Cataloging Culture:

Critical Approaches for Museum Collections

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Abstract

Museum documentation practices have long privileged Eurocentric and Anglo-American biases and perspectives, resulting in Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) source and descendent communities being excluded or erased from the records. The purpose of this study was to understand how anthropological collections departments in museums are currently attempting to engage in critical cataloging practices. A case study approach was used involving semi-structured interviews and document analysis at three university museums: the Burke Museum of Natural History & Culture at the University of Washington, Indiana University's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (IUMAA), and Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Study results revealed that ongoing critical cataloging work at these museums has focused primarily on being mindful about language choices and collaborating with communities in equitable ways. Key challenges faced by the museums are limited resources, database constraints, priorities of the broader university, and current models of museum education and training. This study demonstrates the potential for collections departments to transform their documentation practices in order to make them more inclusive and equitable, while highlighting the inherently collaborative nature of critical cataloging work. It raises further questions about the nature of critical cataloging work in different types of collections and institutions, including both university museums and non-university museums.

Introduction

At their heart, museums are settler-colonial institutions. Originally created to house the spoils of colonial conquest and violence and to showcase "exotic" material culture belonging to racialized "Others," museums remain intimately tied to colonialism today, both in the tangible practices of collecting and displaying belongings in exhibitions, and in the epistemological practices of documenting and categorizing these belongings (Castle, 2021; Maranda & Brulon Soares, 2017; Trammell, 2019; Turner, 2016).

When accessioned into museum collections, cultural belongings or objects are cataloged. During this process, information including the provenience (i.e., location of origin), provenance (i.e., history of ownership), and description of the belonging, often including a physical description and information about the belonging's cultural use and significance, are documented and uploaded into the museum's Collections Management System (CMS) or database. In other words, cataloging is the process of creating and arranging metadata about a cultural belonging—a way of documenting culture and making it searchable and discoverable within a museum's database (Symphony, n.d.). In the Western world, the knowledge within museum collections has historically been produced and safeguarded by White European and Anglo-American collectors, curators, and collections professionals. As such, museum documentation practices and collections databases have long privileged Eurocentric and Anglo-American cultural biases, containing information and classification systems that are culturally inaccurate, irrelevant, and/or inappropriate for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) source and descendant communities (Boden, 2022; Carter, 2006; Krmpotich & Peers, 2014; Littletree et al., 2020; Turner, 2021; Turner, 2016; Vaughan, 2018).

While museums have made recent strides in increasing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (DEI) initiatives and hiring more BIPOC museum professionals, demographic surveys from the past decade reveal the museum field to remain consistently White-dominated (Schonfeld et al., 2016; Westermann et al., 2022). Moreover, though expanding the demographics of the field is certainly a crucial first step towards reconstituting asymmetrical power relations and authority, changes are still needed in the actual practices and policies employed by museums at the institutional and systemic levels (Harrison, 2013). This article describes results from a research study that examined how anthropology collections departments are currently working to implement critical cataloging practices. Critical cataloging is defined as a set of working practices aimed at understanding, critiquing, and mitigating the ways in which knowledge organization systems (KOSs) uphold oppressive structures and hierarchies.

Colonial Legacies Within Catalog Records

The enduring colonial legacy of museums remains palpable within their catalog records. The practice of cataloging cultural belongings when the cataloger is (or was) not a member of the source community entails a lack of cultural competency and knowledge; this, in turn, engenders misidentification, misrepresentation, and misinterpretation within museum records (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015; Turner, 2015). Catalog records are often sparse, absent of contextualizing information, utilize specialized terminology to describe everyday belongings, and/or contain racist terminology (e.g., “Oriental,” “uncivilized,” “barbaric”) (Srinivasan et al., 2010).

As language always expresses a certain worldview or perspective, the language used to describe cultural belongings shapes the way those belongings and the communities they belong to are perceived and the extent to which communities feel a sense of belonging and representation (Alpuim & Ehrenberg, 2023; Modest & Lelijveld, 2018; Shashkevich, 2019).

When community members search through collections records, whether online in a publicly accessible portal or in-person at a museum, they often must navigate racist terminology and slurs (Frick & Proffitt, 2022).

Moreover, museum professionals tend to impose constructions of ethnographic objectivity or neutrality upon catalog records by attempting to describe belongings through a single, unbiased, authoritative voice (Christen, 2018; Turner, 2015). However, the acts of choosing—or, perhaps, the power to choose—how to name, describe, and document belongings all require interpretive work and, thus, subjectivity from the museum professional. Therefore, attempts to neutralize museum catalogs ultimately only succeed in dehumanizing Peoples and erasing their cultures and perspectives from the historical record (Antracoli et al., 2020; Jules, 2014; Rowan & Gonzalez, 2022; van der Merwe, 2019).

Even when knowledge is shared or produced by community members initially, this knowledge is often misinterpreted or taken out of context when communities are excluded from the interpretation and use of that information (Kawerak, Inc., 2020; Onicul, 2017). Thus, catalog records have historically been characterized by a lack of multivocality.

Colonial Legacies Within Databases

The categorization and organization of records within collections databases offer a second avenue where colonial legacies and Eurocentric and Anglo-American cultural biases prevail. The classificatory gaze of collections professionals often entails the creation of taxonomies (e.g., the Linnean taxonomy for biological specimens, Chenhall's nomenclature for man-made belongings), which naturally reflect the beliefs and worldviews of their (predominantly White) creators (Doyle et al., 2015; Harrison, 2013; Krmpotich & Peers, 2014; Littletree et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2024; Vaughan, 2018). The way knowledge is structured within a

museum's database (i.e., the knowledge organization system (KOS)) similarly shapes how collections, and thus the cultures they originate from, are perceived. The use and privileging of taxonomies and KOSs created by White, Europeans or Anglo-Americans effectively results in BIPOC Peoples and cultures being understood and conceptualized through the lens of the colonial oppressor.

One factor contributing to this ontological bias present in museum catalogs is the material structure of databases. Museums started using databases in the late twentieth century amidst digitization campaigns intended to improve the accessibility and findability of their collections (Lewis, 2014). However, while accessibility and findability improved, the colonial legacies ingrained within the pre-existing structures and taxonomies remained, and new issues emerged. For instance, the use of generalized terminologies (e.g., "hat" to refer to "cap", "kufi", "beret", and all other hat-like items) for easy findability catalyzes a loss of diversity and multiplicity in the different names that communities use to refer to their cultural belongings (Lewis, 2024, p. 32). Moreover, many collections databases are only compatible with Roman alphabet scripts, thus requiring alternative scripts (e.g., Cyrillic, Arabic, Chinese, Thai, Greek) to be either translated to English or romanized (e.g., Thai "ปลาสาย" becomes "sai pla"). In her survey of three museum databases, Sprague (2021) found the capacity of all three systems to integrate Indigenous identifications and language scripts to be incomplete and inconsistent.

In a case study in which Khwe speaking community members from Northeastern Namibia were asked to describe photographs from the collection of the Institute of African Studies at Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany in an effort to supplement the current information in the catalog records, Boden (2022) found that Khwe speakers' ways of identifying people did not easily fit within standard database fields. For example, Khwe speakers typically

identify people by their kin relations and specific life events or circumstances rather than directly by name; collections databases, in contrast, often only include "Name" fields (Boden, 2022). Lewis (2024) also expresses concerns over this issue, explaining that:

> "When someone offers contextual information beyond a simple identification, cultural attribution, or collections care instruction…[this] information must be taken, teased apart, and fit into the standing classification systems, or otherwise squeezed inconsistently into note and memo fields" (p. 31).

This upholds museum professionals' authoritative power over collections, as they ultimately possess the ability to alter and reorganize knowledge within databases.

Critical Changes in Museums

In recent years, museums in the Western world have undertaken diverse efforts to redress their colonial legacies and to build or ameliorate relationships with source and descendant communities (Turner, 2015). This growing environment of collaboration, reciprocity, and respect, which grew to prominence in the 1990s, has entailed an increase in the quantity and breadth of collaborative exhibition projects and public programs (Ames, 1999; Harrison, 2013; Magani et al., 2018). The late twentieth century also saw an increasing trend of museums returning stolen belongings of cultural patrimony (Arenas, 2024; Dafoe, 2021; UNESCO, 2024a, UNESCO, 2024b). Many returns have been initiated under the Native American Graves Protection & Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). NAGPRA is a federal U.S. law passed in 1990 and revised and expanded in 2024, which governs the return of Native American ancestors, funerary belongings, and cultural and sacred belongings to lineal descendants, culturally affiliated Indian Tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations (Bureau of Indian Affairs, n.d.). However, NAGPRA only applies to domestic returns, causing international returns to often be overlooked. Moreover, funding and staff capacity limitations remain significant barriers to facilitating these returns.

Despite recent positive changes and initiatives, many museums continue to overlook a critical aspect of their reparative work that occurs "behind-the-scenes:" their documentation practices (Castle, 2021; Lewis, 2024; Srinivasan et al., 2010; Trammell, 2019; Turner, 2015). If museums are to become more inclusive, culturally ethical institutions, then they must work to dismantle colonial structures not only at the public-facing level but also within documentation practices and records, as this is where "the enduring identity of the objects exist" (Srinivasan et al., 2010, p. 747). Recently, museums have started challenging their troubled historical cataloging practices and engaging in conversations about ethical cataloging practices (Turner, 2016). A number of institutions have started utilizing community engagement and local and Indigenous knowledge integration as a means of sharing authority and transforming their catalog records (Chen, 2022; Horwood, 2019; Lewis, 2024; Magani et al., 2018). While some case studies on single museums implementing such work have been conducted, there currently exists little comparative research across the museum field documenting the ways in which collections professionals are undergoing such endeavors.

The term "decolonization" has been widely adopted by institutions as an umbrella term encompassing the various reparative approaches they adopt, which aim to integrate historically marginalized voices, decenter White Eurocentrism, and renegotiate existing power relations (Mallard et al., 2021). However, as Tuck and Yang (2012) assert, the use of "decolonization" as a metaphor for the myriad critical, social justice projects that institutions engage in turns the term into an "empty signifier" ultimately aimed at reconciling settler guilt and complicity (p. 7); decolonization necessitates the deoccupation and return of land. Thus, this paper utilizes the term "critical cataloging" to refer to what some institutions term "decolonizing catalogs."

Critical Cataloging

Critical cataloging is a subset of critical librarianship, which seeks to analyze the origins of library structures and the ideologies, biases, and power hierarchies that underpin them (Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee, 2021; Drabinski, 2019; Symphony, n.d.). Critical cataloging encompasses a set of working practices aimed at understanding, critiquing, and mitigating the ways in which KOSs uphold oppressive structures and hierarchies (Abakanowicz Research Center, n.d.; Perera, 2022). This study applies the concept of critical cataloging to the museum field.

Several museums have already started working to implement critical cataloging practices, especially through metadata remediation projects (Barnett, 2022; Hollingworth, 2021). Metadata remediation is the process of evaluating and updating metadata in order to address inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and outdated information (Askham, n.d.; Piñon, 2022; Pribor, 2018; Rowan & Gonzalez, 2022). In the museum context, metadata refers to the information contained within catalog records, such as descriptions.

The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) at the University of Cambridge offers one example of a metadata remediation project (Carreau & Gunn, 2024). The MAA has been actively working to historicize their catalog and address bias and outdated descriptions by entirely rewriting approximately one third of the museum's 160,000 catalog records and adopting more culturally appropriate terminology. The MAA has worked in collaboration with source communities and academics alike to update descriptions and terminologies and to integrate Indigenous knowledge into the records when possible.

At the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), critical cataloging work focuses on centering knowledge from Indigenous Peoples and source communities and entering such knowledge in the museum's database "whole and original and untouched as primary"

(Lewis, 2024, p. 29). The museum is working to create a new database, which will feature a newly built controlled vocabulary for identifying cultural belongings, in addition to a culture thesaurus that includes updated terminology reflecting Tribal self-identification preferences.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand how anthropological collections departments are currently attempting to engage in critical cataloging practices. This study was guided by three research questions:

1. What strategies do collections professionals employ in their efforts to implement critical cataloging practices?
2. What barriers exist to critical cataloging work?
3. What does an ethical, inclusive museum catalog look like?

Methods

This research study used a collective case study design with multiple data sources. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with collections professionals at three museums across the U.S. and through document analysis of catalog records obtained from the three institutions.

Sampling

The case study sites were all university museums in the U.S. with anthropological collections, including the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture (“the Burke”) at the University of Washington in Seattle, WA; the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Indiana University (IUMAA) in Bloomington, IN; and the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (“the Peabody”) in Cambridge, MA. These museums were selected due to their geographic distribution, as well as their diversity in collection and staff size. In addition, all three

museums include information on their websites about the ethical, reparative work they are currently implementing in their collections work.

The Burke Museum stewards over 54,000 cultural belongings and has seven full-time staff in collections-based roles in the Heritage Arts and Cultures Department. The IUMAA stewards approximately 34,000 cultural belongings and has approximately six full-time staff in collections-based roles. The Peabody stewards over 1.2 million cultural belongings and has approximately fourteen full-time staff in collections-based roles.

Participants

In total, nine participants were interviewed across the three sites. Participants were chosen for interviews based on their job titles and descriptions, which are accessible on each institution's website; the majority of participants chosen have job titles such as Collections Manager, Collections Assistant, or Collections Steward.

The majority of participants identified as White, Asian American, or White Asian mixed, and one participant identified as Indigenous, as a member of the Chickasaw Nation. Seven participants have been in their current position for four years or less, one participant for nine years, and one for 33.5 years. Participants ranged in the number of years they worked in the field overall from four to forty years, with the majority having worked in the field for between nine and sixteen years.

Data Collection

Participants were contacted via email. Five interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, and four interviews were conducted in-person. Audio of the interviews was recorded either directly on Zoom or on the researcher's phone. Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. An initial set of interview questions was designed to gather background information

about each participant's position and institution (see Appendix A). The remaining interview questions generally asked about two primary lines of questioning: 1) the kind of critical work the institution is working on implementing, and 2) the resources utilized and barriers experienced while engaging in such work. Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed using HappyScribe. Additionally, catalog record samples were obtained from each institution for analysis of the language used and in order to contextualize the interviews.

Data Analysis

Content analysis of interview transcripts was conducted within and across institutions in order to understand common themes and points of convergence and divergence. Data from the catalog records were then incorporated into the analysis where they supported or enriched the interview content. Themes were identified through emergent coding under each research question.

Positionality & Ethics Statement

Recognizing my privileged position as a White, female graduate student and museum practitioner in the U.S., I am committed to upholding ethical standards in both my research and professional practices. This includes being intentional with my language, such as using "cultural belonging" instead of "object," and anonymizing participants' names in order to prevent potential harm caused by this study. Additionally, consent was sought before including institution names in this paper. I remain cognizant of my own potential biases, as well as the risk of perpetuating colonialist practices through my research, such as through information extraction from participants.

Results

RQ1. What strategies do collections professionals employ in their efforts to implement critical cataloging practices?

Participants described three key steps they are taking to implement critical cataloging practices: a) updating terminology, b) involving communities, and c) implementing ethical practices in other areas of museum work.

a) Updating Terminology

Participants at all three museums outlined their efforts to retroactively update terminology in old catalog records, but museums differed in the extent to which they have already implemented this work. While the Peabody established a cross-departmental working group dedicated to metadata remediation, staff at IUMAA and the Burke both described their work in establishing a standardized process or set of guidelines as a "work in progress," maintaining that they would like to do more retroactive work.

Participants at the Burke recounted experiences deleting terminology directly from their records. For instance, one participant described and shared catalog records illustrating how she deleted all instances of the word "oriental" and replaced them with "Asian," where appropriate. Another participant recalled an instance where she completely deleted old descriptions containing "insulting" qualitative descriptions of basketry as "coarsely woven." However, participants at the Peabody and IUMAA stated that they are not necessarily removing racist language from records, largely due to findability concerns. For example, while "Eskimo" is today largely recognized as a slur against the Inuit people, the term is still a common search term used; deleting all instances of the term "Eskimo" from catalog records could make searching for and finding Inuit cultural belongings more difficult. Participants stated that they instead move the

racist terminology to subordinate fields, include explicit attribution information about who made decisions surrounding the terminology, and add a note to public-facing portals about the offensive, historical language. One participant at IUMAA stated:

> "It's not deleting all of those words. It's not deleting some of the racist words. But it's setting them in a space where they're still accessible and searchable, but it's not the first thing that pops up. It's not our job necessarily to be saviors of folks who are going into the archives, but we can do some moving around to where they could still find them because the search words are there. But we can also find ways to help alleviate some of the burden and the constant bombardment of these racist terms being the first things that they always see."

Though participants at the Burke did mention deleting terminology directly from their records, akin to the Peabody and IUMAA, they also described instances where they moved outdated information to subordinate fields rather than completing deleting it, such as through the creation of an "Old [Cultural] Attribution" field in the database.

In addition to retroactive work with current records, participants at all three museums described how their institution is currently working on incorporating Indigenous or Native terms or communities' preferred terms in new cataloging, particularly in the "Name" and "Cultural Attribution" fields. Some participants added that they do not always know a community's preferred term but can sometimes find this information online through Tribal museums and community or cultural heritage organization websites. Many participants noted the need to include multiple terms in their database to balance findability with inclusivity, while acknowledging that they always try to prioritize communities' preferred terminology. This balance between findability and inclusivity is illustrated through an example offered by one participant. She described how catalog records for barkcloth textiles from different countries include both the parent or generalized term "Barkcloth," as well as the specific cultural term, such as "Siapo" for Samoan barkcloth, "Tapa" for Tongan barkcloth, and so on; the inclusion of

"Barkcloth" helps make the records more findable and accessible for people unfamiliar with specific cultural terms such as "Siapo," while the inclusion of the specific cultural terms effectively incorporates the preferred terminology of different communities, thus making the records more inclusive and multivocal.

In some catalog records from the Peabody and the Burke, the "Display Title" or "Object Name" field includes both the community's preferred term and the English term, with the community term listed first; examples include "Small 'sai pla' - fish basket" and "Kab Dak Pla; Fish Trap." Other catalog records from the Burke do not include the community term in the "Object Name" field but instead place this information in the "Community Input" field—a field recently created by the Burke staff to allow for community remarks to be uploaded into the museum's database, Argus, wholly as they are provided by the community. Information in the "Community Input" field includes the name(s) of who provided the information, date the information was provided, and the initials of the cataloguer who uploaded the information; one example is:

> "Melody Xiong, 11/9/2024 Hmong New Year (GAM)
> Fish trap native name (Hmong): 'pob tawb cuab ntses'"

The majority of participants across all three museums emphasized that their institution's focus in updating terminology thus far has largely been on communities with whom the institution already has a pre-existing relationship or contacts. However, one participant stated that the focus for her department has been primarily on the collections that are accessed and utilized the most often. Along with updating terminology within catalog records, all three institutions noted their efforts to be more intentional with their own language in their daily tasks and their conversations at work, including using "cultural belonging" or "item" in place of "object," which denotes inanimacy, and "return" instead of "repatriation," which is male-centric.

b) Involving Communities

All three museums stressed the importance of community engagement and soliciting community input during the cataloging process. Several participants, including all participants interviewed at the Burke, described their current positions as centering around engaging with communities and providing them with access to the collections. When describing how they ensure that working with communities is non-extractive, all three institutions expressed their dedication to compensating community members for their time and expertise. Further, all three institutions stated that a crucial step in building equitable relationships with communities is acknowledging that museum staff are not the experts, knowledge bearers, or authority figures surrounding the cultural belongings they steward. One participant explained:

> "And so we really have to be conscious and humble about how we exert our authority. Even if we've spent 16 years doing research on this specific community, we will never be as complete an expert as those individuals from those communities. Those individuals are the experts and authority. We can support, but we will always be on the periphery. We need to humble our egos and step back and ask, 'What do they want?'"

Staff at the Burke and the Peabody expressed their desires to center community in their acquisition decisions going forward, focusing on accepting donations that are meaningful to communities.

Participants at the Burke and IUMAA stated that they are working on more proactively reaching out to community members and preparing materials for visits and consultations in advance so as not to place the burden of initiating contact on the community. At the time of interviews, staff at the Peabody were focusing on ensuring that the museum was compliant with updated NAGPRA regulations passed in 2024; thus, the museum had placed a moratorium on non-NAGPRA-oriented work, including visits by non-Tribal communities and individuals.

Participants across all three institutions stated that they do not expect anything from community members during visits or consultations, adding that they must be okay with community members not wanting to share their knowledge. All three museums further stated that, when community members do share their knowledge and expertise, museum staff explicitly seek consent to document and share this knowledge. Some participants also noted that they give credit to community members and students who share their knowledge by including attribution information in their databases. One participant described the importance of this: "If other folks from that community, Tribal representatives, come back later, they want to know where that information came from."

c) Implementing Ethical Practices in Other Areas of Museum Work

All three institutions stated that critical cataloging goes hand-in-hand with other areas of museum work, including collections care and exhibits, and thus is not isolated from other staff responsibilities. Some participants stated that their department's priority thus far has largely been on NAGPRA compliance and/or collaborative, community-centered exhibit development. Therefore, cataloging has not necessarily been a top priority. However, they explained further that reparative work in the catalog records has oftentimes been accomplished through NAGPRA consultations or exhibit work. One participant described critical cataloging as a "happy byproduct" of community consultation and access work.

All three museums advocated for the need to implement culturally relevant practices in their physical collections care alongside critical cataloging practices in order to respect communities' wishes surrounding how their cultural belongings are stored and handled and to "make sure that we're maintaining the integrity and authority of communities and how they see their objects," as one participant expressed. Some participants, including all staff at the Peabody,

described their institution's critical work not as specific tasks or "work" but rather as a framework or set of guiding principles through which they do all work, similarly viewing critical cataloging as inherently non-isolated.

RQ2. What barriers exist to critical cataloging work?

Participants described four main barriers to their efforts to implement critical cataloging practices in their museums: a) limited resources; b) database constraints; c) the university's priorities; and d) current models of museum training and education.

a) Limited Resources

All three museums described limited funding, staff capacity, and time as challenges to engaging in critical cataloging work. The majority of participants stated a need for additional staff to alleviate time constraints. A few participants expressed a need to step away from the culture of urgency in academia and the museum field entirely, acknowledging that "this work takes time," and several other participants similarly noted that building relationships and trust with communities takes time. Staff at IUMAA stated that lack of staff was not necessarily the primary issue but rather that the current staff, with their differing backgrounds, levels of knowledge, and understandings of concepts such as decolonization, needed to be "on the same page." Two participants from IUMAA described this issue as internal at the MAA, while one described this issue as a cross-institutional lack of communication between the different museums and libraries on campus. To resolve this issue, the museum recently created the Decolonization, Indigenization, Restitution, and Reconciliation (DIRR) working group, which involves a series of monthly meetings to educate staff. In contrast to IUMAA, staff at the Peabody generally felt that the museum's staff were on the same page.

b) Database Constraints

Staff at all three museums noted constraints with their databases. At the Burke, all staff mentioned Argus' incompatibility with non-Roman scripts (e.g., Cyrillic, Arabic, Chinese) and diacritical marks or accents, resulting in communities' preferred terms often being romanized, which one participant described as an "ugly and colonial" workaround. Catalog records from the Burke, such as the earlier example of "Small 'sai pla' - fish basket," show evidence of this issue, where instead of the Thai script being used ("„ÃΔ"), the term is instead entered in the database in its romanized form: "sai pla." Romanization of non-Roman scripts can create issues of findability while searching in the database when different systems of romanization are used by different catalogers. For instance, the Thai musical instrument called the "·•∫" can be romanized as "Khaen," "Khene," "Kaen," "Kehn," or "Ken." Similar to the Burke, participants at IUMAA expressed a concern over linguistic incompatibility of the institution's database, Filemaker Pro.

Staff at all three institutions described how the structures and categories built within their databases, Argus, Filemaker Pro, and The Museum System, do not always align with their needs, such as the need to track edits and changes throughout time; furthermore, the databases require extensive customization in order to work for their specific institutions. One participant elaborated:

> "And databases, in a lot of ways, flatten information. They don't allow for a lot of nuance and complexity. And a lot of times, I think the work is figuring out how to incorporate that nuance and complexity into a flat system. So I think there is work that needs to be done in the realm of relational databases to be able to capture information in a way that feels accurate and respectful, and that also can be tracked over time. Because a lot of the work that is done in terms of reparative cataloging is correcting misinformation, is correcting racist information. And so finding a way to track those changes throughout time."

When asked about their ideal museum catalog, participants at all three institutions explicitly described a database that accommodates various terms, languages, and scripts.

c) The University's Priorities

Staff at both the Burke and the Peabody spoke of their university's prioritization of revenue generating activities, such as research and publication. Burke staff identified this problem of misaligned priorities as existing at both the level of the Burke Museum itself (i.e., prioritizing admissions) and the University of Washington more broadly, with one participant describing the university as "an underfunded state institution with many competing priorities." Staff at the Peabody similarly identified this issue with Harvard University; one participant explained:

> "Even though we're at Harvard, and when you think about funding, like, yeah, okay, we have a lot more funding than the Burke Museum probably gets, but compared to other museums on campus, like the Harvard Art Museums, we are at war, and it's so hard to get anything done. It's really not equitable here. Especially if your mission is to say, 'We suck, and now we're giving everything back.' People just can't wrap their minds around it. Harvard itself is the biggest challenge. Working within the structure of Harvard is very, very difficult. It often feels like a losing battle."

Staff at IUMAA did not describe the broader university as a barrier to their work, but one participant did briefly note, "Because we are part of a university, as you know, there can be a lot of bureaucratic red tape. I don't know if I can really speak to that."

d) Current Models of Museum Training and Education

A fourth barrier mentioned by participants across all three institutions is the current models of museum training and education, particularly regarding physical care of collections. The institutions described these models as inflexible and as presuming the existence of one set of universal practices that are the "best practices" across the museum field. One participant at IUMAA explained,

> "I think that the ways in which people are trained many times in the museum field from museum studies programs is this idea that museums operate in one specific way, and this is the best practices for museums. And it's this indoctrination that there is one way to do it. And it's typically a dominant Western paradigm of how and what conservation means, how you operate with an object that's an inanimate object. And it does not provide space and authority and value and check its own internal ego around hierarchy for other worldviews and epistemological ways of being."

Another participant, at the Burke, recalled an instance where a Māori weaver who visited the museum washed two woven bags in the collection:

> "...[That] broke so many rules I was taught as a graduate student. 'Never anything in the sunshine. You can't do anything without a conservator. Ivory snowflakes? Are they neutral? Is it an archival soap?' It didn't matter. This was a community member taking care of a community belonging, and they knew what the flax could handle. They knew what that weaving could handle."

Other participants described how their ways of cataloging have evolved throughout their careers and how they have moved away from the way they were originally trained to catalog in "fairly rigorous detail." One participant stated, "If I don't have information, then I don't include information," acknowledging that not all information needs to be documented, especially if museum staff are uncertain about its accuracy.

RQ3. What does an ethical, inclusive museum catalog look like?

Participants at all three institutions stated that an ethical, inclusive museum catalog is a) collaborative and b) accessible, but with discretion. Some participants also acknowledged that c) there is no one-size-fits-all model for museum catalogs.

a) <u>Collaborative</u>

Several participants stressed the importance of centering community voices and perspectives in catalog records, describing an ideal museum catalog as one that allows "descendant and heritage stakeholders to have a place to put their voice in the room and drive the

direction of how things would be captured." Some participants specifically used the term "collaborative," while others mentioned "community input" as an integral component of catalogs. Participants across all three institutions cited grassroots, community-based collections management portals such as Mukurtu as good examples of museum catalogs and models they use in shaping their own institution's policies and practices.

b) Accessible with Discretion

Participants at the Burke and IUMAA emphasized accessibility as another crucial feature of an ethical, inclusive museum catalog. Participants at the Peabody did not mention accessibility, perhaps because the museum's catalog is already accessible online, whereas the other two institutions' catalogs are not. The majority of participants identified a need for either general public accessibility, specific accessibility for communities, or both. All participants who mentioned accessibility added that culturally sensitive information—such as information about rituals, records that can only be viewed by certain members of a community (e.g., based on gender, status, etc.), and records pertaining to sacred, holy, or spiritual cultural belongings—as well as information that communities simply do not wish to have shared should not be made publicly accessible. Participants at the Burke highlighted a need for different levels of accessibility and restrictions, relating accessibility back to the constraints of their current database, Argus.

c) There is No One-Size-Fits-All Model

Some participants at IUMAA and the Peabody stated that the ideal museum catalog is specific to the individual institution; thus, there is no one-size-fits-all model for museum catalogs. Staff at the Peabody noted that this is especially pertinent to encyclopedic museums, which steward a diverse range of collections spanning from anthropology and archaeology to

biology and paleontology. A few participants discussed the difficulty of "design[ing] a system that would work for everyone," as their institution represents diverse cultures and works with many different communities. One participant described:

> "I think the ideal database really fits your collection. It fits your mission. What is your mission? What are you doing with this data? Who is using the data? How are people using the data? Is it online? There's so many different variables and questions that I don't... I think it really depends on the institution and who you're representing. What do they want to see?"

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how anthropological collections departments in museums are currently attempting to engage in critical cataloging practices within their institutions. A case study approach was used to examine collections practices at three museums: the Burke, IUMAA, and the Peabody. Data were collected through interviews with nine museum professionals and through document analysis. Several key findings emerged from the study.

Critical Cataloging Work is Collaborative

The critical cataloging work that these three institutions are working on implementing is collaborative at its core. All three institutions described community engagement and access as key components of their critical practices and stated that they are working to involve communities more in the process of updating terminology in their records. In an effort to decenter European and Anglo-American cultural biases and subvert historical power asymmetries within museums, the institutions are putting power in community members' hands by letting them determine how and to what extent they want themselves and their cultural heritage to be represented; further, they are acknowledging that community members are the true experts and knowledge bearers surrounding their own cultural heritage. When describing their

ideal catalog, the museums all emphasized collaboration, with many referencing community-based collections management portals and highlighting the importance of accessibility.

The collaborative nature of this cataloging work mirrors projects implemented at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas (Trammell, 2019) and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge (Carreau & Gunn, 2024) and confirms recent studies by Chen (2022), Horwood (2019), Lewis (2024), and Magani et al. (2018). The museums in this study all stated that they are working to build non-extractive relationships with communities by trying to ensure that collaboration between the museum and communities is for the benefit of the communities above all else, rather than for the museum simply to enrich its catalog records. This finding supports Antracoli et al.'s (2020) argument that collaborative projects should "benefit participating communities rather than solely co-opting the knowledge of those communities for institutional gain" (p. 7).

Language Choice is Important

All three museums acknowledged the importance of language choice while cataloging, as they described their efforts to remove and/or deprioritize harmful, racist terminology (i.e., metadata remediation). These practices echo the metadata remediation work that has been done in both the museum and library fields (Barnett, 2022; Carreau & Gunn, 2024; Hollingworth, 2021). At the same time, the museums were generally concerned with balancing findability and inclusivity in their databases. Their efforts to include multiple terms, including both Indigenous or Native terms or communities' preferred terms as well as the English or generalized term (e.g., "Barkcloth"), helps preserve the diversity and multiplicity in the terms used by communities to refer to their cultural belongings, which Lewis (2024) warns is often diminished through the use of generalized terminologies alone.

Participants also discussed language in reference to their collections databases, describing issues of linguistic incompatibility. This finding supports Sprague's (2021) survey, which revealed the incompatibility of different museum databases with Indigenous languages and scripts. Overall, the attention participants paid to language reflects an understanding of the notion that language is power and "words matter," as Alpuim & Ehrenberg (2023), Modest & Lelijveld (2018), and Shashkevich (2019) maintain, among others.

Critical Cataloging is Ongoing and Needs to be Prioritized More

Participants across all three institutions described their critical cataloging work as a "work in progress," with many stating that NAGPRA and exhibit development took precedence over collections work. They noted challenges in staff, time, and money constraints, which prevent critical cataloging from being prioritized more and accomplished to a greater extent. At the Burke and the Peabody, institutional priorities of the broader university were also identified as a barrier to implementing critical cataloging practices. Thus, critical cataloging practices need to be prioritized more, both within these museums and across the broader university. This finding is consistent with the works of Castle (2021), Lewis (2024), Srinivasan et al. (2010), Trammell (2019), and Turner (2015), who all highlight collections work and cataloging especially as an oft overlooked area of reparative work done by museums.

Limitations

This case study has multiple limitations. One limitation is the highly qualitative nature of the study. While the study has identified multiple hypotheses, a more extensive, quantitative study is needed to test these hypotheses. Another limitation of this study is the researcher's own position as an employee at the Burke. Given the researcher's access to staff and resources at the Burke, four of the participants interviewed in this study work at the Burke, and the majority of

examples drawn from catalog records are from the Burke's records. Thus, the Burke may be overrepresented in the data and analysis for this study, and IUMAA and the Peabody may be underrepresented.

Conclusion

This study has shown that ongoing critical cataloging work being undertaken by anthropological museum collections across the U.S. has focused primarily on being mindful about language choices and collaborating with communities in equitable ways.

Implications for Research

Focusing on anthropological or ethnological collections specifically, this study raises questions about critical cataloging work within other types of collections, such as art, archaeology, natural science, and archival collections. As documentation practices and catalog records differ across types of collection, the nature of critical cataloging across these various collections likely differs as well. Further research with a larger, more diverse sample size would allow for a comparative analysis cross-institutionally and across different types of museums (i.e., public vs. private, large vs. small, art vs. natural history, in the U.S. vs. abroad). Furthermore, this study consisted of semi-structured interviews and document analysis; additional research involving focus groups or work sessions with community members themselves or observation of community visits would potentially reveal illuminating aspects of critical cataloging practices not discovered through working solely with museum staff.

As the participating institutions for this study were all university museums, this study highlighted the unique bureaucratic barriers university museums face within the broader university system, raising questions about the similarities and differences between university museums and non-university museums. Namely, given that non-university museums are not

restricted by the priorities or policies of a university system, what do critical cataloging practices look like for them? Further, to what extent do non-university museums face the same barriers as university museums? On the other hand, are the university affiliation and closer ties to the academic sphere that characterize university museums the reason why they are seemingly at the forefront of critical cataloging museum work?

Implications for Practice

This study demonstrates the potential for collections departments to transform their documentation practices in order to make them more inclusive and equitable. The conclusions of this study may prove to be a useful, relevant guide for other collections departments seeking to engage in critical collections work, but especially anthropology or ethnology collections, for this study outlines the different approaches and steps that museums can take and are currently taking to improve their own practices.

The results of this study reveal that critical cataloging work is inherently collaborative, yet relationships with communities must be built over time and trust, with the ultimate benefit of the critical cataloging work aimed at the communities themselves. If museum professionals aspire to involve communities in their cataloging practices, then they must relinquish authority and let community members make final decisions surrounding what knowledge is documented and who has access to that knowledge. The results of this study also highlight the importance of language, illustrating different steps museum professionals are taking to be more mindful of their language use. Ultimately, this study encourages museum professionals to reflect on their institution's practices, as well as their own individual practices, and to question and reconsider the ways in which knowledge has been and continues to be documented, organized, and stewarded by their institutions.

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Appendix A: Instrument

Interview Guide

Background on Participant's Position and Institution

1. First, I'd like to gather a little bit of background information on your collections department and your position specifically.
    1. How many people in total work in your collections department?
    2. What is your job title?
    3. What are the day-to-day responsibilities of your position?
    4. How many years have you worked in your position at [institution name]?
    5. How many years have you worked in the museum field overall?
2. Now, I'd like to ask you about your cataloging practices.
    1. What CMS/database does your department use?
    2. Who is in charge of cataloging objects?
    3. What information do you include in your catalog records?
        1. What information is typically included in object descriptions?
        2. What kinds of sources do you use for writing descriptions?
    4. How do you determine the object name for objects being catalogued?
    5. What languages are included in your catalog records?
    6. In what ways are community members involved in the catalog process?
    7. Who has access to catalog records?
    8. Is there any other information about your cataloging practices that you would like to share?

Critical Cataloging Work within the Institution

3. The reason that I chose [institution name] for my study is because I was aware that the museum has been undergoing recent efforts to "decolonize" your collections.
    1. Is "decolonization" the language your department/institution uses, or do you have another term that you use to refer to such work?
    2. Can you tell me a little bit about the reparative work you've been doing in your collections?
        1. How do you ensure that new catalog records include culturally appropriate language and terminology?
        2. When you work with community members, how do you ensure that this work is non-extractive?
            1. Are there any particular community groups (i.e., Native Americans, Southeast Asian populations, etc.) that you have focused on engaging with?
            2. Are there any community groups that you would like to engage with more?
    3. Are you doing any retroactive work with pre-existing catalog records?
4. Within your [term they use to refer to this work (e.g., decolonization, reparative work, social justice, etc.)] work up until now, what would you say has been your biggest priority?
    1. What has been the lowest priority for your work/department?
5. Are there any examples of other institutions that are doing similar work in their collections that you have used as a model in your own practices?

    1. Are there any tools or resources from outside sources that you have referred to or used in this work? If so, what are they?

6. In your opinion, what does a museum catalog in an ideal world look like?
    1. What information should be included in catalog records in the first place?
    2. Who should be responsible for "producing" the knowledge contained in the catalog?
    3. Who should have access to the catalog?
        1. Do you believe that catalogs should be made openly accessible online?

Resources and Barriers

7. How do you balance [term they use to refer to this work (e.g., decolonization, reparative work, social justice, etc.)] work with all of the other responsibilities of your position?
8. What resources do you currently contribute toward this work?
    1. What additional resources are needed to facilitate this work?
    2. What changes at the institution level are needed to facilitate this work?
9. What has been the greatest challenge so far in your [term they use to refer to this work (e.g., decolonization, reparative work, social justice, etc.)] work?
    1. What other challenges have you encountered?
    2. How do you work around/through these challenges?

Demographic Information

10. Lastly, I'd like to gather some brief demographic information.
    1. Which of these best describes your race/ethnic identity? Please choose as many as apply.

    1. [Read choices] Black/African American, American Indian/Native American, Asian/Asian American, Latinx/Latino/Latina/Hispanic/Chicano, Middle Eastern/Arab/Arab American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or White

2. What pronouns do you use?