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From Colonial Pasts to Decolonial Futures: A Critical Examination of Community Engagement in London Museums

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Abstrakt:

In den letzten Jahrzehnten hat sich die Dekolonisierung aus akademischen Kreisen durch Aktivismus in einen breiteren öffentlichen Diskurs bewegt. Soziale Bewegungen wie "Black Lives Matter" haben das Bewusstsein für die anhaltende Gewalt der Kolonialität geschärft. Besonders im Museumsbereich sind dekoloniale Kritiken inzwischen ein weit verbreitetes Thema. Der aktuellen dekolonialen Wende ging seit den 1980er Jahren ein Übergang zum 'Community Engagement' voraus. Dies war gekennzeichnet durch eine Priorisierung von lokalem Wissen. Das Museum soll den Menschen dienen, und nicht als Instrument staatliches Wissen benutzt werden. In dieser Arbeit, die London als ehemalige imperiale Metropole in den Mittelpunkt stellt, wird versucht, die Nuancen der Dekolonisierung im städtischen Museumskontext zu ergründen. Dadurch werden die zwei Fragen beantwortet, 1) wie verstehen und angehen Museen die Bürgerbeteiligung, und wie werden diese von den in diesem Sektor Tätigen erlebt, und 2) inwieweit Praktiken der Bürgerbeteiligung mit der Dekolonisierung verbunden sind. Mit Hilfe einer qualitativen Datenmethodik, die sich aus der Analyse von Dokumenten und Experteninterviews zusammensetzt, wird die Forschung des Museumssektor in London untersuchen. Durch die Analyse von Community-Engagement und ko-kuratorischen Praktiken zur Unterbrechung typischer Machtverhältnisse, wird die Forschung versuchen, zwei bisher getrennte Stränge zu integrieren. Diese Konzepte sind bisher im Kontext des Vereinigten Königreichs nicht untersucht worden. Im Allgemeinen wurde der Dekolonisierung in Gegenden ohne unmittelbare indigene Bevölkerung weniger Aufmerksamkeit geschenkt, und es wurden eher vereinfachte Figurationen der Dekolonisierung entwickelt. Die Ergebnisse werden zu einem besseren Verständnis dessen beitragen, wie museale Dekolonisierung im Kontext ehemaliger kolonialer Zentren - wie sie in ganz Europa existieren - aussehen könnte und möglicherweise sollte.

Abstract:

Decolonisation as a catalyst for activism in the past decade has propelled the concept from academic circles into the wider public discourse. Rising tensions in the context of social movements like #BlackLivesMatter, have given rise to a widespread awareness of the damaging colonial logics that widely permeate institutions across the globe. In the museum sector, decolonial critiques have become common-place. Incidentally, the current decolonial turn was preceded by a transition to community engagement from the 1980s onwards. This was marked by a prioritisation of local knowledge towards a museum that serves the people, rather than as a tool of top-down state narratives. This thesis - centring London as a former Imperial metropolis - seeks to grapple with the nuance of decolonisation in the urban museum context by answering 1) how museums understand and approach community engagement practices, and how these are experienced by those working in the sector, and 2) to what extent are community engagement practices linked to decolonisation. Using a qualitative data methodology comprised of document analysis and expert interviews, the research will explore the museum sector in London. Significantly, the research will seek to integrate two previously separate strands through its analysis of community engagement and co-curatorial practices as measures that seek to disrupt typical power relations *as a means of* decolonisation. These concepts have heretofore remained unstudied in the context of the UK. In general, decolonisation in geographies with no immediate indigenous population have received less attention and more simplified figurations of decolonisation. The findings will contribute to a better understanding of what museal decolonisation in the context of former colonial centres - as they exist across Europe - could, and possibly should, look like.

Keywords:

Decolonisation, colonial heritage, knowledge, community engagement, museums, local authority museums, national museums, imperial London, sectoral change, activism, institutional change, urban history

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Preface

The museum has always held a special significance for me personally: the destination of school trips as a child, filled with a mixture of awe and confusion, during adolescence losing interest in the often rigid and formal categorisations, to again begin rediscovering the quiet and peaceful trance of the undiscovered as a young adult. The contents of the museum has always felt like an immersive encyclopaedia, a place to learn about the truths of the world, I imagine this is how many are used to thinking about museums. Coming to terms with the fact that museums, while striving for objectivity have often been anything but - even instruments in the machine of systemic violence - has been a disappointing revelation. Museums, like all institutions, have not remained untouched by the hands of our capitalist, colonial patriarchy. As much as this research is a piece of academic writing, it is equally the product of a personal gripe and desire to better understand in what ways we have power to shape the institutions around us, as they ultimately shape us back.

Born and raised in North East London, I have been visiting many of the museums included in this work for years. To some extent I feel intimately tied to these institutions, having provided free, safe and accessible sites for myself and friends to exist and take up space when the rest of society was not so accepting. Young people are often seen as nuisance disturbances. Museums and galleries in contrast have demonstrated an active interest in the engagement of young people. Over a decade of consistent school trips fostered a feeling of acceptance and familiarity. These spaces encouraged young people to learn, in a way that differed from the typical teacher-student teaching methodology. Museums allowed us to feel as if we could choose what we wanted to learn more about, and provided a level of pedagogical autonomy and freedom. They also allowed us to pretend we were grown-ups.

This study is the product of this long-standing interest in the elusive gallery and museum space. The first substantive piece of work I ever wrote, my bachelor dissertation, was focused in Berlin and was a qualitative study on the navigation of the art scene by Turkish diaspora artists. The undeniable political potential of art, set within the realms of an often constrictive and thus limiting institutional and cultural framework made for a complex case which solidified my interest in this field. A further degree in cultural studies brought me closer to concepts of decolonisation and mastery. The following work is a culmination of my previous interests and the lessons of the last two years of study abroad applied to my home-town.

Contents Page

Table of Figures

all illustrations by @art.amina7890

- The British Museum -

Chapter 1.
Introduction

Reckoning with the horrors of our collective pasts and the legacies that they have wrought into our present, is one of the greatest sociocultural challenges of our time. Modern societies can hardly claim to stand for principles of equality and human rights when the systems on which Western society is built, both material and immaterial, speak to the contrary. The dismantling of these systems does not come without its challenges. The complex nature of this kind of power speaks to the complexity of its collapse. How can modern societies challenge the past in order to build new futures? Whatever the context may be, the responsibility lies with us to deal with it now. This sentiment is the fundamental concern of decolonisation, whose aim is to free institutions of the grips that centuries of colonial rule have imprinted onto the foundations of the world in which we live. The museum, an institution shaped by Empire not only in its physical form but also in its production of knowledge and understanding, is hence the primary site of analysis for this thesis. This work will consider the practical challenges of implementing an ideology such as decolonisation in the museum in the capital of one of the world's former largest Empires: London.

More specifically, this thesis seeks to explore practices of community engagement in the museum through this critical decolonial lens. Community engagement is arguably one of the most influential museological phenomena of recent decades, infiltrating museums and galleries across the world with its focus on connecting museums with local communities. The ethic of community engagement allows communities to shape museums, facilitating them to play a central role in determining the cultural offer of the museum. During an interview with a Senior Curator at the Museum of London, he mentioned during discussion: If the majority of the population is not represented in the museum, this poses the question *what community does the museum represent?* This question highlights the imperative of community engagement as a cornerstone of modern museology. Local history museums can hardly go on representing and exhibiting history without consulting those who have experienced it themselves.

Despite its archaic history, the museum's role in the city is unique. It is simultaneously a site of education and art, combining sensory tools to convey a message, tell a story. The fact that for centuries, the museum was telling a very specific kind of story, is beginning to be challenged. Community engagement and decolonisation have been linked inexplicably in former settler colonial contexts where native populations directly oppose colonial narratives and institutional power structures. In the Canadian and Australian context especially community engagement is increasingly understood as a method to enact decolonial practice. However, these approaches have not been conceptually linked in the context of the former Imperial centre. The purpose of this research is to understand more closely what community engagement in London looks like, and it what ways these processes could be relevant to the broader decolonial approach for museums.

The museum was chosen due to its unique role in society as well as its capacity to shape an urban area. During a time where arts institutions are facing life-threatening budget cuts, the museum is a symbol of what our societies are built on and should represent what we strive towards. Museums are often a point of collaboration between state, private actors and individuals and are meant to be *for* the people - this breadth of stakeholders in one institution makes for an engaging case.

Providing spaces that can be appropriated by people for the people is something that is increasingly under threat in the landscape of neoliberalism. Museums in London which are free to enter and have kept their doors open to the public, seek connection to the urban fabric of the city. Throngs of pedestrians leave and enter museums from the streets of London every day. In a context of dwindling public (authentic, not pseudo-public) spaces and growing marketisation and gentrification of the spaces that do remain, we have borne witness to the gradual destruction of the social infrastructure that makes cities special. Places that allow for spontaneity and encounter with strangers are the backbone of dynamic urban space. As a public institution whose doors are open to all, the museum and spaces like it are becoming increasingly rare.

Given that *decolonisation is not a metaphor* (Tuck and Yang, 2012), the focus on both the immaterial and material is imperative. Focusing solely on discursive changes can lead to misappropriation and even dilution of the terms. Importantly, materiality and immateriality will recur as themes within this work, engaging with the museum both physically and ideologically. The museum's intersection at the material and immaterial makes it an ideal locale to study the both real and imagined colonial remnants of the past. From their collections and physical infrastructure that can be touched in space, to their statements and texts which can only be read and understood, the museum is a rich geographical microcosm at which to view the effects of a colonial system, and conversely the challenges to this system.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Questions

(ideal condition) Socio-cultural infrastructures like museums work collaboratively with their local communities, creating reciprocal relationships of respect and power between community members and museum workers. Museums facilitate space for marginalised communities to display and tell their stories to the wider population. Through collaboration marginalised community members feel empowered, forge new social networks, and contribute to the archiving of urban histories. Through these practices the hierarchical and rigid structure of the museum is challenged in a way that redistributes power.

(real condition) The colonial histories of museums remain entrenched within the practice and its institutions, and requires active work to be challenged. This legacy has influenced how information is relayed, and *who* has the power to shape the narratives of exhibitions. The inherent profit-driven reality of many museums means that initiatives that appear to be progressive can be an attempt at a new marketing strategy rather than challenging the status quo. Community engagement and decolonisation attempts are largely isolated to individual exhibitions and events rather than affecting the institutional structure of the museum.

(the consequences) Lack of sincere and well thought-out community engagement and decolonisation practices do not challenge entrenched power relations. Many museums do not attempt to actively challenge their problematic pasts and presents, and where seemingly progressive changes are being made, these must also be more closely examined to avoid tokenism.

Decolonisation of institutions at large has become a popular topic in academic circles and beyond. Particularly in the museum space, the notion that collections should become decolonised has taken hold, alongside the increasing inclusion of community or bottom-up perspectives. However, the wide use of these buzz-words brings the threat that they lose their meaning altogether. What do museums mean when they bring up decolonisation and community engagement, and to what extent is this new wave actually impacting the ways that museums undertake curatorial work and envision their role in society. The museum is essentially an institution of knowledge and education within the city, hence understanding who has the power to decide what stories are told here, and the factors affecting this reality, is significant.

Research in this particular geographical context is important, as a majority of studies focusing on decolonisation of museums and other institutions in the urban context look at cities with settler colonial histories, leaving the metropoles where the world's colonial empires were born comparatively under researched. Community engagement as a tool for decolonisation has not been researched in the context of the UK. Additionally, there are few studies that have approached the museum from the vantage point of a sector-wide analysis, giving a broader overview to the challenges that stakeholders face.

Firstly, I aim to answer the following:

1a: How do London museums *understand* and *approach* strategies of community engagement?

This question will seek to uncover understandings of community engagement, processes, stakeholders, and the methods used by museums in these approaches. What does community engagement actually involve? A firmer grasp on the process of community engagement is required in order to conceptually link these to theories of decolonisation. In order to gain a closer understanding of the more personal aspects of the work, as a subquestion I will answer:

1b: What are the key stakeholders' experience with the implementation of these strategies?

Finally, the thesis will address the primary theoretical question:

2: To what extent are these strategies and their implementation linked to decolonisation?

This question will consider to what extent community engagement has been adopted as a tool of decolonisation in London museums, and how. Additionally the findings will explore external factors that may have affected the uptake of a decolonial agenda in the museum sector, to gain a deeper knowledge on the status of decolonisation as a movement for sectoral change, and the elements that are affecting this kind of reform.

1.3 structure

The thesis will be structured as follows. The following chapter will review the literature of all the relevant concepts, and frame them within the wider academic context. The review begins with the concept of decolonisation and traces through the colonial history of museums to the emergence of community engagement and new practical approaches to reform. The efficacy of

certain decolonisation approaches are framed within contemporary debates, and community engagement is also considered in the context of the UK.

Chapter 3 is the methodology, which outlines the approach to the study. This includes the theoretical framework and research standpoint, and the rationale for the case city selection as well as the museum selection. The methodology then goes on to outline the methods for data collection and data analysis, and finish with a reflection on the methodological limitations of the study.

Chapter 4 initiates the presentation of the findings alongside a preliminary analysis of the results. Findings are divided into the three main research questions, the first two relating to community engagement, and the final question exploring the relation to decolonisation.

The discussion in chapter 5 considers the results from the findings in relation to the broad research aims in order to answer the research questions. Links to the literature are also made here in order to place the findings within the broader academic context.

Chapter 2.
Literature Review

- The Whitechapel Gallery -

The purpose of this literature review is to lay the parameters of this thesis, and introduce the main concepts and ideas that will be discussed throughout, as well as the debates surrounding these issues predominantly within, but not limited to, academic circles. The following review begins by tracing the journey of decolonisation as a discourse through the 1960s to present day, and how it has begun to take shape as a guiding framework for institutions seeking to address their colonial pasts. The discussion will then pivot to a history of the museum as a colonial institution, placed in the context of the UK and the role museums played in nation-building more widely. Subsequently the contemporary landscape of museums in the 21st century is explored and analysed, unpacking how museums have sought to reassert themselves and their position in society. Finally, the review focuses on strategies implemented by museums in an attempt to change. These include how the decolonisation discourse has begun to impact museums, followed by the turn to community engagement, and the ways that these concepts have been operationalised in the museum space, considering their successes and general critiques.

2.1 Decolonisation: From Armchairs to Activism

Decolonisation has become a popular ideological concept particularly over the past decade, where it has been thrown into mainstream usage through social movements and activists. This thesis explores decolonisation as the process of challenging colonial epistemological and ideological legacies, as well as what Quijano (1993) terms the coloniality of power. The term has not always been understood in this way, and the shift towards this particular understanding represents a widespread acknowledgement of the work that remains to be done in the way of dealing with our colonial pasts. The following paragraphs will trace the origins of decolonisation, from its original usage, why it is necessary, what it means epistemologically, to how academic fields have interpreted and sought to implement changes in order to turn theory into practice.

Decolonisation first emerged as a concept to describe the process by which formerly colonised nations became independent nation-states (White, 1999; Bogaerts and Raben, 2012). The term was thus popularly used to describe the period from the late 1950s until early 1990s, overlapping with the Cold War, and is still taught in this way today. This thesis however looks at the other less tangible understanding of decolonisation, which in some ways lies directly at odds with the former definition. Prominent authors such as Fanon (2002 [1962]) and Cesaire (2000 [1950]) published books to the damaging psychological and ideological effects of colonialism beyond the immanent material forces at hand in colonies. As Grosfoguel suggests, 'one of the most powerful myths of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to the decolonization of the world' (2007: 219). The work of these thinkers was paramount in underlining how colonialism was far more than just a system of power and had become a global ideological project with far reaching consequences that would not end with the independence of former colonies. Thinkers such as Said (1978) and Bhabha (1990) would go on to contribute to the adjacent field of Postcolonialism, which similarly denounces colonialism but with a stronger emphasis on the cultural conditions and effects that it has produced. In the context of the US, notably hooks (1992) directly challenges the 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy', and encourages her readers to do the same. Although not explicitly decolonial, parallel thinkers

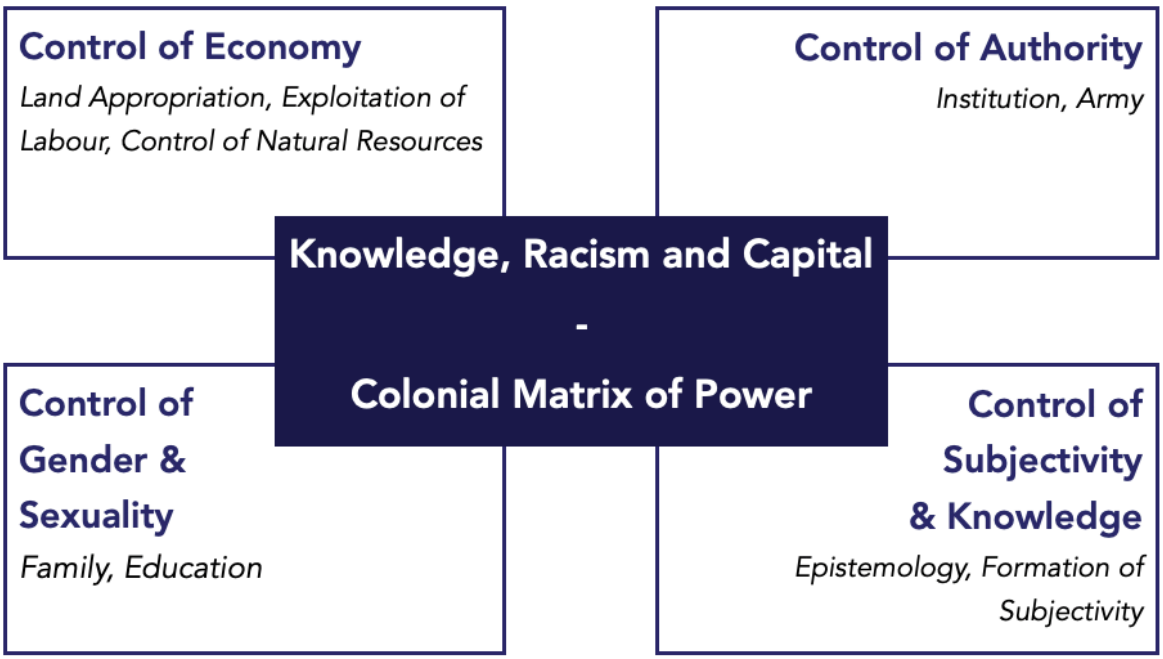

Figure 1: The Colonial Matrix of Power (Quijano, 2000) and described by Mignolo (2007b)

such as Davis (1981) and Crenshaw (1989) highlight the significance of looking at overlapping systems of oppression such as race, gender and sexuality *together*, as opposed to separately. The latter half of the 20th century saw the emergence of many different, but often aligned fields of gender studies, race studies, postcolonial studies, indigenous studies etc which often inform decolonial discourses.

Decolonisation is widely understood as a fundamental critique of colonialism and its ideologies, however for decolonisation to be meaningful, an in depth understanding of colonial power is needed. Implementing Quijano (2000) and Mignolo's (2007) configuration of the colonial matrix of power (CMP, see Figure 1), and the coloniality of power, respectively, deepen the configuration of this dynamic of power and what exactly it entails. Mignolo (2007b) describes Quijano's CMP as a power structure interlinking four domains: control of economy, control of authority, control of gender and sexuality and control of subjectivity and knowledge, (see Figure X).

For Quijano and Mignolo, the very nature of power itself is colonial, whereby hierarchies and systems of power are inherently linked to the idea of furthering modernity's imperial project, as 'there is no modernity without coloniality' (Mignolo, 2007a: 476). Similarly to development discourse which places countries in a hierarchy based on their adherence to a Western model of growth (c.f. Rostow 1959), coloniality values cultures based on their proximity to whiteness (Dantzler, 2021). Even the reinforcement of these different categories by decolonial discourse is considered detrimental, as Gopal (2021:894) argues that both the 'settler' and 'native' are subjective categories requiring dismantling. Looking at systems of power is thus central to a decolonisation approach, particularly in educated liberal contexts, where few would consider themselves overtly racist, yet 'remain complicit with Eurocentric knowledge, imperialist

pedagogies and research methodologies, while perpetuating prejudicial practices in hiring, promotion and pay' (Liu, 2019: 87).

Despite commonalities, understandings of decolonisation vary based on geographical context. Countries with Indigenous populations that experienced settler colonialism like Australia, New Zealand and Canada, and to a lesser extent the US, view decolonisation predominantly through the lens of Indigeneity, which differs from understandings in the UK (Jivraj, 2020:11). Linda Tuhiwai-Smith for example, author of *Decolonising Methodologies* (1999), criticises western research practices and emphasised the significance of Indigenous people doing research about themselves as opposed to being the subjects of white people. Sium et al (2012) underpin that 'decolonization is a messy, dynamic, and contradictory process', however that should not deter us from pursuing it. A look into practices particularly in the Western Pacific is a call to action, as Sium et al highlight how decolonising geographies for many, are not merely an epistemic project, but one about land, territory and rights.

As a currently predominantly epistemic project, decolonisation has found popularity amongst activists, grassroots movements and academic staff at universities. Universities constantly produce and shape current discourses through their teaching practices, diversifying the content at these institutions has been an initial target of many 'Decolonise the curriculum' movements. These activists also tend to highlight the significance of language as a tool of power and potential change. Ngūgī wa Thiong'o, author of *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) argues that language is fundamental to change, and highlights the importance of multilingualism in challenging the CMP. As public discourse moves towards functioning purely in English, many cultural nuances are lost which end up reinforcing the same stories and locales, instead he encourages writers to write in their mother tongues. Similarly, Mignolo also highlights the grammar of decolonisation, which he describes as 'learning to unlearn' (2007a: 485). The development of a particular discourse of decolonisation, changing the language we use and the knowledge we share and produce is clearly one facet of decolonising practice. However Jivraj warns that there is a tendency to focus on 'curricular concerns rather than the societal and structural factors that perpetuate racial inequalities' (2020: 10). As Sium et al caution: decolonisation is a 'messy, dynamic, and contradictory process' (2012: II). In the same way that decolonisation of language is necessary, it can also be utilised to avoid a tangible restructuring of power relations, and can hence be contradictory.

Applying a theoretical guiding principle such as decolonisation to an institutional framework is not a straightforward process. The adoption of decolonisation has heretofore been implemented predominantly in higher educational settings, which will now be briefly explored as an example. There are a variety of approaches institutions can take to effectuate decolonial reform. In the UK, Jivraj notes that a primary concern of universities should be the differing attainment levels of white and 'black and ethnic minority' students, who are less likely to obtain a good degree than their white peers (2020:2-3). In retaliation of the elitist university system, the UK and USA witnessed the emergence of the Antiuniversity and the Free University during the 1960s-70s, respectively. They saw themselves as part of a global movement of alternative studies (Mirzeoff, 2017); and by providing free and more unconventional classes, were in some ways

groundbreaking in their rejection of the institutional norms. Insofar as judging the differing actions that educational institutions can take towards decolonisation, Andreotti et al. (2015) mapped a range of these approaches. The authors observe four categories of reform: 'everything is awesome', 'soft-reform', 'radical-reform' and 'beyond-reform' (see Figure 2). The table shows that radical-reform requires a centring and redistribution of existing resources, while the furthest articulation of decolonisation is a recognition that our existing educational institutions are not adequate in facilitating a decolonial educational space. As the beyond-reform space highlights, a decolonial approach must also challenge the workings of the system itself and not only focus on *what* is taught; Gopal concurs, "decolonisation cannot take place just in the classroom, and […] a singular focus on decolonising the mind runs the risk of standing in for decolonisation itself (2021: 884).

Space	**Meaning of decolonization**	**Practice**
Everything is awesome	no recognition of decolonization as a desirable project	no decolonizing practices required
Soft-reform	(no recognition of decolonization as a desirable project, but) increased access / conditional inclusion into mainstream	providing additional resources to Indigenous, racialized, low-income, and first-generation students, so as to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and cultural capital to excel according to existing institutional standards
Radical-reform *(recognition of epistemological dominance)*	recognition, representation, redistribution, voice, reconciliation	centre and empower marginalized groups, and redistribute and re-appropriate material resources
Beyond-reform *(recognition of ontological and metaphysical enclosures)*	dismantling of modernity's systematic violences (capitalism, colonialism, racism, heteropatriarchy, nation-state formation)	subversive educational use of spaces and resources, hacking, hospicing

Figure 2: 'Different articulations of decolonization in HE' - source: Andreotti et al. (2015)

Academics and higher education institutions often struggle with propelling ideas into the mainstream beyond universities and its circles. Decolonisation as a concept, however, has readily been adopted beyond this context predominantly due to work by social movements and activists, lending to its continued global relevance. The decolonise the university movement has been around since 2011 following a Malaysian conference on the same topic (Charles, 2019). However, the 2015 #RhodesMustFall movement by student activist Kamanzi at the University of Cape Town is widely recognised as the first popular incident of decolonial activism (Jansen, 2019; Nyamnjoh, 2016). The subsequent calls for decolonisation would soon ricochet across the world. In 2018 popular art magazine Frieze dedicated an issue to the topic titled *Decolonizing Cultural Institutions: Where do we go from here?*, where editors Larios and Sherlock observe that 'organizations of all scales are asking questions about how to "decolonize" collections, exhibitions

and reading lists' (2018: 14). In the same year, the release of *Black Panther* (2018) brought the notion of museal decolonisation through restitution to popular audiences. The film's (supposed) antagonist Killmonger confronts a curator, in what is hinted at being the British Museum, about the artefacts in the museum, and ends up killing the curator and taking the object stating, "How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it like they took everything else?". D'Souza (2018) credits this scene to the subsequent outcry at the announcement of two white faculty members at the Brooklyn museum later that same year. The critics' point was the same as that from the movie, "black people know more about African culture than white colonizers ever will" (120). If decolonisation hadn't already reached the global stage by this point, the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests would guarantee that it did. With a focus on institutionalised racism in law enforcement, culminating in a range of protests involving statue toppling (Abraham, 2021), BLM shone the light on systemic racism across society as a whole. In this sense the ideological weight of decolonisation is significant, demonstrated by its ability to transcend academic worlds and social movements into the mainstream. Consequently, the notion of decolonisation whether restitution or institutional dismantling has now entered public discourse.

Given the breadth of understandings that can come under the umbrella of decolonisation it is not surprising that its adoption has been so widespread. The word conjures direct connotations of resistance and a challenge to a colonial past, manifesting in many different iterations, contexts and intensities. For this work, understanding the spectrum of 'decolonisations' is important, as museums are both institutions of knowledge and representation, as well as playing a complex role in society at large. The following section will explore the museal past, delving into the intertwined history of empire and museums, grounding the discussion for why decolonisation of these sites is necessary and what form this may take.

2.2 Museums: Past and Present

2.2.1 The Interwoven History of Empire and Museums

This section explores the history of museums in the context of the UK Empire to understand why decolonisation discourse has become prevalent in the museum sector. The status of museums within contemporary society cannot be understood without a look into the past. The relevance of colonialism to the museum industry stems from the deeply interlinking histories of colonial expansion abroad, the Enlightenment and sharing of knowledge, and the resulting projects of spreading cultural ideologies at home, particularly in the imperial capital. This review will explore the historic context of museums, especially as it pertains to the case city, London. As a state that used to control one of the world's largest empires - a title many proudly continue to identify with - Britain is torn, like many societies, between representing its past and its uncertain future. The following section looks at the museum as a cultural tool of the British Empire in its metropolitan home, London.

Although empires are commonly associated with military and naval dominance and control in terms of physical force, the significance of cultural violence as part of colonial expansion cannot

be understated. In the context of the CMP, museums certainly fall under the category of authority over subjectivity and knowledge, as places where norms are taught and reinforced. Culture was used both as a product (material) and as a vessel (immaterial) through which to convey imperial propaganda. Anderson with his notion of *Imagined Communities* (1983) emphasises the importance of having common points of association to which people within a nation can relate. Commonly understood cultural references are an effective tool in the creation of these *imagined communities*, and have therefore always been utilised by governments and nations trying to convey a particular message. Hanna (2017) describes the 1800s as a century of musical nationalism, and Ghuman (2014) similarly notes how in the early 1900s writers, travellers and artists brought stories and songs from faraway lands closer to home. It is argued by Richards (2001: 10) that every aspect of popular culture was contrived to instil pride in the British imperial achievement. Many artistic works produced during this time would form the basis for Said's now infamous analysis in *Orientalism* (1978), the main takeaway being that 'non-Western' cultures were *other* and ultimately inferior to that of the empirical centres. Many of the cultural artefacts produced during this time remain in museums today, and although they are relics of the past they continue to be significant.

A key component of this imperial cultural project were exhibitions and museums. The traditional museum was born out of sixteenth century 'cabinet of curiosities' filled with treasures from the 'new found worlds' (Onciul, 2015: 4). Longair and McAleer (2016) discuss the significance of the role of museums in constructing the national image of the Empire in Britain and how they function as a) repositories for objects, and b) cultural institutions for conveying knowledge, the politics of culture, and the formation of identities throughout the British Empire. To this effect, the British government opened the British Museum in 1759, groundbreaking in its double function as museum and library, and which in principle had public access (Simmons 1976). As far as being open to the public, Alexander (2020:85) maintains that 'the London museums have roots in Victorian ideals of culture as a civilising mission', and were thus used as a public cultural gift imparted unto the general population. Accordingly, the 1753 Act of Parliament laid down that 'all studious and curious' people were to be given entrance to the British Museum, however Crook (1972) notes a distinction made between 'the People and the Populace', indicating that access was not far-reaching. In 1804 a proposal for liberalising the admission of readers was put under consideration: 'it might be dangerous, in so populous a metropolis as London, to admit perfect strangers' (Miller, 1973: 92). While in principle the government favoured a liberal approach that they considered inclusive, it is clear that in practice this was not the case.

Museums were not to remain exclusive to the elite for very long. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was visited by over six million people (Auerbach, 1999), and the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886 was attended by more than five million people (Schneer, 1990). From the 18th to the 19th Century there was an observable expansion in the visitor base at these institutions, although working classes still remained distinctly absent. The Great Exhibition is widely cited as a 'testament to the middle class' (ironically leaving out the working classes who were responsible for Britain's ascendancy) and was simultaneously intended as a celebration of Britain as an industrialising global pioneer (Auerbach, 1999: 2). The goal was an establishment of British superiority, as the

early colonial museums often reflected the arrogance of their creators, seeking to demonstrate their superiority over the *Other* (Mackenzie, 2009).

The museum however is not an homogenous institution, there are different typologies of museums each with their own history. Procter (2021) provides four main categories of museum: the palace, the classroom, the memorial and the playground. The two most relevant here are the Palace and Classroom museum. Palaces - or town houses (Simmons, 1976) - are comprised of collections that used to be owned by individuals, originally displayed in royal and aristocratic homes. In London, the Soane's museum is an epitome of the Palace, which is a gallery in the home of a former collector, preserved to this day in the way he left it. Procter argues that these collectors' 'influence is still felt heavily in museums today, and it is their tastes and desires that shaped the institutions we still live with' (2021: 18). In contrast, the Classroom is less a site of eccentric personal tastes, and rather driven by a need to educate the public, adhering to principles of classification and organisation of objects (Geoghagen, 2010: 1462). Procter argues that the main distinguishing feature between these two is that in the Classroom, 'strains of artistic nationalism come to the fore' (60), and is specifically designed to represent a united image of a nation (c.f. Anderson), as opposed to a reflection of personal taste. In London this distinction is however somewhat blurry, as previous private collections have been acquired by Classroom museums - such as the British Museum purchasing the collection of Sir Hans Sloane - and thus inadvertently still reflect these collectors' tastes.

A look into the history of museums in the context of London brings to light a world of tastes, cultural capital, elitism, and nationalistic pride. At the very least, the museums and exhibitions of the time were a stage for Britain to define itself as a nation. They were a tool used by the government to convey the greatness of Britain and its empire. Criticisms that the institutions founded during this time may continue to uphold colonial practices and systems - given the symbiotic relationship between Empire and museums - are not unreasonable. The following section will explore where museums are today.

2.2.2 Challenges Facing Museums in a Contemporary Context

In present day, museums have undergone changes from the museological tradition set in the previous section, yet their history as colonial institutions lives on - sometimes literally, as many collections pillaged and stolen during Empire remain intact. Historically, museums tended to be in accordance with state versions of the past, and thus conveyed 'institutional knowledge' - Clopot et al., (2012) argue that today they are more likely to be aligned with 'community' and 'indigenous' knowledge (Onciul, 2015). The following chapter will explore the contemporary museum, the changes they have implemented and the role they play within society today, as 'key locations where identity politics and efforts to (re)claim culture and history play out' (ibid: 3).

As of 2022, the International Council of Museums states:

> 'A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and

> sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing'.

The notion that museums are spaces of inclusion is heavily debated, as established in the previous section the history of museums was based on its representation of otherness (Bennett, 1999), particularly in ethnographic museums (Karp and Kratz, 2000). Despite museums seeming impartial in their displays, 'everything in a museum is political, because it is shaped by the politics of the world that made it' (Procter, 2021: 12); museums can be seen as a microcosm of a nation at a particular time, whose public discourses can be read through its displays.

As state institutions, the restructuring of government and private actors over the past decades under neoliberalism have therefore also trickled down into museum spaces. Alexander (2020) notes how museums have become increasingly marketised since the incumbency of Thatcher, and that this has realistically led to a trade off between best representing the community and marketing, especially as international tourists comprise a large proportion of visitors. There has been an observed shift in seeing those coming to museums and customers rather than visitors. Alexander argues that this change has broadened museums' audiences, and that what was originally considered 'high culture' (c.f Bourdieu, 1984) is now more widely accessible than before, although spatial inequalities do continue to affect equal access (Brook, 2016). As museum audiences have broadened, so too then have their collections. In many ways this shift therefore benefits audiences as museums cannot exist outside public scrutiny, 'more and more marketers and managers are ensuring that these institutions have become outward-facing and driven by public demand, rather than inward-looking and conservation focused' (Martin, 2002: 3). There are also tensions between what Zolberg (1986: 184) argues are populist and elitist interests: the former wanting to democratise access to the fine art world and activate its educational function while the latter want to continue to collect, preserve and study artworks. Museums clearly straddle the fine line between upholding its government mandated principles and wanting to best market itself hence, 'institutions can no longer maintain the kind of austere disdain they have held for so long' (Procter, 2021: 166).

Given that museums are now increasingly at the whim of public opinion and have generally undertaken the task as educational institutions, how is it that they continue to uphold principles that require decolonisation? Sandell (2005: 185) accredits the hierarchical arrangement of objects, the presentation of certain biased histories and the absence of cultural difference as technologies through which museums have created systems of othering, disempowerment and oppression. Similarly, Mirzeoff critically observes the presence of Greek sculptures and architecture as a prominent feature at the entrance to many art museums, whilst 'other cultures are physically marginal within the museum space or addressed in separate buildings' (2017: 15). This hierarchy enacts implicit distinctions, whereby Greek sculptures are upheld as a 'fantasy of whiteness' (ibid). Curatorial practices that dictate the spatial configuration and representation of displays and collections, while often subtle, play a key role in how different cultures and their art are interpreted by visitors (MacLeod, 2005).

Specifically in the context of London, Hicks' (2021) damning book '*Brutish Museums*' explores the violence that continues to perpetuated by institutions such as the British Museum. Hicks emphasises the museum's failed restitution of artefacts that were either acquired through violent means during colonial times, or gifted to the museum - at the very least, the people in the lands from which they stem now want them back, and this restitution is not taking place. Procter indicates that restitution is decided by the museum's trustees, who are tightly guided by the British Museum Act of 1963, which is extremely restrictive even in cases where there may be a 'moral obligation' to do so (2021: 117). In particular the British Museum is under scrutiny for its retention of the Benin Bronzes and Greek's Parthenon/'Elgin' Marbles which have gained considerable public attention. In response, The British Museum admit that the Bronzes were acquired 'in the context of this aggressive expansion of colonial power', however they maintain that Lord Elgin's attainment of the Parthenon Marbles was entirely legal, based on an 1816 report conducted by a Parliamentary Select Committee (britishmuseum.org).

The landscape of contemporary museums is decidedly complex. Balancing educational responsibilities and visitor demands whilst raising enough income amongst funding cuts and COVID-19, as well as being sites of diversity and sustainability leaves museums under a lot of pressure to perform. Bearing the responsibility of being places where heritage is created however means that the decisions made today in state museums will be important for generations to come. Changing and diversifying current exhibitions however may not be enough towards establishing Britain as a future-oriented nation, when remnants of the colonial past continue to physically and figuratively mar these spaces. The controversial and frequently violent histories of these museums and their collections can never be erased from the past, however the curatorial choices made today can influence how we respond to these past atrocities as a nation, which will likely have far-reaching societal impacts.

2.3 Potential for Change

2.3.1 Attempting Decolonisation in the Museum

Given the relatively unstable, and often highly controversial, current status of some collections and museums, many museums are turning to the idea of decolonisation as a curatorial exercise to challenge problematic pasts and present (Lonetree, 2012; Van Broekhoven, 2019; Ariese and Wróblewska, 2021; Schoenberger, 2022). These approaches however can greatly vary and there is not a one-size-fits-all solution, as the presence of institutional coloniality is often multiply layered and many argue that true decolonisation involves systemic abolition and dismantling of these institutions altogether. Broadly speaking, recent historiography has defined decolonisation as acknowledging the impact of anti-colonial struggles and neo-colonial models of 'freedom', and incorporating social processes of re-imagining and practicing western and colonial lives after empire (Craggs and Wintle, 2016: 3). With such a multifaceted and broad concept as decolonisation, the question remains 'how do we move beyond the symbol to the thing itself' (Ndikung, 2018: 122).

The following section will explore some of the discourse surrounding these efforts of the decolonial turn in museums. This review, for the purposes of brevity and relevance, will avoid engaging deeply in literature exploring museal decolonisation in Indigenous contexts, such as in Canada and the Polynesian archipelago, although there is a breadth of work discussing these varying geographical cultural contexts (c.f. Aikau and Gonzalez, 2019). The nuance of those instances make them extremely valuable, but less directly relevant to this work, which does not directly deal with an Indigenous population.

While a designated path for decolonisation is unclear 'the first step is having open and honest dialogue, giving audiences the possibility to question ideas and representations' (Belsey, 2019: 14). A transparent approach that acknowledges rather than deflects from the past is therefore important. However, Förster (2017) emphasises the issues that can arise from focusing on the provenance of objects as she critically engages with the term. While the colonial histories of objects should not be ignored, there is a danger that focussing on this provenance defines the artefact by its acquisition into the European institution (ibid: 18). Förster questions the notion of property itself, as western discourses around these objects are grounded in notions of possession and ownership, which are rooted in European economic and legal constructions of property that may ignore sociocultural contexts that do not ascribe to this model (ibid: 19). It must be reemphasised that decolonisation is complex and not understood as a singular task but rather as a process with an unclear, non-linear trajectory.

The idea of restitution and the return of certain objects is perhaps the most familiar in regards to the topic of decolonisation of museums. Many collections especially in former imperial capitals such as London are comprised of items taken through violent means during colonial rule. Hicks argues that 'for as long as [museums] continue to display sacred and royal objects looted during colonial massacres' they cannot be just 'neutral containers' and 'custodians of heritage' (Hicks, 2020: 3). However, debates around restitution are not unanimous. Basu (2011) for example introduces the concept of 'object diaspora', informed by postcolonial studies on shared identity and third cultures, which places value on keeping objects where they are and instead shedding light onto the pathways by which they came there and continuing to forge these reciprocal links. Förster warns that while Basu's work is inspiring to curators and museum work, it can also be utilised as a rebuttal to all forms of restitution.

Efforts to change curatorial and knowledge practices however can only go so far, as Andreotti et al (2015) showed in their analysis of higher-education institutions, the final iteration of decoloniality is recognising that it is beyond-reform. An acknowledgment of the inherent coloniality within the institutional museal space means that it can never be truly decolonial. During MuseumsNext 2018 annual conference, Shaheen Kasmani discussed her frustrations co-curating *The Past is Now* exhibition at the Birmingham Museum. She communicated that while the intention was to highlight typically marginalised voices, that the existing power structures within the museum space practically hindered any decoloniality that could have potentially taken place. Kasmani additionally problematises a) the initial 'overpromising' of the control that they would have, as 'co-curation' meant community rather than collaboration and b) the unsatisfactory financial compensation. Financial compensation cannot be understated, as often 'it is project

funding which allows us the privilege of thinking beyond our everyday practice' (Belsey, 2019, p. 13). Equitable financial compensation is a necessary component of decolonial work as it addresses the contemporary imbalances that have followed as a result of colonialism.

Decolonial practices, while varied, should contain both tangible and intangible acts. There should be an epistemological reorganisation as 'we need to find new languages, new sounds, to qualify what we do' (Ndikung, 2018:123) as well as expanding who has access to this knowledge i.e. through widening archive access (Basu and De Jong, 2016). The danger remains that museums adopt the terminology of change without effecting it (Pyke, 2021), as Tuck and Yang (2012) insist, *decolonisation is not a metaphor* and should therefore be followed by *real* actions. The reformulation and sharing of power over knowledge must be accompanied by *real* actions that address material imbalances in resources, funding, and ownership. Clearly there is a vast array of work that falls under the umbrella of decolonisation, it is a continuous process, rather than a singular act. Ultimately, there is an extent to which a decolonial museum is an oxymoron and an unachievable task, as Audre Lorde (2003) urges, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'.

During the UK Museum Association's 2018 annual conference, they prompted the audience with the question ''What approaches are needed to decolonize collections over the next decade? What would this look like in your museum?'. As observed by Van Broekhoven (2019), although museums across the world have been concerning themselves with decolonisation widely since as early as the 1970s, this is the first time such a question was posed sector-wide in the context of the UK. While ethnographic museums have begun to tackle this problematic, such as the Oxford Pitt Rivers museum - which has a somewhat ground-breaking approach in the UK context for dealing with Indigenous collections - decolonisation has otherwise been slow to spread. While decolonisation is not a new discussion, it is observable that the UK has been particularly trepidatious when it comes to posing challenges to the past and seeking reform. Lynch and Alberti (2010) argue that museums, although cultural institutions with goals for inclusion, are not exempt from global economic injustice i.e. the colonial matrix of power. They note that for museums 'in Britain, this reality has its roots in Empire' (ibid: 14). Ultimately, decolonisation, concomitantly to colonisation is about power:

> The real work of colonization was and is the extraction and exploitation of resources.The flipping of existing power structures so that colonial power could sit at what was considered 'the centre'— meaning mostly white, able-bodied, cisgender, elite males. Decolonization, therefore, must do the opposite: turn the tables on the power balance, re-humanize, prioritize Indigenous and other knowledges that have been silenced and find ways to establish a new balance, one that starts from a more moral paradigm, that strives to find understanding and empathy and looks for an ethical framework of redress and repair' (Van Broekhoven, 2019: 5)

The following section will explore precisely this, a new museology approach which re-centres and seeks to redistribute power through the sharing of epistemological control.

2.3.2 Community Engagement: A Localised Approach to Museology

A central tenet of new museology, arising in response to questions about how museums are to remain relevant for new audiences alongside a malaise of other issues, is the community engagement approach. Despite Morse's (2022: 7) observation that there is no fully developed body of literature on community engagement in museum studies, this section will seek to explore exactly this. From understanding where the need for an integration of community engagement approaches came from, to the wide range of impacts these kinds of practices have not just on the individuals who participate in them, but also the wider community and museal practice in general, the following section will explore why museums are incorporating the community into what they do, and in what ways this matters. Though there is no strict definition of what community engagement is in the museum, it is usually used to refer both to a set of specific activities and practices as well as a broad approach and ethos, and is sometimes performed by staff across different teams, though it is more often the work of dedicated roles (ibid: 8).

As aforementioned, community engagement does not pertain to a singular practice or belief, but it encompasses changing the historic top-down structure of museums, and prioritising local communities, especially marginalised groups, as museum users. Onciul (2015: 1) observes that a rise of new museology in the 1980s, as part of the postmodern turn, made collaborations between museums and communities more commonplace, while the following decades also introduced an institutional reflexivity where museums considered their own role in curating, and in some respects questioned the role of curating itself (Geoghegen, 2010: 1464). The incorporation of 'other' perspectives was thus made more commonplace, also emphasising the visitors' role as an active participant in curating their own experience (Pozzi, 2023). The collaborative and community engagement approach (Taylor, 2020) as intimately tied to decolonisation has however primarily been popularised in contexts where Indigenous populations continue to live and exist (Onciul, 2015; Clopot et al., 2021). In these instances, the Native communities present a direct challenge to colonial ideologies. For Black (2012), the museum is an institution in crisis, due to the decline in demographics who historically frequented museums, and the subsequent failure to engage new generations. Community engagement is therefore also part of a shift that seeks to change the direction that museums are taking, away from institutions that create and underpin an authorised collective memory (Black, 2010, p. 5). The following will explore the multitude of ways that community engagement has been understood, and the varied effects of this approach.

A key element of the community engagement approach is its perceived benefit to the communities that museums are meant to serve - and this at a time where other social welfare is dwindling. Morse (2018, 2022) argues for museums to be seen as spaces of care, similarly for Sandell (1998, 2003) the museum plays a central role in social inclusion. Sandell (2003) summarises the multiply observed benefits of museums:

> Recent research suggests that museums can contribute towards social inclusion at individual, community and societal levels. At an individual or personal level, engagement with museums can deliver positive outcomes such as enhanced self-

> esteem, confidence and creativity. At a community level, museums can act as a catalyst for social regeneration, empowering communities to increase their self-determination and develop the confidence and skills to take greater control over their lives and the development of the neighbourhoods in which they live. Lastly, museums, through the representation of inclusive communities within collections and displays, have the potential to promote tolerance, inter-community respect and to challenge stereotypes. (45)

Occurring in concurrence with a time where social inequalities are shown to be intensifying and there are concerns about socio-cultural divides, it is no surprise that the museum has been identified by authorities as a site at which to tackle these issues.

In the context of the UK, Morse and Sandell both point to the changing context of the UK government, notably the shifts implemented under New Labour (1997-2010), and again during austerity (2010-2019) as paramount drivers in the process of increased responsibility and pressure being placed on museums. New Labour had promised increased funding and resources for museums in 1998, as they recognised their potential for education, combating social exclusion and promoting urban regeneration' (quoted in Sandell, 1998: 403). In the 1990s, New Labour's social inclusion policies reworked the role of the museum so that it played a more central role in broad social policy objectives (Morse and Munro, 2018: 7). Following the financial crisis of 2007-2008 under New Labour, the Conservative Party responded with public service budget cuts, which were shortly followed by the rhetoric of localism and the 'Big Society': an ideology that emphasised the role of community, charities, co-operatives and any other non-state actor in filling the gap left by the dwindling remnants of social welfare infrastructure. In Morse and Munro's (2018: 12) study on two museums' community engagement schemes specifically working with marginalised communities, they found that participants in community engagement projects are usually identified through existing and already established groups. Therefore, while museums undoubtedly play a role in the community as a form of welfare, their work cannot be considered to work completely independently of a wider network of pre-existing ties within and between communities. Nevertheless, the museum's isolated potential need not be undervalued: Black highlights the museum's ability to attract people who are radically different to one another, concluding that 'institutions that facilitate social, cultural and generational mixing are a core underpinning for a civil society' (2010, p. 8).

Besides the direct social impact of these projects, community engagement has also been emphasised as challenging traditional directions of knowledge (Phillips, 2003), and reframing the modus operandi of museums in general. As discussed in previous sections of this literature review, museums were key players in perpetuating nationalist ideologies, stemming from the time of Empire when many London museums were founded. Longair and McAleer argue that during this time, 'the curator had a significant impact on the ways in which Britain's imperial involvements, overseas colonial settlements, and far-flung territorial possessions were understood by the public at large' (2016: 9). The role of the curator, while often perhaps overlooked, plays a central role in this process of exhibition and knowledge dissemination for a museum. In an interview with three Asian American curators, discussing *Curation as Decolonial Practice*, Davis states that 'all of us,

curators especially, have a responsibility to consider our largely unconscious colonial inheritances, how we are complicit in perpetuating them, and how we might work to name and undo them' (Kina et al., 2002, p. 53). Integrating communities into the process of developing exhibitions is an attempt to ensure that knowledge sways more in line with the 'bottom-up' as opposed to the 'top-down' narrative. As previously mentioned, the 'museum as classroom' phenomenon proposed by Procter highlights how museums have been utilised as educational utensils. Creating exhibits in collaboration with community members can mean that previously untold 'unofficial' histories are told, and therefore accepted into the wider canon of knowledge. The imbrication of knowledge and power means that these practices of knowledge creation through exhibits can play a significant part in empowering and solidifying historically under-represented communities.

Understanding that community engagement presents the opportunity to hear previously neglected voices and stories, exhibitions created in collaboration with local communities may bring light to new stories and untold oral histories. Black has argued that 'museums not only store cultural memory, but that they are also directly involved in creating and manipulating it' (2010: 4). The knowledge shared by community members can reframe existing objects and collections in new ways. Following, Phillips (2003) observes that:

> On one level, then, the community-based exhibit serves as a kind of semiotic repair kit which attaches new meanings to objects that museum visitors have become accustomed to see exclusively through the lenses of the Western disciplines. (p. 163)

As opposed to repatriation, community engagement offers community knowledge as a way to challenge difficult histories without removing items. Concurrently, Abraham notes that the decolonial curatorial approach '[taps] into community memory as a foundational archive' (2022, p. 74). Working with the community in this context therefore offers not just a new perspective, but a mostly unrecorded history, and for many a continued lived reality.

Community engagement, as well as changing sources of knowledge, can help to highlight the inherent subjectivity and sociopolitical power of the museum. Whereas curating, coming from the latin word for *care*, was traditionally comprised of an individual presenting their point of view to an audience, community engagement encourages sharing this responsibility. Phillips argues that 'in collaboratively organised exhibits the intellectual, social, and political dynamics of these processes change in fundamental ways' (2003: 155). Similarly Clifford (1997) stresses the value of community/museum collaborations in illuminating the intercultural social relationships constructed as a result of this colonial history. Fraser and Jim (2018) also call for a rethinking of the role of the curator, instead placing the curator in conversation with the community. In this way, the role of the critical curator becomes inherently political as it involves an engagement with activism or social justice work (ibid: 6). In other words, community engagement can directly be used as an approach to address and challenge problematic histories, rework them, and reframe them as teaching moments. Therefore, the practice of community engagement is about more than just introducing new programs, but also harbours the potential to change the ways that curation itself is thought about and carried out. It is at this juncture where decolonial work and community engagement intersect at the site of the museum. A turn towards community engagement may include a sharing

of 'decision-making power' (Kina et al., 2022, p. 57), and thus represents the opportunity to disrupt the historical flow of knowledge and power.

Despite the overwhelming potential that this practice seems to have, the literature is careful to overstate the overtly radical transformative power of community engagement practices in general. Scholars recognise that community engagement is also used by museum officials who are perfectly happy with the status quo, and want to engage new audiences simply as a way to remain relevant (Simon, 2010). Lynch's 2011 report entitled *Whose cake is it anyway?*, an investigation into engagement and participation practices in 12 UK galleries and museums, highlights the many issues that communities face in community engagement practices in museums. The main findings were: a) there is often a lack of knowledge about community needs and lack of long-term commitment to change from museums, b) emphasising the significance of smaller organisations in treating community members as active partners, and c) the need for a re-appraisal of what engagement actually means. Lynch's report is also wary of the radical potential for community engagement, as there still remains room for exploitative practices that do not challenge any traditional institutional dynamics. Morse (2018), in her study with museum workers, found that understandings of community engagement differed depending on positions within the museum, be that manager, curator or outreach offer. For example Morse's results show that employees in higher ranking positions were more likely to see community engagement as a way to make collections more relevant, and therefore more visited i.e. as an effective marketing tool. Hence, Morse warns that framing community engagement as advocacy means that 'the distinction between community engagement and public relations become blurred and its potential impact muted' (2018, p. 176). Community engagement is a varied and deeply complex process, and therefore includes equally positive and negative effects in its implementation. Ultimately, a critical distance to community engagement should be retained.

In conclusion, community engagement is multifaceted and, similarly to decolonisation, can thus signify a multitude of different things. Community engagement should not be taken as a solution to the ills of outdated museums that ascribe to a certain kind of knowledge, but it is clear that where museums aim to forge collaborations with their local environment, community engagement will inevitably be part of this transition. Currently local museums are most frequently employing this kind of approach, indicative of the more interlinked relationships between community and smaller-scale museums. Nevertheless, the literature points to a broad variety of benefits that can come of this approach, both for the museum and the community - when applied properly in the right context community engagement carries potential for significantly transforming the museum and how it relates to its local peoples.

Chapter 3.
Methodology

- The Hackney Museum -

3.1 Research Standpoint / Theoretical Framework

This thesis centres decoloniality as its main theoretical framework. Decoloniality as understood by Maldonado-Torres is the 'dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world' (2011: 117). Museums as institutions of official knowledge are machines of modernity, often designed to signify societal progress. As discussed in the literature review, they are also the direct product of the colonial era, and hence require active dismantling, both in their structure and in their content. For Mignolo 'decoloniality seeks to unmask, unveil, and reveal coloniality as an underside of modernity that co-existed with its rhetoric of progress, equality, fraternity, and liberty' (2011: 159). Decolonisation does therefore not only address objects, but ways of knowing and ways of being. This expansive view of decolonisation complicates its application, but is necessary in order to not compromise the integrity of its significance and meaning. Henceforth decolonisation in the museum is understood as a complex process that challenges patterns of knowledge production and power relations as they have been inherited from colonial times. Instead decolonisation disrupts and reshapes these hierarchies by reassigning: the right to define, the right to choose what is exhibited, and the right to govern, away from the few and into the hands of the many.

Following, recognising the inextricability of knowledge production and authority, this thesis also draws on Foucault's (1980) understanding of knowledge and power. For Foucault, power is based on, makes use of, and reproduces knowledge in accordance with its own intentions. Knowledge is therefore not an objective representation of the truth but always produced in line with those who hold power. Accordingly, information can always be read as representative of the perspective from which it was produced. This does not mean that there is no truth, but that there is no *one* truth. Building on this understanding, this thesis takes an epistemological pluralist approach. Pluralism understands that different knowledge is created by different parties from different perspectives to serve different purposes. This thesis does not want to pass judgement on who is right or wrong, but more *identify* the different strands of power that produce certain types of knowledge, and more importantly different *ways of knowing*.

Given decolonisation's commitment to undoing systems of power, I will acknowledge my own privileges in creating this work, which have affected my lived experiences and therefore also my approach to the topic. As a white person, I recognise that I have benefitted throughout my life from systems that stem from a society of entrenched racism. As a woman I also suffer from the patriarchal hegemony, but understand that layered identities as they are understood by Crenshaw (1989) complicate these experiences. Identities are not experienced in isolation, as intersectionality provides a framework to understand the inherent complexity of human lived experiences. I acknowledge that my approach to the topic of decolonisation in particular is inevitably different to that of someone whose life experiences continue to be influenced by the colonial matrix of power in a more imminent way. Through conducting interviews I learnt that museum practitioners ignoring their own positionalities and doing little work on reflection is an issue within museal work. I aim to see this research also as a tool for educating myself, and not simply an extractive piece of work. This involves learning from my interviewees, and

understanding that I do not wish to reproduce this theme of silence and lack of self-reflection that runs rife in the field I am studying.

3.2 Research design

Case City Selection:

London was chosen due to its status as a vibrant and multicultural capital at the juncture of changing sociopolitical dynamics: bordering Europe and while brushing shoulders culturally more and more with the US. The UK's cultural proximity to the US has historically meant that the transfer of, at the time, more radical ideas such as critical race theory in the 1960s and 1970s spread from the US and were echoed by theorists such as Stuart Hall. The almost reciprocal academic fields at the time have influenced the UK and developed the conversations around race, identity, and power. Hence, the discourse in the UK - which is felt across the academic and museum sector - might be perceived as more advanced when compared to its European neighbours. Despite this, the UK's history as former home to one of the world's largest Empires has undoubtedly left a stain. London is viewed as incredibly international, in part directly as a result of its former colonial relations, and it is precisely this image that makes it an interesting case. Jacobs (1996) notes how a multicultural image can often be utilised to ignore the structural inequality of a city. The UK's imperial history also has a direct relationship with its museums, many of which were founded during the time of Empire. The British Museum, opened in 1759, was the first public national museum in the world, established for the purpose of educating the people. The British Museum was initially created to house Sir Hans Sloane's collection, thus setting the stage of the intimate relationship between state museums and elite collectors/curators with a close link to Empire. The UK government can thus be seen as pioneers for using the museum as a tool for knowledge dissemination. London acted as the imperial metropolis for centuries, using its collections and exhibitions to communicate this heritage to the public (Longair and McAleer, 2016). The legacy of this history is one worth exploring.

London also receives a disproportionate level of cultural funding nationally (Cunningham and Savage, 2015), and is therefore a rich site for examining museums and curatorial practices with 165 state museums and public galleries (Culture Infrastructure Plan, 2019). During the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, London was one amongst a sleuth of cities that received widespread backlash for the entrenchment of institutional racism across its state departments. Calls for decolonisation have recently been levied directly at some of London's largest museums and galleries, most notably the British Museum, criticised for their retention of Athens' 'Elgin Marbles' and the Benin Bronzes. London's reputation as a 'creative city' (Oakley et al., 2017) is certainly impacted by its rich cultural scene, of which its museums and galleries form a strong basis. The museums in London, which are free to enter, are part of what make the city so unique and are certainly key drivers in the city's personal branding in shaping its own international image. London's museums can therefore be seen as a reflection of the story the city wants to tell about itself.

Museum Selection:

The selection criteria for museums was initially designed to be based around a limited set of case study museums ranging in scale. Difficulty in gaining access meant that not all case studies would have received equal attention, after which the selection process broadened. The resulting selection of museums includes museums that all engage with local history in some way, and excludes museums with a specific niche topic unrelated to the area. The museums are all north of the River Thames, as shown in Figure 3. All museums are history museums with the exception of The Whitechapel Gallery, which is an art gallery. The resulting sample for the document analysis includes the four museums: the Hackney Museum, The Whitechapel Gallery, The Museum of London, and The British Museum. The expert interviews includes employees who work for The Hackney Museum, The Whitechapel Gallery and The Museum of London, and includes freelancers with experience working with all the museums and more. Figure 4 includes a brief introduction to the main museums included in the study.

Figure 3: Map of Museums included in the sample, London - UK

Museum	Description
Hackney Museum	Established in 1986, located in the London Borough of Hackney, with 8,500 objects in their collection. Focus is on local history, and reflecting the socio-cultural diversity of the surrounding area, community engagement is a core ethos. Permanent display traces the history of the area over the last 1000 years. Next upcoming exhibition: 'At Home in Hackney: A community photographed 1970s-today'.
Museum of London	Founded in 1976 through the combination of the collections of other preexisting museums, the Guildhall museum (1826) and the London Museum (1911). Until 2022 the museum that was located in the City of London closed its doors to be reopened in 2026 at the new site in West Smithfield, under the name London Museum. Collection of over 6m objects is the largest urban history collection in the world (Kennedy, 2016). Focus is on the history of the city from prehistoric times with an emphasis on social history.
Whitechapel Gallery	Founded in 1901 with the aim of enriching the East End with global art. Located in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Throughout the 20th Century the gallery has been a driver of up and coming artistic movements and promoting emerging artists in the area. The gallery's expansion in 2009 increased its available gallery space allowing it to stay open all year.
British Museum	Established in 1753 and opened in 1759, its creation was largely based on the private collection of Sir Hans Sloane. It is located in Bloomsbury. Expansion of the collection was largely as a result of British colonisation. In 1881 the Natural History Museum was created from their collection, and in 1973 the British Library also became its own independent institution. With over 8m objects it houses the world's largest collection (van Riel, 2017).

Figure 4: Description of Museums in the sample

Approach:

The study was designed around qualitative data, chosen to represent the complex subject matter with its focus on understandings and experiences of a phenomenon. An emergent research design was employed meaning the focus shifted from the original plan (Creswell, 2013: 47), and eventually narrowed throughout its development as I began collecting data and became more closely acquainted with the literature, applying a critical lens to which methods would be most feasible. The resulting data collection was intended to reflect the institutional perspective as well as placing emphasis on participants' meanings. Document analysis would capture the top-down perspective, while expert interviews would add nuance to these often two-dimensional institutional texts. The documents, often not accredited to a specific author but to an organisation as a whole, represent an institutional voice, while those of experts is more personal. The subsequent analysis also reflects this nuance. Document analysis is often used in combination with

other qualitative research methods as a means of triangulation, defined as 'the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon' (Denzin, 1970, p. 291). By triangulating data, the researcher attempts to provide 'a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility' (Eisner, 1991, p. 110). Across the data, as well as through sampling, the variety of different sources reflect diverse perspectives that allows the data to capture the views of various stakeholders. The following section will outline each method and how these data were collected.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Expert Interviews:

I considered that speaking to people with experience and expertise in the field of study was inevitable in order to understand the nuance of community engagement approaches in London. Mueser and Nagel (2009) describe the expert interview as a qualitative interview which focuses on the knowledge of the expert, which is broadly characterised as specific knowledge in a certain field of action. Interviews would allow participants to describe their lived experiences (McRobbie, 1997) in detail and tell anecdotes, which I deemed central to the research questions focusing on understanding and experience. In this thesis experts were considered those: 1) with experience working in the museum sector in London, 2) with experience with community engagement practices in these museums and 3) who have experience working in the field of museal decolonisation. To avoid hierarchical distinctions experts were not only deemed museum employees but also external curators and community members.

Pseudonym	Position/Role	Organisation Affiliated with	Length
Anita	Member Board of Trustees; Contributor to Decolonisation Working Group; Community Curator	Museums Association; Independent	45 minutes
Jane	Heritage Learning Manager	Hackney Museum	1 hour
Alice	Museum Officer (Projects)	Hackney Museum	1 hour
Jamie	Freelance Curator	Whitechapel Gallery; Independent	1 hour, 2 minutes
Henrietta	Illustrator/ Researcher/ Curator	Hackney Museum; Museum of the Home; British Museum and more	58 minutes
Chris	Community Member	Former Leader of the Hackney Health Emergency Campaign for St Leonard's Hospital - collaboration with Hackney Museum	1 hour
Ronald	Director of Education and Public Programmes	Whitechapel Gallery	48 minutes
Dominic	Senior Curator	Museum of London	37 minutes
Tom	Policy and Campaigns Officer	Museums Association	52 minutes

Figure 5: Interviews conducted, in order of completion

The sample was originally limited to museum workers at the museums, but was later expanded to the criteria outlined above. The sample was therefore purposive. The resulting sample includes experts with experience working across a variety of museums holding different positions. The sample also included two people with experience working for the Museums Association, a national body setting standards for museums across the UK. I felt this to be particularly important for RQ2, which required experts with a comprehensive understanding of decolonisation and community engagement in the museum sector as a whole. The demographics of the sample were also varied with a mixed gender distribution of five men and four women, including people from a range of ethnic backgrounds. A list of interviewees is included in Figure 5. I reached out to experts primarily via their own personal e-mails or Linkedin. Two interviews were arranged as a direct result of a previous interview.

For the first interviews I created interview guides with a set of questions related to the research questions. Given the variety of different professions, interview guides were personalised with respect to the experts' position and experience. The majority of interviews were conducted over zoom for convenience reasons, with the exception of three in-person interviews at the Hackney Museum and the Whitechapel Gallery. The interviews were conducted during the summer of 2023 from July-August, with an average length of 54 minutes. All interviewees are pseudonymised for their anonymity. All interviewees except one permitted an audio recording, where I instead took notes by hand.

As my grasp of the topic grew with time it was easier to outline key themes prior to the interview and structure the discussion around these as opposed to a set of specific questions. The majority of interviews therefore adopted a conversational dynamic, allowing us to discuss the topics relevant to my research without a formal atmosphere. In this way I felt reciprocity between myself as a researcher and the research content itself: learning about the tactics of collaboration so central to community engagement became incorporated into my methods in this way. I allowed interviewees to discuss what they felt was relevant. Given the structure of my research questions, I was also able to present preliminary findings in later interviews with experts who had experience with the sector as a whole. This meant that I was able to share preliminary findings from the first research question while asking about themes related to the second question.

Documents:

The museum as an institution at the core of this research, meant that analysing documents produced by these museums and adjacent institutions would comprise part of the qualitative data for this thesis. Organisational and institutional documents have formed a core component of qualitative analysis for decades (Bowen, 2009: 27). Document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). According to Bowen, 'the researcher should consider the original purpose of the document—the reason it was produced—and the target audience' (2009: 33).

Given the research focus and questions, I chose documents that reflected the museums' statement of purpose, or mission statement that were a direct declaration of the museum and how they view themselves, what they wish to achieve and how. These documents vary from institution to institution and do not share the same format, but they do broadly share the subject. The target audience of these kinds of documents is not entirely clear, yet they likely pertain to any interested party wanting to gain a better understanding of the museum and where they stand as an institution, perhaps partners wanting to collaborate with the museum or general visitors. They may also be a way of holding the museum accountable to itself and its Board of Trustees or donors, in order to provide evidence of change according to the goals set out in the mission statement. The average length of the documents used in the analysis was 6.4 pages. These documents were gathered directly from the organisations' own websites or attained from employees working there. A list of the documents, their respective lengths, and their source institution is included in Figure 6.

Document Name	Accessed Via	Institution	Length	Date
Museum of London Strategic Plan 2018-2023	https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/about-us/our-organisation/our-strategy-and-vision	Museum of London	15 pages	2018
LMD, Diversity Matters Programme 2018-2022: Sharing our Stories - Exploring Jewish Stamford Hill 1930-1960	https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/supporting-london-museums/development-grant-programmes/diversity-matters	Hackney Museum partnered with Museum of London	6 pages	2018
Towards 2020: The British Museum's Strategy	https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/Towards_2020-The_British_Museum_Strategy.pdf	The British Museum	9 pages	n/a (estimate 2016)
Hackney Museum Statement of Purpose	Member of Staff	Hackney Museum	1 page	n/a
Whitechapel Gallery - for artists and audiences everywhere	https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/about/	Whitechapel Gallery	1 page	n/a

Figure 6: Documents analysed

3.4 Data analysis methods

The method of analysis chosen for this study is a hybrid qualitative approach, involving analysis of both interviews and documents using a combination of inductive and deductive coding. This approach complemented the research questions which explored both the meanings and experiences as told by individuals, as well as the institutional perspective of the museums themselves.

Coding:

Interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Office Word's online transcription tool. Where transcription errors were made I corrected these in consultation with the audio recording. The primary method of analysis chosen was thematic content analysis, both for interviews and documents using MAXQDA. Thematic analysis is a form of pattern recognition within the data, with emerging themes becoming the categories for analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). According to Saldana this involves a closer reading and review of the data, whereby the reviewer looks at selected data and constructs categories based from these (2021: 32). Inductive coding is a process where themes are not predetermined before coding of interviews begins, but done generative from the transcript itself. Hence, while broad categories emerged during interviewing, and notes were taken, comprehensive coding categories only developed later. I began coding thinking of the research questions, splitting codes into these three themes. Through the growth of coding categories, I developed broader themes which allowed me to further categorise the codes into 3-4 themes per question. For RQ3, which looks at links between community engagement, museal practice, and decolonisation, the approach was more deductive, as the theme of decolonisation was pre-determined before coding began.

A holistic, 'broad brush-stroke' coding approach was taken (Saldana, 2021: 23), where larger sections of text in the transcript are coded with one theme as opposed to split into many different codes. This resulted in the development of 29 codes, split into sections and themes, shown in Appendix 1. I felt this holistic approach appropriate to the subject matter as this would allow me to identify the most dominant theme in the text, thereby more clearly defining each coding category and avoiding too much overlap between themes. Given the variety of stakeholders and their experience, context was often needed to fully make sense of the quote. This resulted in quotes being split into longer sections, which I felt was appropriate to the subject matter. Some sections were coded for multiple themes, in order to better understanding the relationship between codes.

For the document analysis, different codes were developed as the content deviated greatly from that of the interviews thereby rendering the application of the same codes obsolete. Codes for the document analysis were developed after conducting the majority of interviews. These codes were deductively generated from the documents and split into two main themes, which were broadly connected to two of the themes from the interview analysis.

3.5 Reflections / Limitations

Particularly when conducting explorative qualitative research, the positionality of the researcher is always present. Having grown up in London, specifically Hackney, helped my position in conducting some interviews, specifically with professionals working in museums with a direct link to the wider East London, North-East London area. Given my personal connection to the museums locality, I was considered more of an 'insider' than perhaps an external researcher would have been. I know the local area, the specific context and the nuances of the cultural history. I

think this helped me to be more casual and establish a friendly demeanour with the practitioners that may not have been true for everyone. The findings are inevitably influenced by my positionality and personal beliefs, but this should ultimately not be considered a limitation, as the study's aim never was to provide 'a route to the discovery of an objective reality' (Phillips and Hardy, 2002:85).

A persistent limitation throughout the study consisted of attaining access to individuals working at museums. The difficulty in gaining access led to the adaptation of my research from what was originally meant to consist of three case study museums to a more widespread approach. Perhaps given more time I would have been able to foster stronger relationships with the museums, yet there were also factors outside of my control that prevented this. The relative controversy of decolonisation as a topic may have been a deterrent, especially to senior staff members of museums feeling under pressure to speak on behalf of the whole museum and risk incurring criticism. Many museums have received bad press surrounding issues of colonisation; avoiding me was perhaps a symptom of skirting around this topic altogether, or merely low responsiveness. This issue was compounded at the larger institutions such as the British museum, where it was not possible to organise an interview without submitting a filming request form with a filming request fee of £100. This problem is reflected in the sampling, which sways towards smaller organisations which have less barriers in place for researchers. Similarly senior management is lacking from the sample, as well as front of house staff and the charity sector. Given more time I would perhaps have been able to capture an even broader perspective. Although there were barriers preventing me from speaking to employees at these larger museums, I was able to speak to experts with experience collaborating with larger museums such as the British Museum. This discrepancy in the expert interviews means that richer analysis is granted for smaller museums, while larger museums lack the nuance that speaking to employees from these institutions may have brought.

Chapter 4.
Findings and Analysis

- The Museum of London (Barbican, old site) -

4.1 How do London museums *understand* and *approach* strategies of community engagement?

The first question addresses understandings, processes and the stakeholders that are involved in community engagement practices. Given the relatively vague outlines of the term, a firmer grasp on what is actually meant by community engagement is certainly needed. The first theme explores how communities are identified and how relationships to these communities are formed and navigated. The following section explores the range of stakeholders that culminate in community engagement practices and how they influence the process. Finally, the material and immaterial approaches to community engagement will be explored, covering the actual methods that are used to implement community engagement and how these relate to the practice's overall aims.

4.1.1 Identifying Communities and Making Contact

The first element of community engagement is identifying which community or communities the museum wants to engage with. Although museums exercise agency in choosing these communities, there are often external factors influencing this process. The following findings will explore how community engagement practices are initiated and maintained by the museum.

Target communities depend on the museum, but are often identified as 'under-represented' communities. This means communities that have not been represented in past exhibitions or the existing archive, or those demographics that are least likely to visit museums. At the Hackney Museum community engagement work came as a direct response to criticisms,

> *'So we know that our collections are very strong in West African heritage. However, we don't have much about Central, East and Southern Africa. And we knew that, and in 2021 we put an exhibition on called being African in Hackney and a lot of the feedback we got was brilliant. Lots of West African heritage things. What about the rest of Africa? So we knew it, but we saw it reflected in our feedback. And so again this year, our way of countering that has been. "Okay well, we want to do an exhibition about it. Tell us what you'd like to see included. Tell us what objects there should be." And so now our museum officer has been going out and working with the local community, meeting people'* - Jane

Gaining feedback directly from visitors has allowed the museum to identify its own gaps and remedy these in order to more accurately represent its local communities. Communities can also be considered a distinct group with relevant experience to a historic event, and often include young people and children. However, these community groups vary from museum to museum and are not always obvious. The categorisation of community is varied and wide, it is not a self-explanatory and consistent category. Even within institutions, the targeted communities can vary from project to project depending on the goals. While museums can exercise autonomy in

targeting communities which their collections do not accurately represent, this is only one determining factor.

Importantly, the funding body can be incremental in deciding which communities get targeted by community engagement projects. Understandings of the community are therefore shaped by funding requirements of larger bodies such as Arts Council England, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and more. Henrietta, a freelance artist and curator with experience working with over 30 different museums said:

> '*Many of the projects, especially smaller museums, they rely a lot on community funding or Council funding or Arts Council, England National Lottery. So then there's very specific clauses as to how the amounts can be used. And then we work within all those restrictions but there are requirements. And sometimes they need to attract specific audiences.*'

As museums experience severe cuts to funding, they become heavily dependant on the few streams of income that continue to exist. However, as Henrietta noted, this has a disproportionate effect on smaller museums, and is not felt equally. Dominic from the Museum of London said that communities of interest are identified by the curatorial team, as well as through other networks. Larger institutions exercise more freedom in how they are able to go about running their community engagement practice. When speaking to Jane and Alice from the Hackney Museum, they emphasised how heavily they rely on the National Lottery Heritage fund, where,

> '*you do stage one which creates all the evidence which you submit in order to show them that if they give you a large amount of money you're not going to be wasting public funds […] when we don't have staff that are funded by National Lottery, there are four of us.*' - Alice

Without funding from the National Lottery, the Hackney Museum has an extremely limited workforce, which greatly restricts their capacity. An Arts Council funded report from 2012 on income generation of London's non-national museums showed that Local Authority Museums, which the Hackney Museum is, received 77% of their income from their core funding, whereas other museum types had a greater variety of strands of income, including fundraising and membership, admission fees, trading and other grants (Brodie et al., 2012: 17). A further article from 2012 notes how 42 museums, galleries and heritage sites had shut in the preceding decade, with local authority museums being the most vulnerable (Steel, 2012).

Ronald, the Director of Education and Public Programmes at the Whitechapel Gallery also commented on the way that funding has shaped the landscape of museums in London:

> *'The Last Arts Council round of funding we were lucky, we received almost the same amount as we had before. We had a very small cut, but lots of other London organisations had a quite a substantial cut […] I know the reason why other London organisations were hit so badly is because there was a larger political narrative about levelling up and redistributing money to other parts of the UK. […] I would like to think that one of the reasons why we've been continually supported at the levels that we've had is because of the sense that like we, you know, we're really embedded in the local community and the work that we do around community'*

Here, Ronald acknowledges the national disparities in public funding, which have meant that museums in London which have historically received disproportionate levels of support are experiencing cuts in an unprecedented way. The Whitechapel Gallery in comparison to other galleries received fewer cuts, Ronald speculates that the gallery's ethos of community has something to do with this. Thus a layered dynamic emerges; not only does funding determine which communities are targeted by museums and galleries, but in another way communities determine which museums continue to exist and receive financial support by bodies that push the community engagement agenda nationally. Increasingly community engagement is no longer a choice, but an imperative for museums' continued survival, especially smaller ones.

Although receiving funding for a specific project is a prerequisite for community engagement work, this is only the first step. A key theme in community engagement work is figuring out how to reach out to these communities in the first place, and the kind of relationships that develop as a result. Target communities can be comprised of pre-existing groups or individuals with no prior connections to the museum or each other. In Chris' case he was sharing some objects with Hackney Archive when an employee suggested that the museum may have interest in the materials. He was then the one to reach out to the Hackney Museum with his idea for an exhibition. Making links to 'communities' is therefore not a consistent process as it varies depending on who they are. Alice and Jane from the Hackney Museum discussed how this process is dependent on the target group and project:

> '*We would have representatives who would come and they would work with us and we would design the exhibition together. But I'm aware that sometimes they would come as a group already. There are other times, other exhibitions that we put on that does not happen, an example of that would be every single year we put on an exhibition about an aspect of African or Caribbean heritage and history and it's part of the Council's black history season. For that we put on community forums.'* - Jane

Sometimes outreach involves a combination of utilising pre-existing organisations and using these as a springboard,

> '*I would go to an event for older citizens in the borough. So the council do something called a winter warmer event where people can just learn about what's on for support and for their welfare in the borough, particularly during winter. We went to an event there a couple of weeks ago with Hackney Circle which is a community organisation for older people in the borough. So it's just getting your face out there, if that makes sense. You eat a lot of cake. You drink a lot of tea.'* - Jane

The Hackney Museum, as a state funded institution, is part of a network of pre-existing community groups and organisations in a way that other museums might not be. Alice maintains, '*the beauty of the local authority museum as well is that we have contacts in other parts of the Council. So, for instance, Hackney Education, we were able to use their contacts to get help'*. Although funding may restrict the capacity of these smaller local authority museums, these connections serve as a kind of social capital with its own value. Furthermore, although funding requirements may target certain demographics, sometimes community engagement involves being open to having

community members reach out of their own accord and being recipient - the directional flow ideally should go both ways.

Where communities are less directly accessible or distinctly established, museum workers must make greater outreach efforts in order to make these connections. These outreach practices vary greatly on the target group, with some being more creative than others; Jane spoke of an outreach officer at the Hackney Museum who '*accosted people at bus stops, he really did*'. Some prior understanding of where these communities circulate, or how to connect to them, must already exist or otherwise be learnt, sometimes through experimental techniques. Especially in instances where there are no pre-existing connections, the building of authentic relationships was found to be fundamental. Anita spoke of her experience working as Communities Curator,

> 'I reached *out to the local community, so people who live within the community, your everyday person, and it goes beyond the idea of just an audience. It's really building a relationship with people.'*

This notion of establishing meaningful and not merely transactional relationships was repeated throughout interviews and across different institutions. Alice speaking of prior community engagement projects and meetings said,

> *'A lot of people did say [they] like coming to these because [they] get to meet new people. So it's finding that balance between saying "help us do this thing, but also, we'll be a nice space for you as well"'*

The museum at this stage begins to take shape as an institution of social care. Community engagement projects facilitate relationships, and effectively create safe spaces often for those most marginalised in society to share their experiences with a common group. The authenticity of these connections is emphasised furthermore by Jamie,

> '*those kind of relationships, community relationships, they need to be built up and they need to be relationships that are trusted relationships, not one way streets where you just need them for a single purpose to kind of extract knowledge from this specific group and then just take that into whatever you're doing […] If I'm ever working with, or if there's ever kind of a specific need to have a community workshop, I would always expect the kind of the organisation I'm working with to have some of those relationships already established.'*

As Jamie mentioned, authenticity becomes central to the community engagement relationship due to the emphasis on reciprocity and shared power in the process. Meaningful relationships in community engagement processes are incremental in the implementation of a mutual dynamic of respect, and is generally understood by experts in the field as a part of best practice.

4.1.2 A 'Constellation of Stakeholders': Appeasing Discerning Interests

At the core of community engagement practice is the confluence of multiple stakeholders. Figure 7 shows these stakeholders, including those directly involved in the process as well as the sector-

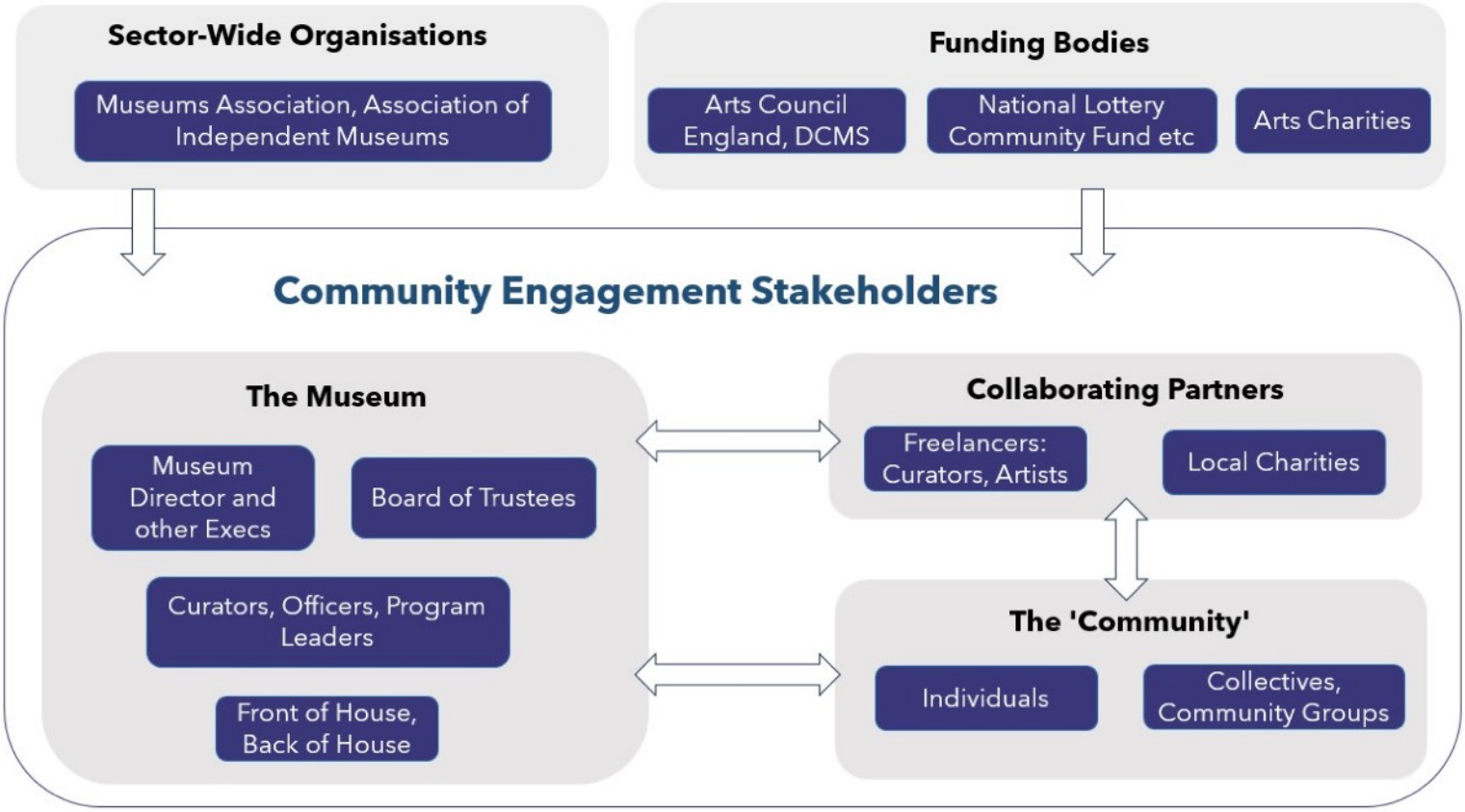

Figure 7: Community Engagement Stakeholder Map

wide organisations and funding bodies that directly facilitate these practices. Arrows demonstrate directions of influence, although this is dependant on the project. As mentioned previously, funding bodies and their agendas are a huge determinant in community engagement practices. Funding bodies may facilitate projects, but there are many more actors involved that have an interest in how things should be done. Community engagement work is widely understood as representing the 'views of the community', which may sound simple, yet one look at the range of players brings to light just how layered these views may be. Negotiating these differing stakeholder interests is a recurring pattern throughout all interviews.

Navigating Community Players

Despite museums and funding briefs setting their own goals in terms of what the outcome of a community engagement project should be, the intrinsic collaborative nature of community engagement means that negotiating between these stakeholders is a key element of the practice itself. Making connections to the community itself is important, but the complexity of community engagement projects means that the collaborative work does not end there. Jamie, a freelance curator, speaking on socially engaged practice in museums said,

> *'a lot of it is around kind of, rethinking hierarchies especially. And I think obviously part of that conversation is not just about like community groups, whatever that means. It's also about, activists. It's about other professionals. It's about, you know, the whole kind of constellation of stakeholders - is such a corporate word. But you know all of the different*

people who kind of feed into a topic and you kind of want to be able to accurately reflect their thinking'

Integral to the process of representing the community, which is not a homogenous group, and also often an imposed category, is acknowledging the variety of stakeholders that lay claim to a certain topic or issue. Anita mentioned working on a project which involved collaborating with ambassadors in seven different local community groups and organisations, including youth organisations, a radio station and an organisation helping survivors of domestic violence.

The term 'community' is already a vague concept, but its broadness speaks to its inherent indeterminate quality. Communities can be comprised of people with shared interests or beliefs, or just people who have share a living space or a collective experience. Although one might have an idea of what a community is, this is unlikely to match another's understanding of the same group - even within communities people can disagree. Whilst this term is often unquestionably used throughout the field as if its meaning is clear, it is far from the case. The community is not a stable category, meaning that as Jamie indicated above, consulting with as many actors as possible gives the best chance of wholly representing these diverse perspectives. In the context of museums in London, which are often located in densely populated areas, this can result in a staggering number of people. Ronald from the Whitechapel Gallery spoke of an ongoing project on Angel Alley, an alleyway next to the gallery with a complicated history (more detail to come). Part of the process involved understanding the stakeholders at play:

'I can't remember the exact number, something like seven or eight legal stakeholders have some involvement in this and that includes like the KFC that's on the High Street. There's an Airbnb flat that there's access to, and another private landlord. There's a charity that works with local homeless people who has some stake in it so when it came to us working in the space, there's so many relationships that have to be managed.' - Ronald

Although Angel Alley is a very small urban space, *'it's almost like a microcosm of the East End and all sorts of, like, political and economic and social issues, almost like you can channel it through this space'* (Ronald). Whether community of place, shared experience, or identity, there are a myriad of different players that coexist, especially in an area such as the East End with its rich social makeup and cultural history. The Whitechapel Gallery ended up involving and bringing these stakeholders together, while showing me a photograph of a former meeting, Ronald discussed those present:

'Last autumn we had what we called a kind of summit, where we brought together existing work at that time. And it was really interesting. Like who's in the room? So we got RESOLVE here, we got Sharon, who's our community curator. This is Claire, who's a member of Cardboard Citizens. It's Chris from Freedom Press. This is Ross from the Council. It's basically like all these different people who have some relationship. Actually, just like talking about the space and again like, this is really interesting work for an art gallery to be doing' - Ronald

Comprehensive community engagement practices involve paying homage to this complexity, and bringing them together in a way that these different players usually are not.

Despite the often impressive level of negotiation that is required to balance the stakeholders' interests, inevitably there are moments when these interests are at odds with one another. Chris helped conceptualise the idea for an exhibition at the Hackney Museum centring on the successful people-led Hackney Health Emergency campaign from 1983-1984 to save St Leonard's, a local hospital facing closure at the time. He spoke about his experience at the launch of the exhibition in May 2023,

> *'There were numerous people at the exhibition who have been involved in the campaign as occupation leaders, as activists and in all sorts of ways. And one of the people said to me that she was rather disappointed, that she and her colleagues should have been elevated more at a greater level. At the exhibition they felt as if it was if it wasn't focused enough on the actual occupation.'* - Chris

The plaque in Figure 8 shows the information on the occupation provided at the exhibition. Figure 9 shows a photograph of nurses voting on the occupation also shown at the exhibition.

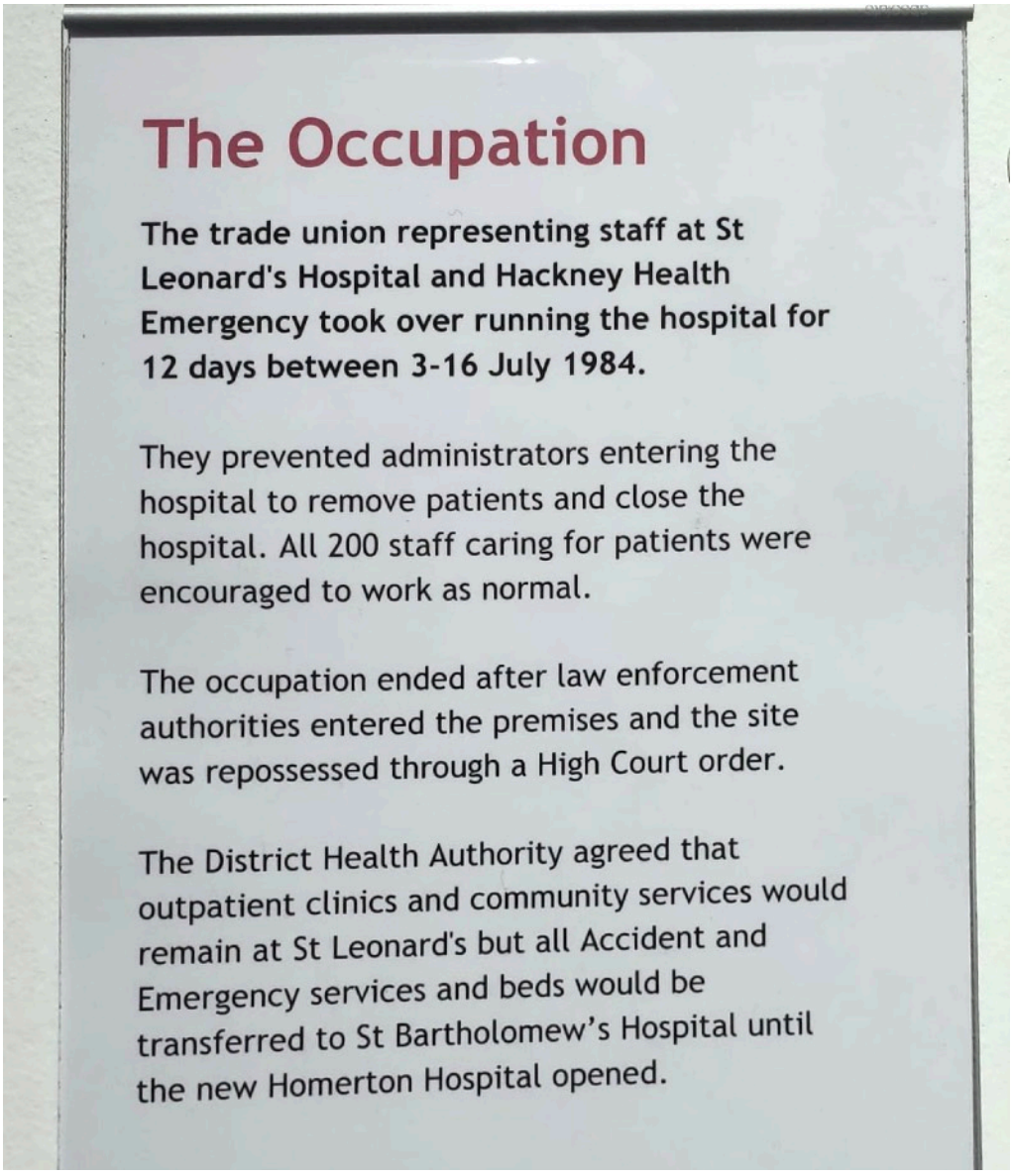

Figure 8: Plaque entitled 'The Occupation' at Hackney Museum's exhibition 1980's People Power, source: Malcolm Alexander

Figure 9: Nurses voting on the occupation at St Leonard's hospital at Hackney Museum's exhibition 1980's People Power, source: Malcolm Alexander

In hindsight he commented saying,

> *'I suppose it should have had a bit more about, you know, what the conflicts were, where people were disagreeing. I know that maybe that isn't part of this sort of exhibition normally, but I think as this was a campaign, I think emphasise the unique situation where human organisation was uniting with the local authority.'* - Chris

Although the stakeholders at the exhibition all are part of the same 'community', and stood for the same cause, their views are far from congruent. The exhibition was focused on a focal point in local history forty years ago, yet those same players continue to remain relevant, expressing disappointment at the apparent underemphasis on their role in the campaign today. Chris suggested that the exhibition should have leant deeper into these disagreements between the different actors at the time, however that he did not have curatorial control to make those kinds of decisions. This example demonstrates the importance that understanding, and embracing these complexities, should hold in shaping community engagement practices.

In anticipation of these conflicting interests, some galleries and individuals have mediation strategies in place. While putting together a Community Advisory Panel at the Hackney Museum, Alice spoke of the members' decision making process:

> *'We've already got an interesting situation whereby a couple of the Community Advisory Panel members are also Council. So the terms of reference say very clearly, and they all discussed this, and say if there is any Community Advisory Panel member who is also a councillor, is not allowed to vote - should it come to a voting situation. They're also not allowed to be Chair.'* - Alice

The Hackney Museum has already implemented measures to avoid Council members, and hence local political interests, from interfering with the exhibitions that are chosen by the Community Advisory Panel. While acknowledging differing interests, not allowing a specific party to overrule others, especially when there is a power dynamic, contributes to better practice. Community engagement is not a simple process - inevitably there will be disagreements and this is actually sometimes the essence of the work, to tap into and navigate these conflicts. Community engagement work is not an idyllic practice, but a space for people to grapple with their surroundings, pasts present and future. It is one of the few platforms where people are allowed to do so.

Navigating Institutional Interests

While diplomacy between stakeholders on the ground is one aspect of community engagement work, there are more interests that shape what kind of projects are funded and how they are run. Not only was organisational structure found to be important here, but also the scale of the museum. Jamie spoke of how the institutional makeup of a museum influences his experience working with them,

> *'I'm careful when I work with institutions, you know. You have to think in advance about what different parties are trying to do. What do they have to gain from your involvement. And yeah, I just try to protect myself a little bit in terms of expectations in terms of, what I expect, how I expect the different elements of the organisation to come together because quite often they are quite devolved. So for instance, like, you know, the curatorial team will be quite separated from the communications people and from senior leadership and in that process of them working together, things can kind of get lost and then you know you can feel a little bit, I don't know, kind of lost in the museum. Maybe you're not credited in the way that you kind of wanted, or that you thought you should have been credited. And often that's not reflected on the people that you're directly working with, it's just something that's got lost in that process.'* - Jamie

Larger museums with a less integrated organisational framework can leave freelancers feeling misunderstood, a case of diseconomies of scale. This again demonstrates the importance of meaningful respectful relationships; where these are not present, people can be left feeling disenfranchised.

These larger museums also have varying perspectives between departments, each with their own respective interests. As the number of stakeholders goes up, so do the different powers at play. Jamie spoke of a phenomenon he had heard of in the industry,

'One thing I could tell you is and this is not directly my experience, but I was having a conversation with the people who run Tate Lates at Tate Britain. And I thought it was interesting how they operate because the kind of late programme that they offer at Tate Britain is run through the education department, whereas the Uniqlo Lates, which are run at Tate Modern, are run by the marketing department, and so I think that's fascinating. Just in terms of expectations from those two different programmes. One of them is potentially feeding into, you know, institutional knowledge and potentially, I'm not saying it definitely does, but you know the one at Tate Britain maybe responds a bit more directly to current programmes that they have there and potentially, you know, like the artists that they work with or, you know other people that they work with are then potentially gaining a relationship with the museum' - Jamie

The nature of the relationship between communities and artists can be linked to the type of department that does the outreach, and what their broader objectives are. Organising an event under the marketing department carries different connotations to one organised by an education department, which may have an effect on the approach and goals. This reflects the findings of Morse's (2018) study on museum workers and their differing understandings of what community engagement work means: for some it is a tool to improve museum participation while for others it is a more radical tool for engagement.

Although individuals may have their own idea of what a specific community engagement project should involve, there is a larger ideology behind what community engagement should mean as a whole. Individuals as well as the institution at large have an idea about what the museum should be doing, and what its role is in society. The document analysis reflects that a large driving ethic of community engagement for museums is the notion of social responsibility. For museums that have community engagement practices more deeply embedded into their organisation, these projects are inextricable from the perceived social responsibility of the museum as a whole. For a local museum like the Hackney Museum this ethic is at the forefront,

'I think one of the things that has come up in conversation is that co-collaboration now in the museum, you can you see it done badly and you see it done well. And when it's done badly, it's just like look at this amazing thing that we did, but it's almost like a tack on to what usually happens? Whereas since we started 20 years ago, we've tried to incorporate it into our working model. And I think it's why, well we'd like to think, we hope, thats why we are well regarded in the local community. It can't be take, take, take, take, take all the time.' - Jane

Having community engagement embedded into the institution as opposed to added on, changes the nature of the work itself, as the motive is not a short-term goal, but a long-lasting relationship. Also at the Whitechapel Gallery, Ronald spoke of how the museum's imperative shapes everything that they do,

'[The gallery] was kind of initially set up by a group of religious and political reformers with this specific mission to bring the best art from around the world to the people of the East End. […] This is our responsibility. So like a civic responsibility. You know, we have this

> *founding mission. We're right here in this borough, like this is what it means to work in Tower Hamlets in 2023'* - Ronald

However, not all museums have an ethic of community in their mandate. While Anita worked as a Communities Curator she said,

> *'for me, it was really going beyond this idea of audience and tourism, and really wanting to engage with the local community to where museums start to think about their social responsibility to the people that live there that are around them.'*

In this case, social responsibility as an ethic is something that Anita working as an employee needed to implement at the museum she was working at. Having museums declare their commitment to the local community and demonstrating their desire to act on this as a social responsibility, the onus can often fall onto individuals themselves. As shown above, not all employees in a museum share the same ethos or reasoning behind a certain practice, however, it is unlikely for long-term community engagement practices and relationships to become common practice if a museum does not emphasise these values at its core.

4.1.3 Material Community Engagement Approaches

The following two sections explore the approaches taken in the name of community engagement work. For many museums, community engagement is one part of a broad set of goals for reform. Museums set targets and goals for themselves and for many, community engagement is playing an increasingly significant role in shaping these targets. However, these reforms are often expansive and include a wide variety of proposed changes. The findings of both the document analysis and the interviews demonstrated two overarching themes: material and immaterial reform. The material approach will be explored first, with the help of a local case study on Angel Alley. Subsequently, the results exploring the immaterial approaches will be presented.

The document analysis gives an overview of which material approaches museums have committed to making, see Figure 10. Material approaches were considered those that dealt with changes made in space, as opposed to curatorial practices. The interview findings add more detail and specificity to the often broad goals set out within the museums' own materials. The results will begin exploring the material approach that can be seen in space. These primarily include spatial reform, and how space has been used as an implementation tool to embed community engagement practices within museums.

Material Approach	Museum of London	Hackney Museum	Whitechapel Gallery	British Museum
Expanding Collections	Y	Y	Y	Y
Accessibility Reform	Y	Y	Y	Y
Spatial Reform	Y	N	Y	Y

Figure 10: Material approaches to reform by Museum and Theme, from Document Analysis

The document analysis found that the material approach consists of three main subcategories: 1) expanding collections, 2) accessibility reform which includes widening access through technology as well as widening visitor-base and physical access, and 3) spatial reform. Improving access as well as expanding collections are fairly common practices present in all the case museums, however the spatial reform is more complex. All museums except the Hackney Museum mentioned renovation or adapting the space within their documents, however Jane and Alice did mention in their interviews that the museum was planning to change the space under their limited budget to be more engaging for visitors.

Notably the Museum of London is undergoing a complete move of the whole museum from its former location at the Barbican to its new location in West Smithfield just a ten minute walk away, set to be completed in 2026. When asked about what motivated the move, Dominic, one of the museum's Senior Curators said that the old site was no longer fit for purpose. They wanted to think about different ways of engaging with the public, and make it more flexible. Dominic mentioned how many found the old museum hard to reach and that access needs have shaped the move. However the changes are more wide reaching. Jamie who was hired as Urbanist in Residence for the Museum of London prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, said,

> *'the idea is that you're going to enter this space and there are going to be a multitude of opportunities to kind of, you know, like which way do you go? You know you're not going to be kind of walking through London from Roman times to, you know, Victorian to World War II, you know, contemporary, modern day. It's going to be curated around themes rather than kind of in a chronological order. So they were thinking obviously quite a lot about that kind of spatial design element. And then also just in terms of what sort of events, what sort of programmes, what sort of exhibition should they be hosting cause if they're very keen to actually feed into some of the discourse that's happening in London. […] They were thinking about what formulation that new museum would take on in terms of shifting the curatorial dynamics from being a local history museum to being a more active agent in the city.'*

The notion of spatial freedom and being able to exercise autonomy in where to go within the museum and exhibit is a theme that was also picked up in the British Museum's strategy. Having a space that is open to flexible usage allows for increased personalisation of the museum experience. Additionally, creating exhibits around themes rather than chronology as well as creating space for events and performance art is likely to draw in a wider audience as the space now caters to them. As Henrietta stated, '*we walk in and you just start exploring, there's no navigation or a particular route that you need to take[…] and then you can find your own world*'.

While often overlooked, the front of house and other staff that contribute to the museum also play an important role in engagement practices. Anita spoke of how she wanted to incorporate the front of house staff into the community engagement practice she was doing,

> '*They were really important because they were facing the audience. They're really holding the gallery together when it comes to the face presenting side of things, but also the function and the operational side of how a gallery would function. Front of house really makes a gallery feel like it's an inviting space because they're the first person you see. And*

so it was really important that we engaged with them when it came to these exhibitions and engagement toolkits'

Perhaps those who work facing the audience are not considered key stakeholders, but they do play an important role in community engagement, as they perform the emotional labour of greeting and accommodating visitors.

Reformation of Space as a Tool of Community Engagement: A Case Study of Angel Alley

The Whitechapel Gallery's intervention in its adjacent Angel Alley is a useful case to examine the impact of space in community engagement work. In contrast to the other museums' spatial reform, Angel Alley is not an interior, but a public space external to the gallery's walls. Angel Alley has a long history in the East End, its name dating back to the opening of 'The Angel' an inn in 1612, which grew in significance through time. The alley has a layered local political history. By the 1840s brothels were in the alley, amongst a bustling Victorian community and an influx of Irish immigrants in the 1850s. In 1888, what would be presumed to be Jack the Ripper's first victim, Martha Tabram was found brutally murdered there (Parson, 2013). The alley is still known for this gruesome history to this day. After being bombed during World War II, Freedom Press, a local radical bookshop opened its doors in the alley. In 1968 the Whitechapel Gallery moved from its

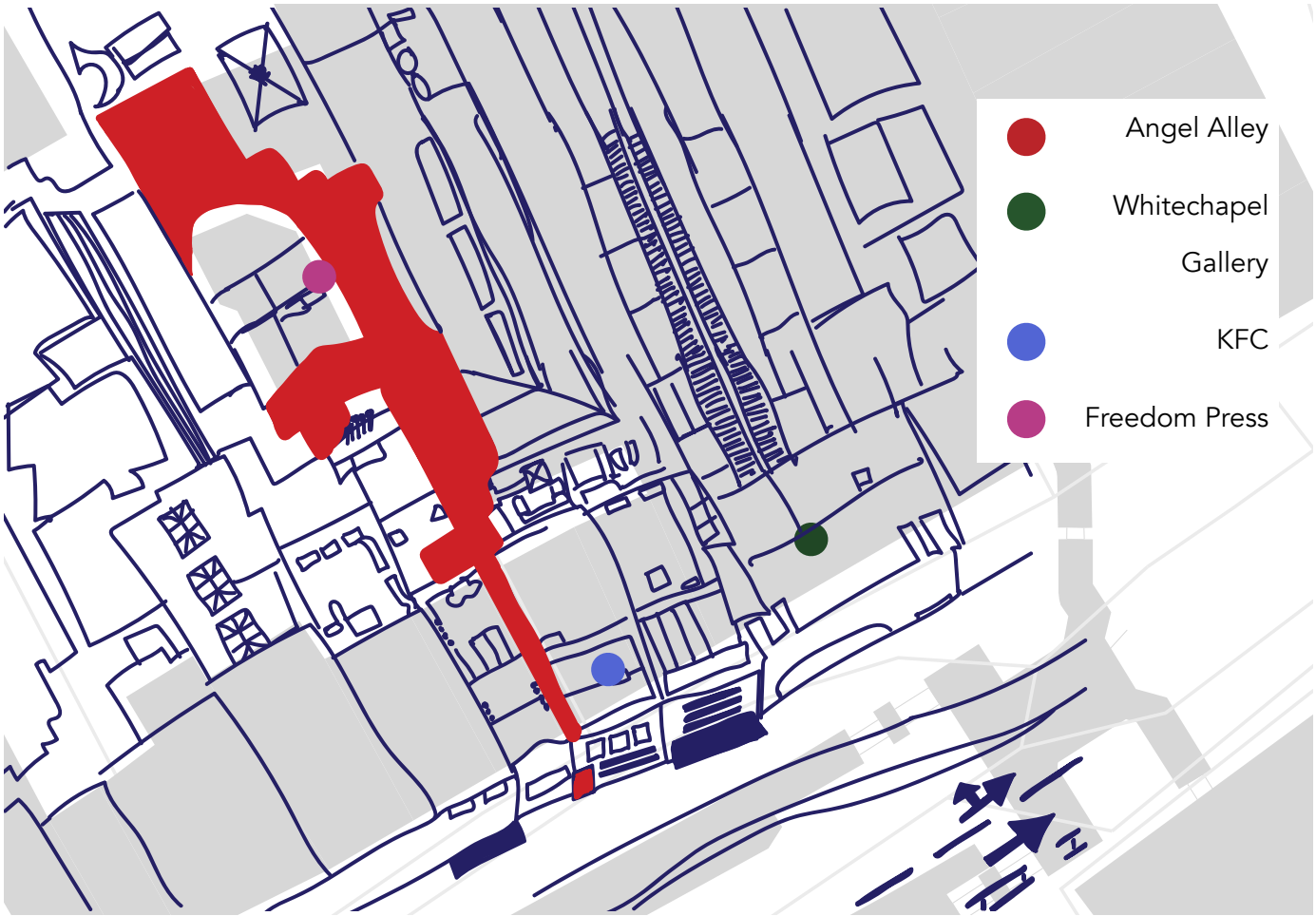

Figure 11: Illustrated aerial view of Angel Alley, source: Amina Khandoker

Figure 12: View of Angel Alley from Whitechapel High St, source: author

former location to where it currently stands, bordering the alley. The Freedom Press would continue to be radical, being known as the hub for the Anti-fascist movement, a reputation it still holds to this day. Figure 11 shows the narrow space of the alleyway from above and some of its neighbours. Figure 12 shows the view of Angel Alley from Whitechapel High Street, just a few steps from the gallery.

Ronald spoke of how the Whitechapel Gallery's embeddedness in the local space has always been there, which is partially what drove the Angel Alley project. Speaking of the project, he said,

> *'From about April 2021 we started to work on a public project that Tower Hamlets Council funded and these were the goals of the project: it was about safety and access to the space, we wanted to produce new amenities for staff and for locals and to have an artistic intervention. And one of the things that when we wrote the initial brief for this is that there's so much scepticism about public art projects in terms of gentrification about them being*

linked with property development that we have to state, you know, right from the start like there's no commercial dimensions to this, this is about a space which is very unsafe and inhospitable and we just want to make something that feels more inspiring, and healthier and long term.'

While the apparent 'renewal' of an urban space like Angel Alley, could easily bring connotations of redevelopment with the goal of bringing new investment to the area, Ronald was adamant that this was not the project's intention. To avoid this association, Ronald emphasised how important it was that the space be designed to cater for those who already use it, and not for a new potential clientele.

'*We put a lot of physical infrastructure in the space, so a tap that can be used as a drinking water tap, we put new lighting in, we put a new gate. There's new lighting that the Council just finished in the passageway. All of this has come, none of this happened overnight. Months and months of work to just like generally feel like the space is getting better and healthy.'*

The physical infrastructure that was implemented does not sanitise the area, but intends to make it safer and usable for those already in the area. For Jamie, who was also involved in the project's conception, it was about thinking about ways to,

'maybe open it up in a way which encouraged its use as a yeah, as a shared space, as a space that the local community could invest in and could make feel it was theirs, especially because of course so much is happening in that area with development'.

The spatial reform of Angel Alley was thus directly intended to be '*all based around encouraging people who are using the space to know what are their rights in public space.*' (Ronald). At this point the work of the gallery steps into the framework of social care for some of the most marginalised people, providing a space where other services fail.

Importantly, this process was achieved through consultation with local stakeholders, including the homelessness charity Cardboard Citizens, the Council, and the architectural design collective RESOLVE. The resulting intervention is based around encouraging people to know their rights within the space, and is informative as well as an artistic creation. Angel Alley has a history of being hassled by police, the intervention leant into this element of safety within the space. Ronald spoke about RESOLVE's approach,

'*They break in some ways the initial expectations around the public realm. The first thing they said is that the aim for a project like this has to be an unequivocal and foundational emphasis on engagement and dialogue with the existing population of people experiencing homelessness on the site. So they're not interested in just like cleansing this space, moving people on, putting some, you know, art in it and move it on, but they wanted to use it as a way for coordinating existing services. About meeting the needs of people who are most vulnerable*'

RESOLVE's approach to the Angel Alley project demonstrates an astute awareness for the structural requirements of what engagement with vulnerable communities entails. As demonstrated earlier in the findings, navigating a complex set of stakeholders can bring problems

- their approach centres the most vulnerable group, and builds a relationship with them at the centre. As Ronald said, '*nothing happens in the space without everyone being aware of it[…] its longterm work'*.

In the future the space can be used in any number of ways, Ronald suggests potential greening projects. However, longterm Ronald hopes that the renewal of Angel Alley will bring great changes to the gallery.

> '*There's a way of approaching this by saying how can the gallery impact Angel Alley? What we've ended up talking about is how can Angel Alley impact the gallery? So lots of things that we've learned about this space, how does that inform how we think about the public space in the gallery? So the foyer that you walked through here, or the accessibility of our space is about who feels comfortable here, who comes here, who doesn't come here. A lot of the things that we've learned about from the entire project can now shape how we set up projects within the space here, how we make the space welcoming, more civic, more public.*'
> - Ronald

Importantly, the project is not under a time restriction. The creation of this space means that it can continue to be used, and truly becomes an embedded part of the gallery and incorporated into the repertoire of what they do.

The case study demonstrates how important space is in community engagement practices. Where there is no dedicated space for the community, practices will always be on the museum's terms. Space is an important element in the negotiation of power, and this project acknowledges that. It also solidifies a commitment in space. The Whitechapel Gallery's reimagining of what Angel Alley could become takes community engagement a step further, and puts into question where the limits to a museum's social responsibility lies. Undertaking the transformation of an urban space renders the museum unequivocally as a key stakeholder in managing conflicting spaces, and challenging them through art.

4.1.4 Immaterial Community Engagement Approaches

Across the different museums, the document analysis revealed recurring themes of immaterial approaches to reform. Figure 13 shows these broad themes and their appearance in the respect museums' mission statements. All museums demonstrate willingness to expand across all themes. The document analysis highlights a sector-wide consensus, where similar themes are being picked up and pushed towards. Little detail is given about how community engagement practices are formed or approached, using vague terms such as 'social cohesion' without more information of what exactly this means. It is likely that these documents are used to pacify funders, third parties and organisations such as the Museums Association as a box-ticking exercise. Interviews are once again needed to add richness to these practices and better understand the inner-workings of these processes within the museum. The findings will explore how community engagement practitioners understand and implement the ideologies that drive their work.

Immaterial Approach	Museum of London	Hackney Museum	Whitechapel Gallery	British Museum
Social Cohesion	Y	Y	Y	Y
Improving Representation	Y	Y	Y	Y
Partnerships	Y	Y	N	Y
Education	Y	Y	Y	Y

Figure 13: Immaterial approaches to reform by Museum and Theme, from Document Analysis

The most overarching theme of community engagement practice is that of co-production, co-curation and cooperation. This is something that came up in all interviews. Within community engagement practices it is understood as,

> *'Curators and historians working together with artists, to then invite the community, and together to decide what to interpret, what to leave out, and the communities really have a say, and they decide how we're going to work together, what's going to be exhibited, how it's going to be exhibited, etcetera.'* - Henrietta

Whatever the project may be, the essence is that everyone has a say. When considering the multitude of stakeholders within a community, giving people equal agency in exercising their point of view is important. Increasingly, the Hackney Museum is redeveloping their approach, in order to more easily facilitate community members suggesting their own ideas for exhibitions. Previously the,

> *'collection staff would have meetings with community representatives who would help them decide on what the themes are, what the key points are, lend objects for the exhibition.'* - Alice

The team are now developing a strategy that flips the direction of conception, handing over the agency to community members rather than retaining control in which themes are chosen for exhibitions. The newly selected Community Advisory Panel, comprised of a mix of people representing Hackney, then decides which exhibitions are chosen.

The theme of consultation and collaboration is not just between the museum and the community, it is present throughout. The disruption of hierarchies between the stakeholders is something that Henrietta also emphasised in her work as a freelancer,

> '*I don't work for museums. I work with them. So again, it's a level of collaboration because I come as a consultant, really. I don't work for them. So I'm not a part of the hierarchies within the institution.*'

Increasingly, freelancers like Anita, Jamie and Henrietta are working in collaboration with museums at all scales on a consultative basis. Their expertise are desired by small and large museums alike, demonstrating a growing desire for freelance work, identifying their own gaps and seeking those with experience in the field. This accompanies a growing acknowledgement that

museums do not have the capacity and expertise on everything, and thus must look outwards for help in areas where they are not experts.

Although co-production dictates the modus operandi of community engagement practices, there are two main ways in which the community contribute to challenging normative curatorial practice. These themes are a) reinterpretation/reflection and b) the importance of personal experience - both are often interlinked, and often manifested through storytelling.

Community engagement is in some ways a break from traditional museology, as the hierarchies of knowledge are broken down. These breakdowns can occur only through reinterpretation of what is there, and in some ways unlearning what we have assumed as absolute truth. Henrietta emphasised how important the theme of reinterpretation was to her community engagement practice,

> '*We the audiences, we think the constructions of the past by historians says the truth, but oftentimes it's not. It's just a proposition of what could have happened, for example. So that's what I find sometimes working with communities when if something is in the history book, then it can't be challenged. Museums are, you know, they are not the academic history spaces, there are public, they provide public history, but they're actually even more important than academic history because they're the accessible places.*'

Encouraging communities to retell historical events through their own lenses, and empowering their own voices in this sense represents a challenge to the role of the curator. Henrietta also touches on an important point, namely the publicness of the museum as an educational institution. Community engagement, by retelling histories in new ways allows the community to create knowledge for itself, as opposed to a top-down filtering of information through a single curator often without consultation.

The reinterpretation of an object as community engagement practice is tied directly to personal experience. At the Hackney Museum Jane spoke of how this has been a driver of their work,

> *'We want to make it people focused because we're telling the stories of people. So when we have a community for them, they can either tell us their personal stories or they tell us someone that they know's personal stories or someone that we should get in contact with, and then we get objects. […] The idea essentially is that we are capturing people's experiences and that goes back to our method of practice, which is about we tell the stories of people in Hackney.' (Alice)*

The museum's focus on local history means that those experiences of people who are still alive need to be collected and stored, otherwise face being lost forever. It is also a matter of bettering the collection and adding information to objects about which little has previously been known,

> '*Trying to get the personal stories for items that we know nothing about. I mean, we know what they are, but we don't know, like, there's nothing to bring them to life. I think that was my focus, bringing the collections to life.'* - Jane

Where alternative histories do not exist because they happened so long ago, Henrietta uses artistic practices as a storytelling tool, to imagine what could have been instead. There are many opportunities within community engagement practices for challenging the official narrative.

Community engagement is not a favour that the museum does for its local people as a service, but it is also about enriching the museum and what it means to be a space of public history and knowledge shared by all. It is therefore reciprocal and about exchange. Genuine community engagement practices should shape the museum and how they think about their collections, just as much as the community itself.

4.2 What are the key stakeholders' experience with the implementation of these strategies?

While the previous question explored how museums and stakeholders understand and approach community engagement practices, the following question examines how the implementation of these processes are experienced by those involved. This section explores the limitations that precarious funding and time limitations bring to those involved, how they manage this uncertainty through an ethos of flexibility and finally how community engagement and its unpredictability brings challenges for growth, learning and creativity as a deeply personal practice.

4.2.1 Inherent Uncertainty and Limitations

Given the importance of funding bodies in facilitating community engagement projects, especially for smaller museums, these parameters often make for uncertain conditions for those involved. These restrictions can not only be frustrating for those working on the project, but can also make the community engagement efforts feel less sincere, thus also limiting their impact.

Community engagement often targets marginalised and precarious groups of people. This inevitably destabilises the work, as these groups can often be in uncertain situations themselves. Community engagement work is also unpaid and requires free time. For example, forums for discussion may be offered, but this may not always go to plan,

> *'You want to people to turn up, but whenever you're working with the local community, you can't guarantee.'* - Alice

Although museums may want to speak to a specific community there is no way of knowing if this community will be receptive or if it is possible to find people with the time and energy to be involved in this work. Outreach meetings may be organised where no one turns up, but staff still maintain that it is important to offer these spaces.

The short timespan of funding projects can also present challenges to community engagement practices. Time limitations can lie at odds with the ethos of genuine relationships and trust building that are central components of community engagement work. Anita expressed frustration at the lack of understanding from funders about what this work truly entails,

> '*Conversations need to be had with funders and also with directors and leaders. To say, hey, if we're going to embark on this work, you need to recognise this is more about long term impact than short term impact. This isn't a simple process that you're asking people to go through, you're asking people to take an object one at a time, research and to build the interpretation of how this connects to a legacy*' - Anita

The theme of short-termism runs endemic to community engagement projects. As mentioned previously in the results, funding can often only be secured for a certain time span. Once the time of the allotted project is over, funding ceases and so do the resources that facilitated that project.

> '*I think with any community engagement work, it always comes down to capacity. It always comes down to there are never enough hours in the day. There are never enough days in the week. There are never enough people working in the museum and there is never enough space for exhibitions, for the people who want to do them.*' - Alice

The effects of short-termism can be especially severe for freelancers like Jamie who do not have a stable income and rely directly on these projects. The nature of the work can often be so demanding and time-consuming, that it allows for little time to reflect,

> *'The fact is, when you're freelance, you just don't have that freedom enough. You don't really have the ability when you're rushing from project to project to refine your approach […] I would love to say that I'm always kind of working in a socially engaged way, but I think in reality I'm just, like, just barely getting through, you know?'*

Although Jamie describes himself as a curator with a socially engaged approach, the constraints of the industry have an effect. Even at the larger institutions, like the Museum of London, Senior Curator Dominic maintained that despite the often ambitious aims of certain projects, the wider societal context of marketisation and neoliberalisation limits their effect. Throughout all levels, stakeholders experience uncertainty, yet more pressure is undeniably on those smaller museums and more precarious individuals such as freelancers that depend heavily on these funding streams. This issue is compounded when working with vulnerable communities. The arts sector has consistently been on the receiving end of budget cuts, and this uncertain element of community engagement work is just one effect of that.

4.2.2 Coping Mechanisms: Grappling with Uncertainties

The following results will explore the ways that stakeholders navigate this uncertain terrain. In response to the intrinsic unpredictability that permeates each element of the community engagement process, stakeholders adopt the notion of flexibility throughout in order to cope with these unknowns. Despite difficult circumstances, stakeholders manage to optimally navigate uncertain community engagement practices, through necessity they mirror this unpredictability and 'go with the flow'. This fluid nature brings frustration for practitioners, but equally presents chances for learning, creativity and reflection.

While uncertainty can bring disappointments, there are also opportunities for learning and creativity within these circumstances. At the Hackney Museum they have brought communities together to enrich their archives, however it does not always go accordingly to plan,

> '*What actually happens is when you get a group of people together and you put all these things out, they don't talk about the object. You plant the object and then they springboard*

> *from it into talking more generally. So that's been great because we've learned also now about the gaps in our collection.*' Alice

Although things may not go as planned, flexibility in the approach means that the process can adapt, and be used as opportunities instead. At the Hackney Museum they've learned that '*people want to bring stuff […] which is incredible and they've been filling in gaps which we don't have represented in our collections*' (Alice) . Henrietta also spoke about how this flexibility is now just part of the process,

> '*Often we have meetings and then we discuss together what works best, and then we can never plan it perfectly, because of course, when working with different communities, sometimes we can start with fifteen people and then it can drop to five or sometimes we can start with five people and then suddenly we can have twenty newcomers that can join. And then I need to plan the sessions so they are flexible for different abilities, different ages.*'

Being adaptable to a changing set of circumstances is a key factor in ensuring successful community engagement practice. Building off this adaptability is the freedom for creativity and expression. Freelancers Anita and Henrietta both spoke of how the lack of official constraints allowed them to be more experimental with their approach to community engagement projects.

Building on the theme of relationships in the previous section, reciprocal learning was also found to be a significant factor in experiencing and practicing community engagement. Given the breadth of community engagement practices and their respective topics, it is unlikely that all museum workers, freelancers and other stakeholders will have a pre-existing grasp on each topic at hand. Jamie admitted that in this respect, approaching community engagement requires honesty,

> '*Sometimes it's hard to just say, like, I don't know anything about this project. You know, I'm a newbie to this idea and I wanna have a conversation with you, but I don't really know what we're gonna be talking about. That's quite hard to say sometimes. […] but you need to accept that you might not have any knowledge about it and you just need to let that wash over. The other person often doesn't have an expectation from you. They and nearly every single conversation I've had with someone directly involved in a fragment of history, or whatever it is, they're just really excited that someone is taking an interest in what it is that they've done*'

Community engagement is a reciprocal process between the community and those working with them, it is a give and take. Asking for peoples' personal stories and their histories requires a level of personal connection that demands genuine care and respect.

Ultimately, community engagement is not only personal for community members as they retell personal experiences and bring forward memories from the past, but also for those working in the field as professionals. Henrietta emphasised this point in her work,

> 'I'm trying to insert myself because at the end of the day, it's part of the whole community engagement process, and the main character that makes these projects possible in a way.'

Just as community engagement work is based off of personal experience, those working in the field have learned to adapt and bring themselves to these projects in order to mirror this intimacy that at some level is inherent to the practice. This ensures that connections made are meaningful, as genuine relationships cannot be built without reciprocity between the community and those working with them. Museum workers and curators also consider their own role in the work that they do, and how their own subjectivity shapes the project.

4.3 To what extent are community engagement practices and their implementation linked to decolonisation?

4.3.1 Intersection of Decolonisation and Community Engagement

None of the museums in the sample have statements relating to decolonisation, or mention decolonisation in their policy documents. When asking museum staff about the topic, there were mixed responses regarding the relevancy of decolonisation to community engagement practices. Freelancers which specialised in decolonial practice had more concrete ideas on the interconnection of the two concepts. However, the two members of staff with experience working at the Museums Association (MA) on their decolonisation guidance had a broader perspective of decolonisation in the sector as a whole. The following results cover the intersection of these two practices, and then explore why the uptake of decolonisation as an approach has been so slow in London museums including institutional as well as cultural barriers to this change.

When asked whether community engagement and decolonisation are relevant to one another, Anita answered,

> *'What's interesting is I've always seen it as part of it, because I think it's really important to value the insight and the thoughts of the community that may connect to an object, or that may want to kind of seek the truth on what the object holds, the story that it tells, and I think it's really important that the sector promotes collaboration and partnership in that sense because it's really easy for curators to kind of be within themselves and within the knowledge that they've learned from an academic standpoint. But I think when you're working with an archive, when you're working with a collection there's a responsibility of, yes, you learning knowledge, but you being able to also share that knowledge, and collaborate with people within that knowledge where it becomes a co-researched situation. And it's a two way learning process. You going to school, you going to a higher education institution and coming out with a degree doesn't equate to you knowing everything. And if you're working with an object in a collection where you may have went to school about it, but there's people who have lived with the collection and who have heritage and legacies passed down through stories, told through their ancestors and their loved ones that that can be added to the archive. It's another way of making the archive a lot more relevant to people, because that's a lot of the complaints that many archivists and curatorial teams have is finding ways of introducing collections and objects to people to where they think it could be relevant, and wanting to tell these stories. People don't want to come to a gallery all the time and see who stole the object and what year they stole the object they want to see what's the story behind this object.'*

This response eloquently establishes the subtle interlinking of these two concepts. Community engagement's practices of reinterpretation and redefinition serve to challenge institutional knowledge and implement decolonial change in the museum. The process of community engagement does not address the uneven distribution of resources, but instead challenges practices of knowledge creation and dissemination. Museum workers primarily understood decolonisation as a process that directly addresses the history of Empire, and thus felt confused about its application in a different context. However this does not mean that decolonisation does not apply,

> 'This is why I find decolonisation to be an ever shifting practice because not every museum and gallery are the same. Yeah, I've worked in galleries that don't have a collection, but we were still able to go through the decolonisation process because the building that it was in, so it's being able to talk about that and what that can possibly mean' - Anita

Strict understandings of decolonisation as being overtly linked to objects and stories relating to the period of Empire greatly restricts the reach of the decolonial approach. Dominic warned that decolonial practice has been at times misappropriated. He agued that it is certainly about power and that not enough work is being done within museums for people to recognise their own positions. Additionally, Dominic brought up the question of who is required to perform the emotional labour of decolonial work, and when this onus falls on those who face disproportionate levels of discrimination, questions must be asked about the execution of these approaches. Community engagement as decolonisation does raise questions about who is doing the heavy lifting work, and whether it is equitably to place this onus onto community members.

The MA's *Communicating Decolonisation Guidance* says, 'the intention of decolonisation is not to erase history, or the history of the object, but to work collaboratively with communities to develop multiple perspectives to support a better understanding and deeper meaning.' (2022: 8). For the MA, communities play a key role in the process of decolonisation. For the officers at the Hackney Museum, decolonisation was also linked to power, and the right to define,

> 'part of that wider process of decolonisation that actually who gets to speak about the objects, who gets to give their views about the object.' Alice

In this way, community engagement practices where communities are given the power to define and control the production of knowledge is a process of power redistribution, and when done right can be a successful component of decolonial action. Although community engagement is pedagogically linked to decolonisation, it is far less politically charged. Community engagement is frequently seen as more of a method than something that requires institutional restructuring, and hence is generally accepted across the sector. Community engagement has therefore been less overtly tied to questions of power.

Tom's primary position at the MA has been to implement decolonisation sector-wide through campaigns and policies. His experience has given him a broad overview of the museum sector and what decolonisation entails,

> 'Community engagement and decolonisation are inextricable currently. You can't address or readdress the power system, which is deeply colonial without consulting generations of

> colonised peoples, […] you can't decolonise unless you engage with your communities because the museums are in a position of power, but they don't necessarily hold all of the knowledge. Whereas community practitioners and partner. They hold the experience, the knowledge, it's their story so you have to work together in order to decolonise. And I think in order to decolonize well, we need to give those community practitioners and those partners positions of power in your organisation, whether or not that's permanent, temporary, whatever, but it needs to go beyond just an exhibition or a programme. It could be questions of museum governance and trusteeship. That's where the key critical questions are you could have a case where you could put, I don't know, somebody from a diaspora group in London on your board of trustees. You could have them fully embedded into the organisation as opposed to here's your exhibition go home now.' - Tom

The experts in the museum sector, are adamant that the community, not just through events and projects, but through structural reassignment, is fundamental to the decolonisation process. This begs the question as to why museums in London have been slow to pick up a rhetoric of decolonisation when community engagement has been so widely adopted as a methodology and practice across all institutions. Despite the clear overlapping of these practices, museums in London, and the wider UK have demonstrated reluctance to adopt this vocabulary. The following sections will explore the factors that may be preventing London museums from embracing decolonisation.

4.3.2 Barriers to the Implementation of Decolonisation in Museums

The institutional barriers to the uptake of a decolonial rhetoric and approach by London museums includes legislation, the organisational structure of museums, restrictions of funding bodies and the lack of enforcement power. Socio-cultural barriers can be a lack of understanding, outdated views, white fragility and a generalised lack of incentive for change. Both of these broad themes tend to intersect as institutions are shaped by socio-cultural factors and vice versa, thereby creating a symbiotic system in which little changes are made.

While acknowledging that decolonisation is more than just repatriation, the question remains as to why so few objects stolen during colonial times have been returned. A large factor preventing a large scale repatriation is the 1983 National Heritage Act, which is responsible for many of the structural elements that continue to permeate the UK's museum sector. This act forbids museums from dismissing objects from their collection unless they are either a) a duplicate of another object or b) an object that has become 'useless' (Waitzman, 2022). Under this Act any repatriation is therefore unlawful, and this legislation has been a huge element as to why few strides been made in this direction. Tom discussed that the MA has plans to repeal this act in collaboration with the Labour government for the next election in order to bring about change.

The 2020 BLM protests that witnessed the upheaval and drowning of local slave trader Edward Colston's statue in Bristol began a national discourse around remnants from the past. Following

this protest, authorities feared there would be a nationwide insurrection against statues with problematic histories. Accordingly, Minister Matt Warman made a statement that the UK's heritage should not be removed, and hence the government took a stance to 'retain and explain': this approach maintains that statues are important in teaching us about the past, and their removal is not condoned (BBC, 2020). It is clear that the UK government at an institutional level is against making attempts at redistribution and letting go of physical remnants of colonial history.

Additionally, a perhaps even more significant factor in deciding the direction of museums is their organisational structure,

> '*Leadership holds a big deal of power, so you've got museum directors and your governing bodies, to meditating how the museum is running, what policies are implemented, which programmes are at the forefront. They're essentially where power is held in order to make decisions.*' Tom

Museum leadership has a far greater role in shaping the direction of museums than many museums would openly admit. In 2020, the Museum of the Home - formerly the Geffrye Museum - conducted a survey with the local community regarding the statue of the former slave trader and Mayor of London, Sir Robert Geffrye. The consultation received over 2,187 responses, of which 78% answered that they had negative feelings towards the statue, with a higher proportion of locals having a negative association (83.4%) than those who generally support or donate to the museum (46.5%) (2020, p.6). This report was followed by a series of ongoing protests in Hackney regarding the statue and demanding it be taken down (Bryant, 2021). Despite the local community overwhelmingly stating their disapproval of the statue, it remains. Similarly, the Museum of London at the Docklands also had a statue - this one of Robert Milligan, also a slave trader - that was cause for concern. This statue however was taken down in June 2020 by the local council to 'recognise the wishes of the community' (Museum of London, 2020: 2). This begs the question as to why the Museum of the Home has been so resistant to their statue's removal. The answer likely lies in its Board of Trustees who have the power to overrule community interests. I had an interview arranged with the Museum of the Home's Director of Creative Programmes and Collections, however after sending an Interview Guide prior to the meeting, was never heard from again and did not respond to any further emails. The interview guide in question will be attached in Appendix 2.

While leadership is certainly important, these structures do not have a uniform affect on all museums,

> '*a lot of the more, smaller museums, they rely so heavily on funding, especially from the Arts Council, and they have a huge imperative for community engagement and that kind of thing. So they have to do things that are more socially engaged. Whereas with the big nationals, they've got these big Tory backers who are essentially saying you mention the word decolonisation and that's it, we're gonna have words.*' Tom

Local small scale museums rely more heavily on funding bodies, and are thus more likely to be restricted to concerns related to the fundings bodies than their own organisation. In contrast larger, national scale museums which are kept under the strict rules of the Board of Trustees, can

become deeply embedded within the current political discourse of the UK. Museums can thus act as pawns in the wider political landscape, onto which powerful individuals are able to project their personal beliefs, which then become lived realities for the local community. Public institutions which claim to serve collective interests can in this case directly fly in the face of what locals want, and it is clear that the leadership structure can result in a democratic deficit as there is no public accountability to their jurisdiction.

Funding bodies can also represent barriers to the effectiveness of decolonial action. While some funders are likely to want to promote decolonisation, the conditions of this funding can have limitations,

> '*What I've noticed with decolonisation funders, people are going to funders for money to do these projects, and they're having to produce something within a year or two, and it's putting a lot of pressures on museum workers and gallery workers because if you're dealing with, like, a collection of 300 plus objects that stem, for example, from the transatlantic slave trade it will take more than a year or two to get through those objects, you are putting pressure on museum workers and you are also putting pressure on communities. And that's not what that should be, which completely alleviates the ability to build a relationship and give proper interpretation to these objects to tell a story that people are wanting to come and see and when funders do that, it cripples the process greatly*' - Anita

Short-termism not only affects community engagement projects, but naturally also decolonisation efforts. It is safe to say that while funding bodies may support community engagement and decolonisation, the nature of these grants also puts pressures and limits the effectiveness of these practices, which in principle require long-term trustworthy relationships and institutional commitment.

The socio-cultural context of the UK must also be considered as a barrier to decolonisation. When considering why decolonisation has not swept across public institutions in the way that it has social movements, the cultural climate for generally must be called into question. A key rhetoric of the Brexit campaign was British exceptionalism, emphasising the special history of the UK. This resonated with many who felt 'left behind' in a culture of growing multiculturalism and cultural exchange. In some respects British identity is in crisis; for many, taking a stance on decolonisation is too controversial. This context is also necessary to understand the subjectivities of the people in leading positions: '*if you look at the makeup of the sector, it's majority white middle class women, and then men*' (Tom). Tom talks about how this has a direct impact on the implementation of decolonial policies and ideas,

> '*white fragility is actually a huge barrier, you just have to mention decolonisation and it makes people uncomfortable. Nobody wants to talk about these issues. And there's nothing wrong with them being in position of power, it's the balance of that power.*'

Although public protests may call for decolonisation, it is clear that organisations, and those who are in positions of power do not reflect these values. Museums that openly support decolonisation are the exception. While there may be executive individuals who do want this kind of change, there is still not enough widespread consensus for reform across the sector at large.

There are sector-wide stakeholders such as the MA, that want museums to begin a comprehensive movement towards committing to decolonisation - however they lack the means to do so. Tom shared his frustration on this front,

> *'We don't have any enforcement power, which for me is annoying, but I would love to go there and say, do this, do that do this. You have to be very gentle. So from the policy side you have to try and encourage best practice.'*

In general it is safe to say that there is not enough pressure or incentive for museums to change. As long as the move towards decolonisation relies on the good intentions of those in positions of power, the uptake of decolonial practice will be slow.

Finally, where museums may show an interest in decolonisation, there is a lack of understanding on what exactly it means and what it looks like. Seeing decolonisation only as a destruction, rather than as an enrichment of current collections is likely to deter senior leadership. Henrietta explains that,

> *'Decolonisation is perceived as kind of negative, it's kind of equated to damaging destroying statues, and it's not, it's much more than that. So as I said, it's not about dissenting only, but it's about finding a space for the hidden narratives.'*

For some museums, the commitment of decolonisation may be too radical to openly commit to. However, for others their actions of decolonisation may not be going far enough,

> *'To decolonise the museum is not a one stop approach, that will take a very long time and I think the understanding of decolonisation as a very of ephemeral, light touch like ohh an exhibition here, a programme here, we've decolonised, and it's like listen Susan, no you haven't, you've got plenty more work to do, like a lot more work. So the frustration I've found is the enthusiasm is there but they don't know how to decolonise. Not a lot of them know how to engage with community practitioners in a way which is equitable and sustainable for the long term.'* Tom

Lacking a solid grasp on what a decolonial agenda would look like is certainly a large barrier, as well as understanding the kind of commitment that decolonisation requires. As Tom states, it is not a matter of a single exhibition but far more structural. Ultimately, '*every museum needs to decolonise because the very foundations of museums are deeply colonial.*' (Tom)

Chapter 5.

Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Answering RQ1

1a: How do London museums understand and approach strategies of community engagement?

1b: What are the key stakeholders' experience with the implementation of these strategies?

The results show that while community engagement practices are highly shaped by funding bodies which set requirements and often determine which communities are targeted, the process is equally personable and relies heavily on the emotional labour of those involved. Despite the restrictions of funding bodies, flexibility permeates the process throughout, from conception through to execution. Accordingly, stakeholders on the ground also remain adaptable, working within the parameters of the projects, many incorporating this unpredictability into their approach. Museums certainly have increasingly adopted a role as social infrastructure, which as the literature anticipated, can exist within a pre-existing network of organisations and collectives. Many museums organised community engagement projects with the help of local organisations or charities that have pre-established relationships with the communities. However, again there were exceptions to this, with some museums and their community outreach officers targeting communities and individuals with no prior connections to one another.

Connections between museums and communities were facilitated either through these existing relationships or in building new ones. Regardless, museum staff emphasised the importance of genuine relationships, which were found to be incremental to the community engagement process. Genuine community engagement relies on trusted and long-term relationships which cannot be quantified into KPIs (key performance indicators) as some funding bodies require. Small museums are shaped by the parameters of funding bodies to a greater extent than larger museums, which comparatively exercise more freedom due to their funding coming from a greater range of sources over which they then have more control. Small scale museums, especially local council museums are closing across London, their very survival hinges on their success in attaining grants and funding from other sources. This instability means that smaller museums are forced to structurally incorporate the objectives set by prominent fundings bodies, such as the Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund in order to avoid closure.

In terms of approaching the community engagement process, appeasing the constellation of stakeholders plays a significant role in shaping practices. As a public facing, state funded institution, the museum is subject to a cacophony of interests. Within this confluence of stakeholders, community engagement practices are unlikely to please everyone. Community engagement practices are subject to interests both from within the community, bottom-up, and from within higher ups in the institution and funding bodies, top-down. Community engagement practices can bring rifts within communities to the surface. On the other hand, there are also institutional interests to consider. Notably museum leadership and funders can present a vision of community engagement that can present issues for those involved. Freelancers expressed apprehension when working with certain institutions, and that a consideration of an institution's

interests is made to ensure a cohesive collaboration. While museums may have mission statements that establish their goals, museum leadership can play a large role in determining the direction of projects. Communities may find it difficult to differentiate between the driving intentions behind community engagement projects while freelancers may be more aware of these nuances as they have more experience in the sector, and can thus better navigate who to work with and what to expect.

When considering community engagement approaches, the findings indicate a deep interconnectedness between the material and the immaterial. Immaterial practices lay emphasis on co-curation, storytelling and personal experience. Through community engagement, human experience is essentially embedded into the museum's framework, building knowledge that challenges traditional institutional narratives. Material approaches are alterations to the physical infrastructure or environment that are designed with community interests in mind. Good spatial design is essential in engaging communities: rigid spaces produce rigid relationships and do not challenge traditional museology. Flexibility as a key component of good community engagement practice should also be reflected in space, which should leave room for improvisation, creativity and freedom without imposed restrictions. Many museums, notably the Museum of London, are undergoing renovations precisely for this reason, in order to improve the function of the museum and make it more welcoming. This should make the museum appeal to a wider audience more generally, as well as create opportunities for new activities and performances within the space, akin to the *'Italian piazza'* (Jamie). These changes may help to break down barriers to accessing museums more generally, as these spaces have historically perpetuated 'high class' culture which require exclusive cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). In order to make museums more open to the public, their spaces must also become more welcome which may involve disrupting the historical idea of the museum itself.

As evidenced in the Angel Alley case study, space can also play a much more significant role in the community engagement process. The Whitechapel Gallery was able to act as a mediator, bringing together a confluence of urban stakeholders for the betterment of a small space primarily for those communities who most regularly use it. The case study also highlights the significance of the museum as an actor shaping the urban realm along social lines, of which there are so few. As mentioned earlier, good community engagement is not one directional but symbiotic. This applies both to the immaterial as well as the material approaches. The sharing of knowledge as well as space between the museum and the community establishes the best groundworks for building strong relationships, on which these practices thrive.

While both material and immaterial approaches are important, community engagement works best when physical infrastructure facilitates collaboration and cooperation. The organisation of space is not irrelevant and providing a safe space for community members makes a difference. In contrast to immaterial approaches, spatial reform represents a fixed commitment to collaboration. Angel Alley will henceforth be available not only to the gallery but also to the public to be appropriated however they wish. Best practice allows community members to work as collaborators with equal power in the process, and effectively results in a breakdown of hierarchy. The coming together of community and gallery in a public space, as a kind of middle ground, can

be interpreted as a means of discarding hierarchies. Ideally, community engagement should result in a restructuring of both the community and the museum in a manner that enriches both.

This contributes significantly to the literature, which is limited when it comes to understanding community engagement in museums, especially in urban areas. The case study of Angel Alley represents an opportunity for museums to take on a far greater role as mediators in urban conflict areas, and developing these collaboratively through the community engagement approach. Further research should seek to better understand how museums can best negotiate public spaces to be used communally.

Through community engagement the museum becomes a better representation of its local communities and the lived histories that often remain undocumented, while the community gains a space to feel heard and connect with those who have shared their experiences. Community engagement should not be seen as the museum doing the community a favour, or the community being extracted for knowledge. Some museums - like the Hackney Museum with their Community Advisory Panel - have begun to incorporate communities into the organisational structure of the museum. In general it seems that museums are still resistant to opening up their institution to the community on a more longterm basis. Thus, community engagement remains limited throughout the sector, collaborations still limited to isolated exhibitions or projects. The strict structure of larger museums will likely prove to be a large barrier to this kind of change.

Research question 1a and 1b were subject to some overlap due to the linking themes throughout. While it was initially assumed that museums would have stringent approaches for community engagement practices, this was found not to be true. Goals as well as approaches are vague, and therefore the practice is extremely flexible throughout. The approaches are highly dependent on the specific context of individuals and stakeholders involved. The theme of meaningful relationships, personal experience, collaboration and genuine connection as a key component of community engagement demonstrates the deeply personal nature of the practice itself. Community engagement is not something that can be outsourced, but instead relies on trust. Where freelancers are involved, they do expect pre-existing relationships to exist. Museum workers and freelancers who work with communities genuinely connect and care for the people they work with. Without their emotional labour community engagement work would not be possible. This includes the work of other museum staff that make it a welcoming space, from front of house to those who keep the spaces clean and functional. Genuine community engagement work requires people who care about what they are doing and want to give people a voice, or rather provide a platform for people to speak.

It is clear that amongst an increasingly harsh set of circumstances, including a cost of living crisis, marginalised communities in turbulent areas are the most vulnerable, socially isolated and facing displacement from outside factors such as gentrification and redevelopment. In the context of London, the museum has unequivocally taken on a role as key player in negotiating urban stakeholders, and facilitating safe spaces for often precarious communities. It is likely that museums' community engagement strategies will only grow, as the practice is a staple of every museum that claims to have a close relationship with its local area and history. As the landscape of

museums is unlikely to become more stable, the status of museums will remain volatile and continue to depend on the criteria of funding bodies. The forces that shape the agendas on these funding bodies is unfortunately outside the scope of this thesis. Over time, museums are likely to establish closer bonds with local community groups, however it is unknown whether this will lead to more longterm and radical changes to the museums' structure.

A weakness of this study is the lack of community members and partners in the sample. The thesis does not adequately capture the community's perspective on the process and how different approaches may affect communities accordingly. However, the focus of the thesis was always to capture the driving factors of community engagement on the institutional side. The range of stakeholders across a range of museums as well as professionals working within the sector is a great strength of the work that has allowed the findings to capture perspectives from across the field. Gaining the perspective of freelancers who can act as mediators between communities and museums has also shed a different light on the practices.

5.2 Answering RQ2

4.3 To what extent are community engagement practices and their implementation linked to decolonisation?

Asking museum workers and freelancers in the sector about their stance on decolonisation reaped a mixture of responses. While some had worked directly on decolonisation and given the practice much thought, others had a lot less to say and were slightly perplexed at my line of questioning. At certain junctures I believed to have been connecting completely irrelevant concepts together for my own academic interest, and questioned the validity of my own research question. However, the mixture of responses, ranging from enthusiasm, to confusion and annoyance are nothing but representative of the sector and its approach to decolonisation as a whole. This made the question an even more intriguing one to answer. While initially seeking to understand how community engagement and decolonisation were related, or could become complementary practices in London museums, the findings, or rather lack thereof, pushed me towards understanding why decolonisation has not swept the London museal scene as one might have expected. Three years on from the murder of George Floyd and the following BLM protests, where the world witnessed what can only be described as an institutional panic across not only the cultural sector but wider society as a whole - little has come of these now empty promises of institutional reform. While community engagement with its focus on local knowledge and redistributing knowledge and power should inevitably be incorporated into decolonial approaches, their framing is far less politically radical. Instead community engagement is cushioned among concepts like social cohesion, togetherness and improving representation. Not that these are not important, yet community engagement could be playing a larger role in reshaping institutions in London in a meaningful way. To answer the question: community engagement is indispensable to decolonial practice, however community engagement is not being framed in this way, and until it is, it is unlikely to bring about decolonial reform in isolation.

The concept of decolonisation and what its implementation would mean is certainly misunderstood. Standing in the way of a widespread uptake of decolonial action in London's museums is their institutional framework, as a direct result of a stifled cultural climate. That same cultural climate that is vehemently unwilling to let go of its own colonial past and the memory of exceptionalism. The MA's decision to commit to promoting decolonisation would not have happened without the push from Director Sharon Heal. Many museums suffer from management by Boards and Directors who frankly do not reflect the interests of the majority; they quietly steer institutions away from radical ideas that would require deep structural reform such as decolonisation, and keep community engagement projects which are good for marketing, bring in funds, and require no restructuring. While in practice community engagement and decolonisation both involve sharing knowledge and challenging the institutional narrative, decolonisation requires a rethinking of power relations and more meaningfully challenges the institutional framework of museums. Decolonisation is not a single practice, but a continual process committed to change. While community engagement could be meaningfully incorporated into a decolonial approach in London's museums, there are too many obstacles and not enough driving factors for this change. Decolonisation in museums in the UK more generally is sporadic and exceptional, with less than a handful of museums that have made outright statements about their commitment to the process.

With reference to Quijano's CMP, the coloniality of power itself cannot be challenged without an explicit challenge to enduring power relations. Understood in this way, decolonisation must reassign positions of power, and refigure the balance of power within not only the production of knowledge but also institutional control. In the museum this means that meaningful decolonisation can only occur through a redistribution of power. A true articulation of decolonisation in the museum would likely witness its collapse; acknowledging that the process will be slow and subject to imperfections will be crucial. The existing framework for community engagement practices, which are permeated by flexibility, uncertainty and simultaneously opportunities for learning and growth, will likely mirror the experience of implementing decolonial action.

Consequently, the reality of decolonisation will require a lot of resilience from those working in the sector.

> *'I remember one time I was speaking to a past director and she said I tend to stop her in her tracks and I was like, Ohh, that was not my intention. She says the questions you ask me tend to be quite challenging, and it was not to purposefully challenge her. It was just me having questions and me really being curious about what the expectations were. But because they're not in it, they're not getting it. So they're on the outside looking in. And so I'm kind of having to bring them in and to really understand.'* - Anita

While decolonisation is framed as a practice of social justice, the lived reality of implementing structural sectoral change will involve miscommunication and conflict. There will be friction in confronting people and institutions with questions and uncomfortable truths. Hence, I emphasise the personal nature of these practices, while academia often speaks of these generalised processes, the emotional labour is done by real people who too often remain unacknowledged.

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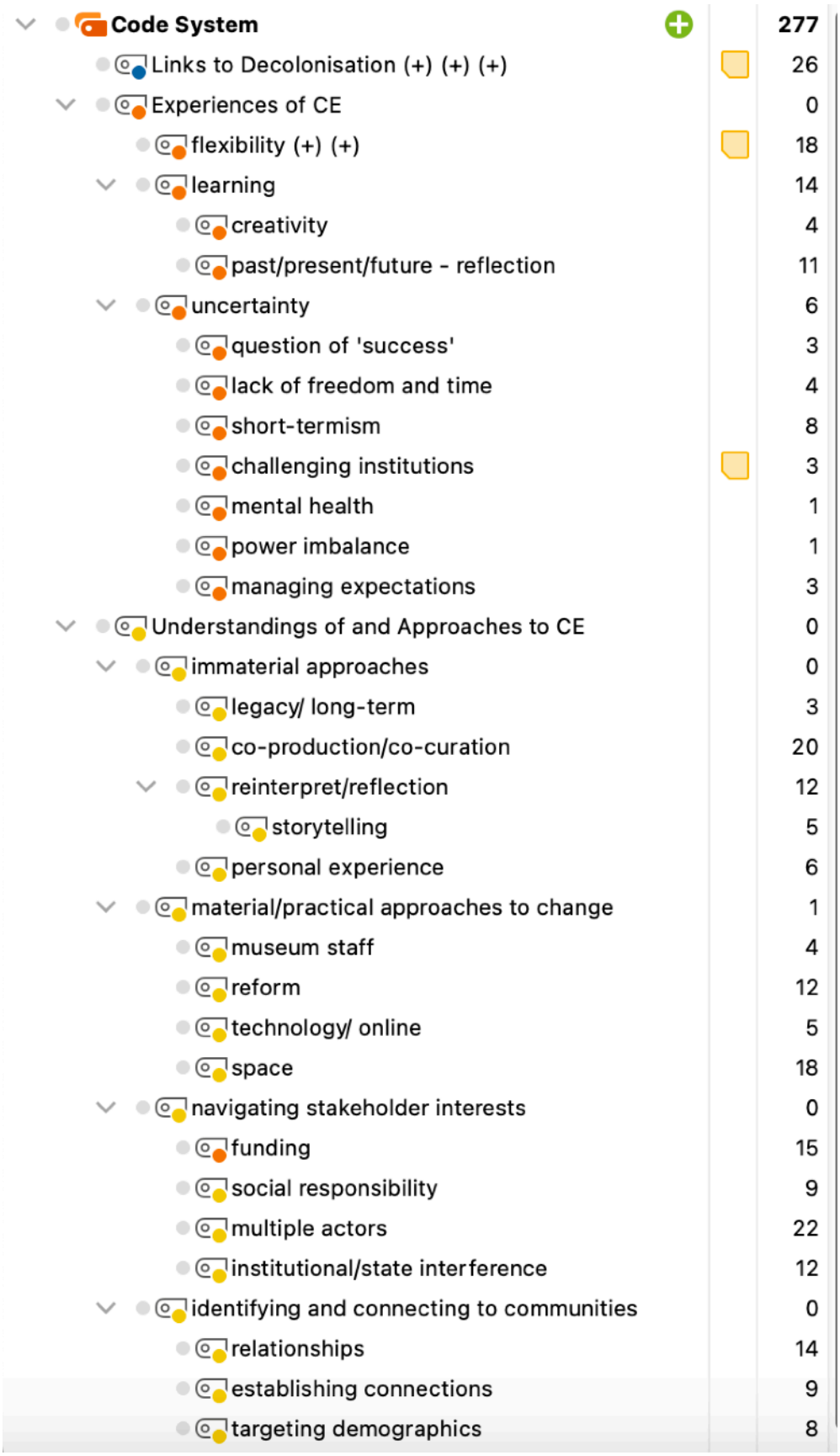
Appendix 1: Codes



Appendix 2: Sample Interview Guide

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Interview with Danielle Patten, Director of Creative Programmes and Collections at the Museum of the Home

For MSc Urban Studies Master's Thesis - Nadia Priebe

Main themes: 1) Understandings of decolonisation and approaches in London museums and 2) Community Engagement and co-curation initiatives

Questions

Theme 1

1. What does decolonisation mean for you? who and what would this involve
2. Do you think decolonisation is important, if so why?
3. Does the museum have an active stance on decolonisation?
4. What actions has the museum taken towards decolonial work?
    1. What was the process behind the name change?
5. What do you feel to be the largest obstacle to change?
    1. There is a controversy around the Geffrye statue, how do you go about making a decision in regards to what should happen to it?
6. How important are museums in the implementation of wider societal moves such as decolonisation in your opinion?

Theme 2

1. Do you see the local community as important to the museum and its identity?
2. To what extent is the museum engaged with the local community?
3. What kind of engagement is this?
4. Do you have any success criteria for your interactions with the community?
5. Is there anything you think the museum could do to improve its relationship to the community?
6. When you incorporate co-curation into your exhibits, is there a set approach/protocol with how to handle these?
7. What is the process of finding artists/curators to work with?
    1. Who decides who you choose to reach out to for co-curation?
    2. Do you accept applications/ when people reach out to you?
    3. Is there anything you look for specifically when deciding who to work with?
8. What is the balance of control when working with co-curators?
9. What do you think are the positives/negatives of working with other curators?