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FINAL REPORT

FOUNDATION PROJECTS

**Provisional Semantics:
Addressing the challenges of
representing multiple
perspectives within an evolving
digitised national collection**

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Tate | Imperial War Museums | The
National Trust | The Decolonising Arts
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Executive Summary

The final report on Provisional Semantics: Addressing the challenges of representing multiple perspectives within an evolving digitised national collection summarises the aims and objectives and research questions for the project, which were to ask:

- *What methodological, ethical and practical changes do heritage organisations need to make to accommodate the multiple and provisional interpretations necessary for a sustainable digitised national collection to genuinely represent UK Heritage?*
- What methods and approaches that engage intellectually and practically with the ‘decolonial’¹ agenda can heritage organisations employ to produce search terms/catalogue entries and interpretations fit for purpose for an evolving digitised national collection?

The research built on and challenged past work undertaken by the participating organisations; Imperial War Museums (IWM), the National Trust (NT) and Tate and adopted a qualitative case study approach. Focusing on the structures, practices, policies, collections, and cultures of these three case study organisations provided relevant settings within which collaborative approaches to cataloguing and reinterpreting collection items could be tested. The methodology adopted for the project drew on practice-led research and action research², enabling the research team, who were themselves predominantly practitioners,

¹ As the team acknowledged in the Interim Report (2021), the terms ‘decolonisation’ and ‘decolonial’ are increasingly under scrutiny and are not clearly defined or consistently used within the cultural sector. Throughout the project the research team attempted to foreground anti-racism and begin a process of ‘decoloniality’, in the sense of undoing ‘the legacies and ongoing relations and patterns of power established by external and internal colonialism’ (Mignolo, W. & Walsh, C. (2018). On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analysis, Praxis: Duke University Press. pp.16). However, team members frequently questioned their individual and collective limitations (in terms of experience, knowledge and positionality), as well as the limitations of the project structure, and project work more generally, and how such limitations impacted their ability to undertake genuinely decolonial and anti-racist work. This questioning is a dominant theme in this report. For further discussion: Coomasaru, E. (2021). ‘Can Art History Be Decolonised?’, The Cambridge Humanities Review, 91–103; Crilly, J. (2019). ‘Decolonising the Library: A Theoretical Exploration’, Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal: 4, pp. 6–15 <<https://sparkjournal.arts.ac.uk/index.php/spark/article/view/123/190>>; Crilly, J., and Everitt, R. (2022). ‘Introduction: Decolonise or “Decolonise”?’, in Crilly, J. and Everitt, R. (eds) Narrative Expansions: Interpreting Decolonisation in Academic Libraries, Facet Publishing.

² There are several interpretations of what ‘practice-led’, ‘practice-based’ and ‘practice as research’ constitutes. The term practice-based is used here in line with the framing given by Linda Candy who has recognised that ‘practice-based research is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice.’ Candy, L. (2003). Practice Based Research: A guide: <https://www.creativityandcognition.com/resources/PBR%20Guide-1.1-2006.pdf>

to gain insights and knowledge through undertaking actions, interrogating, analysing and reflecting on these actions and applying the knowledge gained to shape the project and their working practices going forward. These insights in turn informed the findings and recommendations documented in this final report alongside conclusions drawn from a commissioned practice and literature review (due to be published in Autumn 2022) and feedback from external stakeholders. Furthermore, Provisional Semantics provided an opportunity for the research team to examine the value and constraints of project-based working as a means of addressing the issues at the heart of this research.

The project was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the project team took various steps to mitigate this. The report acknowledges the inherent flaw in the project organisation; that those with the relevant but previously overlooked expertise and knowledge about the case study material – curators, researchers and artists who are Black or people of colour - had not participated in the design of the research and were not adequately represented within the core team. It details the decision the team made to be transparent about their mistakes and to reducing the possible negative impacts they might enact through the project wherever they were able to identify it. The personal positioning work, which was a key element of this reparative work, is detailed in section 10 of the report.

The aims and objectives, interim adjustments, outcomes and outputs and findings from the three case studies are outlined in the report. The IWM case study focused on a sample of photographs from the War Office Second World War official photographs series taken in India (4700-38) covering the recruitment of Indian servicemen during the Second World War. The photographs selected included legacy captions which contained problematic information, language, and narrative positioning.

Three commissioned subject specialists with expertise in Indian experiences of the Second World War researched and responded to the images and their captions, providing alternative texts and contextual essays. This research was presented at an online event for the War and Conflict Subject Specialist Network (SSN). The project and the online content were also presented to IWM's Access and Inclusion Champions Network for response, evaluation and critique. In addition to the research related to the re-cataloguing activities, two further external researchers supported the research team's reflexivity on the limitations of the research method.

The IWM case study provides findings in relation to institutional cataloguing processes and the value of close readings of collection objects. The study also offers insights as to whose perspectives need to be considered when undertaking any 'decolonising' work in relation to collections. The process of re-captioning the images surfaced the degree of scrutiny, care

The conception of action research drawn on in this project is that articulated by McNiff & Whitehead: 'Action research is a form of enquiry that enables practitioners in every job and walk of life to investigate and evaluate their work. They ask, 'What am I doing? Do I need to improve anything? If so, what? How do I improve it?' (McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J. (2011). All you need to know about action research, 2nd edition. SAGE Publications. pp.7)
http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/4045/1/Whitehead_AllYouNeedTo.pdf

and sensitivity required to undertake this work and the danger of reproducing colonial and imperial perspectives³.

The National Trust case study centred on the ‘Clive Museum’ collection of objects from Asia and the Middle East held at Powis Castle, Wales. It was selected as the NT recognised that provenance information about the collection objects it holds is currently either scant or absent, whilst current display captions, which were produced in the 1980s, are neither as yet informed by subject nor object-specialist knowledge. The original objective of the case study was to develop interpretations for selected objects in the collection, engaging ‘decolonial’ approaches and involving ethical co-production with stakeholder communities. However, following changing circumstances from June 2020 onwards, the research team re-oriented this case study to support the NT’s internal examination and development of its interpretation practices and policies. The case study therefore pivoted away from producing interpretation towards testing methods for building knowledge around object collections by gathering perspectives on a particular object in the collection by different stakeholder groups.

The research team selected an eighteenth-century book of poems by the fourteenth-century Persian poet known as Hafez and devised online workshops in September 2021 with three constituent groups; (1) specialists in Persian and South Asian literature and art history; (2) NT curators who could critically reflect on the display and interpretation of the book in relation to practices and policies both within the NT and across the sector; and (3) Powis Castle staff and volunteers with experience of working in the museum and the wider property and of engaging the public with the ‘Clive Museum’ collection. The workshops employed the practice of close reading; that is, describing and discussing an object and developing a reading of that object based on what can be discerned simply through the act of looking.

The NT case study provided valuable insights into how institutional and object histories determine the nature and extent of collection interpretation. The research also surfaced the necessity of working with subject specialists, not least when in-house expertise relating to objects is absent. The case study demonstrated the value of close reading as a method for building knowledge around object collections, revealing too the wide range of perspectives held within institutions on how histories and objects should be presented.

The Tate case study centred on the Panchayat Collection which came into Tate’s Library in 2015. The collection contains material relating to the work of South Asian artists and artists with Black, Caribbean and African heritage in the United Kingdom and internationally. The collection, and specifically material designated as ephemera was selected for the case study as it is inadequately served by current library search terms, particularly in relation to theme

³ In this project we understood ‘colonialism’ as a practice whereby one nation assumes political and economic control over another, and ‘imperialism’ as the ideas driving that practice. For an exploration of the complexities and contestations of the definitions of these two terms, see Walter, D. (2008). ‘Colonialism and Imperialism’, in *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict*, Vol. 1, A-E, 1999, pp. 355-366.

and geographic location. The cataloguing of the Panchayat Collection had been started but was incomplete at the start of the project.

The research set out to explore how working collaboratively with artists in the collection could inform the methods and language used to document and search for those items. The project aimed also to advocate for the cataloguing of the Panchayat Collection to be completed as core work by the Tate Library and to profile its content and contexts with a view to increasing awareness and use of the collection by researchers and the wider public. Research activities developed in three distinct work strands. The first two entailed the devising of a range of resources in the form of essays, interviews and recorded conversations in collaboration with the co-founder and custodian of the collection, Shaheen Merali and the custodian of the collection, Dr Janice Cheddie. Two independent researchers were also commissioned to explore the use and history of the term ‘Black’, with specific focus on how it was mobilised during the time the Panchayat collective was active. Strand three involved the cataloguing and digitisation of the Panchayat Collection funded as core Tate Library work, rather than from the project budget. This three-stranded approach produced new material that offers audiences a variety of ways into the collection, whilst providing insights into how and whether Tate as an institution can work ethically and collaboratively with stakeholders to catalogue and interpret the collections it holds.

The findings from the Tate case study on the Panchayat Collection relate to the ethical and practical issues of the research project structure and understanding the complexity of attempting to incorporate a genuinely collaborative, multi-perspectival and open approach into institutional practice.

This report also details broader findings drawn from the case studies in relation to the project’s objectives and research questions, not least that organisational change can be obstructed by dominant internal cultures and a lack of awareness of the impact of personal, institutional, and structural racism. Based on the experience of the project, the report also details a range of approaches that cultural and heritage organisations can employ to embed more ethical and equitable practices when undertaking research projects, and, when doing the work of cataloguing and interpreting objects itself.

The report concludes with a suggested framework identifying key issues to be addressed to achieve change in cataloguing and interpretation practices and how that might be done critically and ethically. The framework identifies five key areas related to language, the consideration of subject and content, knowledge creation and production, critically examining cataloguing practice and systems and context and history.

Abstract

Provisional Semantics originally set out to ‘examine how museums and heritage organisations (and hence the digitised national collection) can develop ethical, equitable and transparent readings of artworks and artefacts that include the historically under-represented perspectives of people of African and Asian descent.’ As the project progressed it became apparent that this framing was too narrow and the terminology inadequate.

At the interim stage the aim of the project was reframed as seeking ‘to examine how museums and heritage organisations can develop interpretations and presentations of artworks and artefacts that acknowledge: the spiritual, cultural and historical value of artefacts and artworks; the context of their production, use and display in regions of the world that were part of the British Empire; where relevant, the nature of their subsequent transferal to the UK; and the historically underrepresented perspectives of British people with African, Caribbean and Asian heritage’. Provisional Semantics has tested and critically appraised different approaches by which cultural institutions can work with internal and external stakeholders to review existing cataloguing and interpretation practices and outputs through three case studies at Tate, IWM and the National Trust. The project has sought to locate the case studies within a broader analysis of the sector’s work in this area through a literature and practice review focused on the guidance and research available to support galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM), and the wider UK heritage sector to engage critically in recording, writing, and producing knowledge about art and artefacts (publication Autumn 2022).

The research team interrogated their own positionality⁴ alongside examining the effectiveness of project-based working in addressing the need for museums and heritage organisations to re-interpret and re-present objects in ways that can accommodate multiple, shifting interpretations.

As across the cultural and heritage sector and society more widely, Covid-19 impacted the case study organisations and the members of the Provisional Semantics research team profoundly. Consequently, the project’s processes, timescales and stakeholder interactions had to adapt to continuously changing circumstances. Despite, and perhaps because of this, the research has surfaced important findings and offers several recommendations regarding

⁴ The term ‘positionality’ describes ‘an individual’s world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context.’ Darwin Holmes, A. (2020). ‘Researcher Positionality - A Consideration of Its Influence and Place in Qualitative Research - A New Researcher Guide.’ International Journal of Education, Vol. 8. Issue 4. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1268044.pdf>. See also: Warf, B. (2010). ‘Positionality’. In Encyclopedia of Geography, Vol. 1, pp. 2258-2258; SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412939591.n913>; Barker, C. (2004). ‘Positionality’. In The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies, pp. 154-155. SAGE Publications Ltd, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446221280.n185>; Dwyer, S. and Buckle, J. (2009). ‘The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research’. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, Vol. 8 (1), pp.54-63. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/160940690900800105>

the opportunities for and barriers to ethical collaborative cataloguing and interpretation practice. Provisional Semantics offers key insights into the scale of the challenge in terms of the values, processes, practices, and resources needed for museums and heritage organisations to genuinely represent UK heritage.

Project Aims and Objectives

Provisional Semantics' key objective was to identify what institutional values, processes, resources and ethical/methodological approaches are needed to accommodate the multiple and provisional interpretations required to genuinely represent UK Heritage. Specifically, the project had three additional objectives:

- To identify the scale of the challenge in terms of the values, processes, practices and resources needed
- To pilot methodologies through three case studies that engage with a 'decolonisation' agenda to enable staff to work with colleagues internally and with key stakeholders to describe and interpret collections and catalogues
- To review with external stakeholders the efficacy of the three case study interventions within the broader context of the sector's need to revise approaches to cataloguing and interpreting the objects they hold.

As the project progressed, the scale of and need for essential foundational work in each case study organisation regarding the cataloguing and re-interpretation of objects became apparent. Consequently, given the time-limited nature of the project, the priority became to address the first two of the objectives above.

Through these objectives, the project aimed to address two main research questions:

- *What methodological, ethical and practical changes do heritage organisations need to make to accommodate the multiple and provisional interpretations necessary for a sustainable digitised national collection to genuinely represent UK Heritage?*
- *What methods and approaches that engage intellectually and practically with a 'decolonial' agenda can heritage organisations employ to produce search terms/catalogue entries and interpretations fit for purpose for an evolving digitised national collection?*

An additional theme which has grown in significance as Provisional Semantics has progressed has been the efficacy of the time and resource-limited 'project' as a means of addressing the issues at the heart of this research. The project team have analysed and reflected on how the project format itself assists or hinders the re-assessment of how museums and heritage organisations re-interpret and re-present artworks and objects in ways that accommodate multiple and provisional interpretations.

Research Team

Professor Emily Pringle, Head of Research at Tate (principal investigator (PI)).

Dr Anjalie Dalal-Clayton, Decolonising Arts Institute, University of the Arts London (HEI situated co-investigator)

Tate Greenhalgh, National Interpretation Specialist at the National Trust (IRO situated co-investigator (Co-I))

Helen Mavin, Head of Photographs at IWM (IRO situated co-investigator (Co-I))

Ananda Rutherford (Research Associate)

Kim Balukiewicz, Research Grants Manager at Tate

Harr-Joht Kaur, Research Administrator until April 2021 and subsequently Research Programme Manager at Tate

Hannah Squire, Assistant Curator in the National Public Programmes team at the NT (October 2020 – May 2021)

Hannah Wills, Research Manager, IWM (until August 2021)

The project was originally devised by Maxine Miller, former Tate Librarian. However, the original budget for Provisional Semantics did not allow for both a PI and a Co-I within Tate, which meant that Library staff did not have a formal role within the project. However, Provisional Semantics benefitted from the essential involvement of:

Katie Blackford, Senior Liaison Librarian, Tate

Jane Bramwell, Head of Library and Archive, Tate (from May 2020)

Holly Callaghan, Senior Liaison Librarian, Tate (February – November 2020)

The team was majority white and reflects the lack of racial or ethnic diversity in the GLAM sector⁵. It revealed an inherent flaw in the project organisation; that those with the relevant but previously overlooked expertise and knowledge about the case study material – curators, researchers and artists who are Black or people of colour - had not participated in the research design from the outset and were not adequately represented within the core team. This meant that the project, which specifically aimed to address issues of marginalisation and absence, was hindered by a lack of requisite experience, knowledge and perspectives.

⁵ GLAM is an acronym for "galleries, libraries, archives, and museums", and refers to cultural institutions with a mission to provide access to knowledge ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GLAM_\(cultural_heritage\)#:~:text=GLAM%20is%20an%20acronym%20for,to%20provide%20access%20to%20knowledge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GLAM_(cultural_heritage)#:~:text=GLAM%20is%20an%20acronym%20for,to%20provide%20access%20to%20knowledge)).

The project acknowledges that dynamics of power and exclusion were reproduced in the staff structure. Through positioning work (outlined in section 10) there was a commitment to: de-centre whiteness; to be transparent about practices and decisions; to try and protect individual team members from the impact of the emotional labour required in this work; and to mitigate against the re-enactment of hierarchies of white privilege wherever they were identifiable.

The project would not have been possible without the contributions of key stakeholders related to each case study, detailed in section 14. The project team wish to extend thanks to them and acknowledge the huge contribution they have made to Provisional Semantics.

Research Approach

Provisional Semantics, in line with the ambitions for the wider TaNC programme, drew on, was conducted through, and aims to impact on practices within museums and heritage organisations. Exploration of the structures, practices, policies, collections, and cultures of the case study institutions has been the project's central focus.

The research adopted a qualitative case study approach; centring the research in and on the practices of the three case study organisations within which collaborative methodological approaches could be tested.

The work of 'decolonising' GLAM collections has been debated since the 1970s⁶, and much has been written on what should or could be done. However, there is less written on the complex and necessarily time-consuming activities that need to be undertaken, and the institutional affordances and barriers that enable or prohibit genuine change taking place. Arguably, equitable and ethical cataloguing, object description and interpretation are still not treated as 'core work' in the majority of museums. Whilst there remains no agreed best-practice or policy requirement from funders or professional bodies, there is increasing engagement with this issue across the sector⁷. In the case of this project, having to negotiate organisational contractual and commissioning procedures, staffing structures, cataloguing processes and existing workload demands, provided the researchers with vital insights into the pragmatics of 'decolonising' work, and the ways in which this is possible within current organisational hierarchies related to power, knowledge and appetite for change.

The methodology adopted for the project drew on practice-led research and action research. In particular, the research team gained insights and knowledge through undertaking actions, interrogating, analysing and reflecting on these actions and applying the knowledge gained to shape the project and their working practices going forward. These insights in turn have informed the findings and recommendations documented in this final report alongside the conclusions drawn from the practice and literature review and feedback from external stakeholders.

The methodology involved the project team meeting bi-weekly from May to December 2020, alternating planning with further reading, analysis and reflection related to the development of Provisional Semantics as a whole. This was a productive process that brought the extended research team together and afforded opportunities for collaborative

⁶ For early references to the need for greater representation, please see Khan, N. (1976). *The Art Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain* (A Report to the Arts Council of Great Britain), Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and Community Relations Commission and Rasheed Araeen's response to it: Araeen, R. (1987). 'From Primitivism to Ethnic Arts' in *Third Text*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, pp. 6-25.

⁷ See, for example the Museums Association 'Supporting Decolonisation in Museums' guidance published in 2021 (<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/supporting-decolonisation-in-museums/>).

project planning, reflection and decision making, alongside the essential work on personal positioning.

A significant benefit of this approach was that it enabled the project to take a flexible and iterative approach, adapting in part due to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the other external drivers detailed in section 6. Allowing emergent findings to shape the project's development meant that researchers could respond to the changing contexts and take on board insights gained through desk research and conversations with and critiques from internal and external colleagues and stakeholders.

Impacts and Adjustments

From the start of the project in February 2020 Provisional Semantics was impacted by Covid-19 and other external factors in the following ways:

- Staff at the case study organisations and the HEI were furloughed full or part time between April 2020 until September 2021
- The NT, Tate and UAL undertook voluntary redundancy schemes during 2020 and 2021, due to the financial impact of the pandemic, which greatly impacted on the workloads of those working on the project
- Physical access to collections was irregular and partial during the project, which determined the extent to which researchers and stakeholders could physically access objects, artefacts and materials. Almost all contact with and responses to objects and texts was necessarily digital, through virtual images and online forums
- It was not possible to bring researchers and stakeholders together physically for the duration of the project.

In response to these, the researchers made the following adjustments:

- Provisional Semantics was granted a seven month no cost extension that enabled work to continue from September 2021 until February 2022
- The project adapted on an ongoing basis to accommodate the shifts in institutional priorities and policies, the need for online rather than physical interactions with materials and people, and, in response to the emerging findings
- Heightened debate in the media, social media and politics since May 2020 around cultural heritage in relation to historical under and misrepresentation of Black people and people of colour's histories and experiences and the privileging of imperial, white and Euro-centric historical narratives⁸, required constant reflexive engagement by the research team. This led to an expanding out of the focus of Provisional Semantics beyond the specific focus on language, interpretation and cataloguing practice. The project broadened to consider how these practices operate and to what extent heritage, by way of museums and collections knowledge, is complicit and implicit in upholding imperial and racist structures, institutions, and ways of thinking, knowing, engaging and researching
- The case studies pivoted to focus more on engagement with and discussion of specific objects and images. While language remained critical, the project also asked what stories objects can tell? how they are meaningful to different people? what their affects are, and what memories and experiences they provoke? The intention became to facilitate open conversations with objects as a jumping off point which in turn revealed rich and engaging knowledge sharing and connections (see sections 7 & 8).

⁸ See, for example, Shaw, A., & Carrigan, M. (2020). 'Reform or Reset? How cultural organisations are facing a reckoning over racism'. *The Art Newspaper*. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/07/03/reform-or-reset-how-cultural-institutions-are-facing-a-reckoning-over-racism>.

Case study 1 – Second World War Indian photographs, Photographic Collection, Imperial War Museums

Aims and Objectives

The IWM case study focused on a sample of 53 photographs from the War Office Second World War official photographs series taken in India (4700-38) covering recruitment of Indian servicemen during the Second World War.⁹ The photographs selected included legacy captions which contained problematic, offensive, or inaccurate information, language, and narrative positioning. The series is not fully digitised and has had limited curatorial intervention to date. Available information was reliant on the original captions, which date from the time of production (1942). The photographs and their associated labels therefore presented a valuable case study to consider how best to present and re-contextualise these photographs and explore the colonial and racist dynamics present in both images and text.

The case study sought to generate new descriptions and contextual information that addressed the issues inherent in the legacy captions and images. The ambition was also to review the process, practice, and impact of producing this revised and situated content considering the following research questions:

- *Does the presence of contextual information and captions from perspectives outside IWM enable audience engagement and understanding of challenging content and can it mitigate the negative impact of colonial gaze and language present in many historic captions?*
- *Are different layers of interpretation helpful to researchers in exploring and understanding the collection, the objects it holds and the histories and experiences it represents?*

As detailed below, the testing of the revised captions with two groups provided some preliminary data into how perceptions of the images are informed by captions and how contextual information can be created through a collaborative process.

More significantly, the case study affords valuable insights regarding how scholarship, knowledge, perspectives and lived experience of people working outside IWM help to identify and address the problematic nature of existing descriptive texts and mitigate the impact of offensive and inaccurate colonial terms and perspectives still present in many historic collections.

⁹ For further detail on the propaganda value of these photographs, the British necessity for Indian recruitment and the military and political context in India at their time of production in 1942 see: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/research/research-projects/provisional-semantics>.

Interim Adjustments

It became clear early in the project that an international scope would be a necessity on this case study, given the nature and origins of the material selected for research. The conditions of the pandemic, specifically the need to conduct meetings, research and presentations online, enabled the research team to develop an international approach in ways not envisaged during the conception of the project. It also fostered a democratic approach, whereby all research participants accessed materials in the same way and via the same online channels. However, the context of the pandemic limited on-site, physical access to the photographs, which in turn meant that response was always digitally mediated, and that the possibility of serendipitous, archival discovery was precluded.

Approach and Activities

This project has sought to challenge some of the colonial and imperial constructs or frameworks that are ingrained in heritage collections. The photographs that are the focus of the IWM case study are a prime example of how such constructs and frameworks work in practice within museum collections. The Co-I identified the selected collections material before the start of the project, recognising both the absence of up-to-date information about the photographs and IWM's reliance on problematic original captions affixed or inscribed on the back of the images.

The case study was designed to surface and interrogate the problems of the existing interpretation of the photographs. It also set out to explore ethical methods of co-production for cataloguing and developing new interpretation material that, crucially, would not repeat colonial tropes. To address the missing histories and contexts of the images, it was essential that the study drew on subject specific expertise and/or experience from perspectives not only external to IWM and its usual research and practice channels, but also from beyond the UK. (See below for an outline of how the context of the pandemic impacted this).

Community engagement activity was initially considered an appropriate method through which to evaluate current, and co-produce new, interpretation that would be informed by lived experience, inherited/generational knowledge and personal response, including Indian veteran groups and their descendants. However, because so little was known about the selected photographs, their histories and contexts, the research team determined that the project researchers and IWM could not adequately support participants, ethically co-produce material with them or, under pandemic restrictions, undertake sensitive, in-person activity. It was therefore determined that the priority for the case study was to develop a more in-depth, critical, and nuanced understanding of the photographs, and that this would need to take place through collaboration with subject specialists.

The Co-I commissioned three subject specialists with expertise in Indian experiences of the Second World War, who agreed to research and respond to the images and their associated captions and labels, with a view to re-captioning and re-cataloguing them. They were: Dr

Aashique Ahmed Iqbal, Assistant Professor in History at Krea University, Sri City, and a historian of modern South Asia with an interest in aviation, state formation and military history; Dr Ghee Bowman, a historian, teacher and storyteller based in Exeter and author of *The Indian Contingent: the Forgotten Muslim Soldiers of Dunkirk* (The History Press, 2020); and Dr Diya Gupta, Past & Present Fellow: Race, Ethnicity and Equality in History at the Royal Historical Society and the Institute of Historical Research, London.

The photographs and accompanying captions were digitised and added to the IWM collections management system and extant documentation was collated in preparation for the subject specialists' research. Unfortunately, the experience of handling the photographs, understanding the materiality and effect of the physical presence and relationship with the labels and annotations on the reverse side could not be facilitated or replicated digitally. However, because most public interactions with these artefacts is likely to be via the online platform rather than in person, the researchers' experience and engagement with the materials is comparable to that of IWM's online audiences. The subject specialists' brief was to produce new texts to describe the photographs, which would later be published online alongside the historic captions, and additionally sourced critical reflections and contextual articles. As such, the objective was to offer an informed, co-produced, diverse, multi-layered, and multi-vocal range of interpretations and resources through which IWM audiences could critically engage with the photographs.

The research into the objects and the process of providing historically nuanced information about them was then presented at an online event titled *Challenging the imperial gaze: IWM's Second World War Indian photographs*, hosted by IWM to engage with the War and Conflict Subject Specialist Network (SSN).¹⁰ The subject specialists, IWM Co-I, and project Research Associate gave talks on the project and contextual work of the case study. Dr Aashique Ahmed Iqbal presented on the legacies of the Second World War in India; Dr Ghee Bowman spoke on his approaches to archival work to uncover human stories; and Dr Diya Gupta presented her work on emotional histories in the Second World War and the role of colonial photographs. At the end of the presentations there was a facilitated question and answer session whereby participants drawn from the War and Conflict Subject Specialist Network could ask questions of the panellists. The questions posed touched on the following areas:

- How the photographs used in the case study were selected
- How the original captions and the newly generated captions will appear to audiences online.
- What IWM intends to do with the original captions and whether they will continue to be published considering the issues they present.
- To what extent the captions reflect the personal memories and contexts of the individuals photographed.
- Whether technologies such as AI can help to uncover the identities of the individuals in the photographs and whether this was explored in the project.

¹⁰ The SSN is open to those who work for or with not-for-profit organisations. It welcomes members from the museums and galleries sector, community organisations, national and local government, heritage institutions, performing arts groups, and from the education sector.

- Whether the next steps would include translating these new texts or methodologies into exhibitions spaces and other programmes.
- How these discussions could be widened further to engage more directly with South Asian audiences in the UK and South Asia.
- Whether discussions of ideas of nationalism in India and Britain could challenge dominant narratives and create more dialogue between the two nations.

Attendees were asked to undertake a post-event survey, intended to gather evidence to answer the research questions set for the case study.¹¹ It comprised thirteen questions, three of which asked for a response to a series of eight statements designed to map the impact of the event and the new content.

In addition, critical reflections from Professor Annu Palakunnathu Matthew and Jess Crombie were commissioned. Matthew is an artist and Professor of Art at the University of Rhode Island, who draws on archival photographs to re-examine historical narratives and colonial legacies, and Crombie is a researcher and Senior Lecturer at University of the Arts London, and a consultant for the development and humanitarian sectors, whose work explores the ethics of documentary image making. Matthew and Crombie's critical reflections were sought to aid the project team's reflexivity on the limitations of the research method and to surface alternative approaches to the material, histories, and practices in question.

The project and the online content were also presented to IWM's Access and Inclusion Champions Network for response, evaluation and critique.¹²

Outcomes and Outputs

Case Study Outputs:

A resource was created as part of the IWM's Research department's [online offer](#). It comprises:

- [Behind the photographs: Indian Army Recruitment in the Second World War](#) 23 images and associated records with revised object captions displayed alongside original texts. (See images below for examples)
- [Provisional Semantics: Context](#) – a selection of short explanatory texts to give historical context and describe concepts featured in the labels.
- [Anxieties and Absences](#) - an essay by Dr Aashique Ahmed Iqbal.
- [Reflections on Provisional Semantics](#) - an essay by Dr Diya Gupta.
- [Anticipated and unanticipated audiences: a multiplicity of voices](#) – an essay by Jess Crombie.
- The new object captions were also captured in IWM collections management system records for the photographs used in the project.

¹¹ The questions were designed to map against the IWM Social Impact Framework.

¹² The IWM's Access and Inclusion Champions Group is a cross departmental group of around 20-25 colleagues who meet to discuss how IWM can break down barriers to access and inclusion identified in the IWM Access and Inclusion Strategy (iwm.org.uk).

- [*Challenging the imperial gaze: IWM's Second World War Indian photographs*](#) (online seminar hosted by IWM War and Conflict Subject Specialist Network), 16 July 2021.
Speakers: Dr Aashique Ahmed Iqbal; Dr Ghee Bowman; Dr Diya Gupta, Ananda Rutherford and Helen Mavin.



(c) IWM IND 1254

Original caption: New recruits for the Indian Army in Northern India receiving an advance of pay on enrollment. Recruiting is proceeding apace throughout India, unaffected by the Congress campaign

New caption (2021): This is one of the few photographs in this collection that directly mentions Indian politics. The caption that was originally provided with this photograph, approved for publication three days after the outbreak of the Quit India Movement, boasts about the success of the recruitment drive in the face of opposition by the Indian nationalist Congress party. The original caption talks about the desirability of the soldiers' pay, sometimes referred to as the 'King's Shilling'. For many poor Indians the army continued to be a key source of employment in a colony in which a regular income continued to be difficult to secure.

Though Indian nationalist leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were ardent anti-fascists, they were outraged when British Viceroy Linlithgow declared India to be at war with Germany on 3rd September 1939 without consulting any Indians. Indian Nationalist anger only深ened as the colonial government refused to concede independence to India until after the war and went so far as to use wartime legislation to repress the Indian National Congress. Photographs like this one are meant to illustrate that the lives of ordinary Indians, like the bare-chested candidates in this photograph, continued to be dominated by concrete concerns about earning a living rather than by elite calls for independence.

Further, the well clothed civilian and military officials seated at the table are meant to convey the message that the colonial government is increasingly handing over the reins of power to educated Indians willing to work with it. Despite this photo's message the 'King's Shilling' had lost some of its sheen in the traditional recruiting ground of Punjab, where wartime profits from farming proved more enticing. The Indian army would instead be forced to turn to east and south India where the promise of regular pay would be difficult for starving men to say 'No' to. (Dr Aashique Iqbal)



(c) IWM IND 1267

Original caption: PRIMITIVE TRANSPORT IN INDIA The immemorial ox cart still holds sway in India, just as in Old Testament times. This quaint conveyance is used to transport merchandise, farm produce and passengers. The wheels are built to outlive even the driver and the oxen.

New caption (2021): While the presence of a bullock cart in a photographic collection on the Second World War might seem out of place, photos like this actually played a crucial role in discourse legitimizing colonial rule. The bullock cart was mobilized as a symbol of India's stubborn traditionalism and timelessness and was contrasted with the train and later the aeroplane, which served as symbols of British modernity.

The original caption for this photo talks about how the bullock cart is a 'primitive' form of transport using a distinctly Christian register that places it in the 'Old Testament times' before Christ. The erroneous idea that India was a primitive society that might be civilised by British rule was used as a powerful justification for colonialism. Yet the presence of bullock carts in India at a time when Britain was waging industrialised war is also indicative of a central contradiction in this very argument.

If British rule could modernise India then that must imply that British rule would have to come to an end at a point when India passed the threshold of modernity. However, if India was an innately primitive land which could never be modernised, as shown by the primitive transport extant after more than a century of British rule, then colonialism in India had no justification.

As things stood, the lack of investment in India in transport and infrastructure would prove disastrous for the Allied war effort. Indeed, a poorly thought out 'scorched earth' policy aimed at destroying traditional modes of transport, like fishermen's boats, to deny them to the enemy would contribute to a deadly famine in Bengal in 1943. (Dr Aashique Iqbal)

Screenshots of the online resources [Behind the photographs: Indian Army Recruitment in the Second World War](#) 23 images and associated records with revised object captions displayed alongside original texts © IWM.

Other contributions:

- Helen Mavin (Case Study Co-I) and Hannah Wills (Research Manager) presented at the War and Conflict Subject Specialist Network Conference: *Looking In, Looking Out: Diversifying Stories of War and Conflict*, 12 November 2020.
- Dr Diya Gupta participated in an online panel discussion organised by Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, titled [ReVision: Exhibiting Artist Conversation \(Revisioning History, Identity & Home\)](#) hosted by Newport Art Museum, 1 December 2021.

Helen Mavin contributed to a roundtable discussion titled *Rethinking Histories of Empire: Interventions in the Photograph Archive*, convened by Cardiff University's School of Modern Languages on 8 December 2021.

Ananda Rutherford gave a presentation on the Provisional Semantics project and the IWM case study to Royal Holloway, University of London second-year undergraduate Liberal Arts students for the module *Power, Society and Cultural Practice*, 1 December 2021.

Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Ananda Rutherford, 2022, '[Against a New Orthodoxy: Decolonised “Objectivity” in the Cataloguing and Description of Artworks](#)' (article commissioned by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art – Digital Photo Archive), 2022.

Helen Mavin presented 'Provisional Semantics: Challenging the imperial gaze in IWM's Second World War photographs' at Photo-sensible: historians, archives and the dissemination of controversial photographs in the digital age conference - Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, 10 June 2022.

The following outputs are forthcoming:

Blog post by Helen Mavin for the Royal Historical Society's *Writing Race* blog series.

Entry by Diya Gupta focusing on one of the India series photographs for '*Everyday Life History Reader* (under contract with Exeter University Press), edited by Kate Ferris and Huw Halstead, with about 25-30 contributory articles. It is an open access (online and print) documentary reader / sourcebook on everyday life history, scheduled to be published in 2023.

Findings

The IWM case study provides findings in relation to institutional cataloguing processes and the value of close readings of collection objects. The study also offers insights as to whose perspectives need to be considered when undertaking any 'decolonising' work in relation to collections. The process of re-captioning the images surfaced the degree of scrutiny, care and sensitivity required to undertake this work and the danger of reproducing colonial and imperial perspectives.

The case study revealed that **inaccuracies in how images are described may only be obvious to the people they describe or the nations they characterise**. One of the challenges the research team presented to the commissioned subject specialists was to identify and

address both the archaic and offensive terms found in the captions and the problematic attitudes and frameworks that informed the use of such terms. Furthermore, colonial, and imperial concepts and views often reside in seemingly innocuous phrasing and descriptions, appearing as benign in a traditionally white British setting. This makes them difficult to identify, and easy to reproduce. Previously accepted ways of thinking and working cannot be relied on to bring about change.

'So many of the categories and techniques that seemed obvious to me were actually – in some way – recolonising'.¹³

The experience of working through the IWM case study indicates that addressing and removing problematic or offensive terms alone does not equate with removing the problematic contexts, histories and views that informed the production, presentation and purpose of cultural objects. This research suggests that legacy titles and captions should be recorded as testament to the attitudes of the time in which they were written. Further, the sources and the circumstances of the legacy titles and captions' creation and use require explanation¹⁴.

'The deep reading by the team and the resulting captions were illuminating, more inclusive, and easily understood by any audience. As pointed out in the session, there was a lot that was also missing, erased, or not recorded. The photos still prompted the discomfort...but the captions softened the blow.'¹⁵

The case study also reinforced the value of contributions that external researchers can make to institutionally led projects that are grappling with collections formed during, and informed by, empire and imperial perspectives. One of the external researchers commented as follows:

*'As a scholar whose work deals extensively with decolonisation, the project represents an important attempt to decolonise museum collections, that have for very long reflected the perspective of the former British empire.'*¹⁶

This view, that the newly commissioned captions and contextual essays are an appropriate first step in addressing underrepresentation of hitherto marginalised histories, experiences and people also surfaced in responses from the survey soliciting views on the new contextual and interpretive texts generated by the project. The survey was undertaken by two IWM stakeholder groups: the attendees of the War and Conflict Subject Specialist

¹³ Reflection from Ghee Bowman, on the Challenging the imperial gaze workshop July 2021, August 2021.

¹⁴ See also: Dalal-Clayton, A. and Rutherford, A. (2022). Against a New Orthodoxy: Decolonised "Objectivity" in the Cataloguing and Description of Artworks – Features – Paul Mellon Centre. [online] Photoarchive.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk. Available at: <https://photoarchive.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/groups/against-a-new-orthodoxy>.

¹⁵ Reflection from Annu Palakunnathu Matthew on the Challenging the imperial gaze workshop July 2021, December 2021.

¹⁶ Reflection from Aashique Ahmed Iqbal, on the Challenging the imperial gaze workshop July 2021, July 2021.

Network event and the attendees of the IWM Access and Inclusion Champions Network presentation on 29 September 2021. Although the sample size for the survey was small and further evaluation is needed to provide robust findings in relation to these questions (12 individual responses across the two events), the results indicated that, from the perspective of those responding, the newly commissioned captions and contextual essays:

- fostered a multi-perspectival understanding of war and conflict
- naming the authors of the texts increased the responders' confidence in the veracity of the texts
- and finally, that layers of different types of interpretation (i.e. short captions and longer contextual essays) increased the confidence of the responders in consulting IWM collections presented online.

Conclusion

This case study provided IWM with the opportunity to reflect on past practice, to work in new ways, and to collaborate with subject specialists working not only outside the institution but also outside the museum sector. Critically, it provides examples of collaborative cataloguing practice that can assist the IWM on an iterative journey towards more ethical and equitable research and discovery. Although it was not possible to engage stakeholder groups in the research for practical and ethical reasons, future engagement could constitute the next stage of knowledge generation for the IWM. On reflection, the team felt that engagement with researchers, practitioners, stakeholders and networks from a broad range of disciplines and backgrounds should begin at the genesis of projects for more nuanced and diverse perspectives to be embedded in collections and the spaces that hold them.

In the case study, the research team brought together a variety of methods and activities to develop a historically, geographically and subject specific approach to writing about collections and the objects they hold. Although the methods employed are not new, the specificity of this case study, and its resulting close readings of images in relation to legacy captions, has already begun to influence conversations within IWM on future ways of working. For example, as a direct result of the lessons learned from *Provisional Semantics*, in partnership with Delfina Foundation and supported by an AHRC Capability for Collections (CapCo) Fund: Impact Award, IWM will be facilitating digitisation of and research into collections items selected by researchers and practitioners from outside the museum at the start of a new research project: *Shared Digital Futures: partnership and meaning-making in newly digitised collections* (March – November 2022).

Case study 2 – Museum display, Powis Castle, National Trust

Aims and Objectives

The National Trust case study centred on the ‘Clive Museum’ at Powis Castle, Wales, which it is claimed contains one of the most important collections of Indian art and artefacts outside of India, with more than 1,000 objects including weaponry, textiles and other decorative objects¹⁷. The collection was accumulated by the Clive family between 1744 and 1839, and its current display has been in place at Powis Castle since 1987 with limited interpretation or information about the origins of the production or provenance of the objects on show.

The collection of the ‘Clive Museum’ was selected as a case study for Provisional Semantics for three reasons. Firstly, the collection is a direct product of empire. Secondly, provenance information about the objects it holds is either scant or absent, and records largely romanticised perspectives about the foundation of the British Empire and British conduct in India. And thirdly, current display captions in the museum are inadequate and, in some cases, inaccurate. Produced in the 1980s, the display captions are neither informed by subject nor object-specialist knowledge, despite the fact that a detailed catalogue, *Treasures from India*¹⁸, was produced at the same time. Instead, the captions suffer from being either factually incorrect or reveal little about their respective objects. Furthermore, they have not been updated for decades and do not reflect more recent GLAM and heritage sector attempts to place care and sensitivity at the centre of the interpretation of cultural objects acquired through empire.

The initial research question was, therefore: How can the National Trust decolonise the documentation and display of collections arising from British colonial rule in the context of fluctuating societal and political agendas?

The objective of the case study was to develop interpretations for selected objects in the collection, engaging ‘decolonial’ approaches and involving ethical co-production with stakeholder communities, potentially involving a partnership with National Museum New Delhi and South Asian community associations local to Powis Castle.

¹⁷ For an explanation of Robert Clive’s role in the establishment of the British Empire, the Clive family relationship with Powis Castle and the contents of the museum collection see: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/powis-castle-and-garden/features/the-clive-museum-at-powis>.

¹⁸ Archer, M., Rowell, C., & Skelton, R. (1987). *Treasures from India: The Clive Collection at Powis Castle*. Meredith Press.

Interim Adjustments

Due to the UK national lockdown, 80% of NT staff were put on furlough (including the Co-I) and, due to the impact of the Covid pandemic in India, it was not possible to broker a partnership with National Museum New Delhi as planned in March 2020. As with the IWM case study, stakeholder community engagement activities were deemed unfeasible and unethical due to the pandemic and the absence of adequate provenance information on the collection objects.

Upon the Co-I's return to work in June 2020, the context of public and press attention on racism in the heritage sector had led the NT to direct its strategic focus towards ensuring its interpretation was 'inclusive for the entire UK population, representing everyone's heritage in ways that were relevant, accessible, and welcoming to every member of society'¹⁹. This strategy was also to ensure that approaches and histories that had been surfaced in the NT's *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery*²⁰ could become embedded over time into the entire history of individual properties. However, subsequently there were criticisms in the press and from the public regarding the NT's Interim Report and the Colonial Countryside project, which sought to explore African, Caribbean and Indian connections at 11 of the NT's properties. Towards the end of 2020 the strength of polarisation in debates about racism in interpretation and description in cultural heritage became apparent in the national media²¹. In response to the situation the NT refocused on research, increased work with local and stakeholder communities and tested different approaches to developing new interpretation. The NT also began work on an Interpreting History Policy Position to reflect this approach.

In this context, the research team decided to re-orient this case study to support the NT's internal critical examinations of its interpretation practices and policies. Early research for the case study had indicated that, in any case, an accelerated approach to producing new interpretation was not appropriate for collections where detailed provenance information is absent and where staff do not hold relevant subject specialist knowledge. The case study therefore pivoted away from producing new interpretation towards testing methods for building knowledge around object collections.

¹⁹ National Trust Interpreting Histories Policy Position Statement 2021.

²⁰ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/documents/colonialism-and-historic-slavery-report.pdf> This report describes the connections that historic places in the care of the National Trust have with colonialism and historic slavery, drawing on recent evidence including the Legacies of British Slave-ownership project at UCL.

²¹ On presenting the NT with a Special Recognition Award in May 2022, Museums and Heritage Awards Judge, Bernard Donoghue, said '[The NT] became a lightning conductor for criticism about how our sector tells authentic stories and challenges accepted truths'.

Approach and Activities

The project team discussed a range of objects currently on display in the ‘Clive Museum’ and the potential avenues of research that could be pursued to disrupt, challenge or reposition established but problematic narratives presented in and around the museum. Informed by the literature and existing good practice, the objective was to prioritise hitherto underrepresented narratives and review the biographies and activities of Robert Clive and his descendants as the single central focus within the collection interpretation. The research sought to centre individual objects, particularly in terms of the histories and contexts of their production, use and/or cultural significances. After exploring a range of potential objects to focus on, an eighteenth-century book of poems by the fourteenth-century Persian poet known as Hafez was selected²². It is an object of huge cultural, philosophical, and religious significance, but is currently displayed with almost no interpretation in the corner of a small cabinet displaying the personal effects of, and trinkets once owned by, Lady Henrietta Clive. It was our view that by selecting this overlooked but highly important object from this cabinet, we were able to remain faithful to our ambition to decentre the Clive family and their life stories within our research.



Opening from a bound copy of a Diwan, or collection, of the writings of the Persian poet Hafez © National Trust.

²² Hafez (هَفَّظ), Šams-al-Din Mohammad, of Shiraz (ca. 715-792/1315-1390), is a celebrated Persian lyric poet. For an account of his life and works see: <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/hafez>.

Although broad stakeholder community engagement had become neither feasible nor ethical, other forms of stakeholder knowledge were identified, namely that of: (1) specialists in Persian and South Asian literature and art history, who could share information about the histories and context of the production of the book, its cultural value in Iran, India and their diasporas, and of the poetry contained within it; (2) NT curators who could critically reflect on the display and interpretation of the book in relation to practices and policies both within the NT and across the sector; and (3) Powis Castle staff and volunteers whose experience of working in the museum and the wider property and of engaging the public with the ‘Clive Museum’ collection could reveal other, equally important insights.

Three online workshops were devised and held for these groups in September 2021. The workshops employed the practice of close reading; that is, describing and discussing an object and developing a reading of that object based on what can be discerned simply through the act of looking. In employing this method, our objective was to centre the poetry book, its materiality, form and function, both at the time of its production and subsequently. In addition to focussing on the poetry book and its display at the ‘Clive Museum’, we also took this as an opportunity to elicit critical reflections from the three groups on the different interpretive texts about the history and contents of the ‘Clive Museum’ collection that have been produced by or via the NT over the past three decades.

The three workshops produced markedly different conversations:

- The external subject specialist/academics revealed previously unknown factual and historical information about the object. Discussion centred on what the object is, how to understand it, its history, its value to multiple cultures over different time periods and the cultural history its creation responded to. Their insights revealed both the NT’s and the Provisional Semantics researchers’ gross ignorance of the object and its originating culture, which, even when drawing as much as possible from the existing information, still caused the NT’s interpretation to be offensive.
- The non-curatorial staff and volunteers revealed how knowledge and oft repeated family or staff anecdotes are communicated person-to-person on site and are often presented as fact to visitors. However, others within the same workshop expressed uncertainty about the veracity of these stories, and discomfort when those representing the house and the National Trust presented anecdote as fact. Whilst some of the participants expressed a desire to see new, unexpurgated interpretations of the collection within the museum, others shared perspectives that were not particularly critical and occasionally demonstrated an aversion to ‘decolonial’ histories accompanied by an adhesion to and defence of established (and increasingly regarded as, problematic) interpretations.
- Amongst the workshop with NT curatorial and interpretation staff, while there was little knowledge of the histories or cultures represented in this collection, they did provide close analyses of how the language in documentation and interpretation affected meaning, and suggested practical solutions for updating curatorial practice within the NT.

Outcomes and Outputs

- In accordance with the NT’s decision to pause its production of new interpretation, the three workshops that comprised the main activity of the case study did not lead to public-facing outputs during the project. Instead, the recordings and transcriptions from

the workshops constitute a vital internal resource for NT staff working on current and future cataloguing, interpretation and displays at the ‘Clive Museum’. The transcripts will, in particular, inform the Powis Castle property team’s future work of re-displaying and re-interpreting objects in the ‘Clive Collection’.

- The discussion and findings in the case study have directly informed the NT’s new Code of Ethics and approach for interpretation and object description, particularly its emphasis on decentring individuals involved in colonisation and recentering objects accumulated as a consequence of empire, their makers, modes of production, and cultural or religious contexts and significances.
- Anjalie Dalal-Clayton, Tate Greenhalgh and Ananda Rutherford, 2022, ‘Trophies of Empire: modes of acquisition, legitimization and colonial denial in art and heritage interpretation’ (conference paper for the Association for Art History Annual Conference 2022), to be developed into an essay for an edited book or peer-reviewed journal article.
- Hassan Vawda, (2022), ‘ is wineglass: the National Trust’s Powis Castle and the Clive of India Collection’ in *Routes & Roots Research on Visual Cultures*. Available at: <https://rootsroutes.org/>.

Findings

The NT case study provided valuable insights into how institutional and object histories determine the nature and extent of collection interpretation. The research also surfaced the necessity of working with subject specialists, not least when in-house expertise relating to objects is absent. The case study demonstrated the value of close reading as a method for building knowledge around object collections, revealing too the wide range of perspectives held within institutions on how histories and objects should be presented.

The findings from the case study workshops fall into three overlapping areas.

The first area concerns the lack of provenance and in-depth, subject-specialist, object-centred information and the steps needed to address this. From the perspectives of academic specialism and lived experience, workshop participants reported that this gap in knowledge risked the perpetuation of problematic, offensive, and colonial perspectives and interpretations in museums. A challenge facing the NT, as with many heritage and cultural organisations, is the absence of sufficient in-house subject-specialist and curatorial expertise relating to non-European histories and cultures, which we understand as essential in beginning to interpret these objects accurately.

Some participants, especially external participants and curatorial staff reported that the NT’s current documentation and interpretation is heavily biased towards British colonial narratives and can be culturally offensive. Steps to address the bias, imbalance and absence of knowledge and information were suggested, beginning with building cultural understanding through work with academic specialists to help avoid offence and enable more sympathetic and constructive engagement with non-academic communities. At the same time, preserving and retaining evidence of previous curatorial interpretation (in this case the Indian-pastiche display cases) as part of the story of the collection was understood

as important by some of the participants. Others wanted to explore whether the NT could document and interpret the collections in a transparent, auto-ethnographic way that included changes in curatorial approach over time.

Secondly, the case study workshops revealed that different stakeholders and audiences hold different perspectives on cultural material, and that interpretation practices need to evolve at the NT to reflect and represent a variety of different readings taking a multi-vocal approach. Close reading and analysis of the catalogues and interpretative texts revealed how tone and language use heavily influence communication and hence understanding. It was observed that the older, more colonially sympathetic texts appear polite, using indirect language to paint a misleadingly benign depiction of history, whereas more recent consciously 'decolonial' texts use more direct language. It became apparent how different worldviews impacted responses to the different texts under review during the workshops. Recently written texts with a more direct tone elicited strong, reactionary and emotional responses amongst those with a more conservative outlook, and in some cases, such texts seemed to strengthen resistance to 'decolonial approaches' or 'revisionist histories' and prompted a distrust of factual accuracy about object provenance. This experience suggests that the NT will need to make ethical decisions regarding the language used in documentation and interpretation, taking account of the users of each. Creating a national digital collection extends access to a global online audience, whilst the interpretation within NT properties will still be predominantly for a domestic audience. The challenge facing the NT and the cultural and heritage sector in general is to evolve interpretation practices to more accurately represent the objects in their care, without alienating established and prospective audiences.

Thirdly, the workshops revealed that failure to carefully acknowledge contexts and histories of colonial power and violence, and failure to sensitively acknowledge the spiritual, emotional, social and cultural value of objects for stakeholder audiences is an ongoing issue in museums and heritage organisations and the NT specifically. In one workshop it was suggested that the negative impact of colonisation to peoples and places around the world has a legacy in the collections held in the NT's museums, how they are documented, curated and researched today. By not addressing this legacy, collections including the 'Clive Collection' will remain complicit in the colonial and imperial legacies that impact present-day stakeholder audiences, including marginalisation within and exclusion from the public cultural offer in the UK. The discussion in the workshops made apparent the amount of work needed in NT's curatorial practice to be able to share these collections globally in an ethical and equitable way.

Conclusion

The NT case study set out to explore methods through which collections knowledge might be developed in concert with subject specialisms, multi-vocality and co-production. The 'Clive Museum' provided a fertile context for the research, given that the NT recognise that the scant provenance information and current interpretation urgently requires addressing and updating. By focussing on the detailed analysis of a single object from the museum –

the book of poetry by Hafez – attention was shifted from the coloniser and collector to the creator(s) and the cultures of origin. This was a first at the ‘Clive Museum.’

The process of undertaking the case study enabled a critical assessment of interpretation practices within the NT, centred on specific objects, histories and cultural contexts. This, together with the learnings from the workshops, has already initiated several actions within the NT relating to its policies and practices which are detailed in the Outcomes and Outputs section above.

Case study 3 – The Panchayat Collection, Tate Library and Archives

Aims and Objectives

The original concept for the Provisional Semantics project was inspired by former Tate Librarian, Maxine Miller's ambition to create a thesaurus of search terms to better represent and raise the visibility of Black artists' exhibition histories, including the Panchayat Collection. The Panchayat Arts Education Resource Unit (PAERU) was founded in 1988 by Shaheen Merali and Allan de Souza after initial meetings with Bhajan Hunjan, Symrath Patti and Shanti Thomas at various venues including the Slade School of Art. Panchayat was founded in London in 1988 as a response to the need for the representation of Southern world and first nation artists. The terms of its initial impetus expanded to accommodate a widened international perspective. The collection is characteristic of its time representing contemporary artists who produced issue-based work, with a particular focus on cultural identity. Panchayat Collection contains documents, ephemera, manuscripts, images, publications and research material illustrating an important link between modern art and activism²³.

The Panchayat Collection is of central importance to the practice and exhibition histories of artists with South Asian, Caribbean and African heritage, living and working in Britain during the period of the collection's development, and the history of art in the twentieth century in general. Although its structure is broadly in concert with traditional archives, some of its most important content is self-generated documents, flyers, pamphlets and slides, which are not easily accounted for within the established cataloguing practices of a library and would perhaps be more appropriately preserved within more inclusive and flexible models of community archives. Although some work and promotion of the Panchayat Collection had been done previously, cataloguing of the Panchayat Collection was incomplete at the start of the project. The project team identified that the "ephemeral" quality of some materials held were inadequately served by library cataloguing systems/structures and inadequately served by current library search terms, rendering the items invisible. For this reason, the collection held particular relevance to the project's objectives and overarching research questions.

The initial research question was framed as: How can working collaboratively with artists whose practices are reflected in and documented through ephemera held by Tate's library inform the methods and language used to document and search for those items?

The case study team recognised the importance of the collection to art and exhibition histories, its relevance to the overarching research questions of the project, and the unique

²³ For more details on the history of the Panchayat Collection please see Shaheen Merali interview in On Curating: <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-35-reader/panchayat-and-more.html#.YolmqujMKUk>

opportunity to engage with living founders, custodians and stakeholders of the collection. We therefore determined that the broader aims of the case study would be:

- To advocate for cataloguing of the Panchayat Collection to be completed as core work by Tate Library
- To profile its content and contexts with a view to increasing awareness and use of the collection by researchers and the wider public.

Within this, the specific objectives of the case study were:

- To develop knowledge of the Panchayat Collection, its history, contexts and contents in close collaboration with its founders and custodians, and with a selection of the artists whose practices are represented in the collection
- To surface the ethical challenges of developing collections knowledge in collaboration with the above stakeholders
- To identify a selection of terms and concepts that are key to comprehending and describing the collection and its contents, but which require specific, informed and nuanced attention within the object records.

It is relevant to note here that the history of the collection and its relationship to Tate had an impact on the case study. Between 1997 and 2015 the collection was held at Westminster University, and in 2015 it was transferred to Tate's Library as a special collection. Work to catalogue the collection had been limited by Library staff resource and funding. At the start of the research project the collection was listed on the website as uncatalogued, although cataloguing had begun with a small amount of support from Tate, and an excel report could be supplied upon request. This made access for staff, researchers and public audiences harder than it should be. The Library had held a series of events around the collection, including a Show and Tell event hosted by Shaheen Merali (co-founder and custodian of the Panchayat collection) and Dr Janice Cheddie (custodian of the collection), the Women of Colour Index Reading Group, and a visit from ARLIS members, but knowledge of the content of the collection was limited, and dissemination and access was piecemeal.

The involvement of Merali and Cheddie had not been successfully maintained over the years and was further complicated by the instigation of the research project. This meant working relationships were in need of repair and reparation to progress the project.



Panchayat Collection Issues boxes. Tate Library, Special Collections. Photo Matt Greenwood
c Tate.

Interim Adjustments

As noted above in Section 5, the budget for Provisional Semantics did not allow for a Tate-based PI and Co-I, and no one on the research team or Library staff had sufficient capacity or subject-specialist knowledge of the content of the Panchayat Collection. Furthermore, the absence of Black researchers was a significant issue in relation to this case study, given the people, cultures, and histories represented by the Panchayat Collection. Conversations were held individually with both Merali and Cheddie, about how they wanted to be involved, in the project and case study. On realising that the research team had not included Black researchers from the outset, and in protest of this highly regrettable oversight, one decided that they preferred not to be embedded in the project by taking on such a role but would nonetheless contribute to the production of its outputs (see below). The team committed to reducing the negative impacts caused by the project wherever possible, and, to ensure that any additional commissioned outputs were produced by Black researchers and researchers of colour.

Approach and Activities

Despite the issues and adjustments outlined above, the interrogation of the research question in relation to the objectives outlined above remained the same and activities developed in three distinct work strands.

1. In response to the objective of developing knowledge of the Panchayat Collection (its history, contexts and contents) in collaboration with its founders, custodians, and associated artists, Merali and Cheddie each devised a range of resources in the form of essays, interviews and recorded conversations. The resources serve to:

- Provide histories of the collection
 - Provide context for its formation and activities within wider international developments in art and archival practice
 - Highlight the practices of some of the artists represented in the collection
2. Taking direction from comments made by both Merali and Cheddie about contested terms related to and embedded in the Panchayat Collection, we commissioned two independent researchers, Marlene Smith and Dr Alice Correia, to:
- Individually explore the use and history of the term 'Black', with specific focus on the way it was mobilised during the time the Panchayat collective was active
 - Select items from the collection to evidence and illustrate their examinations
 - Suggest additional or alternative search terms and descriptions that would be useful to researchers when engaging with the collection
3. The importance of completing the cataloguing of the Panchayat Collection was taken up during the project, thanks to the engagement and commitment of the two Tate Library team members. It was funded accordingly as core Tate Library work, rather than from the project budget. This work:
- Included the digitisation to date of over 100 images selected by Cheddie and Merali, using existing workflows put in place for the Tate's Archive digitisation project
 - Involved making artists who are represented in the Panchayat Collection aware that the collection is finally accessible to the public and responding to any potential data protection concerns they may have
 - This three-stranded approach produced new material that offers audiences a variety of ways into the collection, whilst providing insights into how and whether Tate as an institution can work ethically and collaboratively with stakeholders to interpret the collections it holds.

Outcomes and Outputs

The three work strands outlined above produced the following outputs and outcomes.

Strand 1 - devised and produced by Dr Janice Cheddie, custodian of the Panchayat Collection

- Justice and The Archive: Reflections on the Panchayat Collection's Move to the Tate Library (essay)
- Janice Cheddie interviewed by Anjalie Dalal-Clayton – a written interview addressing Cheddie's research and her reflections of and involvement in the Panchayat Collection – title TBC
- *You can't eat prestige: Women, reinvention and the archival trace* – a recorded interview between Janice Cheddie, Simone Alexander and Symrath Patti. Video and transcript to be published online and to be included as part of the Panchayat Collection
- *Facilitating intergenerational dialogue and memory within archival practice* - a recorded interview between Janice Cheddie, Rita Keegan and Althea Greenan. Video and transcript to be published online and to be included as part of the Panchayat Collection.

Strand 1 - Panchayat-Horizon: devised and produced by Shaheen Merali, co-founder and custodian of the Panchayat collection

- *The Context* - a recorded discussion of the early history of Panchayat with Rita Keegan, and Shaheen Merali, moderated by Narendra Pachkhédé. Video and transcript to be published online and to be included as part of the Panchayat Collection
- *Crossing Black Waters* - a recorded conversation reflecting on the 1992 touring exhibition Crossing Black Waters, which showcased work by South Asian artists in Britain, with Shaheen Merali, co-curator and participating artist, in conversation with participating artists Bhajan Hunjan and Said Adrus. Video and transcript to be published online and to be included as part of the Panchayat Collection
- *3rd Havana Biennale* - recorded conversation about the five Black artists from the UK who took part in the 3rd Havana Biennale in 1989, Merali discusses the exhibition with Pitika Ntuli and Jasmine Chohan. Video and transcript to be published online and to be included as part of the Panchayat Collection
- An essay authored by Shaheen Merali related to the Panchayat Collection, forthcoming to be published online and included as part of the Panchayat Collection

Strand 2 - Commissioned essays

- Marlene Smith: *In the room next to mine: personal reflections on “political blackness”* - an essay to be published online and to be included as part of the Panchayat Collection
- Dr Alice Correia: *The Panchayat Collection and Black / British / South Asian / art* - an essay to be published online and to be included as part of the Panchayat Collection

The outputs from these two work strands will be published on the Tate website in 2022 as part of a Tate Research online resource which will function as a hub of contextual, discursive information for anyone wishing to engage with the Panchayat Collection.

Strand 3 - Cataloguing and digitisation

- Cataloguing of the Panchayat Collection was completed by the end of the project and was searchable on the Tate Library online catalogue from 4 March 2022, and on a JISC hub and Worldcat. There will be future work to enhance the records by core Tate Library staff following the publication of the outputs
- 100 items from the collection, separately selected by Merali and Cheddie, are in the process of being digitised as part of a pilot project
- The Tate Library will create a page for the Panchayat Collection on the ‘Art & Artists’ section of the Tate website and will continue with digitisation, including the Panchayat Collection’s *Crossing Black Waters* catalogue and slides from Manuel Mendive’s performance at the 3rd Havana Biennale in 1989 (pending copyright clearance). This work situates the Panchayat Collection visibly within Tate’s collection and ensures public and research access, beyond the lifetime of the Provisional Semantics project

Findings

The findings from the Tate case study on the Panchayat Collection relate to the ethical and practical issues of the research project structure and understanding the complexity of attempting to incorporate a genuinely collaborative, multi-perspectival and open approach to working with external stakeholders into institutional practice.

The Tate case study confirmed the degree of reparative sensitivity required by institutions working with artists and other stakeholders represented by and associated with collections in their care, especially in cases where collections and individuals have been historically marginalised. Stakeholders observed, over the course of the case study, that while their careers had been the focus of periodic curatorial and research interest in the past, these moments did not produce a lasting legacy and seemingly remained peripheral within the dominant art historical narratives put forward by the institution. Some stakeholders were therefore sceptical that their involvement in this project and with Tate would be worthwhile or beneficial to them.

The experience of this case study indicates that relationships between stakeholders and institutions are not well served by the project format. Trying to build trust within a time and scope restricted research project, and in an environment where institutional reparations for past erasures and exclusions were needed, was difficult. The expectations of the stakeholders were low, so the challenge within the case study was not about “managing expectations”. Rather, the focus needed to be on repairing past neglect and exclusion and improving the visibility of underrepresented and marginalised artists.

We observed how co-production, testimony, and formal archival practices carried out in an institutional context are extractive, even in research practices that are positioned as solutions to racial bias and exclusion (such as diverse representation in collections). Recording personal accounts, documenting artistic practices, determining contractual obligations, negotiating intellectual property rights, and agreeing on use, all required careful navigation and explanation. Such issues, which were structurally imbalanced in favour of Tate rather than the individuals, were not made transparent enough or discussed adequately at the start of the project.

Further, while research is recognised as a valuable and validating process for the institution’s academic status and contribution to the art historical record, the cost/benefit to those who positioned outside or adjacent to the institution, as both subject and object in the research process, is frequently misunderstood. Personal compromise, fear of exploitation, misrepresentation, and potential instrumentalisation, and, not wanting to be associated with Tate, came up as issues for some stakeholders. At the same time, for some there was a perceived rare opportunity to be present and visible within the Tate collection and thus validated in a traditional GLAM setting. For others, there was a clear expression of confidence and lack of concern with the project or Tate’s activities and outputs, as it was irrelevant to the stakeholder’s own understanding of their position, self-value or work. These positions were held simultaneously, generating an inherent complexity within the project, which required careful navigation for all involved.

The case study revealed the importance of recognising and honouring complexity and subjectivity in multi-perspectival representation. Accommodating memory, knowledge, and experience into existing traditional, research objectives, outputs and information structures proved challenging. The varied accounts given by internal and external stakeholders revealed how complexity, contestation and conflict of opinion exists within groups, between individuals and even within one person.²⁴ This raises questions regarding how a genuinely multi-perspectival approach to recording and cataloguing knowledge can be achieved within current GLAM practice. In the sector there is a widespread assumption that information management systems are objective. This effectively renders knowledge generated outside traditional curatorial practices as subjective and therefore less valuable or authoritative. As a result, subjective response and knowledge tends to be left out of the catalogue or official narrative.

The case study surfaced how genuine co-production requires institutions to fully embrace equitable working practices. The implications of knowledge co-production need to be better grasped. In this case study, the limitations of time-management, budget, access to collections and other resources, and changes in project scope did not align with the flexible and ambitious approach that was needed, particularly from the individual perspectives of Cheddie and Merali.

The case study is an example of how institutions can overlook and neglect collections that relate specifically to minoritised and racialised artists and are not seen as concerned with wider, canonised developments in art and history. The Tate case study, alongside the IWM and NT research evidenced how vital the documentation and dissemination of information about a collection is and the importance of undertaking this work prior to, or failing that, in parallel with any ‘additional’ research. In common with the other Provisional Semantics case studies the material in the Panchayat Collection was not fully catalogued or publicly accessible at the start of the project. Further, and despite internal recognition of the collection’s importance and the best of intentions and efforts of staff and researchers, there was only limited awareness of the Panchayat Collection in the wider organisation.

The work undertaken within the project and by Tate Library is a starting point. The cataloguing and digitisation are crucial but are currently at a basic level and the research within the project is still to be integrated into the records. Without an accurate catalogue (or at a minimum, a published inventory) to understand what a special collection or archive holds, a collection effectively disappears, and access and retrieval of information is reliant on staff memory. The development of collections knowledge and prioritising cataloguing for collections like the Panchayat are essential in improving representation and visibility.

²⁴ Dalal-Clayton, A. and Rutherford, A. (2022). Against a New Orthodoxy: Decolonised “Objectivity” in the Cataloguing and Description of Artworks – Features – Paul Mellon Centre. [online] Photoarchive.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk. Available at: <https://photoarchive.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/groups/against-a-new-orthodoxy>.

Conclusion

The Tate case study provided essential insights relating to the overall project objective, namely, to interrogate what institutional values, processes, resources and ethical approaches are needed to accommodate multiple and shifting interpretations required to genuinely represent UK heritage. Specifically, the case study revealed the sensitivity and degree of institutional change required to develop and maintain ethical relationships with living stakeholders and the degree to which organisational bureaucracy and traditional cataloguing practice/systems do not currently serve genuine knowledge co-production effectively.

The case study revealed an inherent dilemma; how to proceed with the research on the Panchayat Collection, while attempting to ensure a long-term legacy for the material it contains and the history of the art and artists it represents. The Library Team addressed this by allocating time and funds beyond the project, and prioritised the Panchayat Collection, working closely with Merali and Cheddie to make selections for digitisation and cataloguing (see strand 3 above). This work has anchored the research activities of the project within the core Library catalogue. Going forward, the Library and Archive department have secured budget for future consultancy work by Merali and Cheddie regarding the cataloguing and representation of the collection.

The focus on the Panchayat Collection further highlighted the value of informal archives. However, doing justice to such material accessioned from racialised and minoritised communities into museum settings brought to light the need for such institutions to recognise the archival and historical importance of such informal, self-published material and ephemera to researchers. The case study demonstrated the time, resources and expertise needed to catalogue fully and respectfully, which institutions are not always able or inclined to provide. Funding from the research project and from core budget enabled the library to recruit backfill for cataloguing the Panchayat Collection, which has resulted in the collection being fully accessible to researchers. Building on this, the Tate Library is also piloting the digitisation of a selection of items from the Panchayat Collection to increase its visibility and accessibility to an expanding online audience of researchers and the general public and has an ongoing commitment to promoting the collection to both internal and external researchers.

Project work outside the Case Studies

Positioning work with the Project Team

In April 2020 the Academic Co-I and the RA established and led a process through which the project team interrogated their personal and professional positions and identities in relation to race and racism. The work comprised a collaborative process of reading and critical self-reflection with a view to establishing a shared, baseline position of the ethics of/for the project. Stage One focused on reading and discussing relevant texts to aid critical self-reflection. Stage Two involved team members writing self-reflexive statements addressing their personal and professional positions. This exercise was designed for the team to explore and surface an understanding that we were not all approaching the research and material from the same position and experience. From this, and through discussion, we attempted to develop a shared anti-racist position within and for the project.

Literature and Practice Review

The original project proposal presented the contention that whilst ‘many in the heritage sector recognise the need to interrogate and redress problematic language and representations and there is a drive to ‘decolonise’ the sector lacked research and guidance around ‘what is required in terms of ethical methodologies and practical and attitudinal shifts’ and that this ‘prevents sustainable change from taking place’ – that is, how this work could and should be done and how to keep doing it.

The purpose of the review is to address these issues by looking at the guidance and research, available to support galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM), and the wider UK heritage sector, in order to engage critically in professional practices that involve recording, writing, and generating knowledge about art and artefacts. The specific focus is on addressing structural racism and the still prevalent hegemony of traditional, western, colonial forms of knowledge organisation, production, and dissemination.

The review is organised into three sections: an overview of academic literature on issues relating to ‘decolonisation’ in cataloguing practice, object description and interpretation; a survey of GLAM and heritage project work and sector specific professional practice guidance. It attempts to cover a 14-year period, from 2005 to 2019, beginning with the Revisiting Collections initiative²⁵ and ending with the start of the Provisional Semantics project. However, the events of 2020-21 intensified the UK GLAM response to the relationship between racism, colonial histories in cultural heritage collections to such an extent that it has been necessary to account for the change and activity in this period in a separate section. The review will be published in the Autumn 2022.

²⁵ Reed, C., Grant, A., Bott, V. and Newman, J. (2005). *Revisiting Collections: Revealing Significance. An ALM London Project*. MLA London and Collections Trust.

Presentations and Events

The team presented the case studies and research findings as they developed, throughout the course of the project as listed in the case study outputs above. Presentations on the project more broadly were also made.

- *Ananda Rutherford, Provisional semantics, projects and positionality* for the ARLIS Cataloguing and Classification Ethics series, June 2022.
- *Roundtable: Who owns what? Barriers to access, consent, and co-production in UK cultural heritage*, hosted by TaNC, 17 November 2021.

In collaboration with key practitioners and researchers Ananda Rutherford organised an online roundtable discussion, to bring together museum, library and archive professionals, academics, legal professionals, and others with experience of participatory practice, consent and intellectual property rights in cultural heritage. The session comprised a conversation with JC Niala on her collaborative practice, a presentation from Dr Matilde Pavis and Dr Andrea Wallace on open access, museum misunderstandings and misuse of legal provisions, and invited responses and reflections to the issues discussed from researchers and curators Kelly Foster, Dr Tehmina Goskar, Abira Hussein and Shelley Angelie Sagar²⁶. This discussion was organised in part because the research team were encountering barriers to making change in collections practice and co-production across the case studies. The aim of the workshop was to identify and address misunderstandings and myths, to review examples of good practice, highlight pitfalls and possibilities and discuss the potential of developing contractual frameworks that are fit for purpose.

One issue that resonated with colleagues attending the seminar from across the sector, and within the project case studies, was the problematic intersection between knowledge co-production and intellectual property rights: there were concerns voiced about museum practices in relation to intangible heritage, IPR, extractive knowledge exchange and the barriers these create or perpetuate for genuine equitable and ethical access to material held by museums and other cultural heritage institutions. Participants in the roundtable articulated how they had observed and experienced institutionalised power inequalities, protected by complex bureaucratic and legalistic practices that tend to favour heritage organisations²⁷.

²⁶ A recording of the session is available via the TaNC Youtube channel here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6dWvQf9dnA> and here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-GpENxupCU>

²⁷ For further evidence in relation to this point, please see: Wallace, A. (2022). A Culture of Copyright: A scoping study on open access to digital cultural heritage collections in the UK. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6242611>

Overall Project Findings and Recommendations

The project case studies, the practice-based/action research undertaken by the research team and the practice and literature review surfaced findings in relation to the project's objectives and to the project's research questions. These findings are summarised below and should be read in conjunction with the findings detailed above from the individual case studies.

Research Question 1:

What methodological, ethical and practical changes do heritage organisations need to make to accommodate the multiple and provisional interpretations necessary for a sustainable digitised national collection to genuinely represent UK Heritage?

Over the course of the project, the research team observed, and experienced, barriers that prevent embedded change when attempting to carry out work addressing the historically underrepresented perspectives of British people with African, Caribbean and Asian heritage in large scale, national GLAM and heritage organisations. The project's aims were at times impeded by these barriers, which can be seen as manifestations of structural racism, be it through restrictive bureaucracy, professional practice, personal prejudices or an uncritical adherence to traditional and/or imperial and colonial thinking, values and narratives.

It became evident that attempts to make change in cataloguing practice, interpretation and object description are informed by and themselves inform the wider contexts of institutional infrastructure, academic disciplines, professional behaviours and broader socio-political attitudes. The research revealed how vital it is that researchers and museum workers recognise and critique how these external factors shape and limit how we write and think about art and artefacts.

We found that change in large, high-profile organisations can be obstructed by inertia and the persistent challenge of raising awareness among people without lived experience of how personal, institutional, and structural racism are manifested and the impact they have.

Personal

Whilst the case studies revealed that there is appetite for change amongst cultural sector staff and volunteers, the research also indicated poor understanding and acceptance amongst some of what racism is and how it affects Black people and people of colour. When working with groups of majority white participants in some project workshops it was evident that some individuals experienced feelings of judgement associated with the possibility of exhibiting racist behaviours. This triggered defensiveness, disengagement from conversation and at times a resistance to an acknowledgement of racism in contemporary society and anything other than an uncritical version of British history. The workshops revealed a variety of opinions in relation to how and whether their organisations should adopt an anti-racist or 'decolonial' approach to the interpretation of objects, with some staff and volunteers fully supportive through to active resistance on the part of others.

Institutional

The case studies indicated that established systems, hierarchies and methods of cataloguing practice and object interpretation can reinforce and uphold, rather than disrupt problematic interpretations. A seeming lack of institutional commitment to change and an aversion to perceived risk can hamper individuals and groups attempting to initiate ethical change. At times, a commitment to and/or difficulty in challenging organisational orthodoxy and the authority of the institutional voice appeared to prevent staff from progressing more ethical, equitable and critical modes of practice than are currently in use.

Structural

Across the case studies it was evident that external scrutiny and resistance can impede change. Organisational transformation can be slowed, halted, or even reversed, by governance structures and external pressures such as government policy, media focus and social media disputes. The extraordinary focus on racial justice in 2020 may have caused an unusual acceleration in public understanding and use of anti-racist language, but lack of awareness, understanding and prejudice still create resistance to reinterpretation of history and objects. Our findings and experience indicate that **change in cataloguing and interpretation practice cannot be embedded or sustainable until these wider issues of structural racism and colonial era values in GLAM and heritage organisations are addressed**. The persistent tokenism of project work may appear to prompt change, but by its resource and time-limited nature this type of work consistently risks being marginal and superficial.

Research Question 2

What methods and approaches that engage intellectually and practically with the ‘decolonial’ agenda can heritage organisations employ to produce search terms/catalogue entries and interpretations fit for purpose for an evolving digitised national collection?

Provisional Semantics identified institutional and external barriers to change in interpretation and cataloguing. At the same time, it also tested and provided insights into a range of approaches that cultural and heritage organisations can employ to embed ethical and equitable practices when undertaking research projects, and, when doing the work of cataloguing and interpreting objects itself. The research team do not claim that they adopted a ‘decolonial’ approach throughout Provisional Semantics. Rather, our position quickly evolved from wanting to consider ‘decolonial approaches’ to seeking to prioritise equitable and ethical practice.

Provisional Semantics addressed the cultures and lives of Black people and people of colour, and the project might not have encountered some of the challenges it faced if more people of colour had been involved in the research design and implementation. A key finding from the project overall is, therefore, that **research projects are impacted by the makeup of the research team, notably in terms of whether that team has appropriate subject specialist expertise and lived experience**.

Recommendations

- All research projects should be devised and delivered by a team that has appropriate subject specialist expertise and lived experience, so that the research design, questions, aims, objectives, methods and desired outputs are appropriately and effectively shaped by the right people
- A fully representative research team is more likely to recognise sensitivities regarding the material and issues that the project is addressing and able to mitigate these

The experience of the Provisional Semantics research team confirmed that constant critical engagement with and reflection on researcher positionality is essential in trying to avoid a reversion to (although it does not guarantee against) problematic behaviours such as an unthinking adherence to institutional processes that uphold problematic thinking, values and narratives.

Recommendations

- Build into the project planning sufficient time and discussion to guarantee that prospective team members agree a set of shared values and have a common understanding of the issues that the project addresses and how stakeholders may be impacted
- In projects that address the marginalisation and misrepresentation of Black people and people of colour, research teams should commit to active anti-racism, undertaking necessary reading, reflection and positionality work prior to the project commencing with a recognition that positionality work does not mitigate against all personal and systemic racist behaviours
- Mechanisms need to be in place to identify when reversions to problematic behaviours are happening and to halt them. Such mechanisms, based on the principle of democratic scrutiny could include building in collective criticality and reflective questioning (for example, who is this for, does it cause offence, and does it involve equitable exchange?) and obtaining consensus from a fully representative research team on decisions to be taken throughout a project
- Be alert to the value of continual consultation and sense-checking within the project team and with external stakeholders to avoid reverting to or being overwhelmed by institutional orthodoxies, attitudes and processes
- From the instigation of a project the research team should adopt an approach based on humility, openness and willingness to learn and change.

An issue that united all three case studies was the drive in each partner institution to go beyond their own staff knowledge base and engage with researchers, artists and practitioners outside of their institutions with subject specialism on the cultures, histories and objects under investigation. In each case, the research team brought in external expertise, especially from researchers and stakeholders of colour, who are currently underrepresented in GLAM sector staff.²⁸ **The contribution made by these external researchers was vital to realising the ambitions of the project and further highlighted the absence of diverse experience and expertise in the core research team and the partner organisations.** In some cases, relationships of trust with these researchers and stakeholders

²⁸ See, for example, Wajid, S., & Minott, R. (2019). 'Detoxing and Decolonising Museums', in Robert R., Janes, R. & Sandell, R. (eds). Museum Activism. Routledge. pp. 25–35
[https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351251044-3>](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351251044-3)

were hard to build due to the time limitations of project-based work and because of the historic marginalisation of people of colour from these institutions.

Recommendations

- *Cultural and heritage organisations should ensure that those leading/working on projects, especially ones addressing the cataloguing and interpretation of collections of historically underrepresented groups and individuals are representative of the peoples, cultures and histories being addressed by the research. Appropriate representation should be established from the conception of research projects and should be a required metric for funding approvals*
- *Adopt the policy of ‘nothing about us, without us’²⁹ and ensure that genuine consultation and engagement takes place with all key stakeholders within and beyond institutional and personal networks.*
- *Ensure that relationships with key stakeholders continue to be valued and nurtured by the institution and the individuals working within it.*
- *Build in a consultancy budget for artists, donors and other key stakeholders to cover their ongoing costs after the project has completed.*

Because of the issues outlined above, building relationships of trust and fair exchange became a particular concern in the project. Financial remuneration for time and expertise was a minimum, but contractual obligations (and particularly IPR), and recognition for the work undertaken were equally if not more important. **The project surfaced how the transactional balance is often unfairly weighted in favour of the institution and its control of output.** This is especially important to address in contexts where museums and heritage institutions are seeking to engage with and represent the lived experiences of Black people and people of colour.

Recommendations

- *Ensure that artists and other key contributors are recognised as co-producers, that their work is credited and that contracts are not extractive*
- *Projects must be fully resourced, including sufficient funding to cover the contributions from internal and external stakeholders from the planning stage onwards*
- *Researchers must ensure that the constraints of project budgets and timescales support ethical and equitable partnerships with collaborators and do not act to the detriment of external researchers and stakeholders.*

Provisional Semantics set out to interrogate what practical and intellectual approaches heritage organisations can employ to engage with the ‘decolonial’ agenda and produce search terms, catalogue entries and interpretation fit for purpose for a digitised national collection. **However, perhaps the most urgent finding from the project is that any such**

²⁹ While the idea has a long history, this phrase first came into popular usage with the publication of James Charlton's book on disability rights (Charlton, J. (2000). *Nothing About Us Without Us Disability Oppression and Empowerment*. University of California Press). Charlton has acknowledged hearing the phrase from disability activists Michael Masutha and William Rowland.

approaches will only be sustainable if institutions commit resources, time and energy to cataloguing informed by appropriate subject specialist knowledge and experience.

Recommendation

- *As project work is not a sustainable way of bringing about change, embed ongoing and continuous critical reflection, as well as ethical collaboration with stakeholder communities and individuals and move towards a relinquishing of power by institutions and the individuals representing them, and the active contestation of institutional orthodoxies.*

Approaching Cataloguing Practice Critically and Ethically

The following framework was developed by Ananda Rutherford, Provisional Semantics Research Associate during the project to encapsulate the myriad issues that need to be addressed to achieve change in cataloguing practices and how that might be done critically and ethically.

The framework identifies five key areas and suggests issues to consider before embarking on cataloguing, object description or interpretation.

- The first area is **language**: the words we use and how we write. Consideration of the language should address more than offensive words. It also includes tone, intent, authority and accessibility. Additionally, decisions need to be made around how racist and pejorative terms are dealt with when describing or interpreting source material without denying the historical or even contemporary use. Simply changing words or erasing the problematic ones is not the solution³⁰. Content warnings are potentially more useful than erasure. Language also needs to be considered in terms of accessibility and retrievability. Recording the original, traditional or colloquial name of an artefact in the language of origin can help avoid or expose mistranslation or misinterpretation and works to counter the false equivalency that recentres western or colonial understandings of another culture.
- The second area is **the consideration of subject and content**; what, and who we choose to write about, what topics are privileged in terms of publication, expertise and resources and used as representative of the collection. Attempting to surface collections, art and artefacts from racialised and minoritised groups through research and cataloguing should be prioritised within core collections management work.

³⁰ See the following: Dalal-Clayton, A. and Rutherford, A., (2022). Against a New Orthodoxy: Decolonised “Objectivity” in the Cataloguing and Description of Artworks – Features – Paul Mellon Centre. [online] Photoarchive.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk. Available at: <<https://photoarchive.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/groups/against-a-new-orthodoxy>>; Modest, W. & Lelijveld, R (eds.) (2018). Words Matter: An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector. <https://www.materialculture.nl/sites/default/files/2018-08/words_matter.pdf.pdf>; Chilcott, A. (2019). ‘Towards Protocols for Describing Racially Offensive Language in UK Public Archives’, Archival Science, Vol. 19, pp. 359–76 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09314-y>>

- The third area is **knowledge creation and production**³¹; who is involved in description and interpretation work, who is listened to and whose knowledge is valued and recorded. Reflection on ethical and equitable future access, use and ownership of knowledge around collections, art and artefacts should involve scrutiny of the uneven power dynamics between GLAM holding institutions and individuals and communities.
- The fourth area is **critically examining cataloguing practice and systems**³². These are not objective or neutral, and we need to interrogate the tools that we use (be they databases or card indexes). How we organise and structure data, what people, objects, groups and ideas we chose to privilege in analogue and digital systems, data structures and online publications directly affects the cultural and historical record.
- Lastly it is important that those generating new interpretation, cataloguing and descriptive texts understand the **context and history** of the information they use. Before and during cataloguing and/or interpretation, we should consider institutional histories and infrastructure, social and political agendas, hierarchies of value, worth and deficit thinking, and personal position and recognise that these shape the material we produce.

³¹ See the following: Minott, R. (2019) 'The Past is Now', *Third Text*, 33:4-5, 559-574, DOI:10.1080/09528822.2019.1654206; Azoulay, A. (2020). Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism. *Verso*. pp. 1–67.

³² See the following: Turner, H. (2020). *Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation*. UBC Press.

<https://www.ubcpress.ca/asset/46790/1/9780774863940_excerpt.pdf>; Bowker, G., & Leigh Starr, S. (1999). *Sorting Things out: Classification and Its Consequences*. MIT Press. <<http://www.ics.uci.edu/~gbowker/classification/>>

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Charlotte Holmes, Curator and Co-chair of the staff and volunteer Race Equity Network, National Trust

Bhajan Hunjan, Artist

Abira Hussein, doctoral researcher at University College London and Associate Producer at All Change Arts Limited

Dr Sally-Anne Huxtable, Head Curator, National Trust

Dr Aashique Ahmed Iqbal, Assistant Professor in History at Krea University Iqbal, Assistant Professor in History at Krea University

Dr Zehra Jumabhoy, Art Historian, Curator & Writer

Harr-Johit Kaur, Research Programme Manager, Tate

Rita Keegan, Artist

Dr Christo Kefalas, Senior National Curator for Global and Inclusive Histories, National Trust

Shaheen Merali, Doctoral researcher, Curatorial Consultant and Co-founder and Custodian of the Panchayat Collection

Maxine Miller, Former Librarian, Tate Library and Archives

JC Niala, Researcher, curator, and honorary research fellow at the University of Exeter

Pitika Ntuli, Artist

John Orna-Ornstein, Director of Curation and Experience, National Trust

Narendra Pachkhede, Commonwealth Fellow, Anthropologist and Annotator at the Center for Inquiry into the Social

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Artist and Professor of Art, University of Rhode Island

Symrath Patti, Artist

Dr Mathilde Pavis, Senior Lecturer in Law, University of Exeter

Shelley Angelie Saggar, Doctoral Researcher, Centre for Indigenous and Settler-Colonial Studies, University of Kent

Dr Ursula Sims-Williams, Lead Curator Persian Collections, British Library

Marlene Smith, Artist and Researcher

Hassan Vawda, Collaborative Doctoral Researcher, Tate Gallery & Goldsmiths University of London

Dr Andrea Wallace, Senior Lecturer in Law, University of Exeter

Dr Anita Weatherby, Head of Research, National Trust

Suzanne Bardgett, Head of Research and Academic Partnerships, Imperial War Museums

Members of the War and Conflict Subject Specialist Network

Members of the IWM Access and Inclusion Champions Network

Staff and volunteers at Powis Castle, National Trust