**The ethics of collaboration with museums: researching, archiving and displaying home and migration**

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**Abstract**

Collaboration has become an increasingly important aspect of higher education policy agendas in which impact and public engagement are regarded as crucial elements of publically funded research. Collaborative research raises ethical issues relating to the collection, archiving and dissemination of data, but also in regard to the complex and emotional nature of relationships between participants, practitioners and academics, that are currently under-explored. This paper examines ethical considerations raised by collaborative research with museums, drawing upon doctoral research conducted in collaboration with the Geffrye Museum that examined home, work and migration among Vietnamese communities in East London. The paper examines the challenge of balancing the interests of participants with the museum’s aim to document and display testimonies and images of participants’ homes. It explores the ambivalent response of participants to the archiving of their research at the museum. I examine my positionality as a researcher, reflecting upon the emotions involved in collaborative research. The paper identifies contributions from museum studies that account for the multiple viewpoints involved in collaboration. In the conclusion, I suggest that the ethical issues in collaboration speak to wider challenges of reflecting critically upon research relationships that are complex, emotional and underpinned by differing needs and priorities.

**Keywords**: research ethics, museums, home, migration, positionality, collaboration

**Introduction**

While collaborations between geographers, creative practitioners and cultural institutions have been a long-standing feature of academia, changing policy agendas and funding pressures have resulted in an increased emphasis upon collaboration within Higher Education in the UK. Partnerships between academics and cultural organisations have resulted in the co-production of exhibitions, performances and archives, alongside co-authored publications (Owens et al. 2017; Blunt et al. 2013). Collaborations between geographers and museums have been examined from the perspectives of museum geographies (Geoghegan 2010) and are situated within wider engagements between geography and creative practice (Foster and Lorimer 2007; Hawkins 2011; Nash 2013). Geographers have engaged with the challenges of working across disciplines and the unsettling of traditional boundaries between academic and creative ways of knowing (Hawkins 2011; Nash 2013). However, issues relating to the collection and dissemination of research data in museum contexts and the underlying ethical standpoints of museums and universities have been comparatively under-explored. This paper takes as its main focus the ethics of collaborative research with museums, drawing upon doctoral research conducted in collaboration with the Geffrye Museum in London. The paper focuses on three ‘moments’ in the research process in which ethical issues became particularly prominent. First, the paper examines the challenge of balancing the needs and interests of participant and researcher with the museum’s aim to document and display testimonies and images of participants’ homes. Second, it examines the ambivalence of participants in response to having their stories archived and potentially displayed at the museum. Finally, the paper examines my involvement in outreach work with the Geffrye and Vietnamese community organisations, reflecting upon the practical and emotional challenges involved in collaborative research. I argue that the differing ethical standpoints that become entangled in collaboration require academics and cultural partners to reconfigure our understandings of research relationships and the boundaries of the research project. The paper draws upon ethical standpoints from museum studies that enable an in-depth understanding of the complex, unpredictable and emotional nature of academic-museum collaborations.

**Creative collaborations: partnerships between museums and geographers**

Collaborations between geographers and museums are situated within long-established relationships between geographical knowledge and creative practice (Driver et al. 2002; de Leeuw and Hawkins 2017; Foster and Lorimer 2007; Hawkins 2011; Marston and de Leeuw 2013; Nash 2013). Geographers have worked with and in museums in diverse ways, from curating exhibitions based on research (Bressey 2010; Driver 2013, Nast 2005; Yusoff and Gabrys 2010) to exploring issues of identity and representation in museums (Desforges and Maddern 2004; Geoghegan 2010). Geographers have also engaged in creative practices as part of participatory research and activism. Parr (2007) used collaborative filmmaking in research with people with mental health problems, while Johnston and Pratt (2010) produced a play addressing themes of migration and inequality in collaboration with migrant domestic workers.

Collaborations between academics and museums are also situated within changes in museum scholarship and practice. The discipline of museum studies was strongly influenced by the ‘new museology’ of the 1980s, in which scholars called for a ‘radical re-examination of the role of museums in society’ (Vergo 1989, 3), advocating feminist and post-colonial perspectives on the museum as a site of contestation (Karp and Levine 1991). Museums have since become increasingly concerned with inclusion and community engagement (Lynch 2011; Morse 2013; Sandell 2002). Like universities, museums are affected by changing policies and funding pressures, resulting in collaboration being regarded as beneficial to both parties (Owens *et al*. 2017). As this paper will show, creative collaborations challenge conventional research methods and relationships, often evoking feelings of uncertainty and concern amongst all participants (Graham *et al*. 2013; Nash 2013).

This paper draws upon doctoral research funded by an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA) on ‘Home-work: connections and transitions in London from the seventeenth century to the present’ at the Centre for Studies of Home (CSH), a partnership between the Geffrye Museum and Queen Mary, University of London (QMUL). My research was planned with collaborative outputs as an integral part of the project, including the contribution of my research material to the Geffrye’s archive. The rest of the paper explores how the collaborative nature of the project raised ethical issues in regard to researching, documenting and representing home in academic and museum contexts.

### **Documenting homes? The ethics of researching (in) migrant homes**

From its original emphasis on the homes of the English middle classes, the Geffrye Museum has broadened its focus to encompass material and symbolic aspects of home from diverse cultural and temporal perspectives. Its ‘Documenting Homes’ collection preserves testimonies and images of London homes in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries alongside the biographies of their inhabitants. My project examined relationships between home and work for Vietnamese migrants in East London, including the extent to which participants may feel at home in East London, the wider city and beyond. This topic was also of interest to the Geffrye, who were keen to increase the diversity of their archive and to build relationships with local communities. My research involved semi-structured interviews with 22 participants who had migrated from Vietnam to London in diverse circumstances and over different time periods, from 1979 to the present day. Participants were also invited to share an object that was significant to them in terms of their past or present homes.

The materiality of home was an important part of my collaboration with the Geffrye, which has a particular interest in people’s relationships with their homes and domestic possessions. The museum was keen for interviews take place in participants’ homes and for the homes to be visually documented, in keeping with its aim of expanding its archive of homes and domestic possessions in contemporary London.

However, conducting research on and in the home raises ethical issues that point to broader challenges in collaborative research. Pink (2004) highlights the challenges involved in research methods such as home tours, arguing that the home may be an insecure or uncomfortable place for participants. Several of my participants lived in transient shared accommodation, and did not feel that their place of residence was a comfortable space in which to conduct an interview. Conducting research in participants’ homes also raises concerns over researcher safety (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Pink 2004). My application to the University Research Ethics Committee required me to develop protocols to ensure my own safety as well as that of participants. In response to these considerations, I expanded my research design to ensure that interviews were carried out in a space chosen by the participant, whether in the home or a more public setting. Inviting participants to bring an object or image relating to the home provided a means of talking about home while not being *in situ*. While initially the Geffrye were keen for interviews to take place in the home where possible, my research demonstrated to them that experiences of home could be discussed in multiple locations and emphasised the importance of flexibility around the spaces in which interviews took place. However, this issue also speaks to wider concerns about the meanings of home and how it might be researched. While geographies of home have long recognised that home is a multi-scalar concept that stretches beyond the house (Blunt and Dowling 2006), this understanding can be caught in tension with the emphasis on documenting the physical residence for archiving and display in a museum.

**From the interview to the archive: sharing and preserving personal stories**

The second instance in which ethical issues come to the forefront of collaborative research can be observed in the process of transferring research material to the museum archive. Examining the uses of copyright in the context of a participatory museum project, Graham *et al*. (2013) describe the ways in which copyright is used to balance the rights and interests of individuals with those of the public. The public interest argument is articulated in a protocol developed for researchers archiving material at the Geffrye; I was involved in producing this protocol alongside other researchers, curatorial staff and academic supervisors. The protocol states that ‘deposited material is preserved at the museum, managed and mediated by the curatorial department, for public benefit’ (Geffrye Museum 2014). Museums are obligated by national laws and professional codes to be able to prove the ownership and provenance of items in their collections (Museum Association 2016). Securing copyright enables the museum to have control over how items in their collection are kept, used and displayed. For these reasons, museums are generally reluctant to accept anonymous material. Indeed, the Geffrye’s guidance form states that while they accept temporary access restrictions of up to 30 years, ‘complete anonymisation will probably mean the material is unsuitable for the Geffrye’s archive’ (Geffrye Museum 2014). This position differs from that of academic repositories and Research Councils in the UK. While the RCUK Common Principles on Data Policy state that ‘publically funded research data are a public good, produced in the public interest, which should be made openly available’, the same principles acknowledge the need to restrict data so that individual participants cannot be identified (RCUK 2015). Anonymising personal data is advised not only to protect individual identities, but ‘to maintain public trust in the use of personal data for research’ (RCUK 2015). While both academic and museum perspectives seek to balance the interests of the individual with those of the public, their ethical approaches are rooted in differing domains of knowledge-making that become enmeshed within collaborative research.

The collaborative development of the research protocol involved tensions and compromises between academic concerns about anonymity and museum priorities regarding the clear provenance of research material. The protocol aimed to ensure participants’ informed consent to deposit their material at the Geffrye, as well as determining copyright and future use of that material. In response to concerns that participants should not feel pressured to deposit their material at the time of the interview, it was agreed that depositing material in the archive would involve a two-stage process: a consent form asked for initial consent to participate in the research, which would be followed by a later request for consent to deposit their material at the museum. As researchers, we were asked to seek consent for copyright of the interviews and photographs, as well as future use of the material in exhibitions and research. While the form was designed so that individuals could specify restrictions (such as restricting access to their personal details), concerns remained among researchers as to how participants would retain a sense of control over the use of their material. At the time of writing, 5 out of 22 of my participants have consented to their interview transcripts and photographs being deposited in the archive. While some of the reasons for this are related to the practical challenges of maintaining communication, participants’ ambivalence towards archiving their material was also related to the absence of a long-term relationship with the museum. Although some individuals expressed interest in their material being exhibited, most of my participants were unfamiliar with the Geffrye or its collections. Other people were interested in taking part in my research, but were reluctant for their material to be archived in perpetuity. Some participants wanted to remain anonymous because of their position within the community or to protect family members, and were unwilling to deposit their data if complete anonymity could not be assured. This also raises questions regarding the researcher’s role in building relationships between participants and the museum and the limits of what can be achieved. Although my research led some participants to become engaged with the Geffrye, the development of relationships between researcher and participants does not guarantee that participants will develop a deeper relationship with the institution.

While it was accepted that there would be a delay between participants taking part in the research and depositing their material, the copyright process raised a number of practical challenges. Several participants had moved house or changed jobs in the period between their interview and the development of the protocol, making it difficult to arrange further meetings to discuss their material. Some participants had limited familiarity with academic research or museums in the UK. I provided an information sheet (translated into Vietnamese), in which I explained the purposes of the research and how their material could be used in the future. However, I remained concerned as to whether participants had all the information needed to make a decision about the use of their material in the museum context. While I arranged for interpreters to be present for some interviews, it was difficult to co-ordinate this for multiple further meetings.

The process of securing copyright raises emotional as well as practical challenges. Graham *et al*. (2013) highlight the ‘awkwardness’ that is evoked by asking participants to sign a copyright form, describing it as ‘an insertion of a more bureaucratic logic into a highly personal and personally responsive context’ (2013, 115). My research depended on relationships of trust that took time to develop. Asking participants to sign a copyright form and go through their interview transcripts in detail felt awkward and impersonal in comparison to the rest of our interactions, and evoked a sense of anxiety in me about whether our relationships could be altered by the formality of the process. An example from my emails with a participant reveals my anxiety about the copyright process:

Thuy: Sorry for the delay in getting back to you – I just need a bit more time to read through the transcripts before I sign the forms.

Researcher: It’s no problem at all, take as much time as you need. Do let me know if there are any mistakes in the transcript or something that you want to restrict.

Thuy: It’s not really about things being wrong, just that in some places I can add more details and improve the story.

The above exchange illustrates how the ‘bureaucratic logic’ (Graham *et al*. 2013, 115) of the copyright form intervened in our relationship, evoking a sense of concern in me that was not necessarily expressed by the participant. The ethical considerations involved in copyright raise wider points in regard to the differences between what Graham *et al*. (2013, 111) term ‘collecting objects’ and ‘collecting stories’. The authors note that while the transfer of digital stories into the museum collection might be regarded as transforming the story into a ‘finished’ object, participants in their study often view this differently, expecting to maintain long-term relationships with the museum (Graham *et al*., 2013, 113). The authors explore this through the lens of courtesy, arguing that the participatory nature of the project creates a ‘social rather than a legal contract’ and the expectation of an on-going relationship (*ibid*., 113).

The concept of courtesy emerged as highly relevant throughout the process of archiving and displaying my research. Several participants said that they wanted to be contacted if their material was going to be used in an exhibition, despite the fact that transferring copyright to the museum meant that this was not a legal requirement. In practice, when one participant’s material was proposed as part of an exhibition that is on display at the time of writing (6 June 2017 - 7 January 2018), I contacted him to check that he was happy for his narrative to be included, despite the fact that his signing the copyright form meant that this was not strictly necessary. Our relationship meant that I felt concerned to ensure that he was happy to take part, and he appreciated the courtesy of being asked, regardless of what was formally required. The practical and emotional challenges of archiving illustrate how collaborative research involves not only relations between people, but also between people and institutions, which require different forms of negotiation and care as the research is developed and disseminated.

**Homes on display? The ethics of exhibiting home in a museum context**

Museums have become increasingly concerned to ensure that their exhibitions are relevant and accessible to diverse communities (Sandell 2002). Golding (2007, 58) argues that ‘the museum has the potential to function as a “frontier”, a zone where learning is created, new identities are forged; new connections are made between disparate groups and their own histories’. However, while notions of co-production and participation are intended to be empowering, such initiatives also risk reinforcing hierarchies and exclusionary processes (Lynch 2011). Representing home and migration in a museum raises questions surrounding how concepts of identity, mobility and displacement are imagined and displayed (Golding and Modest 2013). With regard to my research, I was concerned to avoid exhibiting simplistic or exoticised versions of the ‘Vietnamese home’ that looked solely through an ‘ethnic lens’ at complex experiences of home and mobility (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2011). Issues of representation also emerged as significant in relation to objects with religious significance. Several participants had religious objects in their homes, including altars or shrines to their ancestors. Images and objects of worship are regarded as particularly sensitive, and their display in a museum may be considered unacceptable or sacrilegious by worshippers (Paine 2013). At the time of writing, my research is being exhibited at the Geffrye as part of ‘Home Thoughts’ (6 June 2017 - 7 January 2018), a display exploring memories of arrival, practices of home-making and questions of belonging in the city. This exhibition draws upon a range of research projects that have been based at the Centre for Studies of Home, with the aim of presenting diverse experiences of home and mobility in London.

However, while the ‘Home Thoughts’ exhibition displays research from a number of collaborative projects involving the Centre for Studies of Home, it was not co-curated by my participants. Indeed, while some researchers, organisations and students were involved in planning the exhibition, my participants were consulted but did not co-produce the exhibition. This raises ethical issues in regard to what is included within the boundaries of collaborative research projects, who is involved in co-producing outputs and how much input participants have in the curation of exhibitions that result from their participation in research.

Collaborative research and its outputs need significant time to develop, presenting further challenges in the context of time-pressured work environments (de Leeuw and Hawkins 2017). While exhibitions are often planned as part of collaborative research, museums and researchers could be said to operate at different time scales, with exhibitions scheduled years in advance. The demands of curating an exhibition while writing up a doctoral thesis require PhDs to be structured to ensure their feasibility. In reality, this may require the funding or time period of the PhD to be extended. Ethical issues are also pertinent in regard to how to proceed with collaborative outputs such as exhibitions after the student has completed their PhD. Collaborative research outputs also raise questions about the on-going role of the researcher as an intermediary between the museum and participants, particularly after the completion of the research.

**Researcher positionality: between the museum, academia and community**

The collaborative design of my research had a significant influence on my relationships with participants and my position as a researcher. In addition to the archiving aspect of the collaboration, my research also contributed to audience engagement activities. With funding from Arts Council England, the Geffrye commissioned a study of how the museum is engaged with by different audiences, which identified the Vietnamese as one among a number of communities who are not engaged with the museum. In response to these findings, the Geffrye developed outreach activities in partnership with Vietnamese community organisations. Such initiatives are part of a wider commitment to social inclusion, in which museums aim to overcome the barriers that may have led to particular groups being excluded or underrepresented (Sandell 2002; Golding and Modest 2013; Lynch 2011; Morse *et al*. 2013). Scholars and practitioners have drawn attention to the limits of such programmes, arguing that projects framed around community engagement ‘can gloss over the complexity of community identities...and lead to tokenistic claims of inclusion by museums’ (Golding and Modest 2013, 1). Such discussions draw attention to questions of knowledge, power and representation in relationships between museums and communities.

Following the report that highlighted the Vietnamese community as being under-represented among the Geffrye’s audiences, it was suggested that my research could contribute towards the development of engagement activities. I drew upon my contacts with Vietnamese organisations in Hackney and liaised between the museum and community groups to discuss the development of the project. Following several months of outreach activities including object handling and reminiscence workshops, 2 community groups visited the museum gardens for the first time. Several members enjoyed discussing how various herbs were used in cooking and traditional healing treatments, comparing them with those used in Vietnamese cooking and medicine. An inter-generational project is being developed in which young people will conduct oral histories with older Vietnamese people about their experiences of home.

My involvement in outreach work involved practical and emotional challenges, particularly in terms of negotiation between participants, the university and the museum. I was concerned to ensure that I did not use my role as a researcher to place undue pressure on people to take part in museum activities simply because they had taken part in my research. I therefore focused on making contact with organisations rather than asking individuals who had participated in my research. Collaborative research can lead the researcher to feel that they are shifting between multiple roles and institutional contexts, each with their own needs and priorities (Morse *et al*. 2013). While most of the outreach work took place after I had completed my fieldwork, I felt an ongoing sense of responsibility towards the communities who were involved in my research, as well as trying to position myself as a link between the museum, university and community groups. Furthermore, while the outreach work did not contribute directly to my thesis, it could be difficult to separate them on an emotional level. I sometimes felt as if my progress in the research was intertwined with the museum’s goal of building relationships with Vietnamese communities, which had more long-term and uncertain outcomes. This points to the need for partners to establish the activities and stakeholders that are included in the collaboration and to be clear about the boundaries of the project.

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined the ethical considerations that are raised by collaborative research between geographers and museums, highlighting issues in relation to the collection and storage of data for the differing purposes of research, museum archives and displays. It situates the challenges of archiving and copyright within wider understandings of the role of museums, noting the differing ethical standpoints of museums and research institutions. The paper also emphasises the emotional nature of collaboration and my efforts to work ethically with research participants and material while also fulfilling the aims of the museum. Drawing upon collaborative research with museums, Morse (2013) argues that while researchers have traditionally been required to follow clearly delineated ethics procedures, collaborative research requires a more flexible and responsive approach:

Collaborative research requires more iterative research methodologies that are improvisation-friendly, participation-centred, incorporating an ethics of care, and attentive to multiple accounts (Morse 2013, 73).

The topics discussed in this paper point to the need for academics and practitioners to develop ethical approaches that reflect the iterative, unpredictable and emotional process of collaboration. The ethic of courtesy explored by Graham *et al*. (2013) highlights the emotional nature of collaboration and the multiple potential outcomes that must be considered throughout the project. Academics and practitioners would benefit from methodological training in ethical issues relevant to collaborative research with museums, including data collection, archives and exhibitions, as well as concerns around positionality and relationships. Greater attention should be paid to the role of the researcher as a mediator between participants, the museum and university, and how to ensure that participants’ needs are met during and after the completion of the research. Examining the ethics of collaboration sheds light on the personal and emotional nature of research itself, as well as the challenges of reflecting and writing critically about research relationships.

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