's description, for the majority world.

Khairani Barokka is a writer and artist, who is currently UK Associate Artist at Delfina Foundation, and Research Fellow at UAL.

⁸ Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 1.

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Rina Banerjee, 'In turmeric Yellow, another world apart from ours, bathed in humans as resources, natural riches seated in nature's warm throne, golden and delicious, encrusted in sugary plants and rambunctious animals waited, watched when small factories tired in the business of making money could not make me a mango', 2020. © Rina Banerjee. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels. Presented by the Contemporary Art Society for The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, 2020.

Workshop 5: Collecting Practices and Acquisition Strategies

26 May 2021

This workshop was moderated by **Dr David Dibosa** (Reader in Museology, University of the Arts London) and opened with presentations from **Dr Nima Poovaya-Smith** (former curator at Cartwright Hall Gallery) and **Sepake Angiama** (Iniva) on the approaches and initiatives they have developed to impact the makeup of collections in public museums and art galleries.

Questions for discussion included:

What can short-term, targeted acquisition strategies achieve in terms of diversifying collections, compared to long-term changes to collections development policies?

Is diversifying a collection the same as decolonising a collection?

How do racist and colonial modes of thinking and doing manifest in the way art museums and galleries develop and make use of their collections?

What does an anti-racist and/or decolonial acquisitions or collections development policy look like?

What are the challenges of embedding anti-racism and/or decolonisation in collecting practices and policies, particularly in terms of navigating between ethical imperatives, visitor expectations and the interests of funders/donors/trustees?

Towards Radical Acquisition Futures?

Forging Meaningful Change in a Climate of Fragility and Underrepresentation

by Jessica Lowe-Mbirimi

The concept of decolonisation is not new, yet the word has been used by arts institutions in their recent rewriting of policies alongside other buzzwords such as ‘equality’, ‘diversity’ and ‘equity’. What does it mean to create fundamental changes in practice and address issues of systemic marginality? In this summary, I critically reflect on the discussions that took place at the fifth workshop in the ‘Doing the Work’ series, which focused on how decolonisation and anti-racism can be embedded in the collecting practices and acquisition strategies of museums. This workshop provided an opportunity to delve into the various challenges and barriers curators are facing when attempting to engage in anti-racism and/or decolonisation through collecting artworks.

The workshop began with presentations from Dr Nima Poovaya-Smith who was Keeper of International Arts at Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford in the 1980s and 1990s, and from Sepake Angiama who is the current Artistic Director at Iniva. Poovaya-Smith discussed her efforts to diversify (rather than decolonise) the collection at Cartwright Hall during her time there. She emphasised the importance of learning about and collecting work by artists who are creating in the present and not simply collecting older material. She asserted that it is not acceptable for museums to continue collecting the same limited range of artists over several decades, particularly artists who are already well supported by other organisations, and around whose work there is already an abundance of art-historical scholarship and criticism. Angiama then spoke about Iniva’s ‘Future Collect’ initiative – a legacy project involving three year-long partnerships between a curatorial trainee, a contemporary artist of colour and a museum or gallery, resulting in the museum acquiring an artwork by the artist involved. ‘Future Collect’ is a model that art institutions can learn from, particularly those that made public statements of solidarity with social justice movements in 2020 and are now seeking to centre decolonisation and anti-racism within their organisations.¹

¹ *Future Collect* has roots in the data collected by the ‘Black Artists and Modernism’ project in 2018. The audit funded by the Arts and Humanities Research

After the presentations, the workshop participants broke out into smaller groups for more focussed discussion. Several important questions were raised during the breakout session, including: What does it mean to do anti-racist work in the museum space and structure? How do racist and colonial modes of thinking and doing manifest in the way art museums and galleries develop and make use of their collections? How does a collection embody a framework of decolonisation beyond diversification? How can museum staff navigate change despite an apparent lack of meaningful commitment to decolonisation and anti-racism from museum leaders? The discussions across the various breakout groups revolved around five key themes, which I will synthesise and critically discuss. The themes are: intention versus action; making policy; support and buy-in from the top; grappling with White Fragility; and embedding change through the workforce.

Making policy

Many of the participants reported that they had been tasked with rewriting or creating a new acquisitions policy for their institution in the aftermath of the re-ignition of the Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall movements in 2020. Rewriting policy is where imbalance within collections should be acknowledged and where clear steps for embedding anti-racism in collecting practices should be articulated transparently, so as to enable accountability. One participant said that they would like their institution to commit in writing, and as part of its collections development policy, to a set percentage of new acquisitions by Black, Brown and minority artists within a specific time frame because ‘statistics hold weight within museums’. Another participant suggested the opposite; instead of placing emphasis on the commitments that *had been* made, the policy should highlight what the institution had *not yet* done to encourage action. Policy making is where change can be initiated and embedded within museum practices, and there are a variety of ways public art institutions can go about developing policy so that it can make change in the areas of anti-racism and decolonisation. The question is what institutions are *willing* to commit to after having recently made such bold claims of solidarity with social justice movements.

Council and carried out by Anjalie Dalal-Clayton at University of the Arts London revealed that less than 4% of the artworks held across 31 UK public collections have been made by Black artists (African, Caribbean, Asian and Middle Eastern heritage) (see Dalal-Clayton, 2020). Several participants cited the Black Artists & Modernism audit as the impetus for subsequent, recent audits, which anecdotally reveal that comparable figures in other collections are as low as 2% of the artworks in their collections.

If museums are to move beyond diversification towards decolonisation, those with the ability to create change in the museum should constantly question how a new acquisition can encourage decolonial thinking or can support anti-racist strategies within the museum *as part of the selection process*. Some recent acquisitions that were supported by the Contemporary Art Society – including John Akomfrah’s film *Vertigo Sea* (2015) for National Museum Wales & Towner Eastbourne, two works on paper from Barbara Walker’s *Shock and Awe* (2015) series for Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, nine works on paper by Jade Montserrat from *What Should White Culture Do?* (2017) for York Art Gallery, and *Moses: Burning Bush* (2015) a film by Samson Kambalu for Bury Art Museum – are possible examples of museums contributing to anti-racist efforts because those acquisitions support living Black artists whose work honours Black history and the contributions of Black communities to the UK and beyond.

Intention versus action

In the workshops and more widely across the last year, there have been numerous conversations about decolonisation and anti-racism. Whilst conversation arguably enables the foundations of decolonial work to be laid, in my view change can only be facilitated through action. Thus, a common theme across the breakout groups was the understanding of what *constitutes* action, how action is manifested and implemented, and how intention can easily be mistaken for action. One group delved into the concept of an ‘atmosphere of disbelief’, which describes an environment in which there is widespread disbelief that anyone would actively work against anti-racist and decolonial efforts, and crucially, how such an environment or atmosphere functions as a barrier to change. This occurs because the disbelief is underpinned by a denial that the institution or its staff are capable of supporting or even enacting racism within their work. Thus, if individuals and institutions believe on a deeper level that they are doing no wrong, there is no impetus from within to change their attitudes and practices. In order for institutions to move from a position of supposed intention to one of action, they must accept that their staff and the institution as a whole can, and does, perpetuate and reinforce inequality, inequity, sexism, homophobia, ableism, colonial thinking and racism, one way or another. The essential starting point for making change is to presume that these varied forms of discrimination and oppression are already in place, and then to put aside feelings of guilt or shame and instead commit to identifying or rooting out the precise processes through which these various forms of oppression are enacted, followed by concrete steps to undo those processes.

Support and buy-in from the top

In order for policy changes to be initiated and authorised, and for institutions to move from positions of intent to action, there needs to be buy-in from those working in senior leadership roles within the museum, and from the bodies that they report to, including boards of trustees and funders. One participant described their institution as being reactive rather than proactive, which they felt was evident in the words and actions of their senior management. Several of the participants expressed a desire for support from leadership through clear policy or advice from an acquisitions committee comprised of both internal and external stakeholders. These are examples of what support from above might look like, but what does the current lack of support look like? Commonly, it manifests in a failure by senior management to allocate time for curators to research and put into place practices or measures that are focussed on anti-racism and decolonisation within their working hours, which in turn forces curators to conduct research on their days off including weekends.² This is frankly shameful, particularly after the public expressions of solidarity that public art institutions made during the BLM protests of 2020. 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. Decolonisation and anti-racism must not be treated as an extracurricular task, nor should it be treated as work to be undertaken solely by passionate (but typically underpaid) junior staff or by staff who find themselves underrepresented in the collections.

Having attended all the workshops in the ‘Doing the Work’ series, I noticed that the majority of participants were in curatorial and assistant curatorial roles, and very few were in senior management roles. When senior management do not attend such workshops, not only does it leave curators feeling unsupported (as many participants expressed during the workshops), but it also indicates that despite public statements of solidarity vis-à-vis BLM, the anti-racist and decolonial agendas that are supposedly shaping policy are not a priority for those in leadership roles. Such lack of engagement, and crucially, lack of commitment to attending professional development workshops *alongside* more junior staff, in turn prevents meaningful, long-term change across the various departments and strata of the museum. Indeed, as one participant commented, ‘What good is it to have people working together yet independently?’

² This only applies to the curators who are committed enough to do this in their own time.

Grappling with White Fragility

Participants expressed a range of experiences and concerns around their own whiteness and dealing with white defensiveness or White Fragility within the workplace (DiAngelo, 2011).³ A participant asked, 'how does acknowledging one's background [i.e., proximity to whiteness] contribute to or hinder the progress of anti-racism and decolonising in acquisitions?', while another questioned, 'for a predominately white team, is intellectual passion *without* lived experience enough?' If so, they further wondered, is it ok to use one's 'voice as a curator to advocate for and articulate another person or communities' representation among their peers?' Some of the answers to these questions lie in the asking of further questions: In practice, what does acknowledging one's proximity to whiteness look like? Do you attend workshops and conduct research related to the colonial history of the museum or town you are in? Have you established relations with the artists whose work you have acquired or wish to acquire (by attending exhibitions nearby, accessing publications or inviting them for talks and projects)? Do you work with and support emerging curators from diasporic communities, particularly if the collection does not reflect local demographics? By asking and then responding to these additional questions, one can assess whether one's own proximity to whiteness, or one's own lack of lived experience as a person of colour, are barriers to engaging with or implementing change.

White Fragility is clearly a significant, ongoing issue within the sector and presents a major barrier to change. Some participants described that key terms relating to racism and colonialism were being treated as buzzwords in their institutions due to there being no clarity or shared understanding of their actual meaning, or, an unwillingness to engage with their meaning due to white defensiveness.⁴ One curator described being labelled and potentially dismissed by colleagues as the person who continually points out racism (because their colleagues did not like being confronted about it), while another discussed instances of severe defensiveness from senior management who took constructive criticism

³ 'White Fragility' is a term coined by Robin DiAngelo (a white American female scholar) in her 2011 book of the same title, referring to the immediate defensiveness that white people feel and/or exhibit when they believe their notions of race (through their position in society, and proximity to power or inequality through race) are challenged. DiAngelo, R. (2018) *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Boston: Beacon Press. A discussion of White Fragility and its implication in the British context by a Black author can be found in Chapter 3 of Reni Eddo-Lodge's 2017 book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017, London: Bloomsbury).

⁴ Having attended all of the workshops, and listened to over 20 curators in each one discussing these complex topics, it is clear to me that key terms and concepts within anti-racism and decolonisation were either not being used or were being misconstrued indicating the need for deeper engagement and understanding of these terms by museum workers.

in relation to racism as a personal attack, leading the participant to moderate their language when discussing anti-racism in the workplace. When White Fragility plays out in these ways, honest and productive discussion about the challenges at hand cannot happen, and the status quo remains in place.

Embedding change through the workforce

As Sepake Angiama commented at the start of the workshop, 'Where are the positions and voices reserved for the freelance curators, curatorial trainees, and researchers from the African and Asian diaspora?' 'Why are they not operating within the institutions to facilitate and provide much needed context and embed change?'. Several white participants admitted finding it difficult, and even uncomfortable, to implement change without having lived experience as a Black or Brown person, and explained that they have asked management to hire Black, Brown and minority curators and practitioners to provide the relevant expertise. This led to further discussion and concern about the more general underrepresentation of people from the Black and Asian diasporas in museum staff and about how the labour of such individuals could be appropriately acknowledged and remunerated. When the workforce is not diverse, the institution is not able to provide appropriate guidance and direction when it comes to engaging with anti-racist or decolonial practices. The impact of this on collecting practices can be seen in the way museums and galleries seem to always be 'playing catch up' with the diversification of their collections, sourcing new acquisitions from the same small range of Black and Brown artists, and tokenising the more established artists among them. The subsequent impact of this process is that public museums and galleries fail to nurture the careers of emerging and local artists, which is an important dimension to diversifying and improving representation.⁵

Many curators engage in dialogue with local community groups. Whilst this approach provides an opportunity for the wider public to inform the development of collections and to include a broader range of perspectives, several participants raised concerns about it: that it is typically funded and run through short-term, temporary projects and therefore fails to become sustainably embedded within the long-term practices of the institution; that community 'networks' are often assembled for such initiatives but dissipate when they end; that this

⁵ I observed this process in action when working as a curatorial trainee at the Contemporary Art Society – curators looking for new acquisitions tend to refer to a very limited range of Black, Brown and minority artists.

valuable curatorial work is sometimes extractive (i.e. it is not based on a relationship of genuine exchange) and unpaid; and that those providing expertise and/or sharing lived experience are perceived and treated by institutions as 'sources of information' rather than as valued holders of much-needed knowledge or as peers in the acquisition, interpretation and curatorial process. The latter point is particularly revealing in terms of how gatekeeping and hierarchies are perpetuated within the museum.

Conclusion

Museums and galleries have been grappling with the issue of diversity for many years, and decolonisation had slipped quietly onto the agenda for some museum workers in recent years. But it has really only been since the re-ignition of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020 that decolonisation and anti-racism have really begun to take up space within the discourse around the future and frameworks of museums, shaking some institutions out of a long-held collective amnesia about Britain's colonial history and its ongoing impacts within museum work. One participant commented that BLM did not simply place pressure on institutions to diversify, but instead asked them to think critically about every step or decision they make and have made in the past.

Over the course of the various conversations that took place within the workshop, it became clear that the lack of consensus on what it might mean for museums to decolonise, combined with the evident complexity of the work that needs to be done, is causing museum professionals to feel anxious, if not fearful, of 'doing it wrong'. It is therefore imperative that museum professionals develop a greater awareness and understanding of how racist and colonial modes of perception manifest in the way collections are developed, utilised and displayed in museums and galleries. Without this basic grounding, any new policies or strategies that are developed in an attempt to engage art institutions in anti-racism or decolonisation will at best achieve very little, and at worst, exacerbate existing problems.

I am left wondering if it is possible for museums to take that step beyond diversification and towards anti-racism or decolonisation if at best less than 4% of the modern and contemporary artworks held by public collections are by Black, Asian and minority artists. If diversifying is the process of acquiring more artworks by Black, Brown and minority artists, then decolonising requires changes to the structure of acquisitions, which can be initiated by asking questions of the collection before and after making acquisitions. Those questions need to critically interrogate the decisions that are made around acquisitions, how they are made and

what attitudes inform them (an understanding of how new acquisitions shape or are shaped by the hegemonic, Eurocentric or Western-derived narratives that are already embedded within museums' structures is important here). And those critical interrogations need to be underpinned by quality research and critical self-reflection, rather than White Fragility and defensiveness, and carried out in collaboration with permanently employed curators of colour. Furthermore, museums should not simply be rushing to fill the huge gaps that exist in their collections through short-term initiatives to collect work by Black and Brown artists. They should also commit to long-term strategies that can achieve the aims they so boldly made to their staff and audiences in the summer of 2020.

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Harold Offeh, *Reading the Realness*, 2017. Performed at Tintype Gallery with six students from Kingston University. Image courtesy: the artist and Tintype Gallery. © Harold Offeh. Photograph: Jo Addison. Presented by the Contemporary Art Society through the Rapid Response Fund, 2020.

Workshop 6: Rethinking 'Engagement'

6 July 2021

This final workshop in the series focused on the practices and ethics of 'engagement' in art museums and galleries. It was moderated by **Sandra Shakespeare** (Black British Museum Project) and opened with presentations from **Barby Asante** (artist, curator, educator and occasional DJ) and **Amal Khalaf** (artist, curator and Director of Programmes at Cubitt).

Questions for discussion included:

How can an art museum's public/audience/community 'engagement' practices be expanded to also account for its relationships with, for example, minoritised artists, external collaborators and its own staff?

How can extractive or exploitative 'engagement' practices be reshaped and reconceived as equitable, co-productive and reciprocal?

How can an ethics of care be embedded in 'engagement' practices?

What does an anti-racist or decolonial approach to 'engagement' involve?

How can approaches to 'engagement' expand beyond engagement with people, to engagement with issues, ethics and power relations?

Collective Care is Different from Self Care

Rethinking Engagement in Art Museums and Galleries in 2021

by Aksana Khan

“More radical, meaningful change that truly includes in an equitable manner might not be easy. It will require noticing the thing which has become invisible through its ubiquity. It will require noticing how whiteness feels and lands in different bodies...” Jemma Desai (2020).¹

The sixth workshop in the ‘Doing the Work’ series focused on the practices and ethics of ‘engagement’ in art museums and galleries, and how anti-racist and decolonial approaches can be embedded in them. It was a space for those who work in museums engagement to not just listen, but to contribute, and learn horizontally about the issues that we face day-to-day. This group included me. My role was to participate, facilitate, and observe as someone who has done/still does engagement work in a heritage, charity, and theatre context. Here, I reflect on what was said during the workshop, as interpreted through my lens. When I use the pronouns ‘we’ or ‘our’ I am referring to the workshop participants and staff who work in community engagement. I also refer to us as ‘frontline’ staff as we’re at the front of an organisation, dealing with members of the public.

¹ Desai, J.D. (2020), ‘This Work Isn’t For Us’, pp. 56-57 [Online]. Available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HGBSsBsERxSaD1t0Oq_9acqAqiAPPLekBxaJ8tk-Njw/edit#heading=h.rwhnpmaszsvh (Accessed: 20 September 2021).

Context

When learning from one another’s lived experiences, context matters. This workshop took place in a pandemic, at a time when we had become used to working from home and through Zoom. What hadn’t changed was (1) the caffeinated jitters at the start of an event and (2) that we brought ourselves. As someone whose job is to facilitate conversations, you become conscious of our respective ‘baggage’ – the energy we store within our bodies when we enter a space. It affects the vibe, the confidence in contributing, and the flow of the conversation – lest we have ‘dead chat’. We do not check our personal lives at the door when we enter work. It informs what we do.

For anyone who works in engagement, there has always been this struggle to ensure ‘best practice’ is used, even before COVID. If you’re working in an institution that is incongruent with what ‘best practice’ is, it leaves anyone on the frontline ‘doing the work’ feeling uncertain and disembodied from what they consider to be true. This feeling of being out of sorts has only been magnified over the course of the pandemic.

As workers in museums and galleries, we needed a moment to restore ourselves. That’s what these professional development workshops offer, a moment to pause, reflect, and validate the thoughts and concerns we have about our respective workplaces and the state of the sector. This workshop helped to fill that void but what we had to say could easily have spilled over the time allocated.

It’s not that COVID is the only reason we came into this virtual space feeling heavy; it’s the way this pandemic has been (mis)handled and has exposed the impact of austerity. Our screens showed the victims of institutional racism, sexism, and ableism in healthcare, education, and policing. We also had extra worry for our loved ones, for ourselves, and our income. Furloughs and redundancies made people who were otherwise financially secure conscious of the slashed welfare safety net. There was talk of ‘the new normal’ and the fear or the reality of ‘going back to the old normal’. These anxieties are almost Tetris-like in the way they build up. For some participants, they had internalised them within the bigger picture, feeling that their work in the arts was all in vain, that their work doesn’t matter when hospitals are overrun, and when there’s more demand for food banks than ever before.

Tick all that apply:

Are you worried?

Are you breathless?

Are you exhausted?

Are you feeling heavy?

Best practice

- What does it really mean?
- Who decides what it means?
- Is this formally recognised?
- How often is this updated?
- How can you do it when your cup is full?
- How do you do it when your budgets are slashed?
- How do you convince people that it's a worthwhile investment?
- How can we make it adaptable in a COVID world?

Author's notes made during the workshop.

A crisis in confidence is hard to deal with for anyone, regardless of their background. But to return to work meant, firstly, going back to institutions that were reckoning with increased social inequalities in the communities they serve, and with their own complicity in causing some of these inequalities through the provision of insecure contracts and low wages to gallery and museums staff. Secondly, they were also dealing with the *imagined* public, the media, and government outrage over how museums are (mis)behaving in a 'culture war', especially in reaction to the Black Lives Matter summer protests.² It's a lot. 'Rethinking Engagement' in this context meant zeroing in on how we can't wait for a better future to arrive, and how we can create one within our own spheres of influence.

Discussions

The workshop opened with gifts from Barby Asante and Amal Khalaf through their respective presentations. Barby read out her beautiful written piece, which showed that declaring our independence from oppressive structures is simultaneously a declaration of our interdependence with others. We cannot make change alone, we do so with others who we're 'Breathing with, sharing with, planning with, fighting with, daring with, loving with' to create a better world now. Amal also shared Barby's ethos of working in, and in collaboration with, communities. She asked us, when doing engagement work, to name power for what it is, so that it is not the bogeyman hanging over our work, and also to think about our desires when doing the work, since our work is about bringing to the forefront the desires of artists and communities – not of the institution. In these ways, we can think of divesting power away from institutions, and re-investing it into the people who are creating better futures and doing a better job of it than the institution ever could.

Barby and Amal's presentations helped to set the tone for the breakout sessions that followed. In the breakout groups the participants initially talked, in quite general terms, about what it means to be engaging with communities, how to work ethically and equitably, and different ways of collaborating with artists and freelancers. But the overarching issue that was voiced in lots of different ways is that something must give. That is, there are several problems with the way art institutions operate, and those problems impact how we as museums workers carrying out public

² Duffy, B., Hewlett, K., Murkin, G., Benson, R., Hesketh, R., Page, B., Skinner, G. & Gottfried, G. (2021), 'Culture Wars in the UK: How the Public Understand the Debate'. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/culture-wars-in-the-uk-how-the-public-understand-the-debate.pdf>. (Accessed 20 September 2021).

engagement feel and work. We are exhausted. We are exhausted by the way things currently work and are structured. We are exhausted by having to mitigate this so as not to enact harm on the museums' publics and on ourselves. And it's even more exhausting now that the global COVID pandemic has exposed to a wider public the vast inequalities in UK society and across the world that we were already aware of in our work with communities and young people. Perhaps this exhaustion is why we didn't manage to come up with many solutions during the workshop. Instead, we took it as an opportunity to verbalise the problems we experience at work and what this means in our everyday lives, or as Amal advised, we made visible our conflicts.

For clarity, we identified four problems with the way art institutions operate, and then four ways that these problems impact us as engagement workers. These are...

Problems:

- working in hierarchical institutions
- having to deal with obfuscated ways of working
- institutions clinging onto the idea of being neutral
- engagement work being impacted by a 'white saviour' complex

Impact on us:

- feeling hyperconscious about the language we use
- absorbing the anxieties of our white colleagues
- being the antenna and the translator between the institution and the communities we serve
- worrying that we may be 'co-opted' by the institution and become the 'enemy'

I will unpack these problems and impacts below.

Do you work in an art museum or gallery

that's very hierarchical?



with obfuscated ways of working?



that's holding onto the delusional of being politically neutral?



where public engagement is very "white saviour"-y?



You are stressed and need to join a union



Problems

Let's expand on the problems listed in the poster:

- 1. A hierarchical institution, especially one that is old, is not nimble enough to be as transformative an agent in our communities as organisations that have flatter structures.** This was something several participants remarked on. Hierarchical structures preclude genuine co-production as power is unequally distributed. As engagement staff tend to be at the bottom of the ladder, they have less power to share with communities in the first place. Moreover, hierarchical structures guarantee an unequal distribution of emotional labour. If power lies with those who confirm what our budgets are, then directors and senior management who don't engage on the frontlines are at best unaware, or at worst ignorant about what it takes to do the work with communities. The teams (or in most cases, the individual) engaging with communities and members of the public are often poorly paid, which reflects the institution's overall devaluation of engagement work. So how can we truly expect the hierarchical art museum and gallery to be a part of changing society when its top-down structure denies change?
- 2. When the participants talked about obfuscated ways of working, they were referring to organisations having bureaucratic processes and how this bleeds into community engagement work.** A key example is in the use of inaccessible language when working with communities. Whether it's intentional or because of ignorance, it results in poor communication and confusion. Clear communication is political because what's normal to you is jargon to another; jargon can decrease accessibility, and discourage people from being involved in the arts because they don't know what you're talking about. The participants also talked about the need to completely rethink how we plan our projects and how we conceive change. For example, they reflected on the stresses of having to deliver big numbers with small budgets. This undermines our perceptions of care and makes our ethics of care seem unrealistic and expensive. If the legacies of our projects are to ensure care, then we need to invest our time and resources in them from the beginning. It shouldn't be treated as an after-thought.
- 3. To avoid becoming yet another example in a think-piece about why museums are not neutral, art museums and galleries need to acknowledge and be brave about their political stance.** They already are political (with a capital P) in terms of the partnerships they choose to have with multi-national corporations and other businesses, and in terms of the kinds of private events they host. To pretend otherwise is highly disingenuous. Those choices reveal a

Is your art museum or gallery very hierarchical?

It's worthwhile working in partnership with other collectives, charities, forums, networks, and organisations. You can advocate and support their work, not duplicate what already exists. You can do this by either offering a space or investing funds from your budget e.g. a charity that supports refugees, food banks, helping ESOL learners from a local college etc. In this way, you're not competing for limited resources. You're supporting those that already have the specialist knowledge and relationships to do the work.

Does your art museum or gallery have obfuscated ways of working?

Well, the smallest and simplest thing you can start to do is getting in the habit of asking what something means or saying "I don't know" It's a better way of running meetings, and having better email communication. Chances are that someone else feels like you too! But if you're already doing that anyway, how are you with managing your projects? We need to re-think how we already do things and conceive change. You can build the budget to make your "dream" project come true, instead of fitting everything around the budget. Change doesn't happen in neat 3-5 year business plans. We need to think of our work as more long-term, not project-to-project.

Is your art museum or gallery holding onto the delusion of being politically neutral?

Just as museums are not neutral, they can also be unwittingly complicit in causing and perpetuating oppression. For example, have you looked into whether your pension fund invests into fossil fuels? Or have you thought about how your organisation hold space and recognises the grief and traumas of the colonised and the diaspora? Colonisation isn't over, it's still happening - from gentrification in the UK to what's happening to Palestinians.

Is your art museum or gallery's public engagement very "white-saviour"-y?

Do you listen to public feedback or have events for visitors and participants to have a say in what your art gallery or museum does? If you do, is this something that all teams and trustees can listen to? How democratic are our organisations really? And be prepared to value people over objects! If art museums and galleries fashion themselves as a place of teaching, especially about unpacking the legacy of empire, there needs to be a move towards talking about racism, not just material culture.

None of this applies to you? Congratulations, you work in a great place! Please teach us your ways or tell us there's a job opening? Either way, you are a unicorn.

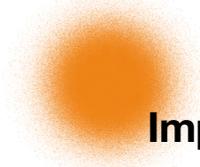


lot about what political stance an institution is taking. Although it is challenging for art institutions to openly acknowledge being political (with either a small or capital P) when most are registered as charities, and especially after witnessing the abuse directed at organisations like the National Trust, it doesn't absolve them from saying and doing something with regards to social injustice.³ This is especially true if you take the viewpoint that charities exist because the government fails to support those that need it. If more art museums and galleries were confident and consistent in taking a stance on 'small p' politics, activism could become core to contemporary museum work. In this way, activism isn't seen as something that happens outside the museum. It would help museums to contribute positively to social justice rather than just talking vaguely about it in their mission statements.

- 4. A 'White Saviour' approach to public engagement does not create a space for communities to heal and repair.** In the culture and heritage sector, 'culture' is usually viewed as only existing inside the museum building and what it displays instead of what's 'out there'. As a consequence, local communities are only 'listened' to when it's politically expedient to do so, and are otherwise ignored. 'Listening' in a contemporary colonial context means that knowledge, especially about traumatic histories, is extracted from others and repackaged in a way that is palatable to white audiences. In this process, culture is not understood as happening or being created collaboratively in a back-and-forth process involving multiple actors or constituents. Instead it is understood as either being 'done' to communities, a process whereby the museum 'reaches out' to engage communities in the culture that is happening inside the museum, or as being 'saved' by the museum and its staff for representation and preservation in the supposedly 'safe space' or 'hermetically sealed' environment of the museum. So this begs the question, is the art museum and gallery truly 'charitable' if it's not listening to the communities it's supposed to serve, or even attempting to dismantle its colonial approach to engaging with them?

³ Cathcart, B. (2021), *The National Trust and the Culture War: A Dissection of Dishonest Journalism as the Tool of the "War on Woke."* [online] Byline Times. Available at: <https://bylinetimes.com/2021/07/26/the-national-trust-and-the-culture-war-a-dissection-of-dishonest-journalism-as-a-tool-of-the-war-on-woke/> (Accessed 28 September 2021).

We must rethink engagement as the antithesis of the four problems I've explored above. It must be done in the absence of hierarchy, involve clear communication, develop from a moral or political stance, and involve active listening as part of an open and equitable process of exchange. Getting to this point, as Barby said during the workshop, will be necessarily painful – 'decolonising is painful'. It will be especially painful to those of us who have benefitted from schemes that encouraged us - the historically excluded - to get into the sector, because the burden to 'do the work' has been placed so heavily on our shoulders. As one workshop participant said, when 'you enter these kinds of institutions... suddenly you become the activist'. But, depressingly, just because we're here now, or just because we might look, think or speak differently, doesn't mean the system is fixed.



Impacts

"We might...assume that diversity workers are appointed to unblock the system. But a blockage is how the system is working. The system is working by stopping those [who] are trying to transform the system. To transform a system we have to stop the system from working. We might need to pass as plumbers (fixing the leak) in order to become vandals (making a leak)..."
Sara Ahmed (2017).⁴

Museum workers who are Black or PoC have been 'doing the work' since long before the summer of 2020. We – and I include myself in this - feel the expectation placed on us by institutions to somehow 'fix' white supremacy, but aren't encouraged or supported to actually take it down. This has made us:

⁴ Ahmed, S.A. (2017), *Institutional As Usual*. [Online blog post] Available at: <https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/10/24/institutional-as-usual/> (Accessed 20 September 2021).

1. **Hyperconscious about the language we use.** Even the term ‘decolonising’ was raised by one participant as being inaccessible, and perhaps not reparative. That’s in part because the term has been co-opted by institutions of power (are we in the Age of Decolonising™?). It has been misinterpreted to mean equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), but decolonising is not about making white people comfortable. It is about unlearning and undoing.
2. **Absorb the anxieties of our white colleagues.** We know which teams are nervous about, or reluctant to, change. And for the not-so-traditionalists amongst us, it feels as if it is yet another cultural re-awakening for those who benefit from being white. Those who have ‘seen things they can no longer unsee’ (e.g. racism, White Supremacy) struggle with the heaviness of it all. Their predecessors didn’t do enough to combat the legacy of colonialism and oppression within their spheres of influence. After all, as the performance artist Jaamil Olawale Kosoko says, ‘it may be the historical lack of social engagement, political investment, and the delusion of national socio-economic progression among white curators and cultural producers in positions of power within most institutions throughout the US and the Western world that landed us in this crisis of monotonous curatorial praxis and vague cultural understanding in the first place’.⁵
3. **The antenna and the translator between the institution and the communities we serve.** There’s a lot of talk in our jobs. Engagement staff are socially conscious, reflective, and are mindful of not doing harm. But to be the ‘community call-centre’ as one participant put it, meant taking on a lot of noise and chatter from different groups, and being able to transmit it into a cohesive narrative. This is especially true when it comes to putting on exhibitions. It’s a lot of information to take in, especially when it’s qualitative and involves nurturing relationships. The workshop participants voiced their frustration towards institutions. They noted the irony that institutions expect their frontline staff to have good communication skills when they (the institutions) are wildly inconsistent in the way they communicate internally with their staff and externally with their publics.
4. **Worry that we may be ‘co-opted’ and become the ‘enemy’.** The workshop participants expressed a fear of being ‘co-opted’ whereby they are required to be the brand spokesperson for their institution even though they don’t fully agree with their institution’s ethics. It’s hard not to feel that there is a clear-cut binary: you are either with or against the institution; you either work with an institution or you create your own space that feels more liberatory. But what if you try to do both? When it comes to working with communities and artists,

⁵ Kosoko, J.O. (2018), ‘Crisis in the Gallery: Curation And The Praxis Of Justice’ in Liepsch, E. and Warner, J. ed. *Allianzen: Kritische Praxis an weißen Institutionen*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, p. 128.

as one participant put it, we work hard to do what we can to ‘channel resources [from institutions] in different ways that speak to their desires’. But being the go-between, or the ‘vandal’ as Sara Ahmed suggests, is not without its stresses and challenges. Frontline staff are conscious of how they are perceived by others.

“If funding weren’t as gatekept, if **universal basic income existed**, if housing was seen as a human right rather than an asset... we might have a fucking chance of evening the way the scales tip. In the in between, we are all just treading water, stealing moments to make incredible art under the circumstances, side hustling... and ultimately too burnt out to present or organise a significant challenge to the institution when they come knocking to exploit us.” Zarina Muhammed (2019).⁶

So, what’s the solution to this?

Care

“The smallest and the biggest thing you can do as the practical staff is [to] lead with care. Whether that’s with your colleagues that you manage, or participants, that’s the ultimate North Star.”

“How is the practice that we’re doing actually resolving the issues that we’re having in society right now?... Sometimes I feel like the work that I do kind of goes in vain...The bigger issue is that people within the community still feel unsafe and unable to go to certain parks and areas because of the violence that takes place.”

⁶ Muhammed, Z.M. (2019), The Problem with Representation. Available at: <https://www.thewhitecube.co.uk/representation>. (Accessed 20 September 2021).

“Do we actually think about our matrixes of accountability? Do we write our own? What is it that I want to bring to this project? How do I want to be? How am I bringing myself? How am I presenting myself? And how do I keep myself accountable?”

“I think it’s the funding bids that are the issue... you have to outline [all the benefits or outcomes] from the beginning in a certain way with a certain language or with certain numbers next to them...[But] if a participant experiences a degree of good mental health during their workshop, you can’t put that down on a list [it’s unquantifiable, maybe even impossible to describe or write about]... funders and institutions [need] to re-evaluate, ‘what are the methods that we’re evaluating projects by?’”⁷

Care felt very much like the buzzword for 2021. The desire to care for others was expressed in many of the conversations in the breakout groups. The majority in the space spoke about caring for communities on the outside, caring for our ‘troublemaker’ colleagues that we empathise with, and caring for the artists that we work with who say more than we can safely do. But there is also the question of caring for ourselves, which only a minority of the participants highlighted. One participant commented that the notion and practice of care is currently ‘a Participant-dominated environment’, another noted that ‘a lot of the policies that exist [around safeguarding] will probably prioritise the health of the young people... over the wellbeing of staff’, and one said that caring for ourselves felt ‘almost like guerrilla work’. But why? Why is it easier to talk about caring for others before ourselves? Is it because:

- We entered the arts believing that it is a form of social care (not just something that is superficial) and so the work feels heavy?
- It’s harder to imagine what care should be when workplaces only abide by the bare legal minimum?
(By this I mean, legislation that clearly outlines wellbeing for those aged under 18 and vulnerable adults).
- ‘The lower down you are on the pay, power or seniority ladder...the more emotional labour you’ll find yourself doing’.⁸
- Engagement staff are typically women, and women are traditionally seen as having a ‘caring’ role at home, so much so that they are socially conditioned to be concerned about ‘care’ for others when they enter the workplace?

When I closed my laptop at the end of the workshop, I rubbed my eyes and scribbled down my thoughts. One of the main take-aways from the workshop I had was that *we need to take care of each other, but we need to look out for ourselves too*. Is this too deceptively simple? It reminded me of these quotes from the presentations by Barby and Amal at the beginning of the workshop:

⁷ Quotes from the workshop participants.

⁸ Uwagba, O., (2021), *We Need to Talk about Money*, p. 171.

“Our ancestors dreamed us, we are here to continue that work of dreaming, and we are here in the process of becoming ancestors...”
Barby Asante (2021).⁹

“We’re meeting together to intentionally practice futures we long for... futures grounded in justice, love and possibility...”
Amal Khalaf (2021).⁹

During and after the workshop, I realised that what was missing amongst the participants, was a conversation on how we care for ourselves. We spoke a lot more about the desires of others before our own. But, to care for others and not oneself makes the equation horrendously lopsided. If ‘best practice’ only applies to those who are outside of the art museum or gallery, instead of those who work inside them, it pushes engagement staff towards burn out. Institutions can’t change if they don’t recognise the challenges that engagement staff are facing right now. It feels like burn out has turned our thoughtful, caring, frontline colleagues in arts museums and galleries into ghosts.

⁹ Barby Asante and Amal Khalaf speaking during their respective presentations at the ‘Doing the Work’ workshop, ‘Rethinking Engagement’, 06 July 2021. Recording available at: <https://vimeo.com/586355054> (Accessed 20 September 2021).

“The most anti-capitalist protest is to care for another and to care for yourself. To take on the historically feminized and therefore invisible practice of nursing, nurturing, caring. To take seriously each other’s vulnerability and fragility and precarity, and to support it, honor it, empower it. To protect each other, to enact and practice community. A radical kinship, an interdependent sociality, a politics of care.” Hedva, J. (2020).¹⁰

Rethinking engagement, then, requires engagement staff to extend to themselves the same generosity of care that they show others. Collective care, or caring for others in our midst, first requires self-awareness and self-care. We need to be conscious of our own limitations, listen to ourselves, and be in spaces or in commune with others who will also care for us too. We need to do this so that there is a critical mass of people in the engagement sector who are stubborn enough to make care the norm – not the exception. If we factor in self-care as much as collective care in our practice, we can do more than survive; *we can dream.*

Aksana Khan is a producer currently creating joy for Arts Emergency and China Plate Theatre.

¹⁰ Johanna Hedva, (2020), *Sick Woman Theory* (essay). Available at: http://johannahedva.com/SickWomanTheory_Hedva_2020.pdf (Accessed 20 September 2021), p.13.

Here’s something to put you, the reader, to work...

Workplace Exam Paper

Using these sources in their context, come up with solutions which centre care. 30 marks.

Source A. Small museum outside of London.

Our engagement team have work experience placements in the programmes team. We offered one of them to write a blog and to take over our social media for the day, to highlight what they’ve been up to. Unfortunately, there were trolls/criticism who didn’t see the point in our “politically correct BS” heritage. I’m worried that this has put off the young person under my care. What should we do as institution to look after them?

This is a white person who is new to the arts but has experience of working with youth services. There’s only two people in their marketing team.

Source B. Local council museum in London.

My workplace never really opened their doors to hearing from members of the public. But now they’re a part of the local council, there’s forums and I don’t think we are prepared for hearing the bad. We know as the community team, there’s so much we can do better, but I don’t just want it to be my team who goes to these spaces. It needs to be more people from different teams. How do I encourage this?

This is a Black man who has experience in doing partnership work for charities and councils, but is relatively new to the sector.

Source C. National Museum.

After ‘Black Lives Matter’ – well it’s still happening because Black lives still matter, there was extra attention on what my team were doing, as if it let the whole organisation off the hook. It feels really performative because they’re pumping extra money but it doesn’t feel like it’s coming from a genuine place. What do I do to keep holding their attention, but to not have my work boxed in as doing good for everyone in my organisation?

This is a white woman manager who has 5 years experience in the institution, two of it in their managerial position. They were furloughed.

Poster print out designed by Aksana Khan, 2021

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Source D. Freelancer.

Contracts in the arts are becoming more and more short term, or just going into freelance. And I want to be able to do more, but it's becoming increasingly unlikely that I'll be able to work long-term with communities. How can I be agile enough to ensure that decolonising/anti-racism is embedded in everything I do when I'm not given much of a chance?

*This is a POC woman with 10 years experience.
They're returning to work after a career break to look after their family.*

Source E. Undisclosed.

There's only me and one other minority in my organisation. We're not having a good time, I feel guilty for even looking at another job ad but I do need to leave. What do I do for my exit strategy?

This person is working in 2021, in a context where living costs are increasing, jobs are competitive, and funding in the arts is being slashed.

These examples are not representative of all participants in the workshop. They're there to show that advice given needs to be mindful of the intersections of one's identity and the context they're in.

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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

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Recommended Readings

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