Third Text

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ctte20

More Process, Less Product

The Making of the Making African Connections Digital Archive

James William Baker

To cite this article: James William Baker (13 Mar 2025): More Process, Less Product, Third Text, DOI: 10.1080/09528822.2025.2461371

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2025.2461371

Third Text, 2025
https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2025.2461371

More Process, Less Product

The Making of the Making African Connections Digital Archive

James William Baker

In their introduction to the 2014 edited volume *African Studies in the Digital Age*, Terry Barringer and Marion Wallace reflect on the transformative impact of digitisation on both access to and the study of African collections. These transformations, they argue, had 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 hidden as ever – if not more so. 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 – that is, what we did in the making rather than the outputs of that making.[1] This article explores key aspects of that work – forgoing detail, foregrounding multivocality, collapsing hierarchies, digitising with care – and documents what we found as principles became actions, as product succumbed to process, and 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 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] Instead, by removing displaced African 'archives' from 'business as usual' practices, by differentiating them from, and making them less subject to, the needs of the whole, our work sought to foreground the

1 Making African Connections was a two-year research project 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.

2 Roopika Risam, *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial*

Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 2019

historical legacies and normativities that permeate our technologies of colonialism,[3] and to document our work as a possible corrective to the impacts wrought on African studies by the digital age.

This article proceeds in four parts. The first explores work to collapse multiple detailed and hierarchical recordsets 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 multivocality; create tensions that sought to destabilise and delegitimise authority; and 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 digitisation 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. 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 by 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 the 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] Maria Caley's contribution to this special issue 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] 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]

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

3 Terry Barringer and Marion Wallace, eds, *African Studies in the Digital Age: Disconnects?*, Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2014; Candace S Greene, 'Material Connections: "The Smithsonian Effect" in Anthropological Cataloguing', *Museum Anthropology*, vol 39, no 2, 2016, pp 147–162; Hannah Turner, *Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2020; Paul Basu and Ferdinand De Jong, 'Utopian Archives, Decolonial Affordances: Introduction to Special Issue', *Social Anthropology*, vol 2, no 1, 2016, pp 5–19

4 JoAnn McGregor discusses the concept of 'descendant communities' in 'African Collections in Context – Why "Source Community" Needs Decolonising', *Making African Connections: Decolonial Futures for Colonial Collections. Initial Findings and Recommendations*, 2021, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4456781.

5 Ibid

6 My thanks to two anonymous peer reviewers for their thoughtful, insightful and encouraging comments. I would 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.

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] Interdisciplinary scholars of history, digital media and computational practice are also urgently telling these stories,[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] While 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]

This collision of immensity 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 practical constraints, attendant imaginaries and social conventions (eg, 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] 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] 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.

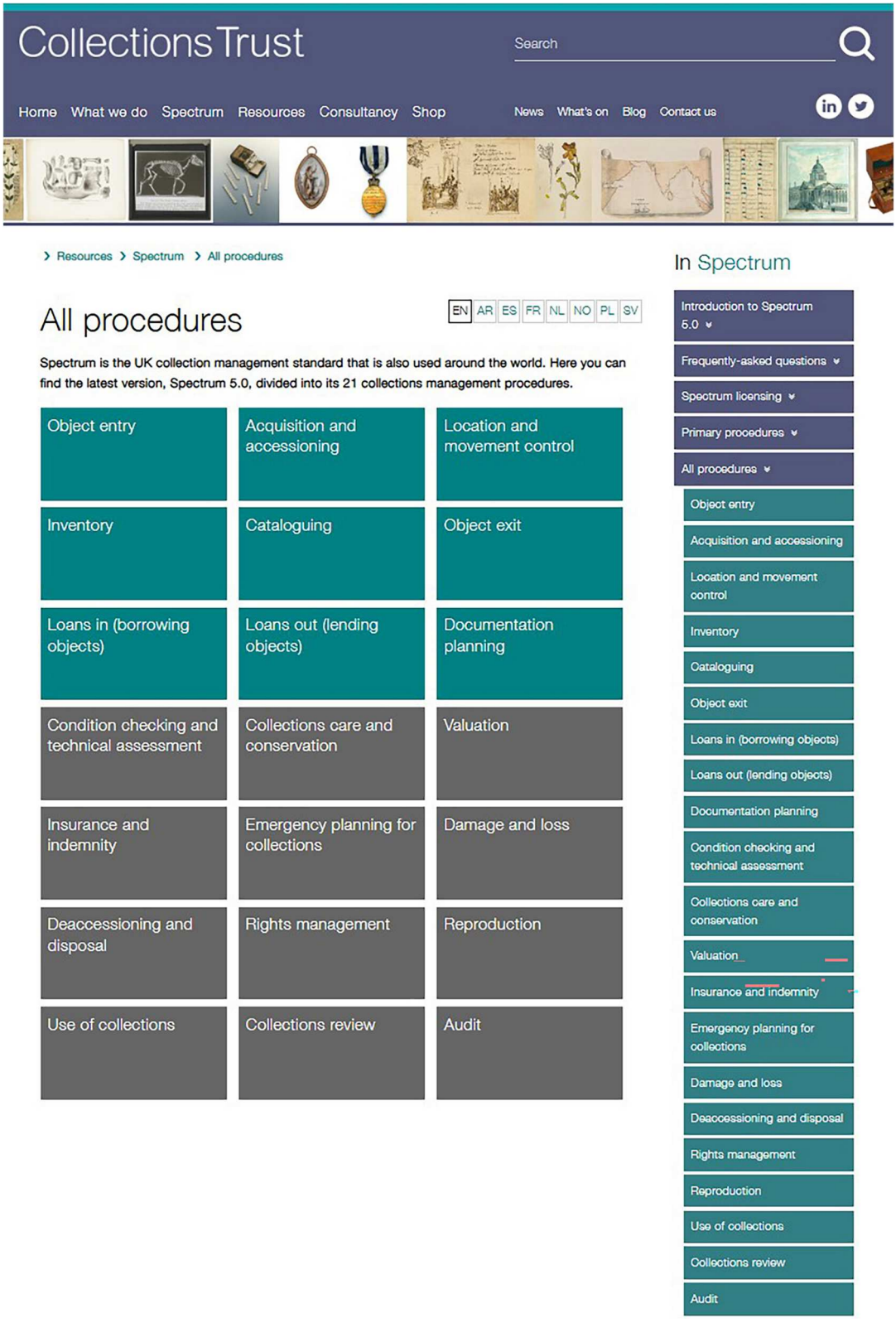
Museums standards such as Spectrum 5.0 are notable products of this computerisation, professionalisation and abundance.[13] Published in 2017, Spectrum 5.0 was the UK museums collections management standard during the Making African Connections project.[14] Being a standard means that Spectrum is more than merely an ontology for documenting collections. It is a standard that states that museums 'should have' things like a policy on cataloguing, as well as what they 'could' or 'are most likely to need to do' at each stage of the collection management lifecycle. Modal verbs like these litter Spectrum 5.0 such that the reader quickly picks up on the imperative tone. And this continues across its

7 Greene, 'Material Connections', op cit; Emily Pringle, 'Provisional Semantics: Addressing the Challenges of Representing Multiple Perspectives within an Evolving Digitised National Collection (Interim Report)', Towards a National Collection, 2020

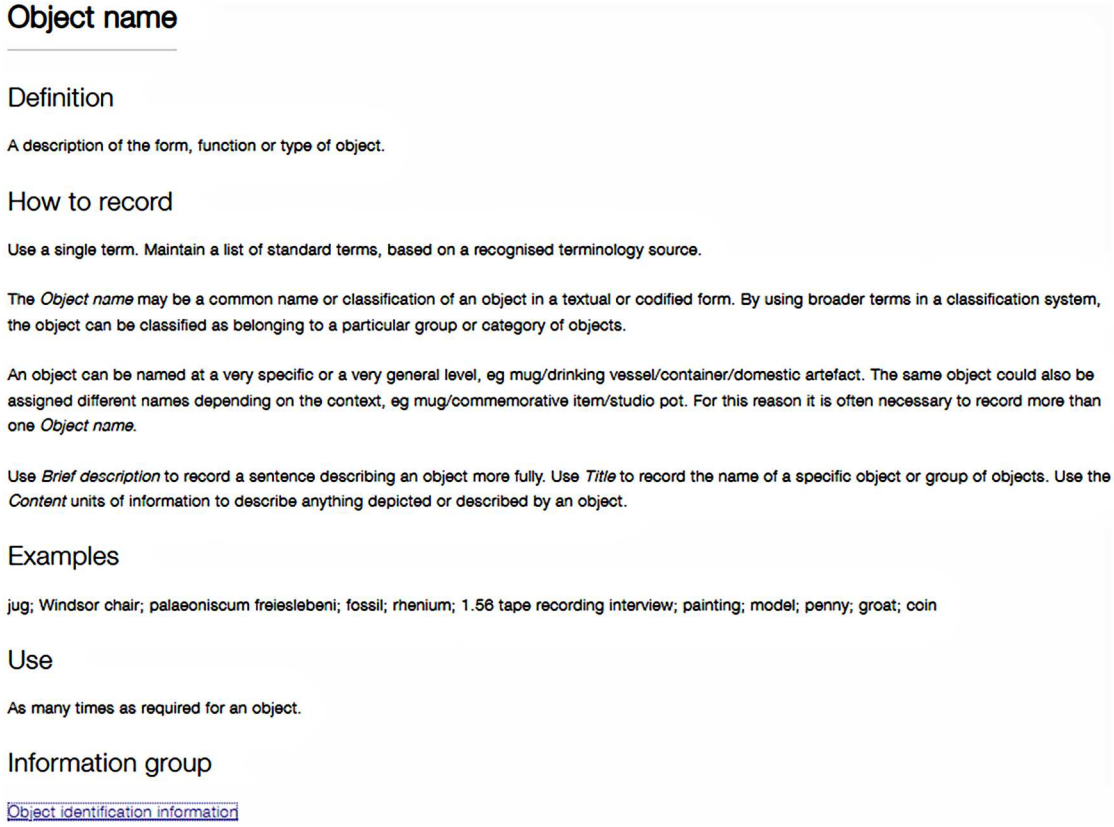
8 Turner, *Cataloguing Culture*, op cit; Alexandra Ortolja-Baird, Victoria Pickering, Julianne Nyhan, Kim Sloan and Martha Fleming, 'Digital Humanities in the Memory Institution: The Challenges of Encoding Sir Hans Sloane's Early Modern Catalogues of His Collections', *Open Library of Humanities*, vol 5, issue 1, 2019; Lucy Havens, 'Legacies of Catalogue Descriptions and Curatorial Voice: Infographics', 2022, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6221868

9 Emma Perez, 'Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol 24, no 2, 2003, pp 122–131; Antoinette M Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003; Daniela Agostinho, Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, and Karen Louise Grova Søilen, 'Archives That Matter', *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Informationsvidenskab Og Kulturformidling*, vol 8, no 2, 2019, pp 1–18; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2009

10 Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, Punctum Books, Santa Barbara, California, 2018; Geoffrey C Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2000; Melissa Adler, 'Classification Along the Color Line: Excavating Racism in the Stacks',



'All Procedures', Spectrum 5.0, 2017, © Collections Trust https://web.archive.org/web/20211129164302/https://collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum/procedures/, accessed 9 January 2025



Object name

Definition

A description of the form, function or type of object.

How to record

Use a single term. Maintain a list of standard terms, based on a recognised terminology source.

The *Object name* may be a common name or classification of an object in a textual or codified form. By using broader terms in a classification system, the object can be classified as belonging to a particular group or category of objects.

An object can be named at a very specific or a very general level, eg mug/drinking vessel/container/domestic artefact. The same object could also be assigned different names depending on the context, eg mug/commemorative item/studio pot. For this reason it is often necessary to record more than one *Object name*.

Use *Brief description* to record a sentence describing an object more fully. Use *Title* to record the name of a specific object or group of objects. Use the *Content* units of information to describe anything depicted or described by an object.

Examples

jug; Windsor chair; palaeoniscum freieslebeni; fossil; rhenium; 1.56 tape recording interview; painting; model; penny; groat; coin

Use

As many times as required for an object.

Information group

Object identification information

'Object Name Cataloguing – suggested procedure', Spectrum 5.0, 2017, © Collections Trust https://web.archive.org/web/20241220083527/https://collectionstrust.org.uk/resource/cataloguing-suggested-procedure/, accessed 9 January 2025

Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies, vol 1, no 1, 2017

11 Robertson Craig, *The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2021

12 The Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG) was founded in 1975. This roughly coincided with the implementation phase of the Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association (IRGMA) cataloguing standard, which in 1977 morphed into the Museum Documentation Association (today the Collections Trust). *The Newsletter of the*

twenty-one 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 – 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' we are told that it is 'a description of the form, function or type of object', that it should be recorded as a single term and as part of a standard list based on recognised 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 seventy-nine 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 of merging the theory and computerisation of documentation, itself a spin-off from the pioneering Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association (IRGMA). At the beginning of the 1980s roughly half of UK museums still had no object documentation, but during that decade documentation and cataloguing became central to their operations, and by the end of the 1980s plans for computerisation had accelerated. In the 1990s an air of systematisation prevailed over documentation and cataloguing labour: Spectrum was here, each version 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 vast, it is granular, it is infrastructural.[15]

In the context of a project like ours, a project seeking to make anti-colonial interventions, we read Spectrum not only as a profoundly historicised social construction that we might critique,[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. 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: in order to make space for more voices, for more ways of interpreting the collections and 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]

And so the Making African Connections Digital Archive embraced Dublin Core, 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 multivocality.

Museum Ethnographers Group records the critical and extensive engagement of MEG with the IRGMA standard and, in particular, their active role in the development of the IRGMA Ethnography Object Catalogue Card; see for example, Len Pole, 'Suggestions for a Future IRGMA Ethnography Object Catalogue Card', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, no 3, 1977, pp 9–10.

13 Collections Trust, Spectrum 5.0, 2017

14 Spectrum 5.1 was published in September 2022 and has moved, among other things, towards acknowledging both the importance of multiple perspectives and the fact 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/.

15 Susan Leigh Star, 'The Ethnography of Infrastructure', *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol 43, no 3, 1999

16 Urmila Mohan and Susan Rodgers, 'Classification Schemes Gone Awry: Implications for Museum Research and Exhibition Display Practices', *Museum Anthropology*, vol 44, issue 1–2, 2021

17 Kathleen Lawther, 'Decolonising Collections Documentation', *Making African Connections: Decolonial Futures for Colonial Collections. Initial Findings and Recommendations*, 2021

Multivocality

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[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, and 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 marginalised voices. By diverting from the standards and ontologies inherent to our source catalogues, the Making African Connections Digital Archive sought to make room for marginalised and minoritised voices, for multivocality, for Ortolja-Baird and Nyhan's vision of 'overlapping knowledge systems'. Dublin Core was then an ideal framework for exploring multivocal 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 Dublin Core is that all of its elements are both optional and repeatable. In practice this means that if a date (**dcterms: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 (**dcterms:description**) of an object can be recorded without any implicit or explicit hierarchy, and many given names (**dcterms: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 marginalised/minoritised voices – moments where silence and absence can most effectively do that work.

The process of enacting multivocality generated various points of reflection. First, the process of mapping potentially multiple title-like fields to the **dcterms: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 **dcterms:title** element. In some cases this resulted in duplication ('Necklace', 'necklace'),[19] and in others differences in elaboration ('Annotated Drawing of Nile', 'drawing').[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

18 Alexandra Ortolja-Baird and Julianne Nyhan, 'Encoding the Haunting of an Object Catalogue: On the Potential of Digital Technologies to Perpetuate or Subvert the Silence and Bias of the Early-Modern Archive', *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, vol 37, issue 3, 19 October 2021, https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqab065

19 The Making African Connections Digital Archive (MAC), GGC211, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/370

20 MAC, 4801.151, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/356

number 5001.25.12 could be a 'necklace', but it is more properly a string of 'Sudanese prayer beads';[21] 8405.15 could be a 'coat', but it is better described as an example of 'Anṣār (الأنصار) underarmour', or as 'Uthmān Abū-Bakr Diqna's quilted robe';[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]

The interleaving of intellectual and infrastructural commitments to multivocality, then, enabled the Making African Connections Digital Archive to foreground tensions between the various titles that had been assigned to objects, usually to the detriment of normative impositions on objects displaced from colonial-era Africa. This was deepened by our 'more process' approach to the **dcterms: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] readers see the production of knowledge at work: how early twentieth-century labels and accession registers classified the object in terms of Linnaean classification and geographies of origin; and how later ethnographic work focused on human use and community experience. To support this reading, to make meaningful a multivocality object record in Dublin Core, we inserted metadata within **dcterms:description** elements, putting ontology back into the record structure, so that entries for objects with multiple available ontologically distinct descriptions have **dcterms: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]'.[25] Elsewhere in the Making African Connections Digital Archive, **dcterms: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]

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 multivocality 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 Dublin Core, by its rupture with the modern museum collection catalogue and the space it created for addition, qualification and creative tension, for open-ended multivocality. And yet for all the turmoil we might see in it, we are also aware that by structuring multivocality 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

21 MAC, 5001.25.12, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/359

22 MAC, 8405.15, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/1819

23 MAC, GGC378, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/455

24 MAC, BC425476, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/1123

25 See for example MAC, R4007/11, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/1242 or MAC, R4007/12, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/1251

26 MAC, 4801.1.2, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/358

many questions and reflections. Does using multivocality 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 multivocality 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] And – in a context of authoritative, professional, precise digital archives – might the turmoil of multivocality do a disservice to the objects that a multivocal 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 multivocal 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, multivocality should be allowed to be inconsistent for it to thrive.

Hierarchies

Along with being repeatable and optional, Dublin Core elements are non-hierarchical. Fifteen metadata elements were specified in Dublin Core Version 1.1 (which we use), none of which take precedence over another. This means that the contents of a **dcterms:contributor** element, used to describe 'An entity responsible for making contributions to the resource', is no more important than the contents of a **dcterms:description** element, that what we enter into a **dcterms:title** element is no more important than what we enter into the **dcterms:rights** element, and so on. We also extended this flattening logic to the object of study. And so while 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] transcriptions of historic catalogue cards,[29] and biographies of individuals.[30] By creating records for these types of materials, we placed them in parallel with entries for museum objects. 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 **dcterms:subject**; a digital file type, a number of pages, or size in millimetres in **dcterms: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, or 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 himself; and for a research report on the 'three kings' visit to

27 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, 'The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics', 2018

28 MAC, 'Interview with Imam Ahmad al-Mahdi, Grandson of the Mahdi', https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/2111

29 MAC, MAC_PCM_ICGD_ETH.ANG3.502, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/2172

30 MAC, 'Tchiliwandele', https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/768

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 multicultural 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 the Powell-Cotton Museum 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 Dublin Core, 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 **dcterms:relation** to link Kediseng to Khama III, **dcterms:description** to link Lekhuthile and the Lebantê, **dcterms:source** to link the Lebantê and Willoughby, **dcterms:creator** to link Willoughby and Brighton and Hove Black History, and **dcterms: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; and 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 and 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,[31] a man Antoinette and Diana Powell-Cotton met and stayed with in May to June 1937 during their journey through Angola, has **dcterms:source** links to eighteen other records, **dcterms:contributor** links to three, **dcterms:description** and **dcterms:relation** links to two, and a single **dcterms:title** link.[32]

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 Dublin Core through Omeka S,[33] 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: **dcterms:title** and **dcterms:description** therefore enjoy precedence in this space (and while 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

31 *Soba* is the title given to traditional community leaders in Angola.

32 For more on Tchiliwandele, see Stylianou and Shiweda's contribution to this special issue.

33 https://omeka.org/s/

the low-resource communities we hoped would find uses for the archive).[34] Other uses created hierarchies by aligning with our intellectual ambitions. By choosing to populate over 500 **dcterms: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 **dcterms:coverage** element with 'Cultural Group:', we reimposed the curation of anthropological collections onto our non-hierarchical schema, and 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 **dcterms: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 while the hierarchies of the modern collections catalogue were discarded and replaced with a flatter and anti-hierarchical starting point, and while 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, and for our flat data structure to be subordinated – despite our efforts – by a culture of hierarchies.

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, digitisation is a political act requiring physical interventions: preparing, handling, removal from display, redisplay, packaging and repacking.[35] 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 has the possibility of situating and positioning the producer as an agent of knowledge production at a particular point in time, and from a particular place, physically and conceptually.

Doing all this quickly is possible, and product-orientated processes that capture these nuances exist. But, as Hughes and Prescott note,[36] 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

34 Sussex Humanities Lab Carbon Use and Environmental Impact Working Group et al, 'The Sussex Humanities Lab Environmental Strategy', 2020, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3776161; Minimal Computing: A Working Group of GO::DH, 2015, go-dh.github.io/mincomp

35 Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, *The Politics of Mass Digitization*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2019

36 Andrew Prescott and Lorna M Hughes, 'Why Do We Digitize? The Case for Slow Digitization', *Archive Journal*, 2018

'more process' we were able to introduce greater care into our digitisation, and 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 'these prerogatives should belong to the communities of origin'.[37] 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 special issue. Making African Connections had begun digitisation, 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 impossible to have taken their intervention as a cue to stop, but it would have been impractical. Instead, Pavis and Wallace increased our attention to process, and amplified our entanglement of access with care and with work that drew attention to that need for care.[38]

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 of photographs made by Antoinette and Diana Powell-Cotton while 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. Problems arise, however, 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 special issue – we hoped to assemble biographical information.

Problems arose because many of these photographs depict women and girls with their breasts uncovered. While many of these women would have considered themselves fully clothed at the time the images were taken, we knew that 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 digitising 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 that have 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.[39] Publishing these images simultaneously risked the Making African

37 Mathilde Pavis and Andrea Wallace, 'Response to the 2018 Sarr-Savoy Report: Statement on Intellectual Property Rights and Open Access Relevant to the Digitization and Restitution of African Cultural Heritage and Associated Materials', 2019, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2620597

38 Temi Odumosu, 'The Crying Child: On Colonial Archives, Digitization, and Ethics of Care in the Cultural Commons', *Current Anthropology*, vol 61 no S22, 2020, S289–302; Agostinho, Dirckinck-Holmfeld, and Søilen, 'Archives That Matter', op cit

39 Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, 'The Californian Ideology', *Science as Culture*, vol 6, no 1, 1996, pp 44–72; Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F Klein, *Data Feminism*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2023; Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, New York University Press, New York, 2018; Anita Lavorgna and Pamela Ugwudike, 'The Datafication Revolution in Criminal Justice: An Empirical Exploration of Frames Portraying Data-Driven Technologies for Crime Prevention and Control', *Big Data & Society*, vol 8, no 2, 2021

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, would contribute to the re-sexualisation of black bodies. 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'.[40] 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.[41]

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.[42] 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.[43] 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,[44] 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 (eg Kanguli). As Shiweda notes, it is important to know where people come from, and in turn where displaced objects were made and used.[45] 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 minoritised communities,[46] and where there are more Wikipedia articles about Europe, Europeans and European society and culture than there are about the rest of the world.[47] If our intention as a project was, in a small way, to contribute to rectifying these systemic content gaps, then

40 Odumosu, 'The Crying Child', op cit

41 Nicola Stylianou, Napandulwe Shiweda, Inbal Livne and James Baker, 'Ethnographic Photographs and Ethics: Powell Cotton Museum', 2020, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/2964

42 Steven E Jones, *The Emergence of the Digital Humanities*, Routledge, New York, 2014. Or, put another way, Jones argues that the Digital Humanities responded to the availability of hitherto private and militarised satellite data rather than from a spike of interest in the work of geographers such as Doreen Massey or David Harvey.

43 Heba Y Amin, 'Avian Prophecies and the Techno-Aesthetics of Drone Warfare', in Daniela Agostinho, Solveig Gade, Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, and Kristin Veel, *(W) ARCHIVES: Archival Imaginaries, War, and Contemporary Art*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2021

44 MAC, 'Enclosure of Kavela (blacksmith). After last bend of the River Poponde. Before Mupa', ETH. ANG2.144, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/3860; MAC, 'Kaingonna village. 30km from Quipungo towards Capelongo', ETH. ANG2.1342, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/897; MAC, 'Enclosure of Jakopo. Calemba District. Before Mupa', 1441, https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/3862. Particular thanks to Harry Frederick Diserens for his work on these records.

45 MAC, 'Napandulwe Responds to the Exhibition', https://makingafricanconnections.org/s/archive/item/2214

it behoved us to find venues in which to sustain our work beyond a live website that would, in time, as websites do, cease to exist.[48] And so as, for example, we began to assemble information about jibbas – patchwork shifts of cotton worn by followers of the Mahdī, fine examples 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,[49] meaning that a Google search for 'Jibba' is likely to return a knowledge panel summary on that subject.[50] 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 digitising another object, to adding more product – uncaringly – to the cultural commons.

The Making African Connections Digital Archive was an outcome of a project that explored 'decolonial' possibilities for African collections. Decolonisation is not a metaphor.[51] 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 article has described – forgoing detail, foregrounding multivocality, collapsing hierarchies, digitising 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 recognise 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 prioritisation 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 vast, granular 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, for organic hierarchies and for particularity.

46 'Whose Knowledge? Issues', https://whoseknowledge.org/issues/, accessed 23 November 2023

47 Mark Graham, 'The Geographically Uneven Coverage of Wikipedia', 2014, https://geonet.oii.ox.ac.uk/blog/the-geographically-uneven-coverage-of-wikipedia-2/; Mark Graham, Ralph K Straumann and Bernie Hogan, 'Digital Divisions of Labor and Informational Magnetism: Mapping Participation in Wikipedia', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol 105, no 6, 2015

48 James Baker, 'How Should a Digital Project End?', *Making African Connections: Decolonial Futures for Colonial Collections. Initial Findings and Recommendations*, 2021, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4456781

49 'Jibba', 2021, https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q105044334

50 'Jibba: Revision History', Wikipedia, 23 February 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jibba&action=history

51 Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol 1, no 1, 2012