MEG Conference 2023

Un-Disciplining the Museum? Changing Practices of Care, Knowledge and Display

Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology (MAA) and Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge

Abstracts

Nuha Abdo and Jumana Hokan (MultakaOxford)

MultakaOxford: People first, everything follows

MultakaOxford is a person-led project at the Pitt Rivers Museum and History of Science Museum, part of Oxford University Gardens, Libraries and Museums. The project focuses on the social role of museums and collections as well as opening up and democratising collections interpretation, and more inclusive approaches to public and community engagement.

Multaka means 'meeting point' in Arabic. The project has been running in the 2 museums since 2018 and works in partnership with organisations over Oxfordshire that support people who are settling in the region as refugees and asylum seekers.

Over 4 years, more than 100 people have collaborated and volunteered on the project to create an inclusive programme of public facing activities (including events, exhibitions, workshops, conferences) and has also demonstrated inclusive and democratic approaches to object interpretation / database enhancement and addressing the harmful language on labels and images / objects on display.

However, the beating heart of MultakaOxford are the people involved. Whilst being the most visible aspect of the project, the outputs, interpretation and public events are actually only the public/sector facing aspect. Instead, this project has a solid community role. It cares about the people involved and uses the collections to develop platforms for intercultural learning and understanding and strengthens people's sense of belonging, pride, personal growth and individuality. The project invests time and resource in supporting people through a clear structure; its governance structure involves the volunteers, community partners, the museum directors and local councils, it has clear volunteer pathways and training, and it is rigorous in equity and mutual benefit. Its approach listens and works with people as individuals, understanding and adapting its role as people settle and/or want to participate in a project which connects us through our commonalities through culture, people, histories.

This paper explores how a project, based in a museum and with museum collections, leads with this person-led approach. As well as giving tangible examples of activities and outputs, it will also take the conference participants through its structure and approach: how Multaka listens, collaborates and meets the needs and aspirations of individual people as well as supporting organisational change and the democratisation of interpretation and engagement. It will end with questions for the conference to reflect on in opening up discussions on ethnographic practice in the contemporary museum.

Glenn Adams, Eona Bell, Kirsty Kernohan and Gemma Ovens (MAA, University of Cambridge)

Anthropologists and photographers: priorities and practicalities for the Poignant and Elliott collections at MAA

[Short Report]

This paper is an update on two ongoing projects with the photographic collections at MAA. Each project aims to document, digitise, and facilitate knowledge sharing around a collection of mid-twentieth-century photographs: Roslyn and Axel Poignant's recent bequest of c. 18,000 photographs mostly from the Pacific and Sicily and Alan J. A. Elliott's collection of c. 1800 photographs from Singapore.

These projects have very similar core goals and their outputs of updated catalogue records, high resolution digitised images, and online content seem clearly defined and coherent. However, as a team of four Collections Assistants we have diverse disciplinary backgrounds in anthropology, museum studies, and photography. So, too, did Axel Poignant as a photographer, Roslyn Poignant as a photographic anthropologist, and Elliott, whose photographs served largely as visual notes for his ethnographic work.

The disciplinary emphases of donors and museum staff have shaped these projects in complementary and conflicting ways. Our work to record and challenge Elliott and the Poignants' descriptions reflects disciplinary changes in anthropology. Other elements of the projects are driven by a desire to build on their rich knowledge through collaborative online research. For some members of the team, attention to the physical and digital lives of the photographs have shaped project priorities as they have emphasised the technical and visual histories of these images and the need for quality digitisation which reflects them.

This update offers a discussion of how the intersecting disciplinary interests of seven people across seventy years have driven the practical implementation of these projects, and laid the groundwork for their uneasily smooth digital outputs.

Nicole Anderson (University of Edinburgh)

Care, Hesitancy and Uncertain Knowledge: Seeking Restorative Justice for Ancestors in Edinburgh University's Anatomical Museum

This paper reflects on the ongoing process of affiliating First Nations, Métis and Inuit Ancestors in Edinburgh University's Anatomical Museum with contemporary descendent communities. The paper theorises the relationship between care and hesitancy in working with uncertain and inconsistent knowledge in this process. By reflecting on this work, I argue that ambivalence and uncertainty can act as productive forces in establishing anti-colonial change. Drawing on provenance research and institutional ethnographic reflections, I show how partial and fragmented archival data challenged a team of ethnographers, archivists, and museum professionals to establish new processes for sharing difficult or conflicting data in a sensitive and careful way. Working through this "methodology of discomfort" reminds institutional actors to work with and through feelings of ambivalence, or risk withholding knowledge that may be valuable to descendent communities. Forgoing the comfort of old, reactive processes shows that it is possible to transform practice in spite of institutional anxieties and fears. 'Un-disciplining' the museum may therefore mean examining the pedagogical distinction between 'learning about' difficult colonial collections, and 'learning from' them. This distinction may enable institutions to see how new knowledge generated through discomfort can change contemporary care practices. Outreach practices rooted in care also allows communities and museum professionals to work together to fill in gaps of institutional knowledge. Responsible stewardship of colonial collections thus calls for institutions to "get their house in order" and model new outreach process that actively seek restorative justice for Ancestors in their care.

Megan Backhouse (National Museums Liverpool)

Who Do You Say You Are? Updating Cultural Group terminology

Between October 2020 and June 2021 I was tasked with updating the Cultural Group Name field of the Pitt Rivers Museum's object catalogue database. Work that was needed to ensure that A) the information held within the field reflected its title, and B) the terminology was contemporary, culturally appropriate, not racist, and accessible. This work, which was funded by the University, was considered part of the general data cleaning needed prior to migration to the Pitt Rivers' new, commercially developed, relational database. But what appeared to be a straight-forward 'search and replace' exercise, was in fact an opportunity to reconsider how the data in the system was organised, who it represented, how was informed and recorded, and ultimately, who it was all for. Is the museum database still a tool for organising things and people by and for museum staff? Is it a tool used by communities searching for material heritage and associated knowledge and histories? How can we, museum professionals in the Global North, make this tool and the information held within as useful and accessible as possible to as many people as possible.

In my talk I will discuss how I approached rationalising, researching, and organising 11,000+ terms representing 9,000 cultural groups so that it reflected and privileged contemporary, culturally appropriate terminology, as well as the various people, networks, and sources I tapped into to shape it. The challenges I encountered throughout, and the shortcomings of these organisational systems, will also be touched upon. And I will briefly consider new ways of re-shaping digital collections access. Solutions such as Indigenised collections databases, and alternative graphical user interfaces for online collections in the Global North.

Eleanor Beestin-Sherriff (MAA, University of Cambridge)

What's the difference between a drum and a kazoo?

Musical instruments are a common type of museum collection which present a unique set of challenges, including in classification and documentation. The Stores Move project at MAA has served as an internal driver of change in improving the ways in which these objects are catalogued; this has also been motivated by the external pressure for greater accuracy and accessibility in museum practice. This talk aims to consider how steps such as replacing complex and technical terminology, improving the use of key words, and solving problems related to documentation and provenance have improved the records, and therefore the visibility, of musical instruments. I will discuss how a recent visit from Ugandan colleagues provided an optimistic glimpse into the impact of this work. Looking to the future, we hope that these changes will continue to generate a positive feedback cycle for the care and research of musical instruments in museum collections.

Faye Belsey (Pitt Rivers Museum) & Anya Gleizer (School of Geography & the Environment, Oxford)

Lighting Togo Inen in the Ethnographic Museum: Evenki Reconciliation Ritual at the Pitt Rivers Museum

Togo-Inen (**Того Инэн***) is the name of the sacred household fire of the Evenki, Indigenous reindeer-herding people of central Asia. Togo Inen is re-established with each migration at the heart of a dykcha (home), and at the start of every ceremony. In this paper we follow the co-creation of an Evenki reconciliation ritual held at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford in 2022. The healing ritual, staged by Evenki artist Galina Veretnova and performance artist Anya Gleizer, constituted a trailblazing intervention into museum working culture by involving museum staff as subjects to be healed, requiring them to learn Evenki choreography and adhere to Evenki cosmologies of relationality. It was also a stepping off point for the Evenki community as it was the first time Evenki invited outsiders into a healing ritual of this kind, performed in the non-traditional context of the ethnographic museum, and healing, not an illness in the traditional sense, but the cultural affliction of the colonial legacy of the Siberian collections that the museum stewards. The process that led up to the ritual also unintentionally exposed lingering tensions and contradictions in the museum's decolonial agenda. Examining the project

from the point of view of an Indigenous knowledge-holder, performance artist and the museum, we show what reconciliation between an ethnographic museum and Indigenous stakeholders may look like. We argue that the lighting of Togo Inen on foreign shores constitutes not only the preservation, but the re-enaction of Evenki culture, a process which needs the contact-zone to continuously re-create 'culture' at sites of intra-action.

Lucie Carreau (MAA, University of Cambridge)

Digital love – performing care on the ground, capturing it through digital environments

Within museums, 'care' manifests itself everywhere: from packing objects to curating exhibitions, invigilating galleries, hosting community visits or documentation. While collections care is one of the core missions of museums, documenting changes in the manifestation of care was rarely accommodated or prioritised in the past, and still remains difficult for museums to capture today. Professionals today try to piece together previous methodologies by analysing changing practices in historic documentation, labelling campaigns and variably-reliable information inscribed in official documents and archival materials. They sometimes struggle leaving tangible marks of the approach they take to solving documentation or storage issues. With increased pressure on museums to be transparent and accountable, understanding and contextualising historic care has become an additional task museums need to tackle. Using the experiences gained so far from MAA's Stores Move project, this paper looks at how investigation into historic care can be built in to day-to-day collection work, and how digital environments (such as databases) can be adapted and transformed to become interactive spaces, accommodating interpretation, peeled layers of historical documentation, and a variety of internal and external voices.

Njabulo Chipangaura (Manchester Museum)

Decolonising the museum as a shared praxis – Zulu Traditional Beadwork Provenance Research

This paper will foreground how to decolonise the museum practice from an empirical perspective by advocating for a fundamental shift away from epistemological metaphors of decolonisation. The praxis and what it means to decolonise will be drawn from my positionality being the Curator of Living Cultures at Manchester Museum (MM) where I am responsible for more than 25,000 ethnographic collections mostly dispossessed from local communities and ordered and categorised according to geographical regions of Africa, Americas, Oceania and Asia. In thinking about cosmopolitan approaches to provenance research on this collection – I will speak about shared heritage knowledge production on traditional Zulu beads that we have at the museum. These beads were reinterpreted through open collaborative engagements with community members in Nongoma, KwaZulu from where they were appropriated from as result of colonial violence. I undertook this shared authority empirical engagement with this community between June and July 2022. I argue that in an African context objects have potency and are treated by local communities as living beings which they can touch, smell and taste. The objects constitute a part of an interconnected whole and although they have been reduced and treated as mundane within ethnographic ordering and classifications - they have agency, individual biographies and carry with them important meanings connected to their ritual and ceremonial functions located in communities of origin. My point of departure in this lecture is that is that whilst other researches have been grappling with decolonising the museum, which has become synonymous with the restitution of objects - my own approach is different, as I posit that restitution is only a small area where the museum needs to be severed from its colonial ties. Museums must rethink the colonial knowledges that led them to collect particular objects and to order them in particular ways. Therefore adequate provenance research has to be undertaken first as a praxis that aids knowledge production prior to any forms of return.

Imogen Coulson (MARKK/Digital Benin) & Alisa Santikarn (University of Cambridge)

Gods in Glass Cases: Confidence and uncertainty in the collection and display of 'More-than-Objects'

This paper focuses on the various issues that arise when collecting and displaying sacred and spiritual 'more-than-objects', a term we use to describe material items that occupy both the living and spiritual worlds. Our thoughts developed from conversations between the two authors, after each encountering more-than-objects through our research. We each approach the concept from different perspectives: on one hand as an anthropologist working with a 'source community' in the present, to collect an object on behalf of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, and, on the other hand as a young museum professional with experience working with colonial context collections.

We will discuss potential issues and considerations relating to the collection, care and display of 'more-than-objects', with a focus on 'ethical' concerns that arise through collecting processes, in-person curation within a museum setting, as well as online or digital display e.g., through an online collections database. Through the case study of the collection and display of the Pakam ropes of the Indigenous Kui community, we will show how this 'more-than-object' is not just a rope but is also imbued with Kui ancestral spirits and is seen as symbolic of the Pakam god himself. The collection of this rope raises several ethical considerations, including issues related to often-contradictory discourse within the community itself regarding the proper treatment of the rope and how this impacts the collections process.

In doing so, our talk addresses the question of confidence and comfort in knowledge – who, we as curators and collectors – have a duty to 'make comfortable', how the uncertainty of knowledge can increase over time, and how to 'sit' in the discomfort of that uncertainty and unlearn our desires to seek neat answers. Ultimately, we posit how digital curation might be

used as a solution (but can also throw up further ethical concerns) in the case of the Pakam rope.

Ashley Coutu & Thandiwe Wilson (Pitt Rivers Museum)
Taking Care at the Pitt Rivers Museum
[Short Report]

The Taking Care project is a large-scale European project co-financed by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union, exploring connections between world culture museums, the climate crisis and issues related to the afterlives of colonialism. The project is framed around the notion of care, considering the untapped potential of ethnographic museum collections to think critically about planetary pasts and more sustainable, plural futures. At the Pitt Rivers Museum, we have been thinking about cultural resilience and unequal access to resources, which includes precarious conditions facing heritage, sacred places, ancestral lands, languages and species threatened with extinction.

Katrina Dring (MAA, University of Cambridge)
From abridged to annotated – making space for multiple voices

The aim of museums is to preserve and share material knowledge through physical collections and the information associated with or demonstrated through them. In seeking to standardise how this information is stored and presented on a database, a hierarchy of formalised knowledge has been reinforced, one which has historically privileged colonial or Western academic viewpoints. Although the knowledge of maker communities is now recognised as equally valuable, if not more so, and steps are being taken to reflect this in museum databases, there are still other forms of knowledge which could prove valuable and which are currently overlooked. This includes insights which historically might have been added to the margin of the Accession Register, written as a note on a catalogue card, scribbled into a note-book, or even slipped into a box with an object. The thoughts of the craftsperson, the insight of the collections assistant, the connected ideas of a researcher looking into another topic, and so on. How can we make space for these additional forms of information, recognising that they might well provide a welcome entry point into the collections, or plant the seed of a connective idea in the mind of the reader?

Leah Emary, with Richard Nevell, Lucy Hinnie (Wikimedia UK), Lucy Moore (University of York) and Martin Poulter (Khalili Collections)
Global and Local Perspectives on Democratising Knowledge with Wikimedia
This talk draws on examples from across the spectrum of current Wikimedia work in the UK and looks at questions of equity, representation and decolonisation praxis. Examining methods of work, including labelling, acquiring and displaying images, and adding new articles to English Wikipedia, this talk will explore what it is to edit Wiki in today's context, where the barriers and pitfalls can lie, and how we can work together to best surmount these and create a more equitable digital space for open knowledge.

Callum Fisher (CARMAH, Humboldt University)
Museum Disciplines and Loose Threads: The Dispersed Collections of Hamburg's Former Museum Godeffroy

Work on the colonial histories of museum collections often employs vocabularies of weaving and following threads. A great deal of time, attention and money has been dedicated to tracing these threads between people and things. Whilst a profusion of colonial provenance research encourages the telling of linear object biographies, the reality of work with colonial collections is altogether more messy and disjointed than such a biography might suggest. My work deals

with a group of 'natural history' and 'ethnographic objects' from 19th century Oceania that is today dispersed between museums and across disciplinary boundaries, but the research moves beyond simply tracing these connections. Rather, it attempts to dwell in the uncertainty that often characterises work with colonial museum collections, exploring how experiences of scientific or academic unknowing may instead be made generative. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted at the Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK) in Hamburg and the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle in Paris, this presentation works through my engagements with one of these objects, the practices through which museum workers seek to apprehend it, and the disciplinary boundaries this collection straddles. Although it acknowledges the shared histories of this object and others in different museums, the presentation will focus rather more on the processes by which they are made to be kept apart. It seeks to trouble key assumptions about 'connections' and 'networks' that underpin broad understandings of provenance research today and asks what, in the absence of a clear provenance, one might instead do with the loose threads that remain.

Anna Freed (Natural History Museum)

Recovering and Restoring Knowledge of Indigenous Collaboration in Museum Documentation: Mikel Utsi and the Sami Collections of Cambridge

As collaboration, co-production, and power-sharing with marginalised communities become increasingly incorporated into museum practice, there is a need to re-examine past collaborations with these groups, and how we have recorded and presented their knowledge in museum catalogues and public display. Museums have not always documented their own histories as well as that of their collections, and we inherit knowledge that has been drawn from extractive processes, or knowledge where the exact circumstances of collaborations have been lost, diminishing or losing community and individual voices. How can museums revisit their catalogues and collections touched by collaboration and knowledge provision, and properly represent their contributions in databases and public interpretation?

This paper, based on my undergraduate dissertation, focuses on Mikel Utsi (1908-1979), an Indigenous Sami man from Karesuando, Sweden. A creator, collector, knowledge provider, and curator, Utsi's work with the Scott Polar Research Institute and Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology represents one of the earliest examples of active Indigenous collaboration and co-curation with museums. Institutional memories of Utsi, his contributions, and the exact processes of his collaboration, have suffered varied fates - they have waned, faded, been lost, rediscovered, and partially recovered in the 75 years since his first documented work for the museums. I aimed to see what could be reconstructed of Utsi's encounters with the museums via database records, archives, and interviews with current curators, and to assess how his knowledge was treated and preserved during, and after, collaboration. Through this case study, past practices of documentation can be evaluated, highlighting the recording that enables us to look into Utsi's work, what led to knowledge loss, and how museums can work to trace the sources of Indigenous knowledge that built their catalogues: how to return attribution and voices to these collections even when some aspects remain uncertain, in both internal and public-facing contexts.

Inbal Harding (John Rylands Library, University of Manchester)

Taking Risks and Taking Care: A case study from the John Rylands Library

The John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, is foremost a 'Research Library' and secondarily one of the University of Manchester's cultural institutions. As such, the needs, desires and expectations of the western, white, academic research community have historically been foregrounded in all decisions of collections care, research and use. But this 'museum of books' was created out of the same ideologies that brought our national and regional 'world cultures' collections into being, and contains hundreds if not thousands of books, manuscripts, archival documents and photographs that connect the institution to an array of global

communities who have rarely been invited to participate in the care of their cultural heritage and whose knowledge and expertise have been routinely dismissed as 'non-academic'.

In this paper I will explore a one-object case study – a manuscript of the Sikh religious scripture the Sri Guru Granth Sahib – and a project that has run since the summer of 2022 working with Manchester's Sikh communities aiming to break down what we (the Library) think 'counts' when it comes to knowledge and care of the collections we steward. The paper will explore how the Library is negotiating internal cultural shifts and reflecting on our colonial roots to understand the impact – and improvement – that joint care and community collaboration can bring to our collections and the people who use them.

Anita Herle (MAA, University of Cambridge)

COLOUR: Art, Science & Power. Multidisciplinary approaches to research and display

Colour is all around us. It influences and reflects our understanding of the world, our emotions, creativity and relations with others. MAA's special exhibition *COLOUR: Art, Science & Power* integrates insights from anthropology, the arts, humanities and the sciences, bringing together extraordinary objects and artworks from different times and places. Exhibition preparations were developed in consultation with numerous specialists, including Indigenous colleagues as well as local community and student groups. Drawing on remarkable and diverse collections from across the University of Cambridge museums, libraries and colleges, this introduction to the exhibition explores different ways that colours are created, put to different purposes, experienced and given meaning.

Catherine Hirst (University of Sussex)
Revealing the History of Collecting Pre-Columbian Ceramics in UK Museums
[Short Report]

This paper will share some interim findings from my PhD fieldwork, which is mapping collections of Pre-Columbian ceramics in UK regional museums. These objects occupied the liminal space between art, artefact, and 'curiosity', and offer a fascinating alternate lens through which to view the histories of collecting and museums at a time of high empire and developing scientific, archaeological, and anthropological epistemologies. My research project links existing fractional sources (notably the 1986 report on the MEG survey of ethnographic collections) with data generated through a new national survey to reveal trends in collecting praxes, cataloguing taxonomies, and curatorial proclivities, testing the efficacy of data as a tool to challenge assumptions, facilitate decolonising practice, and reposition these objects within the 21st-century museum.

Zachary Kingdon (National Museums Scotland)
The 'Pre-Disciplinary' Early African Collections of the National Museums Scotland
[Short Report]

The African collection of the National Museums Scotland (NMS) is one of the oldest in Britain, because it contains assemblages from two other Edinburgh institutions that were founded well before NMS' own launch in 1854 as The Industrial Museum of Scotland. The earliest of these contributing institutions was the University of Edinburgh Natural History Museum, which was launched in 1692. The second institution to transfer many of its holdings to NMS was the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, whose collections dated back to its constitution in 1780. NMS also acquired other early collections by purchase, including the Liverpool collection of Harriet Astley, which includes West African items acquired by the eighteenth-century slave trader Captain Corran as well as others acquired by early nineteenth-century travellers. Many of the individuals who are listed as the sources of NMS's early collections include notable doctor missionaries, and doctor soldiers who were alumni of the University of Edinburgh. While these early collections are eclectic and not representative of African cultural achievements, they are potential significant as relational sources for advancing understanding of disciplinary trajectories and British colonial trajectories and histories.

NMS first employed a specialist curator for the African collections as late as 2006, and the early African collections remain scantily researched. In this short update I will outline current plans to advance research on NMS's early African collections, with particular emphasis on collectors or sources with Edinburgh connections.

Chukyi Kyaping (University of Manchester)
Decolonising Object Records, Indigenising the Database: A Case Study of the British Museum's Online Collection

Aside from repatriation, museums have typically responded to calls for decolonisation by prioritising two major practices: the digitisation of their collections, and the inclusion of reflexive and multi-vocal interpretation in their displays. However, on their own, neither of these practices have significantly changed the museum's systems of documentation and classification – much of which remains rooted in Eurocentric ontologies and colonial knowledge. In many cases, early documentation practices such as the menial copy-and-pasting from colonial-era acquisition records has led to the replication of this 'legacy data' in the digital database. Meanwhile, the voices of the originating/diaspora communities, whether gathered through workshops or displayed in exhibitions, remain divorced from these object records (which often rely on art historical scholarship).

I will attempt to address these two issues through a selection of Tibetan Buddhist objects in the British Museum which were violently removed from several monasteries during the 1903-4 British 'Expedition' to Tibet. The successive material loss resulted in many object records containing little (if at all) information about their origins beyond the identity of the collectors. By attempting to reconstruct these silenced histories, I hope to illustrate not only how the objects might have been originally understood within specific monasteries, but also how Buddhist practitioners might use them today. In this vein, I plan to collaborate with multiple descendant communities based in the UK to explore different ways to embed native knowledge into the museum database and co-produce alternative systems of classification to foster more meaningful connections for the future.

Alice Lodge and Ian Channell (Epping Forest District Museum)
Greater in Spirit, Larger in Outlook
[Short Report]

We have an upcoming exhibition at Epping Forest District Museum, Greater in Spirit, Larger in Outlook. Epping Forest District and Saffron Walden museums have received a grant from Arts Council England to research the objects in our ethnographic collections. Working in partnership with community groups such as the Ethiopian History Society UK, we aim to uncover the stories behind the objects and understand their cultural significance. Through an exhibition, educational resources, events and activities, people in the district and beyond can engage with and be inspired by this incredible collection to learn and understand more about world cultures. Many different cultures from around the world are represented in Epping Forest District Museum's collection of over 300 objects. There is little original documentation about them, but we know they relate to the Buxton family of Warlies and Woodredon houses in Upshire. We think they were collected by, or gifted to, members of the family through their philanthropic and missionary work around the world. Through this project we aim to encourage an appreciation of diversity and a wider understanding of the history and culture of the groups connected with the objects.

Bryony Onciul (University of Exeter) [read by Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp]
Renewing Relations: Indigenous Heritage Rights and (Re)conciliation in Northwest Coast Canada
[Short Report]

For the past year I have been working with Indigenous community leaders and heritage professionals at sites across BC, thinking about what it means to uphold Indigenous rights in heritage in practice following BC's adoption of UNDRIP (UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). We have looked at the history of activism, current efforts towards implementation, and ongoing barriers. The research focuses on the importance of (re)connections, renewing relations within and across cultural groups and heritage organisations, between people and their ancestral treasures, practices, and rights, and recognising the role of ecosystems and environment in maintaining and sustaining heritage. The project report will give a brief overview of current findings and is an invitation to UK curators to participate in an upcoming online workshop focusing on collections in Summer 2023.

Renewing Relations is an AHRC funded Fellowship in partnership with MEG and 9 other UK and Canadian partners. The project report and call to participate should make a positive contribution to two of the conference themes: Democratising Care; Democratising Knowledge, and Confidence and Comfort.

Danika Parikh (University of Cambridge Museums)
Challenging castelessness in South Asian museum collections

As museums in the Global North grapple with the colonial roots and histories of their collections, there is increasingly a need for heritage sector workers to consider the nuances of race and colonialism in different colonial contexts. Many British museums and institutions have abundant South Asian collections formed before, during, and after British colonisation. Research, gallery displays, and education around these collections now often incorporate stories of race and colonisation, but broadly speaking there is still a lack of critical engagement with caste or varna. These collections and their communities of origin are often presented as casteless, to the detriment of marginalised caste communities whose oppression is made invisible. This presentation shares early research on collections from the University of Cambridge Museums to examine how caste has been obscured from public engagement with South Asian museum collections, and how it has been neutralised or idealised by being presented through a dominant caste lens. It argues that anthropology must draw on critical caste studies and be receptive to community activism from marginalised caste groups in order to make caste visible in museum collections, and develop anti- caste approaches to South Asian heritage.

Andrea Potts (University of Brighton)
Displaying Colonialism: Curatorial Confidence and Comfort

Across Europe, many are grappling with how to identify, deconstruct, and eradicate the colonial systems that are bound up in all aspects of museums. While there is a broad consensus that European museums need to address decolonisation, there is no such consensus regarding precisely what this entails and how to achieve this. In this period of change, many exhibition makers are experimenting with more critically exhibiting colonial histories and legacies and do so in a context of heightened scrutiny and the circulation of an ill-defined discourse of museum decolonisation. What impact has this had on professional confidence and comfort? And how does this affect how colonialism is represented?

In this presentation, I examine the complex subject positions that exhibition makers occupy and shift between and how this shapes their professional practice. My case study is the National Museum of Denmark's permanent exhibition titled 'Voices from the Colonies' which opened in 2017. I approach this through an oral history method. Based on interviews with exhibition makers at the national museum, I consider how individuals present the exhibition and their role in and experience of producing it and what this suggests about why Danish colonialism is represented in certain ways.

Through this, I reflect on how exhibition makers each construct their own conception of what it means to critically engage with colonialism that reflects their own multifaceted subject positions. In interviews, individuals consciously and subconsciously shift between personal and institutional identities, claims to critical expertise, and dominant public norms. At times, these subject positions align with a critical engagement with Denmark's colonial past and its legacies. At times, they align with its disavowal. Together, they produce specific ways of representing Danish colonialism that are both critical and conservative.

In my presentation, I will focus on the notions of confidence and comfort raised in the call for papers. Through shifting between various subject positions, exhibition makers at times utilise long-standing and familiar narratives and modes of exhibiting because they feel confident and comfortable about them. When exhibition makers attempt to exhibit narratives that they do not feel as confident or comfortable about, it is possible to read this in the displays themselves. Exhibition makers' uncertainties and discomfort around certain narratives also result in significant absences in the exhibition, such as contemporary legacies of colonialism in Denmark.

This complex scene, I argue, reflects how museum professionals in a European context are grappling with how to critically exhibit colonialism. By focusing on the roles and experiences of the individuals who produce exhibitions, I highlight how museum practice is always, in a sense, interdisciplinary because it is never shaped by a single approach.

Heather Richardson (National Museums Scotland)

In the eye of the beholder

[Short Report]

In my current role as an assistant curator at National Museums Scotland, I am interested in what we can learn from repaired objects. Working as a conservator with world cultures collections for many years, it was important to understand earlier repairs to inform contemporary conservation practice. Taking this interdisciplinary practice as a starting point this short paper considers how these two perspectives can inform and complement each other. How does looking at a repaired object as a curator differ from looking at it as a conservator? Do both disciplines reach similar conclusions or does their training dictate what their eyes see?
It will also consider how and why these objects were being collected and importantly were these repairs made by the originating community or the collector and what can we learn from this today? Are there patterns to be seen in who collected them? Do repaired objects humanise them more than a non-repaired example?

Lisa Robson (Ulster University)

The Ceramic Object: Re-explored, Re-created, re-engaged

This presentation plans to outline how museums are risk adverse when it comes to offering haptic engagement of objects to museum visitors. Fiona Candlin's (2007) evidence demonstrates that museum visitors surreptitiously touch objects to verify the authenticity of what they see, vandalism is not their intention.
Inclusivity, knowledge of material culture and craftsmanship is limited by the vision centric environment of the exhibition space. Modifications in display attitudes could enhance the museum visitor's knowledge, wellbeing and experience. As Glenn Adamson argues (2018, p .4), "As a culture we are in danger of falling out of touch, not only with objects, but with the intelligence they embody: the empathy that is bound up in tangible things".

Utilising artists and makers in museum settings has proven to be a successful tool in bringing museum objects back to life for the visitor. This study advocates incorporating ceramic handling opportunities for museum visitors to further enhance their material culture knowledge. Museum handling collections are known to support inclusivity, democracy of the institution and improve participant's wellbeing. (Chatterjee et al 2009)

Evidence of Artists working successfully with Museums and Heritage Sites:
Artist interventions that have promoted inclusivity and touch, whilst encouraging overlooked groups into museums and exhibitions:
Matt Smith. (2021) Losing Venus exhibition at the Pitt Rives Museum, Oxford. This exhibition identified how the Empire criminalised homosexual relationships and hid them from view, in and out of museums. Smith uses contemporary ceramic objects to bring attention to what has been omitted in the history of Empire.
Inge Daniels. (2019) What are Exhibitions for? An anthropological study on how visitors respond to an interactive and immersive exhibition. This study demonstrated how indoctrinated the public are to the "do not touch sign".
Clare Twomey. (2006) Exhibition at the V&A. In the Cast Court. 4000 Wedgewood, ceramic Jasperware birds were made for visitor interaction and engagement. The audience were invited to take the bird's home, to perpetuate the notion of collecting and engagement.

Tiffany Shellam (Deakin University) with Larry Blight (Albany Heritage Reference Group Aboriginal Corporation), Ross Chadwick (Western Australian Museum), Ali Clark (National Museums Scotland), Shona Coyne (National Museum of Australia) and Lester Coyne (Albany Heritage Reference Group Aboriginal Corporation)

Entangled Knowledges: Kaartdijin, Science and History in the Robert Neill collection

Taking a multidisciplinary cross-museum collection as its starting point the Entangled Knowledges project aims to highlight Menang Nyungar knowledge embedded in a historic collection of fishes, mammals and artefacts held at National Museums Scotland and a portfolio of sketches of fishes held by the Natural History Museum, London, by returning this knowledge to the Menang community in Western Australia.

This collection was brought together by Assistant Commissary Robert Neill in Kinjarling (Albany) in the 1840s, where he worked and lived amongst Menang fishermen and women. Neill carefully recorded Menang fish taxonomies, fish habits and habitats and Menang cultural associations with fishes. These collections were dispersed across museums in Edinburgh and London, becoming isolated from each other and disconnected from the community whose knowledge the collection captures. Once in these museums, the dominance of western scientific knowledge, development of disciplinary silos and museum documentation practices increased this disconnection, reducing museums' understanding of the Menang cultural significance. Today Menang people are reconnecting to the collection and the records of their ancestral knowledge that it holds. This 20-minute presentation will draw on the work of the project to date to explore how working in a cross-sector, collaborative and Indigenous-governed team can enrich and re-frame the understanding of this collection in the Museum/s today.

Byrony Smerdon (Pitt Rivers Museum)

Doing data differently: community-led information management at the Pitt Rivers Museum

[Short Report]

Indigenous groups and originating communities need to be able to trust the information that is supplied to them regarding cultural material and the associated data held by museums. Community members also need to be able to trust the process by which information has been generated and searched for using museum databases and historic documentation, to ensure that object information is as complete, accurate and accessible as possible to those external to the institution. This is becoming increasingly relevant to the Pitt Rivers Museum as we try to build more equitable and sustainable relationships with the different communities represented within the collections, to better care for objects and object data on their own terms.

This short update will provide some insights from recent community-led approaches to cataloguing and repatriation requests, where community representatives have been given control over how data is produced and recorded in the collections database. This work involves challenging how data has previously been recorded and by whom, and poses interesting questions for how we can 'do' data differently moving forwards.

Chris Wingfield (Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia)

1922 and All That: Artefactual Histories for the 21st Century

In 1922, a year that has been called year zero for literary modernism, Bronislaw Malinowski published his Argonauts of the Western Pacific, long regarded as an archetypal text for the discipline of Social Anthropology. While the limitations of modernist approaches to Anthropology have been apparent since at least the 1980s, the discipline has long struggled to reinvent its 'Writing Culture'. Taking the centenary of Malinowski's Argonauts as a prompt, I have been attempting to develop an experimental writing project (https://argonauts2022.net/) that engages with the limits and possibilities of writing about artefacts, in and for contemporary times. Through a series of chronologically sequenced digital chapters, Argonauts of the Eastern Atlantic attempts to create a spider web of narrative that connects the digital avatars of archival and museum objects relating to the London Missionary Society and its history. Museum objects provide a particularly potent starting point from which to engage with the challenge of coevality - between Europeans and their Others, as well as between ourselves and artefacts with their origins in other times and places - at least partly because museum structures frequently function precisely to deny this. The outcome is that most contemporary of artefacts, a digital text, which institutes bricolage as method in order to draw upon and integrate evidence and influence from across and beyond disciplinary boundaries. The challenge is whether such an undisciplined approach will be able to find a home within either the museum or the university, or will remain simply an artefact of the internet.

Claire Wintle (University of Brighton)

All Change? Liberating Collections Care from Discipline

In a moment where museums are facing calls for transformation and revolution, historic moments of 'change' can present cautionary and instructive tales for professional practice. In post-war British museums, as empire appeared to be waning and new forms of political and cultural independence flourished, museums were also engaging with changes and challenges. For the British museum anthropologists and archaeologists that cared for collections from Asia, Africa, Oceania and North America, new professional standards emerged to confront the traditions of their practice and thinking.

This paper uses methods from history and visual culture to explore the professionalisation of collections care in UK museums between 1945 and 1980. It identifies the wide-ranging

discourses and practices that sought to reframe the documentation and storage of 'ethnographic collections', analysing their relationships with long-standing anthropological paradigms. It investigates the new vocabularies, modes of labour, complex documentation schemes and spectacular storage facilities that were discussed and advanced in this time of ostensible change.

Ultimately, however, this paper argues that despite a performance of change, longstanding disciplinary and professional traditions designed to contain and constrain collections were at the heart of these shifts. Imperial and anthropological categories bound up with discipline continued to dictate practice and became further engrained in collections care despite the rhetoric of transformation. For museum practitioners today, this history of museum labour and professionalisation provides evidence of how the act of collections care – as one of the foundational structures of the museum – is particularly susceptible to becoming ensconced with perhaps unhelpful traditions of discipline and method. This history of academic and professional discipline and disciplining calls for a loosening of scholarly confines and control, and a move beyond the performance of change. It calls for genuine democratisation of care and knowledge.