



Practicing Collection Ethics:

A Toolkit for Museum
and Archive Professionals

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This toolkit is designed for museums and archives interested in enhancing their capacities to address the ethical challenges of managing collections. It can be utilized for self-guided learning, group discussions, workshops, project evaluations, or policy formulation. The toolkit complements guidelines and codes of ethics in the field, such as the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, by asking questions and providing concrete examples for museum and archive professionals to reflect on. Engaging with these ethical themes empowers practitioners to navigate the intricate terrain of responsible collection practices, and feel part of a community of practice.

The toolkit opens with a series of questions developed by the participants of the TRACTS COST Action meeting on “Tracing Temporalities, Unearthing Archives”. These questions were co-designed by collections professionals and academics. Framed by real life examples of ethics-driven collection work within institutional practice, these questions can initiate and guide discussions on how ethics-led approaches to collections work can benefit and shape museum practices.



How to Use the Toolkit



Introduction

Museum and archive professionals often grapple with ethical challenges when handling diverse collections. This toolkit stems from the TRACTS COST Action workshop in Potsdam and Berlin on "Tracing Temporalities and Unearthing Archives," identifying three ethical themes crucial to responsible collection stewardship and curation:

- ① **Inclusivity, Diversity, and Community Knowledge**
- ② **Power Dynamics and Social Justice**
- ③ **Potentiality and Future Visions**

Each toolkit segment tackles one key theme, incorporating a set of questions that archive and collection practitioners can employ to reflect on their practice and discern the ethical implications of their collection work. Designed to provoke thought and challenge, these questions do not offer easy answers. They are a good place to start thinking about ethically led collections management. The goal is to offer museum curators, collection managers, and archive professionals a pathway through the intricate ethical dilemmas inherent in their roles and daily responsibilities. Accompanying this toolkit is a series of case studies contributed by international experts, providing an in-depth exploration of the themes. Museums worldwide are at a crossroads, necessitating careful consideration of their obligations to the public — both past and future. This toolkit is founded on the premise that ethically guided collections management is the most fitting response to this critical juncture.



Reflexive Questions

1

Key Theme:

Inclusivity, Diversity, and Community Knowledge

Museum collections should strive for inclusivity and equity in representation, embracing the spectrum of experiences irrespective of ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or socioeconomic status. Involving individuals or groups actively engaged in collection care efforts holds paramount importance. They can encompass community members, descendants, and those with vested interests, such as object users, academics, artists, activists, students, cultural practitioners, and more.



In what concrete ways can we **engage diverse individuals or groups** in decisions about collection management and care?



How can we ensure that **community knowledge is effectively and sustainably integrated** into collection practices?



How can we **make the diverse experiences and histories** within the collection more discoverable, accessible, and visible?



How can we **reconcile providing access to archives and collections** with safeguarding the present and future privacy claims of individuals and communities?



How does **the (in)stability of images and objects impact** the way they are interpreted and used, as well as shape perspectives on the future of the collection?



How can stakeholders **engage responsibly with objects that present varying types of hazards**, including those related to health, wellbeing and spirituality?



What **organizational and bureaucratic changes** may museums implement to better facilitate the collaborative work of museum professionals?



In what ways can bureaucratic, organizational, and technical processes **actively enhance accessibility** in order to promote ethical collection practices?



How can we **create a safe and inclusive environment** for our collections, addressing physical, social, and institutional barriers?

2

Key Theme:

Power Dynamics and Social Justice

Current politics and societal shifts influence archives' access and use. Changes in government policy or public opinion can impact the ethics of using certain objects or images. Power dynamics inherent in archives and collections, between the collectors and the communities they make visible through this collecting, can intentionally and unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes and discrimination. Nurturing awareness of these dynamics is essential for ethical collection practice.



How do **current political and social developments** **affect** understandings and practices of museums and archives?



How can we **recognize the impact of absence and erasure** on the shaping of collection narratives and representations?



What are the **power dynamics in archiving and collecting**, and how might we address these?



How can we **ensure the ethical use** of archives and collections at a time of societal change and the new challenges it brings?



How can we **avoid reinforcing harmful narratives** and instead use archives and collections to challenge such perspectives?



What strategies can be employed to **responsibly acquire and preserve collections and documents** in museums and archives, particularly considering factors such as energy consumption and material constraints?



How can we **ethically utilize multisensory and multimodal knowledge and tools** to enrich our comprehension and curation of collection material?



How can museums **leverage activist initiatives** to advance social justice through the use of their collections and archives?



Can archives and collections serve as **tools against appropriation and extractivism**?



How can we **harness the power of art** to convey historical context and complex narratives within an object's story?

3

Key Theme:

Potentiality and Future Visions

It is crucial to recognize that collections are not static; they evolve to convey different meanings depending on their context. Collections and archives have the capacity to reconstruct harmful historical narratives and envision alternative futures. By destabilizing and decolonizing archives, we can challenge dominant representations and create space for new narratives. This transformation has a profound impact on the roles of experts, researchers, and institutions.



How can collections and archives be utilized both to **reconstruct and challenge historical narratives**, as well as to **envision alternative futures**?



How will **the process of destabilizing and decolonizing archives** impact various parties, ranging from source communities, activists, to experts, researchers, and institutions?



What **ethical tensions arise** when discussing and using vernacular, official and professional language in the context of collection care and history? How can we effectively address these tensions?



How might exploring the potential of objects inspire ongoing development and change, including the process of deaccessioning and degrowing the collection?



What **implications do the ethical calls for restitution, repatriation, and repair** have for collection practice both within and outside of the institution?



How can we make our collection care, interpretation, exhibition, and documentation practices more sustainable in response to the challenges posed by climate change?

Case Studies



Case 1 Study



How can stakeholders **engage responsibly with objects that present varying types of hazards**, including those related to health, wellbeing and spirituality?



In what concrete ways can we **engage diverse individuals or groups** in decisions about collection management and care?

Interventive pest management at the National Museum of Bhutan: On-going considerations and context-specific strategies

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CHALLENGES

- Pest activity in an object of religious significance
- Open display of infested object
- Complex stakeholder relationship to object



Conservators of the National Museum of Bhutan picking thingey (Sichuan peppercorn, *Zanthoxylum piperitum*) from the tree outside the museum.
Author: Ayesha Fuentes.

Next to the entrance of the historic stone fortress in which the National Museum of Bhutan displays the majority of its collection, there are two carved wooden pillars attributed to a sixteenth-century Buddhist teacher and craftsman.

During a recent project at the museum—working with local colleagues to develop a collections management strategy and explore available resources for conservation practice—it was discovered that one of these pillars had an active infestation of wood-boring insects.

Designing a response to this particular infestation is fairly idiosyncratic given its social, economic, cultural, material, religious, and environmental context. Firstly, the pillars are on open display in the galleries, near to where each visitor is greeted by the museum attendant on duty. Although previous conservation consultants at the museum had provided naphthalene, thymol, and paradichlorobenzene as chemical reagents intended for the control of insects, there is relatively little occupational knowledge or local provision for managing the risks associated with these toxic materials. Mixing these insecticides with solvents or adhesive and injecting them into the wooden matrix, for example, could expose museum staff—whose access to personal protective equipment like gloves or masks is extremely limited—to potential harm from daily exposure to volatile or migrating toxins. At the same time, the size of the pillar and its use as a structural element in the gallery display, coupled with – once again – a lack of specialized conservation resources or equipment, prevents it from being frozen, heated, or treated anoxically. Finally, as an object associated with a religious teacher in a predominantly Buddhist community with frequent haptic interactions between material heritage and practitioners, a biocidal response can be somewhat problematic.

As part of an ongoing collaboration between the author and local heritage authorities, plant-based deterrents are being explored. These include oil from the neem tree—known to repel aphids and other agricultural pests—as well as kakishibu—a tannin-rich solution of crushed green persimmons prepared using a Japanese technique—and oil from crushed green thingey—also known as Sichuan peppercorn—growing just outside the museum and said locally to deter a number of biological agents, including rats and silverfish.

LEARNING

The context for an object’s preservation can be complex, requiring careful thinking about how best to care for them.

The preservation of this object is being considered in terms of the needs of the museum and its staff within a larger religious community.

Collaborative decision-making can lead to knowledge exchange, experimentation and professional development.

To ensure proper collection conservation and care, it is crucial to consider engagement and environmental safety as goals, rather than solely concentrating on pest control.

Further reading

González-Laredo, Rubén, et al. Wood preservation using natural products. *Madera y Bosques* 21 (2015), 63-76.

Oo, Mary and Thet Oo. Management of occurring threats to wooden monasteries in Mandalay: A case study of Maha-Minhtin Monastery. *Journal of the SEAMEO Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA)* 7 (2023), 63-88.

Case 2 Study



In what concrete ways can we **engage diverse individuals or groups** in decisions about collection management and care?



How can collections and archives be utilized both to **reconstruct and challenge historical narratives**, as well as to **envision alternative futures**?

White Gold: Stories of Cotton

Tina Palaić
Slovene Ethnographic Museum
Ljubljana, Slovenia

CHALLENGES

- Colonial innocence and legacies of coloniality
- Knowledge inequalities
- Inclusivity and ethics of representation



Installation view of the exhibition White Gold: Stories of Cotton. SEM, 2023.
Author: Blaž Verbič.

The Slovene Ethnographic Museum (SEM) designed an experimental exhibition that explores cotton cultivation from its initial agrarian processes to contemporary challenges in the industry. The exhibition focused on two collections dating back to the early 20th century. The first collection originates from the Bengal mission in East India, where Slovene missionaries were involved in converting locals to Christianity. The second collection is from Togo, where two Slovenes helped establish the first radio telegraph station between what was then Togoland and the German Colonial Empire. Both collections shed light on cotton production and the manufacture of cotton fabrics. However, more importantly, they testify to the involvement of Slovenian actors in the colonial project. This involvement is evident, among other things, through creating and accumulating knowledge about 'Others,' as reflected in photographs, objects, and written reports.

To explore this history and the present-day cotton cultivation in India and Togo, SEM collaborated with Dr. Kanika Gupta, an art historian and artist from New Delhi, who conducted her research in the Indian state of Odisha. They also worked with Ana Reberc, an early career researcher at the Slovenian Migration Institute of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, who spent a month in Togo. The researchers conducted interviews with farmers and other stakeholders in the cotton sector. The interviews were then presented in two videos, allowing museum visitors to learn firsthand about the challenges faced by cotton growers in both countries, and the strategies they are developing to overcome them. Instead of relying on Western collectors' objects to provide the narrative about cotton cultivation and the production of cotton products, the farmers themselves shared their own experiences. This section of the exhibition helped visitors comprehend how the cotton industry operates today, and allowed for a discussion on more sustainable futures.

The project was funded by 'Taking Care: Ethnographic and World Cultures Museums as Spaces of Care' (2019–2023).

LEARNING

This case study addresses the importance of uncovering and communicating silenced parts of history stored in collections. The curators used the story of the collectors' involvement in colonial projects to challenge established narratives about colonial innocence in Slovenia.

Museums may not have the resources to fill in the gaps about their collections. This project shows the value of working corroboratively with researchers and artists, who can help with this.

The curators included the perspectives of those affected by historical and current developments in cotton production. This served to address historical erasure and highlighted the ongoing challenges in the cotton sector in Togo and India, opening a discussion about more sustainable prospects.

Further reading

Palaić, Tina (ed.), 2023, *Belo zlato: Zgodbe o bombažu. / White gold: Stories of Cotton*, Slovenski etnografski muzej, Ljubljana.

Reberc, Ana, 2023, *Cotton production in Togo: challenges and limitations of field research*, <https://www.etno-muzej.si/sl/cotton-production-in-togo-challenges-and-limitations-of-field-research>, 7. 8. 2023.

Taking Care project, the official website, <https://takingcareproject.eu/>.

Case 3 Study



What are the **power dynamics in archiving and collecting**, and how might we address these?



How will **the process of destabilizing and decolonizing archives** impact various parties, ranging from source communities, activists, to experts, researchers, and institutions?

Cooperation Between the National Museums of World Culture and Members of the Seediq Community

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CHALLENGES

- Addressing unequal power relationships in co-creating an exhibition with a source community
- Confronting the extractive nature of coloniality possibly being reproduced in the co-creation process



Workshop in Stockholm with the Seediq research delegation and museum staff discussing the exhibition narrative, February 2022. Photo: Michel D. Lee.

The Museum of Ethnography, National Museums of World Culture, manages approximately 300 objects from Taiwan, most of which were collected from indigenous communities. Archival documents associated with the collections allowed for the identification of descendants of the source communities. When searching for a partner related to the Taiwan collections, images of and information about the collections were disseminated within Taiwan. Eventually, the Seediq people were one of the groups that responded. The term "Seediq" was never recorded in the information associated with the collections, because the Seediq identity was only recognized in Taiwan in 2008. During the period of Japanese rule in Taiwan (1875-1945), the Seediq were labeled as Atayal, a related cultural group with a separate identity.

It was agreed upon with the Seediq partners that an online exhibition would be created to address issues of accessibility, enabling their communities and other stakeholders, particularly in Taiwan, to access the results. Additionally, the Museums of World Culture ordered a physical exhibition to meet the needs of the organization in Stockholm. In this collaboration, the museum aimed to employ methods that could help cultivate a lasting relationship with the community beyond the completion of the project. The museum attempted to address equality in the exhibition development process, power imbalances, and ways to give back to the descendants of the originating communities.

The Seediq partners were officially recognized as equal partners with the Museums of World Culture in this project. This was accomplished by explicitly defining their roles in a memorandum of understanding that all parties contributed to creating. In this manner, space was created for the voices of partners, often with fewer resources. While practical issues prevented complete equality in certain aspects of the project (for instance, the museum organization administered the budget, and the collections are held in Sweden), the work group made a conscious effort to address imbalances as much as possible.

Transparency and good communication are essential, as they can help cultivate mutual trust and understanding. The methodologies of the project were negotiated in collaboration

with the partners. The Seediq partners had the authority to present issues of identity and historic perspectives, and they conducted their own fieldwork on the museum objects within their own communities. The knowledge holders within the community were acknowledged as experts about the objects and culture and were relied upon to confirm information about the objects and how they were displayed within the exhibition. The project budget was also transparent, and the partners had the ability to influence how the resources were used in the project. The cultivation of mutual trust and understanding, facilitated by clear documents outlining roles that all partners contributed to creating, can help overcome some of the power dynamics embedded in archives and collections. Issues of power imbalances are particularly important to consider when working with communities with histories of exclusion and oppression.

LEARNING

The curators began the project with an open mind about the collection. They acknowledged that there may be gaps in the biographies of the collection. This allowed them to recognise the expertise of the Seediq community and value the contributions they made to collection knowledge and context.

The project identified the importance of explicitly recognising source communities as equal collaborators. Even when this means surrendering some control over the exhibition. This is an important way to develop mutual trust.

The project also identified the difficulty of creating perfectly equal collaborations when the museum usually has ultimate control of essential resources, including funding and collections.

The collection contained some linked archival documents that made contacting descendants possible. Collecting and connecting biographical data keeps the collection alive for future researchers and open to source communities.

Further reading

We Are Seediq, the online exhibition,
<https://reurl.cc/blXpmd>

Nokan, Awi, 2023, "Hundred-year-old- Seediq Stories in the Swedish Collection." In: *Spaces of Care: Confronting Colonial Afterlives in European Ethnographic Museums*. Wayne Modest and Claudia Augustat, eds. Independent Academic Publishing, pp. 181–184.

Lee, Michel D., et al., editors, 2023, We Are Seediq Sediq Seejiq: A Record of the Cooperation Between the National Museums of World Culture (Sweden), the Seediq National Assembly (Taiwan) and the Indigenous Cultural Heritage MA Program of Providence University (Taiwan). National Museums of World Culture.

Taiwan Indigenous Group Wants Sweden To Keep Their Ancestors' Artifacts – TaiwanPlus, Patrick Chen and Louise Watt, 9. 4. 2023, <https://www.taiwanplus.com/news/taiwan-news/indigenous-issues/230904016/taiwan-indigenous-group-wants-sweden-to-keep-their-ancestors-artifacts>.

Case 4 Study

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How can we **avoid reinforcing harmful narratives** and instead use archives and collections to challenge such perspectives?

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How can we **harness the power of art** to convey historical context and complex narratives within an object's story?

Lost Landscapes - Anne Zahalka, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Australia

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CHALLENGES

- Objectified nature
- Representational inequity
- Reflexive exhibition practice



Installation view of the exhibition Lost Landscapes, QVMAG, 2021.
Author: Anne Zahalka.

Museums once used habitat dioramas to create the optical illusion of a window into a timeless natural world, oblivious to the presence of humans. Today it is evident that these scenes were made by and for humans, with an anthropocentric and idealist Western gaze. Anne Zahalka's exhibition 'Lost Landscapes,' a collaboration with Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, confronts historical depictions of natural landscapes with contemporary media practices and posthuman ethics.

For the past two decades, Australian photo media artist Anne Zahalka has worked with dioramas from natural history museums, reimagining the idealized narratives and anthropocentric discourses they promote. Using techniques of photomontage, image manipulation, and installation, she takes 2D photographs of the 3D dioramas and then adds or subtracts elements to complicate or question the portrayal from a contemporary standpoint. She introduces issues such as the tourist gaze, pollution, poaching, habitat loss, and climate change.

The museum invited Zahalka to play a more active role and reassemble dioramas that have been taken off display and put in storage. This gives them a new life in the context of an art exhibition, where her 2D reimagined images are displayed alongside the reassembled 3D dioramas. The juxtaposition offers a more transparent and critical perspective on the historical process of constructing dioramas in general, and the dioramas of the QVMAG collection in particular, including archival materials that name and present the museum artists who designed and constructed these scenes. Zahalka's playful and poetic reimagined images, show how practices and ideas about animals in the wild have changed, and challenge us to imagine new futures for the relationship between animals and humans. For example, wildlife enthusiasts now 'shoot' and collect images rather than specimens, and humans care for non-human habitats as well as their own.

LEARNING

This case addresses the ethics of harmful anthropocentric representation within natural history museums. The artist's approach involved a reimagining of the museum's collection of dioramas, providing a more intimate engagement with its materiality and historical context. This case underscores the potential inherent in collaborative efforts between museum practitioners and artists, as it enables fresh perspectives on exhibition practice while shedding light on overlooked historical legacies and hidden aspects of representation.

The installation prompts questions about the way animals are objectified in these collections, employing artistic methods and highlighting shifting attitudes towards nature today.

The juxtaposition of the 3D and 2D diorama's demonstrates that museums can "play" with their collections via multimedia projects without damaging at-risk objects.

Further reading

Anne Zahalka's website:
<https://zahalkaworld.com.au/lost-landscapes-2020/>

QVMAG website:
<https://www.qvmag.tas.gov.au/Whats-on/Past-exhibitions/Lost-Landscapes-Anne-Zahalka>

Martain, Tim, 2021, Anne Zahalka 'Lost Landscapes' (review), <https://thereviewboard.com.au/review/anne-zahalka-lost-landscapes/>

Case Study 5



Reckoning with Restraint

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CHALLENGES

- Resisting the rush to resolution in addressing painful histories
- Reckoning with institutional legacies of harmful practices
- Addressing the ethical challenge of one-size-fits-all approach to sensitive collections

Handle with care: The gloved, clasped, and displayed hands of the curator, researcher, and unknown subject. Image from the meeting of the UCC Living Well with the Dead Collective, 24 May 2022. Author: Róisín O'Gorman.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, before colour photography became widely available, wax moulages circulated globally as public health, medical research and education tools. Many collections were crafted in painful and exploitative processes using disenfranchised people, including women incarcerated in “lock hospitals” because they suffered from syphilis.

University College Cork’s wax moulage collection is made up of over 150 moulages of disassembled body parts. In the reproduced narratives of medical progress much is known about the physicians who commissioned the moulages and the artist who crafted them, but little about those whose bodies were used. The bioarchives at UCC remain largely silent about the collection’s procurement and history of use. However, we know that its production was contemporaneous with the patriarchal, colonial and militarist disease regime of the British Contagious Diseases Acts enforced in Ireland from 1864 to 1886. Cork was one of the “subjected districts” in which women could undergo forced medical examinations and, if found to be suffering from a venereal disease, detained in a lock hospital.

Universities internationally are embarking on reckoning initiatives in response to public controversies concerning their histories of complicity in systems of medical violence and extraction. The UCC-based Living Well with the Dead research collective resists the tendency toward hurried reckoning. Against a background of official revelations about the history of medical school anatomization of infant remains from Ireland’s so-called Mother and Baby Homes, the collective searches for new ethical ways of working with troubling bioarchival collections. Working with the moulage collection the researchers respond to the ethical challenges of learning to live with, and care for, spectres of past injustices. They start by recognising the limits of knowability of the history of the collection, and of the lives of the people whose bodies were used, and uncertainty about if and how reckoning with the history of medical violence that moulages materialise might be possible.

LEARNING

This research requires a slow scholarship approach that adopts an ethics of restraint, resisting the rush to resolution. This entails making an effort to engage with the ethical complexities that arise when reckoning with the histories and legacies of troubling collections.

Working with this troubling collection has necessitated the curators and academics involved to step beyond the usual practices of their disciplines in order to develop an approach that keeps the ethical ambiguities of these objects at the center of any future research, display, collection care, and storage.

Not all new ethical engagements with collections will offer immediate solutions. Museums and archives that begin this process should consider what will happen if the resolutions take some years arriving.

Further reading

O’Donovan, Ó. (2021). Wax Moulages and the Pastpresence Work of the Dead. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 46(2), 231-253.

Hunter, M. (2008). “Appalling Realism”: Wax, Femininity, and the Madness of Realist Fantasies. *RACAR: Revue d’art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 33 (1-2), 43–58.

O’Donovan, Ó. (2021). Wax Moulages and the Pastpresence Work of the Dead. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 46(2), 231-253.

King, M., McCarthy, J., O’Donovan, Ó, O’Gorman, R and Werry, M. (2021) 'Sympathetic Vibrations: sense-ability, medical performance, and hearing histories of hurt'. *Global Performance Studies*, 4 (2)

Case 6 Study



What are the **power dynamics in archiving and collecting**, and how might we address these?



How can we **recognize the impact of absence and erasure** on the shaping of collection narratives and representations?

Provenance research and repatriation process in southern Abya Yala

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CHALLENGES

- Representation
- Decolonization of anthropology
- Museums / Self-determination and identity sovereignty

Images of Kryygy are not included in this toolkit to avoid perpetuating epistemological coloniality. Asymmetrical power structures that used visual representations as a form of subjugation and control, were essential to the colonial agenda, which subalternized, dehumanized, homogenized, and objectified indigenous peoples. Visual representations of indigenous peoples reduced them to mere objects of observation.

It is up to the Aché people to decide, manage and control the ways in which they are represented in different contexts.

In 2010, the Museo de La Plata in Argentina repatriated the mortal remains of the young Kryygi to the Aché people of Paraguay, which garnered significant media attention. While their body was deposited in the museum, their head, along with other soft tissues, was at Charité Hospital in Berlin, Germany. It had been sent as a "gift" from the German anthropologist Robert Lehmann-Nitsche, who was the head of the Anthropology Section of the Museo de La Plata, to the German physician Hans Virchow.

Kryygi's story had been suppressed from collective identity and memory through the archival practices of nineteenth-century anthropology. The archives served as institutional devices that imposed colonial silence on the voices, memories, and subjectivities of cultural "others." Restricted access to these archives contributed to the construction and legitimization of the epistemic authority of museums.

Research on the collection's provenance made visible this harmful history. It showed that the process of decolonizing archives is more intricate than merely obtaining complete access to them. To achieve real decolonizing, a collaborative and inclusive effort is necessary, involving all interested parties. Together, these parties must develop strategies and infrastructures that transform the conventional 'archive' into a community-oriented, solidarity-driven, inclusive, and intersectional network. Within this transformed archive, a variety of memories, histories, and personal perspectives can interconnect and resonate with one another. This approach allows for an ethical use of archives and prevents the reinforcement of harmful narratives.

From this perspective, even as they wait in collections Indigenous Peoples' mortal remains are "archives" that perpetually retain the power and knowledge colonial devices imposed on them to construct them as "study objects." These remains preserve within them the collective historical memory of their peoples and the social networks that anthropology attempted to sever. Kryygi's case unearths from the academic silence and the darkness of institutional archives the spaces of coloniality and the colonial imaginaries that dehumanized individuals in order to make anthropological practices possible.

LEARNING

This case study highlights the potential of provenance research as a means to contemplate the power dynamics that exist between collecting institutions and the source communities. In response to the persistent harm caused by these collections, the researcher proposed a set of recommendations, including:

- Decentralizing the epistemological authority that underpins the structuring, preservation, organization, and accessibility of archives.
- Acknowledge the the contextual presence of colonial influences and the unequal power relationships that led to their formation.
- Empowering and involving historically marginalized voices in the curation, interpretation, and safeguarding of their own history and collective memory.

Further reading

Ballester, Diego and Erik Petscheli (eds.), 2023
Collaborative Projects as Means to transgress Western Epistemologies, Special Issue, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (In press).

Sardi, Marina and Diego Ballester, 2017, El pueblo Aché en la práctica y el discurso de la Antropología, *Revista del Centro de Estudios Antropológicos. Suplemento Antropológico* LII (2), pp. 7-117.

Case Study 7



How can we ensure that **community knowledge is effectively and sustainably integrated** into collection practices?



How can collections and archives be utilized both to **reconstruct and challenge historical narratives**, as well as to **envision alternative futures**?

The Water Think Tank

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CHALLENGES

- Integration of multiple perspectives into exhibitions
- Inclusion of embodied knowledge in exhibitions
- Building an ethical exhibition about a complex contemporary problem



Installation view of the exhibition Water Messages, MARKK, 2023.
© Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK), Hamburg, photo: Paul Schimweg

The exhibition "Water Messages" at Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK) explored water-related ecological knowledge, cosmologies, cultural techniques, and materials documented in the MARKK's collections. It relates these elements to contemporary water protection and climate justice movements founded by the affected communities. Taking the topic of water as a starting point, the exhibition project began with a search for ecological knowledge, water stories, and skills documented in the MARKK's historical collections. The aim was to connect these themes to the climate justice and water protection movements of communities currently grappling with the climate crisis, and actively reviving, strengthening, and implementing solutions.

The curators convened a Water Think Tank bringing together Dr. Kelsey Leonard, a member of the Shinnecock Nation, a water protector, and an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Environment at the University of Waterloo in Canada; Carolina Caycedo, a multidisciplinary British-Colombian artist and activist primarily concerned with the ecological and social implications of dam constructions and removals in the Americas; and Oladosu Titilope Adenike, a climate activist and ecofeminist who advocates for the restoration of Lake Chad and the security and livelihoods of women and girls in the region. The one-year cooperation included four planned meetings, one in-person meeting in Hamburg for one week, and three digital meetings via Zoom.

For their participation, the knowledge bearers received an honorarium, along with coverage for travel expenses, accommodation, visa costs, and daily allowances. They contributed to the development of the exhibition concept, assisted in selecting examples from the collections for display, advised on the exhibition design, and facilitated contacts with a range of artists, designers, curators, and grassroots organizations now featured in the exhibition. Together, it was decided that the Think Tank would also contribute to the exhibition catalogue and the members were invited to the opening and accompanying events.

The curatorial principle was to prioritize the voices of the Water Think Tank, which meant listening to and advocating for their preferences, even if the museum had previously approached things differently. Given the colonial legacies of the museum's collections, the Water Think tank requested that the descendants of the communities that had produced the object be contacted, before they were displayed in the exhibition that had produced the objects to be displayed in the exhibition. They sought permission to showcase them or invited the community members to share their knowledge or thoughts. However, due to various histories of acquisition or appropriation and intermittent museum documentation, this was not possible for many examples from the collection.

The project illustrates that the (self) understanding of the role of curators has changed. The curators have relinquished interpretive authority and invited many voices. This also includes confronting privilege as white trustees of a powerful institution. The meeting in person was essential for building a trusting relationship, which is needed for such an intense and sensitive collaboration. The relationship of trust is so important because the process of coming to terms with colonial heritage is very painful – especially for those affected, who often can never be fully prepared for what awaits them here in the collections.

The project was funded by 'Taking Care: Ethnographic and World Cultures Museums as Spaces of Care' (2019–2023).

LEARNING

Engaging the source communities required the curators to relinquish control over the exhibition design and open up space for alternative stories within the exhibition.

While surrendering control is often seen as a risk to the integrity of collections, here it helped to build relationships and ensure the collection's future value.

Through ethical engagement with stakeholders, the collection acted as a catalyst for (re)discovering, co-creating and publicly sharing different ways of knowing and being. This way, the objects can help address historical collections and be used to explore pressing social issues today.

Further reading

Nowak, K.; Wild, J. (eds.) 2023: Water Messages. Catalog for the exhibition. Hamburg: Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt.

Taking Care project, the official website, <https://takingcareproject.eu/>

Exhibition Water Messages, MARKK official website, <https://markk-hamburg.de/ausstellungen/wasser-botschaften/>



How can collections and archives be utilized both to **reconstruct and challenge historical narratives**, as well as to **envision alternative futures**?



How can we **harness the power of art** to convey historical context and complex narratives within an object's story?

Archives, Potentiality, and Future Visions: The Case of *Partizanka*

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CHALLENGES

- Curatorial practice as an ethical intervention into contested moments of history
- Activating the political potential of the archive
- Future-oriented counter-archiving



Installation view of the exhibition *I'll open the door straight, dead straight into the fire*, State of Concept Athens, 2019. Available at: <https://stateofconcept.org/exhibition/i-ll-open-the-door-straight-dead-straight-into-the-fire/>

In the post-Yugoslavian context, revisionist memory strategies hold sway. They are characterized by allegations of totalitarian tendencies, the erosion of Partisan symbolic production through nostalgia, and the normalization of narratives of national hatred and reconciliation. Partisan art, characterized by its collective and engaged ethos as its theoretical, artistic and political foundation can counter this ideological landscape in an international contemporary context.

To illustrate how curatorial practice can address ethical tensions in historical contexts effectively, I introduce the 2019 exhibition "I'll Open the Door Straight, Dead Straight into the Fire," curated by the collective What, How and for Whom/ WHW. The exhibition, hosted at State of Concept Athens, showcased already existing contributions from more than fourteen artists, interpreting, against a revisionist landscape, separate artistic addresses of female partisan legacy as a resisting "principle of praxis guiding the present" (WHW, 2019).

Drawing its name from a 1978 verse by the artist, actress, and anarchist Katerina Gogou, it revolves around the traces of the *partizanka*, understanding the role and representation of female partisans, bridging antifascist struggles in Yugoslavia and Greece. *Partizanka* isn't portrayed as a historical footnote or nostalgic symbol, but as a practice and representation that resonates in the present. She embodies a landscape of experiences, victories, and defeats intertwined with broader narratives of liberation, anticolonial movements, and contemporary feminist calls for societal transformation.

By reassessing *Partizanka* as contested positionality, existing as both a trace of resistance and a disposition within different temporalities of violence, WHW anticipates a radically different future, opposing localized history revisionism. This approach counters the tendency in the post-Yugoslavian context to challenge emancipatory narratives of the past, thereby actively contributing to the insurgent practice of Partisan counter-archiving. The presented artworks

reveal feminist principles of care within partisan practice. By refining and globalizing the practice, the curators effectively ward off the potential for nostalgic interpretations. This approach seeks to reframe the past, foster the creation of counter-archives, and empower communities to explore history beyond revisionist historiography, thus envisioning diverse futures.

LEARNING

The exhibition aims to address revisionist tendencies through an internationalized curatorial practice focused on generating an abundance of counter-archival memories.

By engaging with and in radical practice of care, the curators transform the political potential and possibilities of activating an archive within the community.

Further reading

Ferrarese, Estelle and Steven Corcoran, 2020, *The Fragility of Concern for Others: Adorno and the Ethics of Care*. Edinburgh University Press.

Kirn, Gal, 2016, „The Yugoslav Partisan art: introductory note“, *Slavica Tergestina* 17: 9–17.

Majewska, Ewa, 2021, *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common*. London: Verso.

Case 9 Study



How does **the (in)stability of images and objects** impact the way they are interpreted and used, as well as shape perspectives on the future of the collection?



How can we **recognize the impact of absence and erasure** on the shaping of collection narratives and representations?

Archives of Violence

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CHALLENGES

- The impact of colonial legacies on archival material
- Absence of accurate archival sources
- Addressing gaps through an emphasis on material and visual culture



Monument in the city of Bissau to memorialize the Pidjiguiti Massacre, 17 May 2023. Author: Víctor Barros.

This case study reflects research conducted at the Guinea-Bissau national archive. The collections under examination are linked to colonial history and the public memory surrounding the 1959 Pindjiguiti massacre, an incident that occurred when dockworkers initiated a strike to demand higher wages. In response, a manager summoned the Portuguese state police, who opened fire on the protesting crowd, resulting in many deaths and several wounded. The entire number of victims and injuries are unknown. The government attributed the incident to a revolutionary group and subsequently detained several of its members. This event prompted the PAIGC to abandon its campaign of nonviolent resistance, ultimately leading to the outbreak of the Guinea-Bissau War of Independence in 1963.

The primary objective of this research was to delve into the legacy of colonial violence and its impact on the collective memory of in Guinea-Bissau. It also aimed to investigate how national memory politics were managed through the production of public remembrance. Notably, information regarding the massacre was manipulated by colonial authorities, and the liberation movement also utilized the event to promote its work in various ways. This dynamic significantly influenced the construction and content of the available sources. The most pivotal primary source relies on colonial reports, and it is evident that the information within it is distorted in terms of accuracy. Additionally, some existing sources within Guinea shed light on the role of colonial power in shaping the perspective of the past, as well as how the archive collection is deeply entrenched within power relations.

This research underscores the enduring coloniality of archival materials. It is crucial to recognize that colonial archives are far from neutral, and their sources are often inadequately preserved. Many documents demand greater attention in terms of protection. This perspective facilitates an understanding of the ethical dilemmas and the diverse scales, encompassing collection care and national and transnational archival connections as a way to investigate past atrocities, such as the Pindjiguiti massacre in Guinea-Bissau.

The manipulation of colonial records, coupled with the scarcity of accurate archival sources, along with the production of collective traces, imagery, and monuments in public spaces by post-colonial Guinean authorities, served as key strategies in shaping the public remembrance of the Pindjiguiti massacre. All these aspects influenced the way in which that episode of colonial violence was represented and interpreted: the public remembrance of that colonial event was used to promote yearly the demands of Guinean urban workers for better labor conditions of life. The recollection of the past was transformed into a catalyst for sparking new demands aimed at enhancing the living conditions of the population.

LEARNING

The project draws out the importance of studying national memory projects through the archive as a collection of material culture. The archive is a source of information but the material conditions of the objects within the archive are also an important source of knowledge.

Exploring gaps and damage within the archive of postcolonial Guinea-Bissau can also serve as evidence of the violence of colonialism. It can also reveal how the colonial legacies influence the production of history taking into account the gaps existing, as well as the weight of the manipulation of information in the interpretation of some facts. This is why it's important to approach the writing sources, the printed documents produced by colonial propaganda and the ideological conditions of production of those documents critically. In some research contexts, the commemorations, the production of monuments, and the creation of images serve as crucial resources for exploring historical narratives about colonial violence and difficult past.

Further reading

Roque, Sílvia, 3 de Agosto de 1959, Massacre de Pindjiguiti, Bissau, *Esquerda*, 3. 8. 2021, <https://www.esquerda.net/dossier/3-de-agosto-de-1959-massacre-de-pindjiguiti-bissau/63784>.

Case 10 Study

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How can we **recognize the impact of absence and erasure** on the shaping of collection narratives and representations?

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What are the **power dynamics in archiving and collecting**, and how might we address these?

Heritage from Below | Drežnica: Traces and Memories

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CHALLENGES

- History from below
- Invisible (women's) histories
- Inclusivity and question of representation



Sanja Horvatinčić in conversation with Marija Vukelić, 2020. Photograph was shown at the exhibition Heritage from Below | Drežnica: Traces and Memories. Photo: Milan Radanović.

The exhibition “Heritage from Below | Drežnica: Traces and Memories”, held in 2022 at the Gallery of the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, Croatia and curated by Dr. Sanja Horvatinčić, Dr. Rui Gomes Coelho and Lujo Parežanin was the result of an international and interdisciplinary heritage project that took place in the Drežnica region in central Croatia. The community-based research project launched in 2019 and led by Dr. Horvatinčić focused on one of the most important sites of underground partisan resistance during the Second World War. It aimed to encourage new critical reflections on phenomena such as social memory and the production of heritage, while it simultaneously dealt with the pressing social issues of today, such as the contemporary treatment of people on the move and refugees, passing through a nearby migrant route.

The multi-layered exhibition corresponded to Drežnica’s equally multi-layered memorial landscapes and complex history, and was divided into four thematic trenches – Radical Care, Media of Resistance, War at Home and Shelter. Each was connected to a specific archaeological site, such as the burned down partisan Hospital no. 7, and the secret location(s) of the central technical department of the Agitprop and its underground printing services, as well as the location of former civilians’ houses, which belonged to the peasants who joined the People’s Liberation Struggle. The latter example served as a great entry and insight into the approach and methodologies used not only in the research, but also in communicating the results and ideas to the general public through the exhibition.

The common denominator connecting different problems and themes was the significant shift in focus, which was moved away from the grand (and already known) narratives and put on a lived war experience of the local population. Combining scarce archival materials, photographs and memoirs, but most importantly newfound archaeological artifacts (interpreted through the lens of post-processual archaeology) and oral sources, the history was told *from below*,

and included important testimonies of the *forgotten* children (today, 90-year-olds) that could be heard at the exhibition. In one of these testimonies, that happened almost accidentally, the illiterate Marija Vukelić told a story of her family’s wartime experience as refugees who were evacuated almost barefoot to the liberated area of Bela Krajina in Slovenia. By highlighting these significant experiences, often marginalized or entirely overlooked by official history, this exhibition not only sheds light on war-related material and cultural aspects but also raises questions about the control of social memory through dominant public narratives and heritage institutions. These frequently disregard the community's role and the often unnoticed caregiving contributions of women, which were indispensable for the flawless operation of the aforementioned forest hospital.

LEARNING

The project was based on international and interdisciplinary research, which contributed significantly to the sensitive treatment of the chosen topic.

To interpret historical events, the project team combined archival sources, photographs and memoirs, as well as archaeological artifacts and oral sources, with an emphasis on history told from below, thus enabling new insights and understandings in relation to official history.

New testimonies gathered and created for the exhibition now bolster the preexisting collections, adding new voices and perspectives.

Further reading

Horvatinčić, Sanja and Vesna Vuković, 2019, “Interview with Rui Gomes Coelho. ‘There is no Neutrality in Thinking about Heritage’”, *Etnološka tribina: godišnjak Hrvatskog etnološkog društva*, 49(42): 223–238.

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This toolkit offers an exploration of ethical challenges encountered by museum professionals and researchers engaged with archives. Each case study is presented within the context of the challenges it poses and the lessons it imparts. It underscores the undeniable reality that there is fits-all solution for the multifaceted dilemmas confronting museums and archives. Instead, this toolkit encourages the placement of ethics at the forefront of professional practice, a shift that can yield unexpectedly innovative and careful solutions. The approaches advocated here naturally vary depending on the specific circumstances. The primary aim of this toolkit is to stimulate discussion and self-examination within the day-to-day practice in museums, archives, heritage organisations and collecting institutions. It emphasizes that only through reflexive and collaborative practice can we ensure that our collections are used in an ethical, responsible, compassionate, and inclusive manner. This, in turn, can help unlock their full research and curatorial potential in the changing society today.

Conclusion

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