**More Process, Less Product: the making of the Making African Connections Digital Archive**

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Abstract

Reflecting in 2014 on the transformative impact of digitisation on access to and the study of African collections, Terry Barringer and Marion Wallace argued that whilst there had been positive change, in some respects African collections were just as – if not more – hidden than ever. It is in this context that the Making African Connections project sought to make a digital archive whose ends were to investigate – and make investigable – our process of making a digital archive, what we did in the making rather than the outputs of that making. This article explores key aspects of that work – forgoing detail, foregrounding multi-vocality, collapsing hierarchies, digitizing with care – and documents what we found as principles became actions, as product succumbed to process, as tensions and conflicts arose in the making of a 'decolonial' digital archive.

Biographical Note

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In their introduction to the 2014 edited volume *African Studies in the Digital Age*, Terry Barringer and Marion Wallace reflect on digitisation’s transformative impact on both access to and the study of African collections. These transformations had, they argue, not all been positive: imbalances in training and wealth had deepened geographical inequalities in collection development; commercial actors had prioritised collections in and from the Global North; and changing research practices had created conditions in which African collections were just as – if not more – hidden than ever. It is in these contexts that the Making African Connections project sought to make a digital archive whose ends were to investigate – and make investigable – our process of making a digital archive, what we did in the making rather than the outputs of that making.[[1]](#footnote-1) This article explores key aspects of that work – forgoing detail, foregrounding multi-vocality, collapsing hierarchies, digitizing with care – and documents what we found as principles became actions, as product succumbed to process, as tensions and conflicts arose in the making of a digital archive.

Throughout, the question of whether or not our archive could be ‘decolonial’ was hardly at stake: to Roopika Risam’s (2019) urgent provocation ‘if the archive itself is a technology of colonialism, can the creation of new [digital] archives resist reinscribing its violence?’ we answered a resounding no.[[2]](#footnote-2) Instead, by unpicking displaced African ‘archives’ from business-as-usual, by differentiating them from and making them less subject to the needs of the whole, our work sought to surface the historical legacies and normativities that permeate our technologies of colonialism,[[3]](#footnote-3) to document our work as a possible corrective to the impacts wrought on African studies by the digital age.

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The paper proceeds in four parts. The first explores work to collapse multiple detailed and hierarchical record sets into a single structure that created room for new – less institutional, less infrastructural – object description. The second describes what we did with that space: foreground multi-vocality, create tensions that sought to destabilise and delegitimise authority, embrace inconsistency and particularity. The third elaborates on our motivations for using a flat, non-hierarchical record structure, and describes the novel hierarchies that emerged from their implementation. And the fourth and final part reflects on the affordances of slow digitization and the care it enabled. Across all four parts we bounce off (and against) ‘More Product, Less Process’, Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner’s seminal – if not uncontroversial – paper published in *The American Archivist* in 2005. In it Greene and Meissner argued that in the context of backlogs, the growing scope of archival collections, and reduced staffing, the archival profession should devote less attention to the minutiae of individual collections, and instead concentrate on describing collections at a high level, thereby making access rather than completeness, product over process, their priority. Greene and Meissner’s concepts of ‘the archive’ and of ‘archiving’ are narrower and more professionally bounded than those imagined by Risam, Barringer and Wallace, or us. But the frame is instructive, for it reminds us that access stands as the goal against which much collection management – across the galleries, libraries, archives and museum sector – is judged. And in the case of objects displaced – forcibly or otherwise – from colonial contexts, there are clear imperatives to prioritise access. As Napandulwee Shiweda often reminded us during the project, “descendant communities” just want to know what they have lost.[[4]](#footnote-4) Maria Caley’s contribution to this volume underscores the value of creating access in the form of digital archives published online, without paywalls, in accessible forms. During and since the project such uses were made of the Making African Connections Digital Archive: to produce banners, to create portable displays, to support learning materials.[[5]](#footnote-5) Any interventions, therefore, that interrupt that possibility of knowing, that slow down production in favour of process, must have good reason. We hope our work comes close to meeting that threshold.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. Space making

Modern collection catalogues are remarkable infrastructures of knowledge. It may be impossible to digest everything on display at somewhere like the British Museum in one day, but the information available in its galleries and displays is dwarfed by the size, detail, and complexity of modern collection catalogues, most of which describe collections out of sight, in stores, and held in archival or library collections. Such size creates an artifice of always-already completeness, an artifice that gives legitimacy to the modern collection catalogue, that elides that which is discoverable with that which exists. The owners of these catalogues tend to know that in spite of their scale, the contents of these catalogues are far from ‘complete’. Significantly, they know that their catalogues contain great variability, that they are partial, fragmented, piecemeal, and – at times – plain bad, whether as a result of human agency, machine reprocessing, ideological fervour, fiscal corner-cutting, something else, or all of the above. And their owners – the cataloguers, archivists, curators, and keepers – are starting to tell these truths, to document these stories, to reckon in public with the manifestations and consequences of lacuna and abundance.[[7]](#footnote-7) Interdisciplinary scholars of history, digital media and computational practice are also urgently telling these stories,[[8]](#footnote-8) drawing connections as they do with work that challenges the (archival) construction and framing of the past through a white colonial heteronormative gaze.[[9]](#footnote-9) Whilst these reckonings and narratives are changing how – and by whom – catalogue production takes place, they do not diminish the capacity of the modern collection catalogue to overwhelm. These catalogues consume us as we satisfy their needs, as we attempt to satisfy a demand for ever more granular data, for time to research and input that data, for cognition(s) to hold that granularity in memory, such that we still, against our better natures, make such categorisation real – often violently so – through our collective embodied investment in its construction of the world.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This collision of bigness and granularity is especially true in the museum sector, the sector whose collections the Making African Connections Digital Archive sought to represent. The cataloguing protocols developed to enable the many functions of the museum – discovery, knowledge making, maintaining provenance, risk management, exhibition, loan, conservation, audit – have encouraged a wealth and variety of documentation to be produced. This has developed hand-in-hand with computerisation. For whereas the printed page or catalogue card constrained documentation by creating material-cum-practical constraints, attendant imaginaries, and social conventions (e.g., there is only so much one can get on a card, there is only so much floor space we are willing to give to cards[[11]](#footnote-11)), computerised documentation practices – especially as those practices were uncoupled from removable storage media, from the constraints of disk space – are characterised by imaginaries of endless abundance. This is not surprising. Computerisation was sold to places like museums as liberating them from the constraints of physical media. Computerisation was the infrastructural backdrop to which novel – often justice-oriented – documentary practices were developed.[[12]](#footnote-12) And computerisation was well suited to satisfying more particularity, more ontology, more data, all the many types of could-be-standardised information a highly-professionalised museum sector saw objects as implying.

Museums standards such as SPECTRUM 5.0 are notable products of this computerisation, professionalization, and abundance.[[13]](#footnote-13) Published in 2017, SPECTRUM 5.0 was the UK museums collections management standard during the Making African Connections project.[[14]](#footnote-14) Being a standard means that SPECTRUM is more than merely an ontology for documenting collections, it is a standard that states that museums ‘should have’ things like a policy on cataloguing, what they ‘could’ or ‘are most likely to need to do’ at each stage of the collection management lifecycle. Such modals litter SPECTRUM 5.0 such that the reader quickly infers an imperative intonation. And this continues across its 21 collection management procedures, especially in its nine ‘primary’ procedures, those whose standards accredited museums must meet (or must have a credible plan to achieve). Central – quite literally in the web presentation of these nine divisions (Figure 1) – is cataloguing, the suggested procedure for which creates a minimum of seven pieces of documentary information: an object number, an object name, a brief description, a current location (in the form of a reference name or number), a current owner, a recorder of this information, and the date this was recorded. The production of each piece of information is supported by a guidance note that defines the record type, explains how to record it, provides examples, describes its use, and records its object information group. To take one example, in the case of the SPECTRUM 5.0 Cataloguing Procedure for ‘Object Name’ (Figure 2) we are told it is ‘a description of the form, function or type of object’, should be recorded as a single term and as part of a standard list based on recognized terminology, that it is often repeated as objects have many terms associated with them – ‘eg mug/commemorative item/studio pot’ – and that it is part of the object information group ‘Object identification information’, one of eight such groups, the sub-information types of which give us 79 further possible pieces of information to attach to an item record during cataloguing. The guidance notes for each of these information types cover 174 pages, roughly 40,000 words of dense, informative, modal-and-yet-imperative instruction.

SPECTRUM 5.0 is an extraordinary achievement, and as the version number implies, SPECTRUM 5.0 is the product of lengthy and ongoing iteration. Developed and maintained by the Collections Trust, work on the original SPECTRUM began in 1991. It was launched in 1994. At that time, what is now the Collections Trust was known as the Museum Documentation Association, a body established in 1977 with the ambition to merge the theory and computerisation of documentation, itself a spin-out from the pioneering Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association (IRGMA). Whilst at the beginning of the 1980s roughly half of UK museums still had no object documentation, during that decade documentation and cataloguing became central to their operations, and by the end of the decade plans for computerisation had accelerated. In the 1990s an air of systematization prevailed over documentation and cataloguing labour. SPECTRUM was here, each instantiation more institutional than the last, such that data created to comply with SPECTRUM 5.0, in a culture of SPECTRUM 5.0, and using SPECTRUM 5.0 compliant software is intimidating data: it is big, it is granular, it is infrastructural. [[15]](#footnote-15)

In the context of a project like ours, a project seeking to make anti-colonial interventions, we read SPECTRUM as not only a profoundly historicised social construction we might critique,[[16]](#footnote-16) but also – at a practical level – as an infrastructure that threatens to confuse, distract, overwhelm. Central then to the approach taken to designing the Making African Connections Digital Archival was to lose a great deal of SPECTRUM and SPECTRUM-like granularity. This was not uncontested: among the project team, some museum practitioners expressed considerable discomfort about the partial and unfamiliar records that would result from this approach. Among those in favour of this approach, primarily those team members with academic or research background, the rationale for unpicking SPECTRUM-like granularities was partly practical: the Making African Connections Digital Archival did not need to perform many functions of the museum – risk management, exhibition, loan, conservation, audit – and so did not need the data that supported those functions. But the approach was also intellectually grounded: to make space for more voices, for more ways of interpreting the collections, for generating more (and hopefully unexpected) interconnectivity between objects, it was believed that we needed to reduce the overall size of the data, especially when that data is often the product of underinvestment in collections expertise.[[17]](#footnote-17).

And so the Making African Connections Digital Archive embraced DublinCore, a fifteen element data structure with no subfields, and we fed data from three museums using SPECTRUM compliant software – Brighton Museum & Art Gallery, the Royal Engineers Museum, the Powell-Cotton Museum – into that structure. In some ways the light, brief records that emerged were ‘More Product, Less Process’, a vision of museum documentation free from SPECTRUM, from practical ‘need’ elided with the unconscious grip of fantasies of abundance. But deletion alone would be to vandalise accumulated professional practice. Instead all the loss we created was to make room for addition, for more process at the service of the project’s intellectual ambitions, and – in particular – for more and more prominent multi-vocality.

1. Multi-vocality

Much of the growing dissatisfaction with institutional attempts to reinstate marginalized voices into digital spaces stems from concerns that their underlying standardizing and meta-ontological approaches negate the existence of overlapping knowledge systems

(Ortolja-Baird and Nyhan, 2019) [[18]](#footnote-18)

Making African Connections encountered, dealt with, and sought to assemble a polyphony of voices speaking on, about, or with objects displaced from colonial-era Africa to Brighton Museum & Art Gallery, the Royal Engineers Museum, and the Powell-Cotton Museum. At times there were political imperatives to do so, as was the case with Mahdist history, where the project team were mindful to provide balance, to represent contemporary perspectives, to accommodate competing notions of community descent. Knowledge infrastructures, and digital knowledge infrastructures in particular, can often inhibit such accommodation. As Ortolja-Baird and Nyhan write, standards and ontologies force consensus, and – where cultural heritage knowledge making is concerned – that consensus tends to come at the exclusion of marginalized voices. By diverting from the standards and ontologies inherent to our source catalogues, the Making African Connections Digital Archive sought to make room for marginalized and minoritized voices, for multi-vocality, for Ortolja-Baird and Nyhan’s vision of ‘overlapping knowledge systems’. DublinCore was then an ideal framework for exploring multi-vocal approaches to presenting colonial collections. For though it is a standard (in its case, designed to record data about digital objects), a central principle of DublinCore is that all of its elements are both optional and repeatable. In practice this means that if a date (dc:date) on which an object was produced is understood differently in different knowledge systems, both types of information can be recorded. Similarly, multiple competing descriptions (dc:description) of an object can be recorded without any implicit or explicit hierarchy, and many given names (dc:title) for an object can be recorded in the same element, expressing for example the linguistic diversity of descendant communities. And all elements, even the title element, can be left blank, demanding – in the spirit of making room for marginalized/minoritized voices – moments where silence and absence can most effectively do that work.

The process of enacting multi-vocality generated various points of reflection. First, the process of mapping potentially multiple title-like fields to the dc:title element underlined the arbitrary nature of ‘giving’ titles to objects. For collections at the Royal Engineers Museum (REM), this was most evident as we had chosen to map both the ‘Title’ and ‘Object Name’ fields to the dc:title element. In some cases this resulted in duplication (‘Necklace’, ‘necklace’),[[19]](#footnote-19) in others differences in elaboration (‘Annotated Drawing of Nile’, ‘drawing’).[[20]](#footnote-20) Importantly, however, on many occasions it produced a layering of expertise, knowledge, and language, a confrontation with the positionality of documentary interpretation: and so REM item number 5001.25.12 could be a ‘necklace’, but it is more properly a string of ‘Sudanese prayer beads’;[[21]](#footnote-21) 8405.15 could be a ‘coat’, but it is better described as an example of ‘Anṣār (الأنصار) underarmour’, or as a ‘ʿUthmān Abū-Bakr Diqna's quilted robe’;[[22]](#footnote-22) 5705.5.2.1 could be a ‘jibbah’, but it is more precise to refer to it as an ‘Anṣār (الأنصار) jibba’; GGC378 could be a ‘flag’, but describing it as a ‘Large silk banner, possibly carried by Anṣār (الأنصار)’ disempowers normative assumptions of the purpose and role of flag-like objects.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The interleaving of intellectual and infrastructural commitments to multi-vocality then, enabled the Making African Connections Digital Archive to foreground tensions between the assigned titles of objects, usually to the detriment of normative impositions of objects displaced from colonial-era Africa. This was deepened by our “more process” approach to the dc:description element. For example, for a selection of objects housed at the Brighton Museum & Art Gallery we took transcriptions of historic labels, accession registers, and catalogue cards and manually added them to object entries. And so in the record for an ostrich shell,[[24]](#footnote-24) readers see the production of knowledge at work: how early-twentieth century labels and accession registers classified the object in terms of Linelian classification and geographies of origin; how later ethnographic work focused on human use and community experience. To support this reading, to make meaningful a multi-vocality object record in DublinCore, we inserted metadata within dc:description elements, we put some ontology back into the record structure, so that entries for objects with multiple available ontologically distinct descriptions have dc:description elements prepended with the bespoke labels ‘Physical Description:’, ‘Contextual Description:’, ‘Historic Label:’, ‘Accession Register:’, and so on. The precise sources of these descriptions are then appended to the element with phrases like ‘[Royal Pavilion & Museums, 2019]’, ‘[Notes from Tshepo Skwambane and Neil Parsons initial visit to view objects, 2017]’, and ‘[Herbert Samuel Toms, 1936-03]’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Elsewhere in the Making African Connections Digital Archive, dc:description fields for objects like an Anṣār banner (4801.1.2) include the metadata ‘The Arabic script reads:’ to separate commentary from transcription and translation, and ‘[FN/ON 14.8.19, FHM 2019]’ to record the provenance of the entry.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Many voices, then, actively populate the Making African Connections Digital Archive: some individuals, some institutions, some contemporary, some historic, some members of the project team, some individuals we interacted with over the course of the project. This multi-vocality was intended to destabilise and delegitimise authority. Integrating these voices was process heavy and time consuming, and so its distribution across the archive is – necessarily – patchy. This patchiness is exacerbated by the repeatability of DublinCore, by its rupture with the modern museum collection catalogue and the space it created for addition, qualification, and creative tension, for open-ended multi-vocality. And yet for all the turmoil we might see in it, we are also aware that by structuring multi-vocality in the form of metadata, however lightly applied, and publishing within the architecture of a digital archive replete with logos and funders and markers of prestige, we create new sites of authority, a cumulative controlling effect that may – depending on the audience – embody professional rigour and project infrastructural power. This opened up many questions and reflections. Does using multi-vocality to challenge the construct of objective ‘institutional’ voice place burdens on new voices? Is the status of ‘authority’ desired by those who now have it? Is multi-vocality a strand of the ‘radical culture of openness’ that is part of Europe’s moment of reckoning with its colonial past, and perhaps not the colonised’s burden to bear?[[27]](#footnote-27) And – in a context of authoritative, professional, precise digital archives – might the turmoil of multi-vocality do a disservice to the objects that a multi-vocal infrastructure represents, might it undermine the perception of a collection’s value and significance?

On a personal level, I know that on occasion I found myself trying to ‘fix’ inconsistencies introduced by our multi-vocal approach, but that I had to catch myself, had to resist an urge to normalise, systematise, standardise. Because if structure and consistency are the ideologies of the modern museum collection catalogue, then in a digital archive of this kind, multi-vocality should be allowed to be inconsistent for it to thrive.

1. Hierarchies

Along with being repeatable and optional, DublinCore elements are non-hierarchical. Fifteen metadata elements were specified in DublinCore Version 1.1 (which we use), none of which take precedence over another. This means that the contents of a dc:contributor element, used to describe “An entity responsible for making contributions to the resource”, is no more important than the contents of a dc:description element, that what we enter into a dc:title element is no more important than what we enter into the dc:rights element, and so on. We also extended this flattening logic to the object of study. And so whilst in some cases descriptions of objects were placed in the object record, in other cases historic and contemporary descriptions were placed in separate records. Examples include interviews on Mahdi heritage,[[28]](#footnote-28) transcriptions of historic catalogue cards,[[29]](#footnote-29) and biographies of individuals.[[30]](#footnote-30) By creating records for these types of materials, we placed them in parallel with entries for museum objects. This, in turn, opened up the arbitrary nature of the record containing digital images of a collection item as the object of worthy of itemhood. By lacking detail, by not reconfiguring fields by item type, by offering large buckets that could welcome varying metadata – ‘music’ and ‘An online Black History resource for schools’ in dc:subject; a digital file type, a number of pages, or size in millimeters in dc:format – we are able to place a description of a research trip alongside a museum object, a story of conflict alongside the biography of a contributor or historical actor, a catalogue card alongside the description of a material, a Zoom call alongside the collections under discussion, without one being *structured* in data as subordinate to the other. During those periods when Covid-lockdowns restricted access to both collections and collecting institutions, this flattening took on new meaning and salience.

And so we created a variety of entries. For Gase Kediseng, a member of the project team and assistant curator at the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe, Botswana. For the Khama III Memorial Museum, for an interview with Scobie Lekhuthile – the curator at Khama III – and for Lekhuthile himself. For a bullet pouch or Lebantê collected by the Christian missionary Reverend William Charles Willoughby, for Willoughby, and for a research report on the ‘three kings’ visit to Sussex in 1895, for which Willoughby was an unofficial interpreter. For the authors of that report, Brighton and Hove Black History, a community group that challenges racism and prejudice by raising awareness of the multi-cultural history of Britain, and one of our project partners, along with the Powell-Cotton Museum, based in Birchington in Kent, for whom we also made an entry. For one of their collection items, a doll made from beeswax and palm nuts, and for palm nuts – or Ondunga – a versatile crop widely used in 1930s Owangwe, Angola. And we put ourselves in the archive – our labour, our choices, our realisations, our failures, our uncertainties; not relegating them to secondary concerns, but foregrounding our agency as a site of critique.

Our implementation of DublinCore then afforded us a ‘flat’ structure with which to create records and to trouble the notion of records. What gave that structure meaning were the joins between the records. Kediseng, Khama III, the interview, Lekhuthile, the Lebantê, Willoughby, ‘the three kings’, Brighton and Hove Black History, the project partners, the doll, and the Ondunga are not merely a selection of records we have created, they are an active knowledge pathway any user can take through the Making African Connections Digital Archive. These are not machine generated pathways. In line with our “more process” approach, they were hand-made and hand-placed, using dc:relation to link Kediseng to Khama III, dc:description to link Lekhuthile and the Lebantê, dc:source to link the Lebantê and Willoughby, dc:creator to link Willoughby and Brighton and Hove Black History, dc:format to link the doll and the ondunga. The directionality of these links give the connections further meaning. Ondunga *is a format of* the doll, Lekhuthile *describes* the Lebantê, Willoughby *is a source of* the Lebantê, Brighton and Hove Black History *are a creator of* the record for Willoughby. As entries were built up, inward and outward links created hubs and pivots within the archive. Some of these are unremarkable: as collection holders, the records for Brighton Museum & Art Gallery, the Royal Engineers Museum, the Powell-Cotton Museum each link to hundreds of records. But other pivots emerged from the affordances of our flat structure. For example, the record for the soba Tchiliwandele, a man Antoinette and Diana Powell-Cotton met and stayed with in May to June 1937 during their journey through Angola, has dc:source links to 18 other records, dc:contributor links to three, dc:description and dc:relation links to two, and a single dc:title link.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Ultimately such meaning making created new kinds of hierarches, for it built clusters of records, nodes of intersection, that foreground one record over another. Other hierarchies that emerged were infrastructural. By implementing DublinCore through Omeka S,[[32]](#footnote-32) a web publishing platform for digital cultural heritage collections, and by using a standard Omeka S ‘Theme’ to present our records, we were required to select two elements to display for previews of each item on our browse page: dc:title and dc:description therefore enjoy precedence in this space (and whilst we could have rewritten the site to generate a randomised order of elements each time a user landed on a record page, that would be an inefficient use of both server side processing and – more importantly – user side processing, and therefore ill-suited for use by the low-resource communities we hoped would find uses for the archive).[[33]](#footnote-33) Other uses created hierarchies by aligning with our intellectual ambitions. By choosing to populate over five-hundred dc:creator elements with “Creator Unrecorded”, we foregrounded the absences in the colonial record of the people who created objects displaced from Africa during the period, and thereby made the ‘Creator’ element prominent in each object record. Similarly, by prepending many entries in the dc:coverage element with “Cultural Group:”, we reimposed the curation of anthropological collections onto our non-hierarchical schema, we teased out important – that is, important to us at our particular moment in space and time – specificity that was lost in our forcing together of records. Similarly the aforementioned prepending and appending of dc:description elements to make clear the type and provenance of descriptions created implicit hierarchies within elements, if not of trustworthiness, then at least of chronology. And so whilst the hierarchies of the modern collections catalogue were discarded and replaced with a flatter and anti-hierarchical starting point, and whilst we actively acted against hierarchical impulses within and between records, our record pages *are* structured and non-object records *are* outnumbered by object records. In turn, this opens up the possibility of the reception of the archive to remain within the paradigm of the structured museum catalogue, for our flat data structure to be subordinated – despite our efforts – by a culture of hierarchies.

1. Slowness and care

If more process means less product, it also means reflecting on the polyphony of possible product, and processes that cascade from acts of production. Take digitisation. For a museum object, digitization is a political act[[34]](#footnote-34) requiring physical interventions: preparing, handling, removal from display, redisplay, packaging, and repacking. Once digital representations of an object are captured – in our case, as photographs – those representations require management: transfer from a capture device to temporary storage, renaming, recording on asset registers, selection and disposal, editing, duplication onto backup devices and long-term storage, migration to and compression into web ready formats, uploading onto servers for use. And the very production of these digital assets prompts the creation and revision of other digital assets, of object documentation, documentation that reflects an anti-colonial intervention, documentation that have the possibility of situating and positioning the producer as an agent of knowledge production at a particular point in time, from a particular place, physically and conceptually.

Doing all this quickly is possible, and product-oriented processes that capture these nuances exist. But – as Hughes and Prescott note[[35]](#footnote-35) – such processes can fail to create sufficient space to (re)examine why digitising is happening, why products of digitisation workflows are being created, and what might be done differently. And so a slower “less product” digitisation was chosen for the production of the Making African Connections Digital Archive. That decision ensured that many in-scope objects remained undigitised and under-catalogued. Regrettable though that was, the advantage of this approach was that by choosing “more process” we were able to introduce greater care into our digitisation, more opportunities to reflect and react based on our interactions with the objects.

Prominent among these acts of care was our approach to making collections accessible. In their response to the ‘radical practice of sharing’ of displaced African cultural heritage advocated by the Sarr-Savoy report, Mathilde Pavis and Andrea Wallace argue the ‘management of intellectual property is a cultural and curatorial prerogative’, and that ‘[t]hese prerogatives should belong to the communities of origin’.[[36]](#footnote-36) In contrast to the call in Sarr-Savoy for European institutions to create and publish online digital representations of the objects they return to descendant communities, the lesson of Pavis and Wallace is that the decision to create and publish digital representations, and the resources to do so, should be the preserve of descendant communities – themes that Niala and Ondeng expand on in their contribution to this volume. Making African Connections had begun digitization, and received funding on the basis of doing that digitisation, before Pavis and Wallace published their response to Sarr-Savoy. It would not have been not impossible to have taken their intervention as a cue to stop; but it would have been impractical. Instead then, Pavis and Wallace increased our attention to process, amplified our entanglement of access with care and with work that drew attention to that need for care.[[37]](#footnote-37)

In practice this meant that, for example, in the case of a series of photographs we deemed problematic to publish on the Making African Connections Digital Archive, we published metadata that drew attention to the existence of the photographs, but hid the digital images from public view. This approach was taken for several photographs taken during the aftermath of the September 1898 Battle of Omdurman in which fatalities are visible. It was also taken for a series photographs made by Antoinette and Diana Powell-Cotton whilst travelling in Angola and Namibia in the 1930s. This photographic archive is of great importance to researchers and those interested in the history and culture of the region, however problems arise when confronted with its digitisation, especially so as we chose to focus our resources on those photographs that contain individuals, individuals whose agency was often excluded from the colonial record, and around whom – as Shiweda and Stylianou describe elsewhere in this volume – we hoped to assemble biographical information.

Problems arose because many of these photographs depict women and girls with their breasts uncovered. Whilst many of these women would have considered themselves fully clothed at the time they were taken, we knew some were asked to remove clothes in order to look more “authentically” African, and we could not know which specific photographs this applied to. We therefore believed that it was inappropriate on historical-curatorial grounds for us to place these images of women and girls in the public gaze by digitizing them and providing access online. We also deemed doing so inappropriate because of how web technologies are used in society. The Web is a place of datafication where images, objects and people can easily be displaced from their context and subject to gazes which has harmful intent, and where concepts like ‘adult nudity’ are shaped by the socially conservative and economically libertarian policies and practices of North American social media companies.[[38]](#footnote-38) Publishing these images then simultaneously risked the Making African Connections Digital Archive being taken down for being a publisher of explicit images of adolescents, thus preventing any remote access to these displaced collections by descendant communities, *and* enabling representations of this archive to be being radically decontextualised and subverted – and, in particular, the black bodies they contain to be re-sexualised. Slow, process-led digitisation, therefore, provided us with opportunities to avoid the harms created by what Temi Odumosu calls ‘unmediated access to, and batch scanning of, cultural memory’, and in turn ‘those breaches (in trust) and colonial hauntings that follow photographed Afro-diasporic subjects from moment of capture, through archive, into code’.[[39]](#footnote-39) And by putting our justification for not publishing into the object record, we were able to invert our process, to push outward our attempts to balance access with care.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Other acts of care were more subtle. As Steven Jones has observed, the urge of digital projects to map and geolocate data has perhaps been driven less by an intellectually grounded spatial turn, and more by the availability of geospatial and locative technologies[[41]](#footnote-41). As Heba Y. Amin reminds us, these geospatial technologies remain at heart military technologies, a historic colonial mapping project entangled with the modern techno-aesthetic of drone warfare, views from above, and geospatial precision that gets both ordinary citizens and killing machines from here to there.[[42]](#footnote-42) To map then is political; through the lens of computational technologies even more so. We, therefore, mapped very few objects in the Making African Connections Digital Archive, we did not affix their historic production and use to points on a map, and we do not reduce complex material heritage to the tyranny of the dot. Where we did map we mapped with care. A small number of the aforementioned photographs taken during the aftermath of the Battle of Omdurman contained places that are recognisable, where the viewpoint of the photographer is possible to ascertain, and so we chose to geolocate them. And for series of objects collected by the Powell-Cotton sisters, for which we were able to determine an approximate production location from partial and contextual information recorded in memo books and diaries,[[43]](#footnote-43) we have attached multiple possible locations, labelled our location markers so as to indicate uncertainty (‘Potential River Poponde’), and foregrounded practices of collapsing places names with people (e.g. Kanguli). As Shiweda notes, it is important to know where people come from, and in turn where displaced objects were made and used.[[44]](#footnote-44) It is also important not to geolocate people and objects for the sake of it, when the names of the individuals who made or owned an object, or a reference to the cultural group who used an object, can provide a richer grounding in space and time.

Finally, digitising slowly gave us space to identify knowledges produced by our interaction with the objects that are under-represented in wider knowledge systems, and to spend time embedding those knowledges beyond ourselves and our digital archive. Places like Wikipedia and Wikidata are central to modern information systems. They are also emblematic of an Anglophone internet that has failed to centre the knowledge of minoritized communities,[[45]](#footnote-45) where there are more Wikipedia articles about Europe, Europeans, and European society and culture than there are about the rest of the world.[[46]](#footnote-46) If our intention as a project was, in a small way, to contribute to rectifying these systemic content gaps, then it behooved us to find venues in which to sustain our work beyond a live website that would, in time, as websites do, cease to exist.[[47]](#footnote-47) And so as, for example, we began to assemble information about jibbas – patchwork shifts of cotton worn by followers of the Mahdī, fine example of which are in the collections of the Royal Engineers Museum, and digital representations of which are available on the Making African Connections Digital Archive – and as we began to notice the lack of publicly accessible information about those jibbas, we sought to move information out of our infrastructures and into knowledge systems operated by the Wikimedia Foundation. The result is a page on English Wikipedia for ‘Jibba’ first published in January 2021 by Elvira Thomas that has since been edited and refined, connected to pages on Sudanese art, the Madhist State, and regional clothing, translated beyond English language Wikipedia, and assigned an ID – Q105044334 – on Wikidata,[[48]](#footnote-48) meaning that a Google search for ‘Jibba’ is likely to return a knowledge panel summary on that subject.[[49]](#footnote-49) This task took time and labour to set in motion. But as an outcome of a project that sought to challenge the knowledge systems it encountered, it was preferable to digitizing another object, to adding more product – uncaringly – to the cultural commons.

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The Making African Connections Digital Archive was an outcome of a project that explored ‘decolonial’ possibilities for African collections. Decolonisation is not a metaphor.[[50]](#footnote-50) In making a digital archive from African collections and their subsequent documentation, our attempts to mitigate the violent reinscriptions of this technology of colonialism may have been anti-colonial in intent, but they were not decolonial. The actions this paper has described – forgoing detail, foregrounding multi-vocality, collapsing hierarchies, digitizing with care – centred on building processes that prevented the collections we worked with from being subsumed into the whole, from becoming treated as business-as-usual. To achieve this, we did things slowly, we responded to the particular demands of particular objects, and we prized reflexive practice over efficiency of output; process over product – and we disagreed, in both inhibiting and generative ways. We do not claim to be the first to act in this way or to think the way we did, rather our practice throughout built on the work of scholars and practitioners in, adjacent to, and beyond the museum and cultural heritage sectors.

Of digitisation’s negative impacts on African collections identified by Barringer and Wallace, we recognize that many were not addressed by our approach. For example, the production of the Making African Connections Digital Archive did not contribute to rebalancing geographical inequalities in collection development. And our work has perpetuated the prioritization of collections in – and in a sense also from – the Global North. But our approach did try to give agency to descendant communities in the contextualisation, interconnection, and framing of collections displaced to the Global North. And our work has created new visibilities for the collections we worked with, not by creating a glut of production within the big, granular, infrastructural, and intimidating data infrastructures of the Global North, but – guided by a “more process” – approach by stripping back those structures and creating space for more voices, organic hierarchies, and particularity.

1. Making African Connections was a two-year research project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK (project reference AH/S001271/1). The project was a collaboration between the University of Sussex, Brighton Museum & Art Gallery, Royal Engineers Museum, Powell-Cotton Museum, Botswana National Museum, Khama III Memorial Museum, University of Namibia, Brighton and Hove Black History, Reem el-Helo (El Mahdiyya Restoration NGO), Osman Nusairi (Playwright and translator), Fergus Nicoll (Journalist and author), and Tshepo Skwambane (Diverse Community Empowerment Services). The Making African Connections Digital Archive is published at makingafricanconnections.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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5. *Making African Connections: Decolonial Futures for Colonial Collections. Initial Findings and Recommendations*, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. My thanks to two anonymous peer reviewers for their thoughtful, insightful, and encourage comments. I'd also like to thank the Making African Connections project team for creating such a vibrant intellectual environment in which to operate. All errors of judgement and fact are of course my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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14. SPECTRUM 5.1 was published in September 2022 and has moved – among other things – towards acknowledging the importance of multiple perspectives and that all records are provisional in some sense. A summary of changes is available at https://collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum/spectrum-5/summary-of-changes/ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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