Collecting Change/Changing Collections: diversity and friction in contemporary archive and museum collecting in London

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
I, Kyle Alexander Lee-Crossett confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signature:                                Date:
Abstract

The research in this thesis asks: What is being done with ‘diversity’ in collections practice? Diversity and representation have been on the agenda of public archives and museums for the past twenty years or more. Despite this, there is a sense that these issues have remained on the margins, with little progress having been achieved in key areas. This PhD investigates the lack of impact of diversity in what is often referred to as the ‘heart’ or ‘core’ of archives and museums: their collections. Although institutions claim to value diversity and representation, they are not frequently associated with or examined in reference to the work of this central, enduring area. This research follows contemporary collecting work in social and natural history that is invested in increasing the representation of underrepresented groups, comparing biodiversity and cultural diversity. Does bringing in material from previously underrepresented groups impact how the collection is conceptualised and managed? Building on the work of Sara Ahmed (2012), the thesis views diversity as not only about the variety or representativeness of a collection, but also about the ability of institutions to change their management and governance. Because diversity is a mobile concept, intended to be applicable across all types of public institutions, the thesis examines a range of different types of archives and museums in London through interviews, participant observation, and workshops with practitioners. The thesis proposes critical descriptive models that establish how diversity and representation have been both incorporated and contained (or neutralised) through collections practice. As part of the Heritage Futures research project (Harrison et al. 2016; Harrison et al. forthcoming) it also considers the implications of how the selection and preservation and particular kinds of diversity shape futures for conservation.
Impact statement

This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of contemporary practices of diversity and inclusion in public institutions. It explores this issue through the analysis of contemporary collecting in London archives and museums. The thesis draws on a range of comparative material to place it within a broad context of discourses of representation and institutional reform. Future dissemination of the findings will aim to reach researchers in the fields of critical heritage studies, museum studies, archival studies, and contemporary archaeology. The research could also be of public interest in light of the recent high-profile campaigns for decolonisation and repatriation in museums, as well as the ongoing attention to the lack of workforce and audience diversity in the heritage sector. For both academic and public audiences, engagement with the research could have an impact on narratives about change in archives and museums and how institutional reform is approached. The thesis also aims to have an impact on contemporary collecting practice in archives and museums, especially in the UK. The research of this thesis has already involved engaging with a large number of archive and museum practitioners and disseminating early findings. Dissemination and engagement has led to citations in new contemporary collecting guidance produced by Museums Development Northwest (2019) and to some practitioners reporting changes in their practice and ways of thinking. Copies of the thesis will be sent directly to the individuals who have already participated in the research, which includes practitioners at national, local authority, and independent archives and museums. As part of the Heritage Futures project, direct dissemination of the research will also reach an international network of heritage and policy practitioners, academics, and policy makers. The thesis may also have a longer term, incremental impact on the development of ethnographic methodologies for the academic study of studying of mobile, contemporary practices in heritage studies. This is likely to be of increased relevance as the sector continues to adopt digital technologies and respond to global migration and tourism, which thrust archives and museums into new global, distributed networks.
# Contents

Declaration........................................................................................................................................... 2

Abstract.................................................................................................................................................. 3

Impact statement ................................................................................................................................... 4

Contents.................................................................................................................................................. 5

Figures.................................................................................................................................................... 7

Tables...................................................................................................................................................... 7

Acknowledgements.............................................................................................................................. 8

Chapter 1  Introduction.......................................................................................................................... 9

  1.1  Research questions ..................................................................................................................... 13

  1.2  Structure of the thesis .................................................................................................................. 15

Chapter 2  Defining diversity................................................................................................................ 19

  2.1  Diversity as outreach activities .................................................................................................... 20

  2.2  Diversity as workforce demographics ......................................................................................... 21

  2.3  Diversity as collections ................................................................................................................ 23

  2.4  Methods stage I: thematic review ............................................................................................... 26

Chapter 3  Doing diversity .................................................................................................................... 35

  3.1  Diversity and its frictions ............................................................................................................. 35

  3.2  Endangerment and threat .......................................................................................................... 38

  3.3  Diversity and collections development strategies ......................................................................... 41

  3.4  Marginalising diverse aims and materials ................................................................................ 51

Chapter 4  Ethnography of a social project ........................................................................................... 55

  4.1  Ethnographic forms .................................................................................................................... 55

  4.2  Methods stage II: ethnographic research ................................................................................... 63

Chapter 5  Porous zones: research at the borders between collections and publics ...................... 76

  5.1  Tensions of the contact zone ........................................................................................................ 78
5.2 Museum geographies and backstage .......................................................... 81
5.3 Porous zones ............................................................................................. 85
5.4 Cases .......................................................................................................... 88

Chapter 6 Object stories: negotiating significance and representation in museums ..... 111
6.1 Object stories ............................................................................................ 114
6.2 Assessing significance .............................................................................. 117
6.3 The politics of representation .................................................................. 124
6.4 Cases .......................................................................................................... 127

Chapter 7 Future expertise: evidence and learning in archives and natural history...... 151
7.1 Evidential value ........................................................................................ 152
7.2 Frameworks and expertise ...................................................................... 156
7.3 Cases .......................................................................................................... 164

Chapter 8 Discussion ..................................................................................... 184
8.1 The afterlife of diversity work: Speak Out London: Diversity City ............. 184
8.2 The absence of frameworks for collecting diversity in social history .......... 190

Chapter 9 Conclusion .................................................................................... 202
9.1 Reflections and connections across themes ............................................ 202
9.2 The scale of practice ................................................................................. 206
9.3 Refusing institutional reform: abolitionism ............................................. 214

Bibliography .................................................................................................. 221
Figures

Figure 2.1 ‘Collections Vortex’ by author ................................................................. 25
Figure 2.2 Presence of ‘diversity’ and related words .................................................. 31
Figure 2.3 Uses of ‘diversity’ and related words ........................................................ 31
Figure 4.1 ‘Collecting Change/Changing Collections’ workshop participants in discussion .......... 67
Figure 5.1 View of the Darwin Centre, looking toward the Spirit Collections .................... 90
Figure 5.2 A display in the Spirit Collection, looking into the collection storage ............... 90
Figure 5.3 Front doors of the Angela Marmont Centre for UK Biodiversity ....................... 91
Figure 6.1 ‘Undefinable gender’, donated to the Museum of Transology .......................... 113
Figure 6.2 Model mechanism of significance assessment ............................................. 121
Figure 6.3 The pictures of the placards posted on Twitter. Credit: Hackney Museum ................ 129
Figure 6.4 An example of one of the objects donated to the Museum of Transology .............. 137
Figure 6.5 Left: The Museum of Transology logo. Right: feedback hat stand ....................... 138
Figure 6.6 My contribution to the Wellcome Collection’s crowdsourcing: .......................... 145
Figure 7.1 Frameworks of evidence in natural history and social history archives ............... 154
Figure 7.2 The UK Species Inventory’s shift from taxonomic to biodiversity evidence .......... 161
Figure 7.3 Identifying specimens on the projector microscope ....................................... 170
Figure 7.4 Image of the specimens I eventually learned to collect, identify, and pin, atop a key .... 170
Figure 7.5 The WAL archive ‘To be catalogued shelf’ including gold archival box ................. 178
Figure 7.6 Greenan pulls out a custom bottle of Beck’s beer advertising an art exhibition .......... 179
Figure 9.1 The author presenting findings from the thematic review ................................ 210
Figure 9.2 Close-up of participants’ mind-mapping ...................................................... 213

Tables

Table 2.1 Organisation types represented in the thematic review sample .......................... 28
Table 3.1: Timeline of policies and reporting addressing diversity and collections development in the heritage sector, 1990s-2019 ................................................................. 44
Table 4.1 Organisation types represented in the interview sample ................................. 68
Table 6.1 Informal frameworks used to identify the potential values of contemporary material... 123
Acknowledgements

My PhD was funded by the Heritage Futures research programme and UCL through a UCL Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences studentship. Many thanks to the Heritage Futures team for involving me in conferences, workshops, discussions, and dinners that provided both inspiration and support. My supervisors Rodney Harrison and Andrew Flinn provided me with the right amount of encouragement, feedback, and free rein in order for me to find and pursue my research topic. My research participants generously gave of their time and let me learn from them. Though they came from many disciplines and at different points in the process, I was very glad to have academic writing and discussion partners in Ewan Harrison, Lamble, Bruno Vindrola-Padros, Harald Fredheim, and Sarah Hoile. The writing would not have been able to take place without a crew of friends who cheered me on, proofread, or gave me somewhere quiet to work, especially the team at Open Barbers, Felix Lane, Jennifer Leather, Gill Taylor, and Kate Worland. I am also very grateful for the patience and support of my parents, Kevin and Lydia Lee-Crosset. Most of all I owe my thanks to Rowan Kinchin, without whom this would not have been possible, and who reminds me that ‘there is no end to what a living world will demand of you’, but also that there is love and strength for the future.
Chapter 1  Introduction

The research in this thesis asks: What is being done with ‘diversity’ in contemporary collections practice? Similar questions open Sara Ahmed’s (2012) influential book on diversity work in higher education institutions. She asks, ‘What does diversity do? What are we doing when we use the language of diversity?’ (2012, 1). Over the course of the book, Ahmed argues that using the language of diversity comes to stand in for it having an effect (2012, 117-118). In this case, what diversity is not having an effect on is the marginalisation of underrepresented groups within institutions. Although institutional discourses of diversity appear to indicate commitments to make changes in response to awareness of structural inequalities, this is not necessarily what is happening. In essence, the language of diversity might not be failing to have an impact on the work of institutions—not having an impact might be what it is doing. One of Ahmed’s (2012, 173) key concluding insights is that:

‘Diversity work does not simply generate knowledge about institutions [...] it generates knowledge of institutions in the process of trying to transform them’
(emphasis original).

Asking about what is being done with diversity is therefore not just a question of how the language of diversity is used, or who or what appears within institutions (and who or what is missing), but a question about institutional ability to reform or transform.

In many ways, my research can be seen as an application of Ahmed’s (2012) work on diversity to the field of archives and museums in the UK. Archives and museums, like higher education institutions, see themselves as key sites for the production of civic life, and both have been similarly interested in diversity since at least the 1990s. Reasons for their interest in diversity include using it to remake colonial legacies, responding to the rise of mid-century rights-based representation, identity politics, and social history movements. Diversity became further enmeshed with archive and museum interests through Labour government policy and public sector strategy in the 1990s, tethering it to funding regimes that continue today. At this time, diversity also became part of broader public discourse, with relevance in fields including education, business, media, and culture.

In the UK public sector, diversity discourses probably reached their height in the early-to-mid 2000s. Revisions to the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000) and Equality Acts (2006;
2010) required public bodies (and in practice, those they funded) to create equality schemes, often called equality and diversity schemes (Ahmed 2012, 8; Nightingale and Mahal 2012). The years following the millennium saw UNESCO’s *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001) (which also references biodiversity) and the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (2005) also have an impact on the heritage sector, in the UK and beyond (Harrison 2013). By 2016-2017, when I started my data collection, diversity had been replaced within the heritage sector, most notably by ‘decolonising,’ which partially responds to some of diversity’s failings to address systemic injustices and inequalities within institutions (Das 2019; Decolonising the Archive n.d.-a; Kassim 2017; Wajid and Minott 2019). Although diversity may no longer be so fashionable, it does remain fundamental, not just because its rhetoric has been more-or-less absorbed into equalities and similar work, but also because concepts of diversity and representation underpin the organising frameworks of archive and museum collections.

Alongside diversity, representation is a second key term for my research. Representation is a principle and function of the political rationality (Bennett 1995) of collecting institutions, the term I use to refer to archives and museums together. Not every archive and museum in this thesis is an ‘institution’, or an established organisation that has standardised structures, processes, and routines (Ahmed 2012). However, I argue that archives and museums (at least those considered in this thesis) can be thought of as institutional because they subscribe to fairly uniform professional standards for the care and management of their collections. In other words, the archives and museums in my thesis broadly reproduce institutional behaviour even if they are not ‘institutions’. Within my thesis, I focus on collecting institutions that aim to represent publics, communities, or environments of some kind. The political rationality of modern collecting institutions configures them as sites of *universal representation*, a principle that is frequently contested on the fronts of who (and what) it includes and how it can be achieved (Bennett 1995; Douglas 2017). Since diversity is especially concerned with increasing the representation of groups that have been marginalised within attempts to develop ‘universal representation,’ it has emerged as one important strand of this contestation.

In my definition of diversity within collecting institutions, I distinguish between two aspects of representation: active and passive. Passive representation can be defined as diversifying the demographics of the collection (who or what it represents). Active representation can be
defined as extending the agency of marginalised groups in assembling, governing, and managing collections (how representation is achieved). Active representation asks collecting institutions to address structural inequalities, rather than to simply create a better reflection of the ‘universal’ they are trying to represent. These two aspects of representation are not necessarily linked, although collecting institutions often assume that by doing the former they also accomplish the latter. As critical legal scholar Stacy Douglas (2017, 20, 46-47, 56) writes in her book about museums, constitutional democracy, and political community, museums ‘confuse their project of representation with democracy’ by assuming that (passive) representation somehow creates an active space of fair, inclusive participation (also see Dibley 2005).

Since the publication of Tony Bennett’s *The Birth of the Museum* (1995), there has been robust discussion, primarily within museum studies literature, about the extent to which it is possible for museums to achieve adequate universal representation (e.g. Dibley 2005; Boast 2011; Douglas 2017; Graham 2012). My thesis is concerned with engaging with this larger question about the potential for, and future of, institutional reform. Following Ahmed’s conclusion above (2012, 178), my thesis is less concerned with making an argument about what should be done with diversity in collecting institutions and more interested in critically describing what diversity’s use can tell us about institutional transformation and change. It aims to pay attention to how different uses of diversity shape different futures for collecting institutions, drawing on work from anthropology, archives, and heritage studies that explores the cultural production of the future (Appadurai 2013; 2006; Caswell 2014; Drake 2019; 2017; 2016a; 2016b; Gilliland and Caswell 2016; Salazar et al. 2017).

In this area, my thesis most strongly builds on the research and research practices of the Heritage Futures project (2015-2019), of which my PhD is a part. Heritage Futures is premised on the assumption that heritage practice is as much about assembling legacies for the future as it is about the past (Harrison et al. 2016; forthcoming). Through the work of its 16 interdisciplinary researchers, Heritage Futures has explored what it means for both natural and cultural heritage to be preserved ‘for the future’ or ‘on behalf of future generations’ across a broad range of domains of practice. As Rodney Harrison has argued, ‘different forms of heritage practices enact different realities and hence work to assemble different futures’ (Harrison 2015, 24 emphasis original).
Taking its cue from the Heritage Futures’ comparative and interdisciplinary research approaches, my research explores both biodiversity in natural history collections and sociocultural diversity in social history collections. Biodiversity provides a domain that is not so closely bound to discourses of political representation, allowing for a broader-than-usual exploration of what is being done with diversity. I engage with biodiversity work that is defined around recording individual species (rather than ecological communities), although in Chapter 7 I investigate how the category of ‘species’ can be malleable in practice (Bowker 2005; 2000, 670). My fieldwork deals with species that have been historically excluded from museum and scientific collections because they are either considered ‘non-charismatic’ or difficult to identify (Bowker 2000, 655; Rosenthal et al. 2017).

Although the causes for their structural exclusion from biodiversity are not the same as those I discuss within a sociocultural context, I argue that considering how diversity is used in natural history collections provides some insights for social history ones. For this thesis, I define social history collections as those that contain everyday materials, from the present and recent past, connected with people’s social and cultural lives. Although there are a number of groups that can be understood as having been underrepresented or excluded within social history collections, I focus on two in order to give my fieldwork a clear focus. I look at the representation of black and minority ethnic people in Britain, because the label of diversity, or ‘being diverse’ is most often associated with non-white demographics (Ahmed 2012). While individuals are not inherently ‘diverse’ in a meaningful sense (because diversity is inherently contextual) certain demographics, identities, and appearances are more associated with diversity than others, and I sometimes use that shorthand. I also look at LGBTQ+ people, firstly because, as a transgender person, I have a personal connection to this aspect of representation in collections. Secondly, 2017 was the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of male homossexuality in England, and many archives and museums ran LGBTQ+ collecting projects timed to correspond with the anniversary that were active during my fieldwork period. While these two strands of diversity are my focus, I address other aspects of sociocultural diversity where relevant. Although biodiversity acts as an important comparative, I am ultimately most interested in the sociocultural dimensions of diversity and their relationship with institutional change. The literature and fieldwork in my thesis reflect this.
My research centres on collecting institutions in London. London was chosen as the area of my research because I have been active in LGBTQ+ heritage initiatives in the city since I was a teenager, and have volunteered, worked, and researched in many of its archives and museums. London also presented a wide range of collecting institutions where the use of diversity could be explored. I was interested in looking across a number of institutions, because Ahmed (2012, 57) argues the discourse of diversity is mobile in nature:

“The word “diversity” appears as if it is everywhere, but that appearance might be part of what it is doing. Actually, the word “diversity” is far from everywhere’.

Having the appearance of being everywhere describes not only how diversity functions within a field, or across a group of sites, but also how it appears within institutions. Paying attention to where and what ‘diversity’ was used to refer to in archives and museums revealed that while it was often associated with human resources, outreach and education, and written policies, it was rarely used in the context of collections. This is a noteworthy absence, because collections are often considered the ‘core’ or enduring value of archives and museums (e.g. Cannadine 2018, 29-30; Dewdney, Dibosa, and Walsh 2012). Equality and diversity policies tell us that diversity is important and should be featured in all aspects of an organisation’s work. However, the persistence of diversity only as the external face of collecting institutions, and not within their core operations indicates that diversity might not be consistently applied or considered within them (Chandan and Nightingale 2012, 16-17; Fredheim, Macdonald, and Morgan 2018, 28; Lynch 2015; 2011).

My research, then, investigates how diversity is collected and managed across both biodiversity and socio-cultural collections in London. It uses a comparative approach to identify commonalities and the common futures they assemble, while recognising how learning from their differences might expand ideas of heritage practice (Harrison 2015; Harrison et al. 2016, 68).

1.1 Research questions
In my fieldwork, trying to speak to collections staff about diversity often involved first being redirected elsewhere. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to talk to the education team?’ one curator of contemporary social history asked, while an archivist responsible for appraising community-based records answered by pointing to a print-out of the institution’s diversity policy. These interactions were surprising in their deflection not just because my research
interviews were explicitly about the role of diversity in collections development in London, but also because I had reached out to archives and museums that actively promoted representing and reflecting London’s communities. Ahmed (2012, 58) also notes that trying to speak about diversity within institutions often involves dealing with redirection and a persistent lack of clarity. Like Ahmed, I found that in order to understand what diversity was actually doing, I needed to follow diversity around the institution, paying close attention to how it was enacted in practice.

‘The question of what diversity does is also, then, a question of where diversity goes (and where it does not) as well as in whom and in what diversity is deposited (as well as in whom or in what it is not)’ (Ahmed 2012, 12).

I pursue my primary research question, What is being done with ‘diversity’ in contemporary collections practice? through a series of research questions that help answer ‘where diversity goes,’ as well as how the use of diversity in collections can inform how we understand institutional change—and resistance to it—in archives and museums.

My research questions about what diversity is doing are centred on the activity of contemporary collecting and contemporary collections practices. In my fieldwork, I allowed archive and museum practitioners to define the ‘contemporary’ of contemporary diversity however was relevant to them. The time frame of ‘contemporary’ in my thesis thus ranged from the material that had been collected in the current year to material that had been collected in the 1980s. Rather than being interested in working within a particular understanding of the contemporary, I wanted to investigate experiences of collecting everyday materials from the recent past that were new or underrepresented in collecting institutions. The profusion of this kind of everyday, contemporary material means there is a lack of consensus about its role and value in archives and museums (Macdonald and Morgan 2018; Terwey 2014). This lack of consensus meant it was easy to identify points of friction: where practices and values diverged or chafed with the existing order of collections frameworks. I was able to participate in shared enquiry with museum and archive practitioners about elements of their practice that were not yet settled or routine. In my thesis, I use the terms ‘archive and museum practitioners’ or ‘collections practitioners’ to describe the archive and museum professionals who participated in my research. My research participants included anyone working at an archive or museum who was involved in contemporary collecting, so ‘practitioner’ simplifies a wide range of role types and titles.
My secondary research questions that follow ‘What is being done with “diversity” in contemporary collections practice?’ are:

How can diversity be located in respect to collections development and practice, if at all?

How are decisions made to introduce ‘diverse’ materials and perspectives into collections?

When does bringing in material from previously underrepresented groups impact how collections are conceptualised and managed?

Through answering these questions, I demonstrate that both passive and active aspects of representing diversity are absent from most collections practice, with active representation being least present. I argue that the lack of impact of ‘diversity’ can be explained by the absence of purposeful frameworks for collecting diversity in social history contexts and by how diverse materials and perspectives are devalued within existing frameworks. From this conclusion, I reflect on my research to ask: What are some of the practices within collections and collecting institutions that have prevented diversity from being embedded there?

1.2 Structure of the thesis

In Chapter 2, I establish where and what diversity is typically used to refer to in archives and museums, looking at the state of diversity in outreach activities and in workforce demographics. I also present my thematic review of London archive and museum collections’ webpages, looking at when diversity is used to describe collections content and work. Even when diversity is associated with the ‘core’ of collecting institutions, I argue that it is seen to be a marginal aspect.

In Chapter 3, ‘Doing Diversity’, I argue that diversity is not just a word or discourse, but also a social project that is driven by the frictions inherent in its history and deployment. As a site of friction, diversity creates ‘awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative […] connections across difference’ (Tsing 2005, 18). Diversity can be understood as a social project in the sense that it emerges from and operates within particular genealogies and social contexts. In the context of biodiversity, diversity still shapes how we as human beings understand conservation (ideologies, frameworks, imaginings) and how we organise our conservation work. Additionally, methods of representing and managing difference in populations in the
sciences have bled over into sociocultural realms, both now and in the past. After evaluating the historical genealogies of diversity, Chapter 3 examines how diversity has been presented as a strategic aim for collection development in the English archives and museums sector over the last 20 years. Evidence of a continuing lack of commitment to diversity aims within collections development policy sets the context for my fieldwork on diversity in collections in Chapters 5-7.

Chapter 4 lays out the methodology and ethnographic methods used in the fieldwork for my thesis, which follow diversity around the margins of collections practice. I review ethnographic approaches that were designed to function in complex, contemporary settings and how these were applied to studying diversity through the activity of contemporary collecting. Notably, my thesis employs a series of ‘cases’ rather than a small number of more in-depth case studies in order to try to capture something of the mobile, ‘universal’ nature of diversity as a social project (Tsing 2005). Following this, the main empirical chapters are organised thematically, each exploring a process of contemporary collecting where diversity plays a part. Chapter 5 explores the production of collections boundaries, Chapter 6 how the significance of collected material is decided, and Chapter 7 the process of developing collections expertise. Because each of these chapter takes on a new theme or process, they each contain their own introductory background section. In this background section, key theoretical concepts for the theme are discussed in order to lay the groundwork for the new critical model proposed for each process. The second portion of the chapter then explores how the proposed model works in up to three cases from my fieldwork.

Chapter 5 addresses the research question: ‘How can diversity be located in respect to collections development and practice?’ by introducing and discussing the spaces of my research. These spaces often occupied locations that were in-between the ‘backstage’ works areas of collecting institutions and their exhibition displays. I argue that diversity work often happens in these interstitial spaces, which do not often achieve the kind of porosity they are trying to signal. Derived from a discussion of the legacy of James Clifford’s (1997) contact zone, study of this ‘porous zone’ draws attention to processes of managing access to collections and collecting. Although there has been an architectural and cultural embrace of transparency and democracy in archives and museums in recent years, my fieldwork shows that rather than remove barriers to collections access they have instead renegotiated their design. How to engage or intervene with collections is still not transparent for many
members of the public, and it is not always clear whether collections institutions either desire or are able to change this. Like the contact zone, porous zones are uneven spaces of exchange that are impacted by historical and contemporary modes of exclusion. The cases in this chapter: the Angela Marmont Centre, Hackney Archives, and MayDay Rooms archive (which all experienced substantial building development in the early 2010s) provide a set of examples where the design of and access to collections space has been consciously and recently addressed.

In Chapter 6, I address the question ‘How are decisions made to introduce “diverse” materials and perspectives into collections?’ by examining processes for collecting materials considered diverse. In discussion with the concept of ‘object biographies’ as it has been used in archaeology and museum studies (e.g. Gosden and Marshall 1999; Byrne et al. 2011; Joyce and Gillespie 2015), I posit ‘object stories’ (practitioners’ narratives about collecting) as a way of understanding the trajectories through which materials enter collections. Through an analysis of the object stories in my research, I argue that materials’ significance is determined in often informal ways that do not necessarily follow established, linear models of significance assessment. Within the object stories, practitioners were also demonstrably ambivalent about traditional modes of collections representation. With examples from the cases, I argue that we can see that practitioners’ understandings of how best to use collections to relate to and represent publics are changing on the ground. To explore this, I first look at how Hackney Museum staff have approach being representative in their collecting. I then look at two cases of ‘crowdsourced’ collecting (at the Wellcome Collection and the Museum of Transology) that re-work curatorial decision-making and representational processes. However, I ultimately argue that despite this good practice, materials involved in these kinds of initiatives do not often end up within permanent collections and do not therefore affect core collecting practices.

Chapter 7 considers how evidential frameworks in archives and natural science have evolved since the latter half of the 20th century. It addresses the question: ‘When does bringing in material from previously underrepresented groups impact how collections are conceptualised and managed?’ by examining how widening ideas of evidence in these fields have influenced change in collections’ management and conceptions of practitioners’ roles within them. The chapter explores relational theories of evidence and the relationship between evidence and expertise. I argue that within collecting, diversity projects often provide content for evidential
frameworks, but are not usually allowed to shape the form or basis of these frameworks (i.e. are not allowed to occupy positions of expertise). The cases in this chapter follow how expertise in collections is developed. I first return to the Angela Marmont Centre and biodiversity collecting to shadow trainees in species identification. This is compared with how the Women’s Art Library has built their collections and expertise in feminist art practice.

Chapter 8 returns to questions posed about the lack of progress made by diversity initiatives in archive and museum collections. It addresses the final research question: ‘What are some of the practices within collections, and collecting institutions, which have prevented diversity from being embedded there?’ To do this, it reflects on the afterlife of a diversity project at the London Metropolitan Archives, asking to what degree it is reasonable to hold institutions to account for falling short of their transformative aims. It then analyses how practitioners across the thesis’s fieldwork sites used the language of ‘gaps’ when talking about diversity in collections. I argue that the language of ‘gaps’ is reflective of the piecemeal and passive way representation is conceived of and pursued within in the sector. This lack of frameworks for diversity was not universal, however. I end the chapter by summarising how some of the practitioners across my thesis worked on diversity beyond the ‘gap’ and reflect on their strategies for doing so.

In my conclusion (Chapter 9) I explore which takeaways from the critical models I propose have resonated with practitioners so far and that others may find useful. I also return to engage more deeply with the question of institutional reform and real and visionary alternatives to continuing the cycle.

Notes

1 I primarily use the language of diversity and representation in my thesis, but also bring in related discourses around decolonisation, equality, and social inclusion.

2 There is some work within archival literature that questions the ability of archival institutions to reform, for example the work of Jarrett Drake (2019; 2017; 2016a; 2016b). Perhaps because fewer archives share the representative aim of museums, critique about archival functions has not followed the same lines. Early, notable critiques of archival work were aimed primarily at archival professionals rather than archival institutions (Ham 1975; Zinn 1977).

3 Specifically, my PhD was part of Heritage Future’s ‘Diversity’ theme. The project’s themes also included ‘Uncertainty’, ‘Profusion’, and ‘Transformation’. See the Heritage Futures website: https://heritage-futures.org/ and other publications cited in the text for some of the project’s work on its four themes.

4 LGBTQ+ is a commonly used acronym for ‘Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer’ with the ‘+’ standing for a range of allied identities that variously including asexual, ally, intersexed, or questioning.

5 In practice, ‘contemporary’ material could be broadly defined as material the practitioner remembered themselves (or their colleagues) collecting from a person or context within living memory.

6 When referring to an individual practitioner, I normally provide a generic version of their job title.
Chapter 2  Defining diversity

The question I received most often in response to my research (both from the practitioners I spoke to and in general) was, ‘What do you mean by diversity?’ Initially, this was in fact the question I hoped practitioners would answer for me. But in practice, it was often awkward and uncomfortable to directly solicit definitions of diversity. Practitioners were not often confident in articulating their (or their organisation’s) definition of diversity or experienced the question as being about the gap between where their organisation was and where they felt someone might expect it should be. Some rejected the language of diversity, and others expressed being ‘weary’ of the word itself. I too, struggled with how to define and talk about diversity. As a white, transgender man who is read simply as a white man the majority of the time, I worried that it was not clear why I had a stake in diversity work. In some instances, I did share my identity as part of discussions about how and why people came to work on diversity in collections. In other cases, I did not disclose my identity, and the discussion took on the tenor of two well-meaning white people trying to grasp an issue upon which progress is elusive. However, I think both of these experiences—being alternately read as ‘being diverse’ and not—help to offer insights into what diversity means in collection practice.

Diversity often seemed like an untimely subject, where I felt that I was looking at work that was unfinished but had nonetheless moved on. To many people, diversity seemed stale, but perhaps because of this, it felt possible to step back and reflect on its functions in a way that way that might not have been possible with a quickly-moving, ‘hot’ topic. Anthropologists Paul Rabinow and George Marcus associate the ‘untimely’ with the practice of contemporary anthropology, which involves ‘preserv[ing] a certain critical distance, an adjacency’ to what is happening (Rabinow et al. 2008, 58). This critical distance ‘seeks to establish a relationship to the present different from reigning opinion’ (Rabinow et al. 2008, 59). So, answering the question of what is being done with diversity involves exploring both how diversity functions as a contemporary ‘convention of speech’ (however vague) and going beyond this to propose a more critical understanding of its functions and effects (Ahmed 2012, 58).

This chapter looks at what is meant by the term ‘diversity’ in archives and museums. First, I look at what diversity usually refers to within archives and museums, establishing that is not usually associated with collections. Then, I look at what diversity is being used to mean in
the minority of cases when it is used to describe collections, based on my thematic review of London archive and museum websites. In Chapter 3, ‘Doing Diversity’, I move on from exploring at what people say diversity is to looking more in detail at the historical genealogies of what it has been used to do and how they bear upon its use in collections today.

2.1 Diversity as outreach activities

Diversity is most strongly associated with archives and museums’ public education, participation, and engagement activities, including the development of temporary exhibitions. I group these as activities as ‘outreach’. Diversity’s association with outreach is demonstrated in sector and academic literature (e.g. Arts Council England 2015; Cannadine 2018; most contributions in Sandell and Nightingale 2012a) as well as in my experience of having practitioners try to redirect my enquiries toward the education team. In essence, outreach activities translate or make connections between the content and work of collections and external audiences. Theoretically, this work could refer to serving any and all communities and demographics. In practice, it tends to especially focus on ‘trying to reach’ those who are perceived as not having been educated in the benefits and values of the institution. This didactic form of outreach is rooted in the role collecting institutions have played in educating and differentiating civic populations since the 19th century (Bennett 1998, 206; 1995; Hein 2006).

Diversity is linked with outreach and engagement (or ‘participation’) because of the institutional logics that place diversity, and people considered to be diverse, on the outside of collecting institutions (Cannadine 2019, 29-30; Eichhorn 2010). Who diversity is considered to refer to is always contextual, but archives and museums can be understood as spaces that have primarily been designed to serve ‘respectable’ white, upper-middle class interests. The little research around non-participation that has been done in the sector shows that other demographics may feel cultural institutions to be exclusive and ‘not for people like me’ (Doran and Landles 2016; Dawson 2019; Meghji 2019; 2018). The continued emergence of independent archives and museums like the Black Cultural Archives (1981) and the Museum of Transology (2016) (both discussed in this thesis) further highlights that minority demographics have felt it necessary to create collections spaces outside of existing institutions.
The impact of work intended to reach those considered to be outside of collecting institutions has been unclear. In spite of the growth in funding for outreach and public engagement work since the early 2000s, both the money and its impact on collections appears to have been limited (Lynch 2015, 5-6; Lynch 2011; Morse and Munro 2015, 363). Bernadette Lynch’s (2011, 5) influential report on public engagement and participation in museums for the Paul Hamlyn Foundation concludes:

‘the funding invested in public engagement and participation in the UK’s museums and galleries has not significantly succeeded in shifting the work from the margins to the core of many of these organisations. In fact, as this study demonstrates, it has curiously done the opposite. By providing funding streams outside of core budgets, it appears to have helped to keep the work on the organisations’ periphery’.

Although funding bodies like the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and practitioners like Lynch have long argued that outreach should be built into the museum’s core work, this shift has occurred partially or not at all.

### 2.2 Diversity as workforce demographics

The other area diversity is most likely to be associated with in collecting institutions is workforce demographics. Diversifying the demographics of archival and museum workforces, especially in regard to Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff, has been ‘on the agenda’ since the early 1990s (Davies and Shaw 2010; Sandell 2007; 2003). As with outreach activities, concern has often been about how the outward face of the institution can connect to and reflect the public. While there have been some increases in the employment of underrepresented demographics in the last ten years or so, reporting on this topic admits slow or retarded progress as well as incomplete and irregular monitoring data (ARA n.d.-a; Arts Council England 2019; 2018; 2016; 2015; BOP Consulting 2016; Brook, O’Brien, and Taylor 2018; CILIP and ARA 2016; Davies and Shaw 2010a; Shaw 2013).³ BAME, disabled, and working-class people especially continue to be underrepresented in the workforce, and there remains an overriding perception that the heritage and cultural sectors are the domain of privileged demographics (Brook, O’Brien, and Taylor 2018, 17-19). The recent founding of networks that advocate for and support BAME and working-class museum and gallery workers (like Museum as Muck and Museum Detox) also highlights that certain demographics continue to experience marginalisation within the sector (Wajid and Minott 2019).⁴
Crucially, like outreach activities, ‘diverse’ staff appear to be disproportionately attached to spaces and roles on the external margins of museums, such as front-of-house staff and education teams (Arts Council England 2015; Davies and Shaw 2013; 2010, 149; Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh 2012, 118; Nightingale and Mahal 2012, 20). Niti Acharya, who manages the membership directories of both Museum Detox and the Social History Curators Group,\(^5\) has recently stated that while over 300 Black and Minority Ethnic museum professionals are members of Museum Detox, only 50 have curatorial (or related) roles and only 3 of those 50 are among the 130 individual members of the Social History Curators Group (H. Fredheim, unpublished data, 2019).\(^6\) Nine years earlier, Maurice Davies and Lucy Shaw (2010b, 1) wrote in their report on the ethnic diversity of the museum workforce for the Museums Association\(^7\):

‘Even in larger, generally urban, museums in England only 4.2%-6.1% of collections-related jobs are held by people from minority-ethnic backgrounds. The numbers for smaller museums are likely to be lower still. The number of minority-ethnic people in collections-related jobs needs to more than double to represent the wider population.

In museums in cities such as London, it arguably needs to increase far more than that’.

While there may be other Black and Minority Ethnic museum staff with curatorial responsibilities in social history collections in the UK than captured by reporting, these distributions provide further context for how diversity is kept outside the core of collecting institutions.

Increasing the participation or employment of ‘diverse’ people will not automatically lead to more representative collections or content, and assuming this can be reductive and harmful. In an essay about her experience of co-curating the decolonial exhibition ‘The Past is Now’ at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Sumaya Kassim (2017) notes that ‘too often people of colour are rolled in to provide natural resources – our bodies and our “decolonial” thoughts – which are exploited and then discarded’ (c.f. Alberti and Lynch 2010). When ‘diverse’ workers are included, rather than marginalised, they are sometimes thought of as a resource that can be harnessed for the benefit of all. In what is otherwise a very good volume of academic and practitioner reflections on diversity work in museums, Richard Sandell and Eithene Nightingale (2012b, 3) provide an initial definition of diversity that highlights ‘diverse staff’ as an underexploited resource for museums:
'Diversity policies and practices generally embody measures intended to celebrate, promote respect for, and enhance understanding of difference and – in terms of workforce – to harness the benefits of diverse staff.'

Instrumental arguments for diversity (e.g. its association with development goals) are often brought in when it is assumed, usually correctly, that non-instrumental values (e.g. rights-based, humanistic, intrinsic) will not be sufficiently persuasive for action (see Arts Council England 2015). Although left unstated by Sandell and Nightingale, it is implied that the benefits of diverse staff will go to the (non-diverse) museum, with unclear impact for the staff in question. Although association with diversity is supposed to be a win-win for these groups, there is evidence that this is questionable at best and damaging and exploitative at worst for those involved (Ahmed 2012; Kassim 2017; Vidal and Dias 2106a, 9; Wajid and Minott 2019). In raising these issues, I am not arguing against work to increase the inclusion of diverse expertise. Instead, I have tried to draw attention to how the marginalisation and/or short-term exploitation of diverse expertise limits the possibility for long-term, structural change in collecting institutions. Doing work on diversity appears to benefit some more than others. Kassim (2017) makes a similar critique, arguing that ‘The Museum Will Not Be Decolonised’ by the type of short-term work of which she was a part.

2.3 Diversity as collections

While both engagement work and workforce demographics are valid sites for exploring what diversity is doing in archives and museums, my research has focused on diversity within the collections of these institutions. ‘Collections’, as I use it the concept in this thesis, describes materials being assembled, held, and preserved within an archive or museum (cf. Yeo 2012). Archives and museums generally have many individual collections that vary in subject, material type, or source, which in sum make up their institutional ‘collections’. I have mostly considered collections in this summative sense, considering what material is included within the overall holdings of public, institutional collections (the passive representation of populations and environments) and how these collections are managed (active representation). I focus on collections because unlike ‘marginal’ diverse staff and outreach activities, they are considered to make up the core of archives and museums. Looking at diversity in the very heart of the institution should be able to help explain the broader state of this work in archives and museums.
There’s been a marked lack of attention to the topic of diversity within archive and museum collections, with the majority of academic and sector literature concentrating on workforce and outreach activities, especially on exhibition-making and engagement projects. When diversity is highlighted in the context of collections, it often falls into the ‘hidden histories’ trope, where ‘lost’ aspects of underrepresented experiences are found and re-inscribed into historical archives or museum collections (e.g. Wilkinson 2005, 13-14). This work is vital to many, but it often fails to challenge the larger exclusionary structures of collecting institutions. Scholars working especially on race, diaspora, and queer heritages have questioned the assimilationist project of recuperating ‘lost’ histories (Arondekar 2014; 2008; Munoz 2009; Nguyen 2015). Mimi Thi Nguyen’s article ‘Minor Threats’ (2015, 17-18) reflects on her ambivalence about depositing her teenage queer black punk zines into an archive asks:

‘Who is being recuperated, and from what disaster? […] What might be rendered missing in the act of “correcting” an absence, including the conditions of absence [?]’.

Nguyen (2015, 19) argues that the inclusion of previously marginalised materials can become ‘usable as a measure of accountability, without actual transformation’. As I have emphasised in my two-fold definition of diversity, heritage has most frequently accepted diversity as a project of passive representation, if indeed diversity has been accepted at all. Adding new material, or new categories of material to collections does not help to understand what diversity is doing, it merely produces more difference (and more stuff).

My first experience of working in archives as a teenager involved preparing the early organisational documents of a London LGBT+ charity to be deposited into a university archive. I found reading their meeting minutes from the 1990s truly exciting—but I also remember watching those feelings dissipate as the results of the project were packed neatly away into their new, uniform archival boxes. Collections, and our images of them, are so visually uniform that not only do the vast majority of photos of them look similar (as a quick Google search can confirm), they have actually been composed from an identical perspective point (See Figure 2.1; Lee-Crossett 2017). Additionally, almost none of such photos contain people. When does diversity make a (in this case, literally) noticeable difference to collections frameworks and use?
In order to get away from the ‘hidden histories’ approach to diversity that aims to uncover undocumented experiences and insert them into historical narratives, my research has followed active processes of collecting contemporary diversity. I try to understand not just how people collect diversity but why they are doing it and what work these projects ultimately do in terms of perpetuating collecting institutions (Harrison 2013; Harrison et al. 2016). By understanding what work collecting diversity is doing, we can then consider whether it is achieving what we want it to achieve, and deconstruct or reconstruct it if necessary.

Choosing to look at when practitioners collected contemporary materials enabled me to observer how collections processes were often in flux. When practitioners collected recent or new kinds of content and materials, there were not always predetermined boxes or categories for them to go into. Unlike when collecting historical material, the sheer amount and variety of contemporary material means there is often little consensus about what is significant to keep or what categories ‘contemporary social life’ should include (Morgan and Macdonald 2018; Terwey 2014). I explore the uncertainties around the significance of
contemporary material in depth in Chapter 6. Therefore, when following how practitioners collected diversity, it was not always clear whether new material would be made to fit into existing boxes and frameworks or whether the boxes and frameworks might be forced to change in either minor or significant ways. Studying these processes, I was able to repeatedly return to these moments of challenge and ambivalence that Nguyen and my younger self experienced.

2.4 Methods stage I: thematic review

Because of the lack of work on diversity in collections, the first stage of my PhD research involved establishing what diversity was being used to refer to in this context. As I stated at the beginning of the chapter, addressing the question of what is being done with diversity first involves understanding how the term comes up and what it refers to. From summer through autumn 2016, I conducted a thematic review of the content of more than 300 archive and museum collection webpages in Greater London. Principally, it looked the presence (or absence) and use of ‘diversity’ and related words on these sites, asking: Is diversity mentioned in relation to collections materials (passive representation), and/or in relation to collecting processes or connecting with their target users/audience (active representation)?

Conducting a thematic review of archives and museums websites online allowed me to look at a substantial number of sites, and the size of my sample allowed me to establish a baseline for the range of ways diversity was used to describe collections and collections activities. Webpages, in fact, provide one way of addressing the question of locating diversity in collections practice. In 2019, websites are a key part of the public interfaces for most archive and museum collections, even when collections records are not accessible online. Websites thus provide a good proxy for observing the ways that collecting institutions present and approach their holdings. Of course, the picture websites offer of the work and coverage of collection is not complete, and not all collections doing work on diversity will have integrated this into their online presence.

2.4.1 Scope

The basis of the thematic review was the National Archives’ online directory of archives, ‘Find an Archive’, with Greater London defined as the geographical scope.11 Greater London provided the largest regional sampling of archives (over 650, almost twice as many as the
next largest regional grouping) with a great deal of variety within the sample. The National Archives’ directory was used as the core of the review because it is the most comprehensive, up-to-date public listing of archives. Because of the directory’s breadth, by extension it is also a fairly comprehensive listing of museums (through their institutional archives or other archive holdings) than is publicly available elsewhere. Still, the directory was not all-inclusive, and the review was augmented by additional research and other listings, particularly to capture community-based archives and museums too small or informal for inclusion within the National Archives directory. From a combined sample of over 700 archives and museums, the review established a set of over 300 archives and museums that:

- Had publicly accessible collections
- Continued to collect contemporary material
- Had a central responsibility or interest to reflect or connect with contemporary publics and environments

Because I wanted to be able to address the question of how practitioners made decisions about what to include in their collections, I only recorded sites that collected contemporary material in ways that beyond went receiving internal records (or other artefacts) to keep for legal or organisational requirements.

Collections that were primarily born-digital or composed of artwork were also excluded on the basis of having significantly different processes and economics to most social- or natural history collections. The art market and born-digital collections represent two opposite sides of the economies of contemporary collecting. On one end, collecting art typically involves a well-established market that can make acquiring things an extremely pricey endeavour which bears little resemblance to collecting most everyday social and natural history materials. On the other, born-digital collections are still an emerging form of collecting where materials can be acquired, duplicated, and circulated without the same kind of costs or formal transactions in the majority of cases. Additionally, while digital materials should arguably receive the same degree of attention as non-digital ones, the latter are currently subject to more established, institutional infrastructures and processes (Breynard 2017; Canadine 2019; Ray 2009). One curator told me that unless she made a point of it, born-digital material did not go through the museum’s central collecting committee, instead being approved more informally by smaller groups. With digital materials either being ignored by or circumventing regular
collections processes, or evaluated idiosyncratically, it made them less of a good fit for to observe the work of everyday collecting practices.

No further discrimination was made on the basis of collection subject, organisational type, or type of collections material. Especially because of the interdisciplinary scope of my and Heritage Futures’ research, I tried to avoid making assumptions about where ‘diversity’ would be relevant and what it was being used to refer to. Because of this, the review helps to define the interdisciplinary, expanded field of collections my thesis works with. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, the scope and criteria I used to define my thematic review also determined my sample of ethnographic research sites.

Table 2.1 Organisation types represented in the thematic review sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation type</th>
<th>Definition (adapted from the Museums Association website FAQ)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent archive or museum</td>
<td>Owned by registered charities and other independent bodies and trusts, including ones for whom maintaining collections is not their primary function. In this context, also inclusive of community archives and museum collections or other collections maintained by self-identified groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authority archive or museum</td>
<td>Owned and run by local authority bodies. Generally house collections that reflect local history and heritage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University archive or museum</td>
<td>Owned and managed by universities. Their collections often relate to specific areas of academic interest and their own institutional history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National archive or museum</td>
<td>Run and/or funded directly by central government. Generally larger institutions that hold collections considered to be of national importance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The organisation types in Table 2.1 are listed in terms of their frequency in my thematic review sample. Independent archives and museums were the most common organisation
type, with national archives and museums being the least common. Although my category of ‘independent archives and museums’ includes a very wide range of organisation types, in practice, the sample is biased toward archives and museums that had some level of professionalisation (at minimum: some paid staff, premises of some kind, some adherence to established collections practices). While this may have excluded some small, community-based or grassroots archives or museums taking innovative approaches to diversity, this degree of professionalisation helped identify places that matched my criteria of (1) providing ongoing public access to their collections and (2) had a legal or felt responsibility to reflect and/or be open to a relatively wide variety of people. By setting these bounds, my goal was to focus on social and natural history collections that were actively curating their contemporary content and engaging with bio- and/or social diversity, whether as a policy dictate or as a factor coming out of their organisational goals and interactions with user populations.

2.4.2 Method

When conducting the thematic review, I considered any webpages and documents linked to webpages specifically about the collections (overviews of holdings, collections policies, collections descriptions, information about collections access). I deliberately excluded pages relating to outreach, education, or general (diversity or equalities) policy because I have argued that we can learn something new about diversity in the heritage sector by trying to look at diversity specifically within collections. If available, additional contextual information was gathered about the self-identified purpose of the collecting institution, modes of access to the collection, who was responsible for the collection (i.e. type of role, professional or volunteer status), and their approach to collections development (including links to collections policies or similar documents).

The method of data collection and analysis used was based on framework analysis, a qualitative, thematic method designed for large-scale social and policy research (Gale et al. 2013; Richie and Spencer 2002). Summarised data was collected for each of the categories, accompanied in most instances by short sections of relevant website text. The resulting matrix, built over four months (July-October 2016) captured information about diversity in over three hundred archives and museum collections. Because of the qualitative nature of summarising and interpreting the data, I have chosen not to provide exact values when reporting the findings.
2.4.3 Findings

Diversity as variety

The thematic review suggests that diversity is not presented as an important aspect of collections work, or a key characteristic of collections themselves. As shown in Figure 2.2., only slightly more than a third of the websites surveyed mention ‘diversity’ or other related words and phrases (such as: ‘varied,’ ‘wide spectrum,’ or ‘reflecting all aspects of [e.g. women’s lives]’ when describing their collections. Figure 2.3 shows that where the word diversity was mentioned, it overwhelmingly indicated a kind of generic variety: the range of material types in the collection, the subjects covered, or the material’s geographical origins.

Descriptions of collections’ range and variety, like: ‘unique and diverse archival material’, an ‘extremely diverse and exciting array of local material,’ or ‘100,000 items on the diverse history of the borough,’ evoke an impressive quantity of collections materials. References to geographic variety was an important subset of this. Collections that referred to the geographic diversity of their objects’ origins often did so in order to emphasize their institution’s own significance, for example, their ‘world leading,’ or ‘world’s finest’ collections. In more detail: ‘one of the world’s pre-eminent […][collections] with material from almost every country of the world,’ ‘the world’s largest and most comprehensive collection of [e.g. sports history].’ As discussed earlier in this chapter, diversity can accrue benefits primarily for the collecting institution’s own reputation and prestige. The positive language of geographic diversity or variety can also work to paper over the conflictual histories of England’s colonial collecting and its legacy today (e.g. Alexander 2005).
Figure 2.2 Presence of ‘diversity’ and related words across 300+ London archive and museum collections webpages

Figure 2.3 Uses of ‘diversity’ and related words on London archive and museum collections webpages
Diversity as representation

Of the third of websites that mentioned diversity or related terms, only one fifth of those (i.e. less than 10% of all websites reviewed) referred either to (passive) representation of sociocultural diversity or to active representation (i.e. to addressing experiences of marginalisation in collecting institutions though their collections practices). Active and passive representation were bundled together both because of the small size of the category and because it was not always possible to divide between them on the basis of website content.

In some cases, the representation of sociocultural diversity also looked similar to geographic diversity. Both categories could include text that referred to the range of geographic origins of collections material. However, what was assigned as sociocultural diversity content also aligned the collection with aims for increased representation in the sector. For example, the Black Cultural Archives’ aim to better represent the diasporic histories of African and Caribbean people in the UK can be understood as not just describing the geographic variety of their material but as part of a representational aim. In addition, collections’ web pages identified as referring to sociocultural diversity more often contextualised their content in terms of the socio-political dimensions of global diversity in London, e.g. migration and colonialism. It is also relevant to consider (as I do with the Women’s Art Library in Chapter 7) issues of diversity within already underrepresented identities and experiences, e.g. the diversity of women artists’ or diversity within the African and Caribbean diaspora.

Some descriptions of diversity also responded to the structural factors that inform representation in collections, and thus could be understood as referring to active representation. In these cases, diversity was not just a descriptor of collections content, but a principle that informed action on widening access and participation in collections. Collections like the Black Cultural Archives deal with diversity on both these levels. As the only national repository of its kind, the Black Cultural Archives disrupts predominantly white collections holdings and structures in the heritage sector.

References to biodiversity and the diversity within the natural world made up the very smallest percentage of uses of diversity, which matches the small number of natural history collections in my sample as a whole (inclusive of institutions that mixed natural history with anthropology, such as the Wellcome Collection and Horniman Museum).
The review of diversity demonstrates that while diversity may be a concern for some collecting institutions, it does not appear to be presented as a key characteristic or guiding principle within the majority of collections. Instead, it mostly shows up as a descriptor of variety within collections or to signal the importance of the institution.

Other research done as part of the Heritage Futures project shows that in addition to not being included in how collections are presented, diversity is not considered to be part of the core duties of collections staff. A 2018 survey conducted by Heritage Futures’ Profusion theme on the topic of contemporary collecting and disposal in social history collections asked curators to identify which responsibilities they felt in regard to future curators and publics. As demonstrated by Harald Fredheim, Sharon Macdonald, and Jennie Morgan’s (2018) report on the results, the context for these responses is one in which collections staff are under pressure from a lack of space and resources and having to prioritize core functions. These responses therefore highlight what collections staff perceive their core functions to be. The primarily responsibility named was collections care and documentation (over 60%). Only slightly more than 20% identified continued collections development, with 15% mentioning making collections more accessible, and less than 10% making reference to increasing diversity or making their collections more representative (Fredheim, Macdonald, and Morgan 2018, 28). The identification of collections’ care and documentation as the key responsibility for the future is not surprising, given that this defined as part of the core work of collecting institutions and the primary job responsibilities of a curator. However, the omission of collections development or anything relating to diversity and accessibility in favour of preservation of existing collections is nevertheless indicative of the on-the-ground priorities of curators.

In this chapter, I have explored what diversity is generally used to refer to within archives and museums, and the state of diversity in these contexts. I have defined the subject of my thesis as diversity in collections, because unlike in other areas where it is possible to look at diversity, collections are considered a core part of archives and museums. Through my thematic review of London collections websites and the Heritage Futures Profusion survey, I have argued that while diversity is sometimes presented as part of collections’ content and work, it seen as marginal even within this core area. This chapter’s focus on the conventions and presentation of diversity, however, only begins to provide a sense of how diversity is functioning within institutions or in the work of collections’ practitioners. In order to
understand what is being done with diversity in collecting institutions, and its marginalisation within collections, in the next chapter I investigate historical genealogies of diversity.

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Notes

1 It is often assumed, rightly or wrongly, that being a member of an underrepresented groups means that you will support and benefit from diversity work.

2 In using ‘outreach’ as an umbrella term for public education, participation, and engagement activities, I collapse some of the distinctions that have been made between these and other terms (e.g. in Graham 2017; 2016; McSweeny and Kavanagh 2016; Simon 2010). However, since my research is framed in terms of institutional practices and processes rather than through discourses of participation, engagement, etc., I do not engage with that discussion in my thesis.

3 The UK archives sector has done much less monitoring of workforce diversity than museums and galleries, with archival professional bodies (the Archives and Records Association [ARA] and the Charted Institute of Library and Information Professionals [CILIP]) only having produced one major report, in 2016. This broadly similar workforce demographics to those in museums and galleries, with some demographics represented even less than in museums and galleries (ARA 2018; CILIP and ARA 2016).

4 Museum Detox, an advocacy and support network for black and minority ethnic museum and gallery workers as founded in 2014. Museum as Muck, a network for working-class museum and gallery workers, was founded in 2018.

5 The Social History Curator’s Group, founded in 1983, is one the subject specialist networks for museum practitioners in the UK which was formed ‘to improve the status and provision of social history…within museums’ (Terwey 2014, 71).

6 This data was collected from Museum Detox by Heritage Futures researcher Harald Fredheim for an article in preparation, and was shared with permission for this thesis.

7 The Museums Association is the major UK professional body for museum, gallery, and heritage organisations and professionals.

8 Of course, diversity in collections cannot be completely separated from issues of workforce or outreach, so I continue to bring these other aspects into my thesis where relevant.

9 Archives have traditionally preferred the ‘organic’ fond to the ‘artificial’ collection, where the former refers to records created or accumulated by individuals, families, or organisations in the course of their activities, and the latter an artificial, jumbled assemblage (Yeo 2012, 48, 50). However, in recent years, it has been accepted that fonds never truly reflect a complete, ‘organic’ whole (if there is such a thing) and ‘collections’ have been more accepted within archival practice (Yeo 2012, 51-52), especially in regards to community and contemporary material.

10 The original ‘vortex’ image used in Lee-Crossett (2017) was collaged together from eight of the first 500 Google image search results for ‘archives’ and ‘museum collections’. The image in Figure 2.1 is made from eight equivalent creative commons-licenced images on Wikimedia Commons, credited (Top L to bottom R) to The National Archives UK, user Homoatrox, DRs Kulturarvsprojekt, user Sarah Stierch, the US National Park Service, DRs Kulturarvsprojekt, and user Aude. The bottom right image is uncredited.

11 The National Archives directly does not provide a definition of ‘Greater London,’ but generally this is accepted as any of the 33 local authority districts governed by the Greater London Authority.

12 For example, the directory of the Community Archives and Heritage Group and the Radical Librarians Collective, which prioritise the types of grassroots archives and heritage collections that did not always register in the National Archives’ listings.

13 I eventually excluded archives and museum collections that were attached to for-profit businesses because they arguably fall outside of this scope.

14 The survey had over 90 respondents who worked in collections development in museums covering all 12 areas of the Museum Development Networks (in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). The authors caution against drawing conclusions based on the survey alone, since it likely represents less than 10% of the ‘museums in the UK with everyday objects from the recent past’ (Fredheim, Macdonald, and Morgan 2018, 9). Nevertheless, the survey sample size is comparable to other collection development surveys in the sector (Taylor and Sansom 2007; Terwey 2014; Museums Association 2012).

15 This was an open response question, with responses grouped thematically. Individual responses were assigned multiple themes where relevant (H. Fredheim, pers. comm.).
Chapter 3  Doing diversity

This chapter presents genealogies of diversity that contemporary archives and museums draw from (more or less consciously) in their collecting practice. By doing this, I start to establish diversity’s ‘relationship to the present’ in a way that cuts through some of the lack of clarity around its many uses. In the second section of the chapter, I review how diversity has been used within English collections development policy and strategy since the 1990s. Finally, in the third section, I reflect on how the genealogies I discuss in the first section can be seen to have carried over into policy and strategy, as well as the state of diversity described in Chapter 2.

3.1  Diversity and its frictions

Diversity, like other concepts that Tsing (2012, 21) defines as ‘universal’, or globally used,¹ can be thought of as a social project that has moved across localities and cultures. Tsing argues that instead of thinking of ‘universals’ as abstract, decontextualized principles, they can be understood as projects that are made and shaped through their specific, material encounters as they travel. Within my research interactions, the meaning of diversity was uncertain not because I or my participants were incapable of understanding it, but because diversity is a term that comes tangled up in a variety of histories, applications, and misunderstandings. In her book Friction, Anna Loewnhaupt Tsing describes concepts like these as generating ‘zones of awkward engagement’, ‘where words mean something different across a divide even when people agree to speak’ (2005, 9).² To get a sense of how diversity’s zones of awkward engagement have been shaped, I look at its historical trajectory through three different genealogies.

Firstly, I look at ideas about diversity within biological conservation and theories of evolution. Then I look at how biological conservation has shaped diversity discourses in cultural conservation and social policy realms. I draw especially from Fernando Vidal and Nélia Dias’ volume Endangerment, Biodiversity and Culture (2016b) in discussing the first two aspects, although I take their analysis of bio-and cultural diversity genealogies in a different direction. Though there has been a fair amount of work done on the intersections of biodiversity and cultural diversity (Harrison 2016; Harrison et al. forthcoming; Maffi 2005; Takacs 1996; as well as Vidal and Dias 2016b), connections to contemporary UK and Anglo-European social policy are not frequently dealt with. The ‘social policy’ realm, here, means
where diversity is operating primarily as a project in the public realm, particularly within institutions, as something which is distinct (though not totally separate) to diversity as a subject or project of conservation. Although these different strands of diversity do not have identical origins, they have followed roughly parallel, mutually-supportive trajectories, and it is on these areas of overlap that this review focuses. Social policy is an important extension for considering diversity as it is descriptive and prescriptive about how people participate in public culture and public institutions like archives and museums. Across these three areas, diversity can be ultimately understood as a type of social project that carries certain aspirations, assumptions, and management frameworks across collecting institutions, not without conflict or contradiction.

Biodiversity became of interest to the scientific community from the 1960s and 70s because of how it transformed theories about the nature of extinction (Sepkoski 2016). Early evolutionary thinkers like Charles Darwin saw extinction as a natural process where unfit species were gradually replaced over time. Contemporary theories of cultural evolution and extinction were governed by racist applications of these principles. This included colonial rhetoric arguing that some races would disappear (or be ‘civilised’, or whitened) under colonial domination and anthropological salvage projects that were carried out under the assumption that indigenous cultures would fade away in a ‘nearly natural and certainly unavoidable process’ (Lemov 2016, 89-90; also Bennett et al. 2017, 12-16; Sepkoski 2016).

In the mid-to-late 20th century new models of extinction began to gain traction. Scientists became interested in records of mass extinction and biodiversity loss in fossil records and theorised these events were not part of a cycle of natural selection. Instead, large-scale extinctions were catastrophic events affecting both the ‘fit’ and ‘unfit’ species and had dramatic and possibly permanent consequences for much of life on Earth (like the asteroid that killed off the dinosaurs) (Sepkoski 2016). Palaeontologists, evolutionary biologists, and conservationists began to raise concerns that the environment was fragile and vulnerable to human impact. Although there has been a long history of nature and individual species conservation in many places, conservation based on the idea of biodiversity began formally in the 1980s in this context. Biodiversity conservation thus aimed not only to document species to monitor and combat their loss, but also to combat overall threats to environmental stability and human life.
The Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2000) defines protecting biodiversity as ‘in our own self-interest. Biological resources are the pillars upon which we build civilizations. [...] Our personal health, and the health of our economy and human society, depends on the continuous supply of various ecological services that would be extremely costly or impossible to replace’ (2-3). While the founding Convention on Biodiversity (1992) first recognises the intrinsic value of biodiversity, this is shortly followed by a long list of its human-centric values: ‘the ecological, genetic, social, economic, scientific, educational, cultural, recreation and aesthetic’. In response to the drives for quantifying and managing biodiversity since the 1980s, influential historian of science and technology Geoffrey Bowker argues, ‘we now see nature as essentially only possible through human mediation’ (2005, 644; cf. Briethoff and Harrison 2018; Harrison 2017; Harrison et al. forthcoming).

Cultural diversity became linked to biodiversity through the many ‘sustainable development’ initiatives that emerged the last decades of the 20th century (e.g. Brutland Commission 1987; CBD 2000; World Commission on Culture and Development 1995; UN Documents 2019; see also Vidal and Dias 2016a, 8-9). Work on sustainable development connected biological and cultural diversity through observations of the ‘global overlapping distributions’ of biological, linguistic, and cultural diversity and the similar threats they faced from homogenising forces (for example, the threat of industrial agriculture/forestry for biodiversity or the threat of ‘majority languages’ to linguistic diversity) (Maffi 2005, 601-602). The perceived unity of cultural diversity and biodiversity was also strongly associated with the sustainable environmental practices of indigenous groups, who were sometimes considered ‘ecologically noble savage[s]’ (Vidal and Dias 2016b, 10; italics added). Although biodiversity and cultural diversity have been more closely identified with some groups than others, they are also formulated as necessary for all (UNESCO 2001). This creates a situation, similar to the one I described regarding diverse museum staff in the last chapter, where it is assumed that the diversity of some people (and some locations) can be ‘harnessed’ for the benefit of all (Sandell and Nightingale 2012b, 3).

Diversity has been ‘harnessed’ through the extraction of value, both historically (through colonial structures) and today. Bowker (2000), along with others, has raised the issue that the benefits of biodiversity do not necessarily go to the people it is most closely associated with. Where many countries in the Global South are rich in species and raw biodiversity data, developed countries are rich in the scientific and economically-valuable information about
species. Countries in the Global North gain many of the benefits from biodiversity and its associated data, but do not always share it with the countries or populations where it originates (Agosti 2006; Bowker 2000, 672-673). Salvage collecting, capturing lifeways thought to be at risk of disappearance, is also at least partly an extractive practice that biodiversity and cultural diversity both share (Harrison 2016; Lemov 2016; Macdonald and Morgan 2018). In this overlap, cultural conservation and social history have drawn upon and transferred evolutionary and taxonomic concepts from the sciences in often discriminatory (especially racist and sexist) ways (e.g. Das 2019; Das and Lowe 2018; Haraway 1984). When material was collected from groups that deviated from norms set by dominant, Anglo-European cultures, it was often placed at the bottom of a ladder of ‘evolutionary’ progress, or provided as examples of the savage, exotic, and/or of outsiders. In this way, much representation of underrepresented groups has implicitly or explicitly extracted and devalued their materials, and in some cases, their lives and humanity.

3.2 Endangerment and threat

Both the similarities and differences in definitions and applications of social and cultural diversity above show that diversity is not a single social project, but a variety of related projects being carried out across a number of different fronts and fields. One of the things these projects share is a mobilisation of diversity in response to perceived endangerment threats. This ‘endangerment sensibility’ refers to widespread perceptions of scarcity and loss, and extinction-level threats to materials, values, and practices (Vidal and Dias 2016b). Collecting diversity for archives and museums both reify a diverse subject’s endangerment (by establishing it as something which needs to protected) and martial against it (by preserving it within the collection—and ostensible form of protection) (Harrison 2013; Vidal and Dias 2016a). This endangerment sensibility can be seen in major 20th century conservation developments, including the founding of UNESCO after the destructions and losses of the Second World War.

Within nature conservation, the fear of loss and endangerment, especially to human life, can be seen in the transfer of paleontological models of extinction into recent settings. Historian of science David Sepkoks (2016, 75-76) writes:

‘the model of “nuclear winter” that frightened the public during the mid-1980s was actually developed from climate models produced to estimate the atmospheric effects of the massive asteroid that likely struck 65 million years ago’.
Thus, in our most striking scenarios, diversity is mobilised as a strategy for maintaining human stability against perceived threat—not because diversity has intrinsic or independently positive value. Moving into the social policy realm emphasizes how diversity functions to maintain stability and manage threats.

Like bio-and cultural diversity conservation, the social management of diversity shares functions of ordering, representing, and extracting value from difference. The 1980s onward saw diversity emerge as a buzzword for equality and inclusion work in governments, public institutions and businesses. In this context, diversity joined or replaced terms like ‘antiracism,’ ‘multiculturalism,’ and ‘equal opportunities’ in the UK and Euro-American contexts (Ahmed 2012, 52-54; Titley and Lentin 2008, 11-15). Diversity goes beyond the ‘tolerance,’ associated with multiculturalism, theoretically promoting the positive celebration of differences (See Sandell and Nightingale 2012, 3, again). Governments, universities, corporations, and museums promote diversity as a descriptor, or value, or aspiration (it is not necessarily clear which) (Ahmed 2012, 53, 57, 108-110). The invocation of diversity is intended to both serve as a repair for historic exclusions and as a competitive asset in a 21st century, globalised world, although I argue in my thesis that these two aims do not necessarily cohere, nor get pursued with equal attention. Like with biological and cultural diversity they raise questions about what is being recuperated, and why, as well as who is benefiting from the work of diversity.

Although the use of diversity in social policy shares broad similarities with its use in biological and cultural diversity, there are also some important differences to note. In cultural and biodiversity ‘certain charismatic endangered objects, species, places, landscapes, languages, or sets of practices come to stand in for the concept of biological or cultural diversity more generally’ (Harrison et al 2020, forthcoming). By contrast, metonyms for social diversity, the most prominent being (non-white) ethnicities, do not share the same charismatic or positive regard—despite the fact diversity may be used in cheerful advertisements filled with smiling, ethnically varied individuals (Ahmed 2012, 53). Aspects of social diversity in the UK are also not at risk of disappearing in the same way as endangered species. While, for example, people of colour are a minority in Britain, they are a global majority.5 That being said, the UK-government’s austerity and increasingly hard-line migration policies target and endanger those who are labelled diverse: e.g. people with low income, disabled people, LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, migrants from the Global South (Ryan and Sim 2016, 723-728). People and
categories that are considered diverse within social policy frameworks are thus often endangered or precarious while also being considered threats to the status quo (Ahmed 2012; 2006; Titley and Lentin 2008, 22). Migrants are one prominent example of latter. Although diversity rhetoric celebrates migration as an asset in certain respects (international business, talent), other aspects of migration are considered a threat (terrorists, the perceived strain of accepting refugees) (Titley and Lentin 2008, 14, 17, 22).

My thesis will demonstrate that what is desired in most liberal formulations of diversity is to celebrate and benefit from diversity while containing or avoiding aspects that are perceived to challenge existing structures and frameworks. In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, I argue that this can be seen within collecting institutions, where potentially threatening aspects of diversity are kept away from the core of collections, while elements considered positive are displayed on the margins. Using the understanding of diversity developed through social policy above, examples of subjects that are considered both at-risk and risky can also be found within bio- and-cultural conservation. Like within social policy, these emerge as significant point of contestation. In biodiversity management, the focus of debates around the reintroduction of extinct or near-extinct carnivores like wolves tends to centre on the perception that wolves are physically dangerous to people and/or livestock, despite evidence these risks are very low and biodiversity benefits could be very high (Wilson 2004). Risky subjects can also be those that are threats to existing organising frameworks. Within cultural conservation, the introduction of intangible heritage to UNESCO management frameworks initially caused tension because it was seen as displacing a concrete, past-focused idea of heritage for something that was changeable and present-focused (Smith and Akagawa 2009). In truth, both of these examples challenge fundamental principles of the management frameworks involved. In both examples, the ‘risky’ types of diversity challenge often exclusive images of what the arenas concerned should look like (e.g. assumptions that ‘natural landscapes’ are not threatening to humans).6

Discussion of these genealogies of diversity replace the idea of diversity as a vague ‘convention of speech’ with diversity as a social project that intersects particular conservation and policy histories. Diversity is never merely descriptive or enumerative: it is also linked to certain actions and interventions—or, as I will go onto argue, lack of action (Bowker 2005; Harrison et al. forthcoming; Vidal and Dias 2016b). Along with enumerating and assimilating difference, concepts of diversity have been very heavily deployed to maintain (perceived)
stability against (perceived) threat. Including discourses of diversity in social policy in this discussion of genealogies of diversity allows the thesis to begin to consider the relationship between passive representation of materials within collections (which bio- and cultural diversity conservation focus on) and the active representation that shapes their collections management and governance. From this broader discussion of diversity frameworks, this next section looks more specifically at diversity as a strategic aim within English collections development policy. Moving forward from the 1990s, it provides additional background while getting closer to addressing what is being done with diversity in collections practice today.

3.3 Diversity and collections development strategies

Given the policy, funding, and initiatives devoted to diversity and representation in archives and museums since the 1990s (see Table 3.1), diversity in collections (measured either by relative increases in content of underrepresented demographics or by management interventions) is not increasing as much as the attention given to it might suggest. Reviewing the last twenty years of national policy and strategy in archives and museums demonstrates that although diversity has been on the sector's agenda, it has been inconsistently and largely unsuccessfully pursued, despite the dedicated work of many individual practitioners. Based on this review, I argue that one of the significant factors that has made diversity unsuccessful as a collections development aim is the devaluing of diverse materials and perspectives within the preservation paradigm, which privileges the conservation of heritage materials already deemed valuable by Anglo-European institutions over materials that are new or do not fit within that Anglo-European art historical or evidentiary frameworks (the latter discussed in Chapter 7) (Holtorf 2015; 2014). I continue to develop this argument through the thesis. Institutional racism and discrimination also continue to persist in the sector (as well as society at large), adding to and compounding this (e.g. Ahmed 2012; Wajid and Minott 2019).

3.3.1 Diversity as a strategic aim in collections

Within the context of English archives and museums, diversity can be thought of as a strategic ‘aim’ rather than a ‘goal.’ Although ‘aim’ and ‘goal’ are sometimes used interchangeably, in organisational theory, aims are generally identified as the highest or most abstract values that shape action, while goals, objectives, or standards are thought of as more specific and measurable (Jung 2011; Noddings 2008; Mohr 1973; Simon 1964). To discuss
diversity as a goal or objective in collections development would require some reference to
defined outcomes or results, which I will demonstrate are either mostly lacking, purposefully
vague, or poorly monitored. This is not a situation completely unique to diversity aims, as it
is widely agreed in organisational theory research ‘that public organizations have vaguer goals
than do business firms, and that goal ambiguity thus raises greater challenges in measuring
the goal attainment and performance of public organizations’ (Jung 2011; 193).

The preservation of collections is such a normative goal in the sector that is more thought
of as a responsibility or duty, not an aim that one could choose to consciously pursue (or
not) (Holtorf 2015). It can be consequently thought of a kind of ongoing, baseline goal whose
object is not just material preservation, but preserving the core value attributed to collections.
Within heritage studies, the preservation paradigm has been defined in terms of the
nationalist constructions and preservations of heritage rooted in the 19th century
developments of Anglo-European public, civic spheres (Bennett 2006; 1995; Holtorf 2015;
Joyce 1999; MacDonald 2006). Cornelius Holtorf (2015, 407) defines the preservation
paradigm as:

‘the duty to conserve the most valuable parts of the existing cultural heritage because
it is seen as an inherently valuable asset that is non-renewable, cannot be replaced
and must, therefore, be preserved for the benefit of future generations’.

The development of the preservation paradigm, both internationally (i.e. through UNESCO)
and in the UK, has resulted in the expansion of both heritage management frameworks and
the types of material and practices that fall under heritage’s remit (Harrison 2015; 2013;
Lowenthal 1996; Merriman 2008; Meskell 2018). As heritage preservation became
synonymous with maintaining value, more groups of people have argued that their heritage
interests needed to be preserved in this way.

This expansion of preservation aims and targets should, theoretically, reinforce the
expansion of representation in heritage and collections. Concepts of representation within
collecting institutions share similar European Enlightenment and nation-state roots with the
preservation paradigm (Bennett 2006; Douglas 2017; Macdonald 2006). Over time, aims for
representation in collecting institutions have shifted from elite, universal-material ones
(collections should encompass and teach about the order underlying the material world) to
communal-democratic ones (Macdonald 2006, 83-85). The latter formulates the aim of
collections’ representation as reflecting the demographics, practices, and/or materials of local, national, or international communities, depending on an institution’s scale and area of focus (Macdonald 2006, 86). While the majority of collecting institutions have moved away from attempting to achieve universal-material representation, communal-democratic representation remains an important ideal for social history collecting institutions.7 The aim for this communal-democratic representation to be diverse, or inclusive of groups that have previously been underrepresented or represented in discriminatory ways, has been a consistent part of heritage policy rhetoric over the past two decades (Bennett 1995; Dibley 2005; Boast 2011). In the remainder of this chapter, and in Chapters 5-8, I will argue that this ideal has not always corresponded with collections practice on the ground.

Within the archives and museums sector, aims to preserve and to diversify collections are often portrayed as compatible and mutually beneficial (Museums Association 2019; 2017; Cannadine 2018; 29; Wilkinson 2005). Going further than mutual benefit, it is also sometimes expressed that incorporating diversity into collecting and collections management could be a cost-effective way of increasing the value of collections more generally—the assumption being that the new, diverse material will cause renewed interest in a collection as a whole (Museums Association 2019). However, as I set out in the introduction to this section, I argue that, in actuality, aims for increasing diversity in collections have been inconsistently and unevenly pursued. To demonstrate this, I review how diversity has developed as a policy aim for English collecting institutions since the late 1990s.

The review concentrates on policy and documentation from the English government and heritage sector bodies that have published major, sector-wide reporting inclusive of collections development and diversity topics over the past two decades. This primarily includes the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS), the Museums Association (the major UK professional body for museums, gallery, and heritage organisations and professionals), and the Art Fund (a charity funding body for museums and galleries) (See Table 3.1). I have also reviewed significant diversity initiatives in London that arose out of the mid-2000s Mayoral Commission of African and Asian Heritage (MCAAH) and the former London Museums Agency, the latter of which was the strategic development body for the museum sector in London until 2004 (Helen Denniston Associates 2003, 2). Other bodies that play a large national role in funding and shaping practice in the archives and museums sector (e.g. Arts Council England; Collections Trust; Heritage Lottery Fund [now
Heritage Fund]; Historic England) have not been included within the scope of this chapter either because they did not publish substantive reporting on archive and museum collections in this period, or because their reporting on collections has not addressed collections development and/or diversity. Diversifying collections’ representation does not always happen through the collection of new or contemporary material (existing collections can be reinterpreted or new historic material can be collected) but it has often been an important way of addressing this issue within collections development.

Table 3.1: Timeline of policies and reporting addressing diversity and collections development in the heritage sector, 1990s-2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event/Report</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td><em>Archives at the Millennium</em>, Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td><em>Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries, and Archives for All</em>, DCMS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td><em>Holding Up the Mirror</em>, London Museums Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Reflections: Mapping cultural diversity in London’s local authority museum collections</em>, London Museum Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td><em>Delivering Shared Heritage</em>, Mayor’s Commission on African and Asian Heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Collections for the Future</em>, Museums Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td><em>Embedding Shared Heritage</em>, Mayor’s Commission on African and Asian Heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Archives for the 21st century</em>, Ministry of Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td><em>The 21st Century Curator</em>, Art Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Museums Taskforce</em>, Museums Association</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The aim of representing diversity within archives and museums is most often attributed to New Labour’s social inclusion agenda in the late 1990s, early 2000s, which expanded the scope of institutions involved in government social policy objectives (Cannadine 2018, 20; 29; Mendoza 2017, 83; Morse and Munro 2015, 362-363; Smith 1998). The government defined social inclusion in opposition to social exclusion, which they described as affecting people or areas experiencing social disadvantage including ‘unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health, poverty and family breakdown’ (DCMS 2000, 7). Although social exclusion does not circumscribe exactly the same type of marginalisation or underrepresentation as diversity does, in practice they were (and still are) often bundled together, with the government using social inclusion policy to explicitly target, for example, minority ethnic groups (Morse and Munro 2015, 362). The social inclusion agenda most directly impacted the sector through DCMS’s Centres for Social Change (2000) report and influential funding schemes that followed, like Renaissance in the Regions (Cannadine 2018, 20). This policy ‘effectively reworked the public role of the museum [and to a lesser extent archives] into broader social policy objectives well beyond its traditional curatorial and education functions’ (Dewdney, Dibosa, and Walsh 2012, 117; Morse and Munro 2015, 362). Not just a product of New Labour, aims to represent diversity in collecting institutions in the 1990s can also be attributed to broader societal pressures and activism in the heritage sector and beyond (e.g. BASA 1991 [see Bressey 2014]; Hall 1999, Macpherson 1999).
The Race Relations (Amendments) Act in 2000 also resulted in race equalities policies becoming positive duties for public bodies in the United Kingdom. Successive legislation (now subsumed under the UK Equality Act [2010]) added further duties to integrate equalities policies, collect monitoring data and set regular equalities objectives for service delivery and workforce recruitment (Ahmed 2012, 8; Arokiasamy 2012, 341). This impacted archives and museums because although the majority are not public bodies, the UK’s main collections funders are (local authorities, Arts Council England, and the Heritage Fund). The need to obtain funding from these public bodies incentivised reflection about the role of diversity and representation in museums, and the production of diversity and equalities documentation. Initially, diversity aims were framed in terms of increasing the representation of underrepresented groups within collections’ content and workforce, particularly Black and Asian communities. This has shifted over time. In the past few years, diversity aims in collections have been linked less to demographics and more to engaging in democratic collections practice.

3.3.2 Diversity as a key strategic aim to reflect communities

Increasing representation within collections was one of the eleven main strategic aims set out in *Centres for Social Change* (DCMS 2000, 5, 17). It has since persisted, more-or-less, as an aim in both collections-specific and overall policy and strategy for the sector. Exploring how diversity is framed as an aim for collections in *Centres for Social Change* (2000) helps to contextualise the continuing ambivalence of diversity’s association with collections. *Centres for Social Change* (2000) sets out more explicit diversity aims than many of those that would follow, but it is prefaced by qualifiers that do not appear in front of any of the other ten strategic aims in the report.

‘Where appropriate, collections and exhibitions should reflect the cultural and social diversity of the organisation’s actual and potential audiences’ (DCMS 2000, 5).

And, in more detail:

‘Where appropriate, acquisition and exhibition policies of organisations with strong regional or ethnic potential audiences should reflect the cultural and social diversity of the locality, region, or communities served. People from local communities, or communities of interest, should be involved in identifying and selecting material. In this way communities will contribute to the acquisition policy and there will be a broader public ownership of its delivery and success’ (DCMS 2000, 17).
The qualifier, ‘where appropriate’ weakens the diversity aim. It suggests that, unlike with any of the other strategic aims, archives and museums are being uniquely given permission to determine whether or not diversity is appropriate to them (whereas presumably they will work towards all aspects of all the other objectives). It is hard to think of an example of a publicly-funded collection where cultural and social diversity does not have the potential to be relevant, specifically within the aspirational framework of ‘museums, galleries, and archives for all’. Even, for example, a period art collection has the potential to include diversity through collections development, e.g. either by broadening their geographical scope or collecting contemporary responses to their holdings.

There are two other significant points to draw out of Centres for Social Change’s framing of diversity and representation aims in collections. First, the detailed description of the aim makes clear that diversity is being used primarily as a proxy for racial/ethnic difference (i.e. ‘strong regional or ethnic potential audiences’), which continues today. Second, although the report’s definition of diversity is narrowed somewhat by its assumptions of who it pertains to, elsewhere Centres for Social Change goes beyond demographically reflective (passive) representation, advocating for greater community involvement in collecting.

As far as I am aware, the impact of Centres for Social Change’s aim for collections to better reflect the diversity of the communities they serve has not been evaluated, nor has there been much work reviewing demographic representation in collections more generally. However, two recent surveys about representation in collections demonstrate that there are still significant absences in collections content. The first of these is a 2017 report from the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Education Trust that audited the outputs of Heritage Lottery-funded BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) heritage projects in Greater Manchester between 2000-2017. It concluded that both that that specialist and non-local authority repositories in Greater Manchester held little, if any material on BAME communities. Overall, only 50% of museums and archives reporting holding any BAME material (Vickers and Bolton 2017). In addition, although BAME heritage projects have grown since 2000, only about a third of these projects’ material ended up in libraries, museums, and archives (Vickers and Bolton 2017). When presenting their work at the 2017 ‘Discovering Collections, Discovering Communities’ conference, Jennifer Vickers and Hannah Niblett reported that the collecting on these heritage projects was considered incompatible with institutional standards or ways of working (often by both sides). The materials themselves were also sometimes seen as
being incompatible with institutions’ collecting policies, whether this being museums that
did not collect oral histories, or archives that did not recognise the materials as a full or
professional-enough collection.

Second is an example from the art world, where the lack of diversity in permanent collections
has also been felt. The Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous group of feminist artists and activists
who since the 1980s have led public campaigns drawing attention to sexism and the lack of
female artists in art institutions, surveyed 383 European art museums and galleries about
diversity in their collections in 2016 (Whitechapel Gallery 2016). The survey responses were
presented in an exhibition called Is it even worse in Europe? at the Whitechapel Gallery in
worse in Europe,’ which critiqued European art institutions for supporting even fewer
women and artists of colour than American institutions (Tate 2019). Of the 101 institutions
that responded to the survey, only two had 40% or more women artists in their collections,
and only 14 had more than 20 artists from outside Europe/US in their collections (Guerrilla
Girls n.d.). As well as the exhibition’s title, the Guerrilla Girls’ material from their campaigns
since the 1980s questions whether significant progress on reflecting diverse communities has
been made.

3.3.3 Diversity as initiatives to represent African and Asian heritage

During the mid-2000s in London, the Mayor’s Commission on African and Asian Heritage
(MCAAH) (2003-9) was a major initiative that addressed the lack of representation of African
and Asian heritage in the city (Arokiasamy 2012). While the two reports published in 2005
and 2009 therefore focus on diversity in terms of African and Asian heritage, the latter report
especially draws connections between their work on ethnicity to other issues of
representation and diversity in the heritage sector. Delivering Shared Heritage (Mayor of London
2005) reported on the consultations undertaken across archives, museums, and community
heritage organisations about better addressing African and Asian heritage. These
consultations helped to create recommendations that advocated for leadership on diversity
within the workforce, valuing community expertise and partnerships, and fostering more
inclusive education (13). Delivering Shared Heritage also created MCAAH’s successor body,
the Heritage Diversity Task Force (HDTF). Embedding Shared Heritage (Mayor of London
2009) reported on the taskforce’s work supporting the delivery of the 2005 recommendations, which included subcommittees on ‘Diversifying Museum Collections’
and ‘Diversifying Archive Collections’. For ‘Diversifying Museum Collections’, former CEO of Collections Trust, Nick Poole (2009, 17) wrote:

‘Deciding to acquire something, formally and permanently on behalf of the public is an act of assertion. To a great extent, the ability of the cultural sector to reflect the diversity and breadth of society depends on how and why those decisions are made. The decision to collect is made within an organisational context […] In this sense, the diversification of collections is as much about diversifying institutions, as it is about what they collect’.

Where Delivering Shared Heritage’s coverage of collections development emphasised locating and highlighting African and Asian heritage material, Embedding Shared Heritage’s shifts to more broadly address democratising collections management and practice (e.g. Poole 2009, 17). The introduction to the ‘Diversifying Archive Collections’ subcommittee, similarly emphasizes democratising practice as its central principle (Flinn and Pick 2009, 21). While MCAAH helped to create new networks for professionals and stakeholders to support African and Asian heritage in Britain, and produced good practice guidelines and standards, the mayoral turnover during the HDTF and the onset of austerity had a limiting effect on its legacy (Arokiasamy 2012, 333-344).

3.3.4 Diversity as an example of good practice

In the Museums Association’s major collections inquiries of the mid-2000s (Wilkinson 2005; Cross and Wilkinson 2007), representation and diversity disappear as standalone collections aims. However, their influence can still be seen in recommendations for museums to commit to continued collections development (‘ensuring that collections adequately reflect the complexity and diversity of contemporary society’ [Wilkinson 2005, 17]) and in praise of work on ‘hidden histories’, for example Leister University’s publication (Dodd et al. 2004) on the representation of disabled people in UK museum and gallery collections (Wilkinson 2005, 13-14).

Similarly, DCMS’s Museum Action Plan (2018), drawing heavily on the Mendoza Review (2017), folds diversity under examples that are cited as good practice in collections development rather than as its own recommendation or priority (DCMS 2018, 12; Mendoza 2017, 44-45). Unlike Centres for Social Change (2000, 10-11), the Museum Action Plan (2018) and Mendoza Review (2017) do not acknowledge structural barriers for underrepresented groups in engaging with museums (even though these continue to be documented). The latter report characterises
the main barrier to participation as the challenge of the already ‘crowded’ leisure and experience economy (Mendoza 2017, 41-42).

3.3.5 Diversity as a result of democratising practice

The Museums Association’s most recent report, Empowering Collections: Collections 2030 (2019) engages much more with the barriers between collections and audiences, and between collections work and audience or outreach work in museums. Diversity does not return as a standalone strategic aim but is embedded in the rhetoric used to convey a commitment to promoting community and public agency in collections. This is a shift in degree rather than in kind from the strategic aims the Museums Association laid out in Collections for the Future (2005). Where the overall strategic aims of the 2005 report are ‘Engagement, the dynamic collection, and strengthening the museum sector’, in 2019 they are ‘Empowering, relevant, dynamic’. Where Collections for the Future suggests that museums should engage with the ‘highly contentious issue’ of ‘[t]he extent to which museums can or should share control over the meaning of objects’ (2005, 30), Empowering Collections (2019) more decisively sets out recommendations for public collaboration in collections’ development and interpretation. Like the later work of MCAAH, this appears to register a shift from diversity and representation aims as reflecting specific demographics to emphasising the need for collaborative collections development (especially with groups that have been excluded in the past). While this idea of pursuing diversity was included as part of Centres for Social Change (2000) and has been substantially developed in museum practice since then, it has not carried through as an important part of government collections development recommendations (DCMS 2018).

In many ways, the shift toward including diversity and representation aims as part of democratising collections practices is a welcome one. First because, as Hackney Museum’s Heritage Learning Manager explained in our interview about their museum’s approach to representation (Chapter 6), people have multiple, intersecting identities, and undertaking collections development on the basis of single demographics like racial or religious identity can miss out these complexities and interrelations. Secondly, as I defined in Chapter 1, representation is not just a passive or static reflection of peoples, but also requires active work on structures of governance. That said, democratising practice has not replaced demographic representation as a diversity aim because the latter has been achieved. If surveys like those carried out by the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Education Trust or the Guerrilla Girls are
any indication, demographic representation in collection has not improved. There are also few indications that collections have become significantly more democratic in recent years (e.g. Alberti and Lynch 2010; Boast 2011; Dewdney, Dibosa, and Walsh 2012; Douglas 2017; Lynch 2011). Speaking about trying to change collections practices through diversity work at the Tate Modern, Andrew Dewdney, David Dibosa, and Victoria Walsh observe that:

‘one can point to institutional manoeuvres – containment strategies – that have ensured demands for change are neutralised in order to protect the integrity of long-held views around “core mission” and objects bearing “real cultural value”’ (2012, 114, my emphasis).

In the concluding section to this chapter, I examine how diversity is not often seen as providing ‘real value’ to archives and museums in comparison to the conservation of existing collections. Practitioners working in heritage sector have also testified that diverse materials and perspective continue to be kept out of collections or treated as add-ons rather than core collections work. These critiques have been made, repeatedly, since the very beginning of the introduction of these aims (Arokiasamy 2012; Bienkowski 2018, 14-15; 2016, 42; cf. Lynch 2015, 5-7; Lynch 2011; Sandell 2003).

3.4 Marginalising diverse aims and materials

Within the policies I have reviewed, diversity goes from a standalone, if qualified, aim to something that is assumed to be an effect of work to democratise collections. There is a sense that working on diversity on its own has become a little stale (or ‘untimely’) for the ‘dynamic collections’ aspired to in recent collections development policy (DCMS 2018, 12; Mendoza 2017, 44; Museums Association 2019; 2005). Posing diversity as an effect of democratisation continues to associate it with current aims for good practice without having to continue to pursue it. Having been dropped as an explicit aim, diversity has been placed even further away from measurable outcomes and accountability. In this last section, I demonstrate that the different diversity aims I have described above have been implicitly and explicitly marginalised within the sector. By extension, materials considered diverse are also marginalised within collections.

As much as diversity is presented as an aspiration for collections’ representation, it is also seen as posing a potential threat to the status quo (as I argued in earlier in this chapter). Thus, diversity aims can be perceived to come at the expense of the preservation of existing
collections and the types of materials that are already valued. Even *Centres for Social Change* (2000), which progressively defines diversity and representation as a key strategic aim for collections, includes an introduction that reverts, perhaps inadvertently, to describing collections preservation as in conflict with and needing to be protected from social inclusion work:

‘But I also recognise that action to tackle social exclusion will have to be balanced against [museums, galleries, and archives’] other important responsibilities, such as the acquisition of new material, the conservation and interpretation of their collections, scholarship and education’ (Smith 2000, 3).

The perception that diversity and representation come from outside and/or at the expense of collections preservation continues today. *Why Collect?* (2018), the Art Fund’s review of collecting practice in museums and galleries represents critics of diversity and representation work as arguing that:

‘stress on outreach, access, engagement, diversity and community has meant that attention (and thus resources) has shifted away from what must always be the core purpose and fundamental raison d’etre of museums and galleries, [...] to maintain, develop, and curate their collections, which should be “at the centre of all they do”’ (Cannadine 2018, 29).

This perspective paints the diversity as competing with rather than complementary to or part of collections preservation and development. Historian David Cannadine’s (2018, 30) review of Art Fund data on museum and gallery practice goes as far as to suggest that museum and gallery spending on ‘outreach and education’ (within which he includes diversity [see above]) has in fact been benefiting at the expense of ‘core curatorial functions,’ even before the arrival of austerity funding regimes. However, it is questionable to draw this conclusion from the available data, which first presumes that diversity and outreach work is always a wholly distinct category from collections work. Second, and perhaps more importantly, his analysis of the Art Fund data does not consider the impact of the funding in each area. While there may have been an increase in bespoke funding for ‘outreach and education’, this funding, and its impact on the institution is often siloed in short-term staff roles, external partnerships, and work practices (Lynch 2015, 5-6; Lynch 2011; Morse and Munro 2018, 363).

Types of diversity and representation work that do not obviously generate economic value (including grant income) have also been particularly likely to suffer cuts in recent years (Morse and Munro 2015, 363). Nuala Morse and Ealasaid Munro cite the scaling back of the
Victoria and Albert Museum’s diversity team and English Heritage’s closure of their outreach department in the early 2010s as examples of this (2015, 363). Diversity and representation initiatives might be public-facing and high-profile, but investment into collections is what endures. Part of the context of the marginalisation of diversity within collections is that collections have been struggling to achieve ‘core’ preservation aims in English austerity funding regimes (Morse and Munro 2015; Stevens 2019).

Perhaps especially because of the need to combat further financial insecurity, most collecting institutions have not addressed the question of whether the conservation paradigm truly does what it says—preserve value primarily through materially preserving collections. The lack of scrutiny about the preservation paradigm within collecting institutions is understandable, as much of the funding available to them is premised on the idea that they preserve valuable things through (primarily material) conservation. However, if just preserving collections generated value, then preserving more things should create more value. In practice, the sector has been experiencing a crisis of value. The meaning, purpose, and worth of pre-existing, stored collections has been questioned by the media as well as by sector and governmental policy from around the same time as the introduction of diversity aims (e.g. Brown 2018; Merriman and Swain 1999; Museums Association 2007; 2005; Pogrebin 2019). In this context, collections have focused on preserving things that have previously been valued within traditional Anglo-European art historical and evidential frameworks rather than committing to expanding or challenging what has been valued (c.f. Holtorf 2015). As I will go onto discuss in Chapter 6, this does not always mean excluding diversity completely, but rather marginalising diverse materials from preservation within permanent collections.

In this chapter, I have denaturalised how diversity is used as a vague convention of speech by interrogating how it has functioned as a social project across the arenas of biological conservation, cultural conservation, and social policy. I have argued that in these areas, diversity has been used to extract value from people and materials who are deemed to be associated with it in order to maintain a status quo. Through reviewing some of the ways that diversity has functioned in English archive and museum policy, I have also argued that even while being extracted for use, diversity is often marginalised in comparison to ‘core’ preservation aims within collections. In the next chapter, I use the findings of this background research in order to build an ethnographic approach that is able to track what is
being done with diversity in contemporary collecting practice in London archives and museums.

Notes

1 Diversity can be thought of as a ‘universal’ by dint of its adoption into global conservation discourses (Harrison 2013).
2 Similar to Ahmed’s (2012) observation that diversity’s lack of effect might not be a failure but actually what it is doing, Tsing (2005) points out that the friction and conflict inherent in these awkward zones is not a fault, but instead a necessary precondition for their mobilization.
3 The 1986 National Forum of Biodiversity in D.C. is usually given as the date for the beginning of biodiversity as a movement (Sepkoski 2016, 77–78).
4 Sustainable development is defined in the Bruntland Commission (1987) as natural, social, and economic development that meets the needs of people in the present without compromising the needs of those in the future (from Vidal and Dias 2016a, 9).
5 The term ‘majority world’, roughly equivalent to the ‘Global South’ was coined by photographer Shahidul Alam to replace ‘Third World’ or ‘developing world’ (Davis 2018).
6 In the case of intangible heritage, a definition of heritage invested in immutable materials disadvantaged many countries from the Global South whose heritage practices were less bound up in monumental architecture than, for example, Europe’s.
7 I discuss evolutions and tensions in museum representation in more detail in Chapter 6.
8 Although text of Hall’s keynote was not a report or policy per se, it became (and remains) a hugely important document for framing work on representation and diversity in the sector.
9 For example, a middle-class or wealthy black family would not fit the government’s definition of being socially excluded, but they would still be underrepresented and face structural marginalization from archives and museums (and other sociocultural institutions). See sociologist Ali Megji’s (2019; 2018) research on black middle-class experiences of cultural institutions for more on this topic.
10 The Appendix of Val Bott’s Holding up the Mirror (2003) report, cited in Table 3.1 includes Bott’s research on the demographic groupings of 28 local authority collections, also conducted for London Museums Agency. Unfortunately, any findings from this are limited as the whole report no longer exists in the public domain. Additionally, what reporting there is only presents the demographic breakdown of the 28 museum’s collections coverage in one table. It also does not register the size of any given ‘collection’, (e.g. is a ‘collection’ of 19th century Indian social history comparable to the size of a ‘collection’ of 19th century white social history?) (Bott 2003, 50–53).
11 In the context of the ‘Coming in from the Cold’ project, BAME was used to refer to Black, Asian, and 9 of the 13 ‘minority ethnic groups’ as identified by the 2011 census (Vickers and Bolton 2017).
12 As I will discuss in Chapter 5, the causal link between democracy and diversity is not particularly strong, as Ben Dibley (2005) and Robin Boast (2011) critique the assumption that ‘democracy’ automatically creates level playing field for participation.
13 Occasionally it is argued that collections preservation is being pursued at the expense of diversity (Lynch 2011; Morse and Munro 2015, 363) but mostly it is the other way around (Cannadine 2018, 29).
14 In Chapters 6 and 7, I critically discuss formal and informal frameworks for determining whether collections material is significant and how these frameworks can work in discriminatory ways (to support racism, homophobia, class bias, etc.).
Chapter 4  Ethnography of a social project

In this chapter I describe the methodological approach I used to address my research questions, after completing the thematic review discussed in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I defined diversity as a kind of social project whose meanings have enabled its movements across public and organisational domains. Although the policies I reviewed in the last chapter are able to point to ways in which diversity has been used rhetorically, and how it is valued, I needed to study what is happening in practice in order to get closer to what is being done with diversity in collections practice today. For this, I adopted an ethnographic approach to conducting my empirical research, which is presented in Chapters 5-7.

4.1 Ethnographic forms

Ethnographic research on contemporary collections management and development practices is relatively uncommon within archive and museum studies and related fields. This gap is specific to contemporary research, as there is a wealth of quasi-ethnographic (or historical ethnographic) research on the formation of nationally significant archive and museum collections pre-1950 (e.g. Alberti 2005; Bennet et al. 2017; Cornish 2012; Gosden and Larson 2007; Joyce 1999; Stoler 2009). Using ethnographic methods to analyse how different heritage practices assemble the past, present, and future has been key to the methodology of the Heritage Futures’ project (Harrison et al. forthcoming; Harrison et al. 2016). Ethnographic methods are helpful for comparing what people say they are doing (with heritage, or with diversity) to what people are actually doing as well as our assumptions about what they are doing. My secondary research questions—how diversity can be located, how decisions about collecting diversity are made, and the impact of these decisions on the collection—are designed to test assumptions about what diversity does in practice, which I have already started to unpick in the two background chapters (Chapters 2 and 3).

Within museum studies, ethnographic research that has been done on the work of contemporary practitioners has overwhelmingly focused on the development of exhibition displays and outreach projects (Macdonald, Gerbich, and von Oswald 2018, 141-142). Although early book-length museum ethnographies (i.e. Handler and Gable 1997; Katrial 1997; Macdonald 2002) offered perspectives on everyday work cultures and organisational change as well as museum’s presentation and display activities, researchers have primarily followed these with shorter-term studies of the latter. As much as possible, my fieldwork
dealt with collecting that was not primarily done for temporary exhibitions, in part to get away from the tendency to look at diversity as a question of exhibitionary politics rather than internal processes.

I argue that ethnographic research in museums has continued to focus on exhibition-making and outreach projects because of the way that collections work is structured. These features of museum work also shaped how I carried out my research on contemporary collecting, so I discuss them here briefly. First, and perhaps most obviously, research has taken place on exhibition-making because it is seen as one of the museum’s key functions—although collecting, ordering, and governing materials (following Bennett et al. 2017) both in concert and independently of exhibitions can be argued to be equally foundational. Museum literature’s emphasis on display functions made it especially valuable to also work with archives and natural history, where display is much less central to collections processes. Ethnographic work on contemporary collecting and collections frameworks is more common within archives and natural history, but still not especially common (Ellis and Waterton 2005; 2004; Flinn, Stevens, and Shepard 2009; Pell 2015; Stevens et al. 2010). There has been further investigation of some aspects of the organisational work of museums in recent years, including accountability (Morse 2018), flexibility, change (Morgan 2013; 2018), and their use of project management (Alberti et al. 2017). Work in museum geographies, which often draws on ethnographic methods, also offers another approach to exploring the labour of behind-the-scenes museum practice (Geoghegan 2010; Geoghegan and Hess 2015; Morse and Munro 2015).¹

The second feature of museum work that influences the nature of the ethnographic research is short-term project funding. Many current funding structures for museums (especially around ‘diversity’ work) incentivise the production of visible, relatively short-term outputs (rather than open-ended outcomes [Alberti et al. 2017, 325]). An exhibition or an outreach event (or both) fulfils this goal. Exhibition outputs are not only attractive to funders and project managers, they are seductive to researchers as well. Following the production of an exhibition or the trajectory of a short-term outreach project provides an ethnographic researcher with a narrative and temporal container for their work.

This was initially how I intended to carry out my research. However, it became clear once I began contracting potential fieldwork sites and participants that this was going to be more
difficult than I had envisioned. Few of the collections I contacted had active, ongoing collections projects related to diversity. As I discussed in Chapter 2, diversity was not strongly linked to contemporary collecting or collections staff. Where projects on collecting diversity did exist, they were usually the domain of only a few staff members. The permanent staff invested in working on diversity often pursued it on top of their regular collections’ duties, at least partly because of a personal commitment to the work. Staff members who had roles dedicated to diversity in collections were often on short-term, project-based contracts. This meant that work on diversity appeared to happen either in concentrated bursts (part of a specific project) or in piecemeal patches over a long period of time (when permanent staff had time). Either of these patterns of work meant that there was little opportunity to take on a long-term, in-depth participant-observer role. The zones of awkward engagement I described diversity as operating within in Chapter 2 also apply to conducting research on diversity.

‘These zones of cultural friction are transient; they arise out of encounters and interactions. They reappear in new places with changing events. The only way I can think of to study them are patchwork and haphazard.’ (Tsing 2005, 9, italics added)

My ethnographic research on diversity was carried out primarily through relatively short-term interactions that took place in a series of archives, museums, and other locations across London. As I detail in my empirical chapters, these interactions generally took place in the most fluid and uncertain parts of collecting institutions. In trying to do research on diversity at the core, I went from the margins of the institution to the margins of the collection. As I argued in my introduction, citing Ahmed (2012), these margins are not marginal—diversity is a key site for understanding how institutional change and transformation is negotiated.

In the following two sections, I discuss the ethnographic approaches that I drew on in order to make sense of the mobile, short-term, and messy nature of work on diversity in contemporary collecting (cf. Law 2004). Although my research was designed and carried out independently of the Heritage Futures team, the approaches I review build on Heritage Futures’ methodological background and the team’s research activities (Harrison et al. forthcoming; Harrison et al. 2016). These approaches include multi-sited ethnography, short-term ethnography, and para-ethnography. These overlapping methodologies all respond to the increasing interdisciplinarity of ethnographic work and its attempts to engage
with complex, contemporary, and globalised subjects—like diversity (e.g. Holmes and Marcus 2008; Marcus 1995; Pink and Morgan 2013; Tsing 2015; 2005).

4.1.1 Multi-sited ethnography and comparison

My ethnographic cases aim to depict the experiences of practitioners and others who participate in collecting contemporary diversity, but what I am most interested is describing processes and practices that commonly take place within collecting institutions. As Ahmed (2012) argues, using ethnographic thick description to reveal the unfinished, messy nature of institutional work helps to interrogate the assumption that institutions are naturally stable objects of study (20-21). Tsing (2005) draws a parallel between her work demonstrating that globalisation is not a smooth, homogenous force with scholars who have challenged assumptions about the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of colonial records and taxonomies (286). Anjali Arondekar’s (2008) *For the Record* and Ann Laura Stoler’s *Along the Archival Grain* (2009) are two examples of this kind of project. Stoler (2009, 32) centres colonial archives as ethnographic subjects, stating that:

‘the ethnographic space of the archive resides in the disjuncture between prescription and practice, between state mandates and the manoeuvres people made in response to them, between normative rules and how people actually lived their lives […] Ethnography in and of the colonial archives attends to processes of production, relations of power in which archives are created, sequestered, and rearranged’.

Although my research is not located within the colonial past, it also takes the premise that archival and museum collections are likely to sites where ordering and managing difference (one for form of doing diversity) is imperfect and negotiated. The uncertainty of *what kinds of categories and order* collections actually produce means that is important to answer questions of what diversity is doing by looking at practices and processes of production on the ground.

To understand diversity as a necessarily mobile project means accepting that what diversity is doing cannot be determined from studying a single site. Instead, it needs to be followed around a number of partially connected sites in order to understand how it travels (Ahmed 2012; Tsing 2005). Using the findings of the thematic review, I conducted interviews and undertook participant observation across 14 different sites. Twelve of these sites are discussed in my thesis. The ethnographic ‘cases’ that resulted from this fieldwork present briefer portraits than a traditional case study, but nevertheless use thick description to locate
the use of diversity in specific contexts. To frame the many locations I follow diversity through, I draw upon methods of multi-sited ethnography and comparison (Gagnon 2019; Marcus 1995). Multi-sited ethnographies help describe how diversity can be understood to be embedded within institutional processes that work within and across different sites. Making comparisons helps draw these expansive networks of processes and practices back together at key points.

Tsing’s *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2005), which I drew upon in the previous chapter, could be characterised as a multi-sited ethnography exploring deforestation in the Indonesian rainforest. However, it is perhaps more accurately described as an ethnography of networks and processes, where Tsing traces the geographically diverse, multi-scale interactions that shape her topic. On a more modest scale, my empirical chapters present a series of ethnographic cases that explore how diversity is used in different contemporary collecting processes. Chapter 5 first establishes how ideals of representation and diversity shape the boundaries interaction on the periphery of collections. Having established a spatial location for the use of diversity in collections, Chapter 6 then looks at processes of decision-making in these spaces. Chapter 7 takes a step back to investigate the disciplinary frameworks that shape these decision-making practices and how people gain expertise using them. Chapters 7 and 8 analyse these frameworks and how they transform (or not) in response to the introduction of different kinds of diversity. I address my research question about the impact of trying to increase diversity and representation within collections primarily through evaluating the current evidence for change within these frameworks, and the potential for further change in the future.

My thesis has two main axes of comparison. The first, broadly shared with the Heritage Futures project, is the comparison of social and natural history collections practices. Heritage Future’s Diversity theme has focused most on international ex situ biodiversity conservation and endangerment (Breithoff and Harrison 2018; Harrison 2017; but see Harrison et al forthcoming for work on endangered languages). By contrast, I have focused my research primarily on diversity in social history, using one UK natural history site for comparison: the London Natural History Museum’s Angela Marmont Centre, introduced later in this chapter. By putting social and natural history in comparison, I also place them within the same, expanded field, following the many arguments that have been made against sharply dividing them into two categories (see Harrison 2015; 2013; Harrison et al., forthcoming; 2016).
Considering natural and social history together allows for observations about what they could gain from being in conversation with each other. I offer insights on this topic in the conclusion, based on the comparisons drawn in my fieldwork.

The second comparative axis of my thesis is between social history archives and museums. Like with natural and social history, I put them in comparison partly as a way of considering them together, as an expanded field of practice. Public archives and museums are often grouped together: as part of the ‘creative and cultural industries’, as ‘GLAM’ (galleries, libraries, archives, museums), or in the heritage sector, because they are subject to similar or the same types of governmental oversight, funding, and policy. Archives and museums both have professional standards for collections management practices, and the practices themselves often overlap (Given and McTavish 2010; Trant 2009). Even when archives and museums are not official subject to professional standards for collections management (i.e. they are not public institutions, or small community projects) these standards are often aspired to, in order to legitimate collections. More than natural history, practitioners in social history archives and museums have also been subject to a fair amount of reflection about the legitimacy of practitioners’ authority. Especially in reference to contemporary materials, archivists or curators increasingly understand themselves as facilitators or mediators rather than sole authorities (Beier-de Haan 2006; Flinn, Stevens, and Shepard 2009; McSweeney and Kavanagh 2016). As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, looking at social history archives rather than just museums also offered an in addressing my research questions. Since archives do not have the same focus on exhibition and display; it is much more common for the public to have direct or lightly mediated access to collections. Archives and museums also sometimes overlap in the material they collect. Some of the archives in my thematic review and fieldwork had objects collections, while almost all museums had archives. The small, independent archives in my sample also collected more like museums than archives, in the sense that they were happy to collect individual items and ephemera rather than fonds or ‘complete’ collections.

Although social history archives and museums have many similarities, in my empirical chapters I have chosen to pair social history archives with examples from the Angela Marmont Centre. As I discuss in Chapter 7, this is primarily because, unlike museums, archives and natural history share frameworks that understand material as records and as evidence. Social history museums might broadly understand their collections as being part
of the historical record or historical evidence, but they do not share the same established disciplinary frameworks for treating their collections in this way. This means that decision-making around what to collect can be significantly different than for museums. There is also an established tradition of studying the archival and archival-like practices of the sciences that aids in comparing these two fields (e.g. Latour and Woolgar 1979; Latour 1999; Ilerbaig 2010; Shankar 2004).

4.1.2 Short-term and para-ethnography

As I described at the beginning of this chapter, my research was shaped in part by the relative absence of the work I was hoping to study. But, as the absence of diversity in collecting institutions became as much a part of my research as its presence, so did the kinds of short-term ethnographic engagements I began to have. Short-term approaches to ethnographic research challenge the anthropological convention of conducting long-term fieldwork (Pink and Morgan 2013, 352). Aspiring anthropologists are meant to go out ‘into the field’ for calendar year of fieldwork (usually undertaken for a PhD). The ethnographic portion of my fieldwork was equivalent to a calendar year, but instead of going away, I remained where I was (London) and engaged in periodic ethnographic activity which ranged from a single stint of a few hours observation at a site to returning to the same collection repeatedly over several months.

As defined by anthropologists Sarah Pink and Jennie Morgan (2013, 353) short-term ethnography produces ‘forms of intensity, empathy, and an ongoing ethnographic-analytical-theoretical dialog’.3 These three characteristics were strongly present in my research. The intensity of my research was produced partly through my focus on decision-making. When addressing the question: How are decisions made to introduce ‘diverse’ materials and perspectives into collections? I observed or asked practitioners to return to (in interview) often challenging or stressful moments where they made decisions to accept new materials, interpretations, or ways of working with their collections. Talking directly about diversity generally could be intense and uncomfortable for people.

As someone who has trained and worked in the heritage sector, it was easy to empathise with contemporary collections practitioners. Like in a more traditional ethnography, I was able to easily take on a student or apprentice role. In some cases, I formally became a student or apprentice for a brief period. In others, I informally assumed (or was assumed to be
occupying) that role, since I was a student of archives and museums, and most of my sites functioned as educational institutions of some kind. This shared educational and professional background allowed for a direct engagement with theory as part of the research process. Many of my research participants had postgraduate degrees and were conversant with the theories and approaches that informed my work. Many also kept up with recent developments in archival or museum theory for their work, either as active researchers themselves, or as part of their engagement with sector trends or with researchers working on their collections. This meant that I addressed the question: When does bringing in material from previously underrepresented groups impact how the collection is conceptualised and managed? in conversation with practitioners, who were engaging both theoretically and practically with how their collections functioned.

This theoretical dialogue aligned my research with what anthropologists Douglas Holmes and George Marcus (2008, 82) define as a para-ethnographic subject, an ‘epistemic community—in which “research” broadly conceived is integral to the function of these communities’. Holmes and Marcus (2008) argue that in these spaces ‘we can find a pre-existing ethnographic consciousness or curiosity’ (82) where ‘actors [are] experimenting with various narratives of their personal circumstances and the ambiguous conditions framing their expectations and sentiments’ (83). All of my interviewees were reflective about their work, and described their engagement with diversity in more complex ways than straightforwardly celebratory or critical accounts.

Both short-term and para-ethnography define collaboration, intervention, and dissemination as important parts of the research process itself (Pink and Morgan 2013; Holmes and Marcus 2008). Although my research was not co-designed with my participants; presenting, discussing, and receiving feedback from participants was an important part of my research process. Conversely, there is some evidence that participants experienced these discussions as impactful on their practice. After delivering a talk at a 2019 Contemporary Collecting Group workshop event, a curator with whom I had sustained contact with during my research wrote in an email:

‘it was listening to your talk I realised just how influential your event and report have been to my practice! So much of what you said resonated with me. […] I heard a lot of people mapping their work onto the frameworks you put forward’.

62
4.2 Methods stage II: ethnographic research

Following the first stage of my research, where I conducted a thematic review of London archive and museum collections websites, I undertook ethnographic fieldwork periodically between January 2017 to July 2018. In total, I completed 21 semi-structured research interviews with archivists, museum curators, and other practitioners working in collections across 14 different sites. These were complemented by periods of participant observation and engagement with outreach and events associated with the same sites. In this section, I detail how I carried out ethnographic research, describing my interview and participant observation practices, and then presenting short profiles of each of the dozen sites referred to in my thesis.

The thematic review I discussed in Chapter 2 helped me to gather background data and contact information for potential research sites. The broad scope of the review helped to turn up sites I would not have come up with on my own. When analysing the thematic review data, I identified around 40 ‘priority’ sites which appeared to have the most potential for further research into diversity and representation in contemporary collecting. From these priority cases, I assessed which sites appeared to collect contemporary material most actively, and then contacted these for interview. After a first round of interviews and participation observation, I assessed the balance of my sample and also added additional cases both from the list of priority sites and via suggestions from earlier interviews. Because of the balance of interviews to other ethnographic methods varies across cases, I recap my research contact with each site when it is featured in the thesis.

4.2.1 Interviews

Interviews with practitioners who worked on contemporary collecting and diversity, in some aspect, shaped the body of my ethnographic data. I treated interviewing as an ethnographic practice by interviewing multiple practitioners at each site (when there was more than a sole member of staff) and by recording observations of the site in excess of the interview dialog. At what became my primary natural history site, the Angela Marmont Centre, I was able to interview five members of staff. When it was not possible to interview more than one person (and even when it was) I made a point to enrich my understanding of a site by spending a day using the collections, and/or attending one of their relevant events. In summary, at minimum I completed an interview and participant observation at each site, but often
conducted multiple interviews along with participant observation. The one exception to this was at the Wellcome Collection, where I did several days of participant observation but was only able to speak informally to a curator.

Interviews mostly took place within collections workspaces and collections stores, and interview recordings were accompanied by ethnographic field notes and photos. Interviews were either recorded by audio or through extensive note-taking. Note-taking was chosen for interviews that were mobile and hands-on, conducted while touring and handling collections, sometimes in busy workplaces or reading rooms.

Interviews were semi-structured, drawing from a list of topic questions around collecting practices, decision-making, diversity, collections access, and future aims for the collection, but also guided by what came up in conversation. As I explore in Chapter 6, many practitioners told me in-depth stories about how objects had entered their collections. As my research progressed, I moved from a focus on asking questions about reflecting communities (passive representation) to asking about the challenges of altering diversity categories and practices (active representation).

Interview subjects consented to participation in the research with the knowledge that the research could only be partially anonymised because of the distinctive character of many of the institutions. Human participant research approval was granted by the Institute of Archaeology Ethics Committee (Ref. 2016.094) and registered in compliance with UCL Data Protection (Ref. Z6364106/2016/09/12). All interviewees were given an information sheet about the research and signed a consent form before participating in an interview. In the majority of references in the thesis, collecting institutions are named, but the individuals that were interviewed or interacted with are not. Individuals are mostly referred to by their professional titles, or a generic version of it, without personal descriptive detail. There are some exceptions to this, where it was impossible to anonymise individuals because of their prominent association with the collection, or where to anonymise them would deprive them of credit for their work or for their contributions to my research. These named persons were provided with chapters where material about them appeared and approved their inclusion before submission.
My interviewees were broadly representative of the demographics of archivists and museum curators in England (Arts Council England 2019; Brook, O’Brien and Taylor 2018; CILIP and ARA 2016; Davies and Shaw 2013). Slightly more of them were female than male, and slightly more than 90% were white. Only a very few did not hold postgraduate degrees or professional qualifications, and almost half of them had (or were completing, at time of interview) a doctorate. The majority of the people I interviewed could be described as mid-career, having had previous roles within the heritage sector, but occupying a non-managerial position or non-senior managerial position. Partially due to my own interest and experience, a handful of my interviewees were well-known LGBTQ+ advocates in the sector, which contributed to the prominence of this aspect of diversity in the thesis. Although the sample was not designed with this in mind, there ended up being a fairly high degree of professional connection between the interviewees, and between the interviewees and myself. This can be attributed partly to the relatively small size of the field of diversity-engaged social history collections in London, and partly to UCL’s role as one of the few locations in the UK who offer a professional archives qualification. Interviewees were also interconnected through UCL’s also strong heritage and museum studies programmes and its university museums.

4.2.2 Participant observation and engagement

As often as possible, interviews were augmented by participant observation of collections work, collections use, and events. This took different forms in different locations, depending on the kind of engagement that was possible at the time. As I go on to discuss in Chapter 5, I found that my ethnographic research took place in what I have termed ‘porous zones’: spaces in collecting institutions were more connected to the work of the collection than exhibition displays, but still involved some element of being in public view or on display. These were the semi-public, semi- ‘backstage’ spaces like open-to-the-public collections workspaces, reading rooms, and education and event areas.

At sites with a small number of staff, such as Bishopsgate Institute, Women’s Art Library, Mayday Rooms, and the Black Cultural Archives, I dedicated a day post-interview to experiencing the archives, usually reading about organisational history and opening boxes that had a connection to diversity and representation. At many of these sites, and also at bigger collecting institutions, I attended public events related to the collection, for example a Women’s Art Library’s panel at the Feminist Film Festival, and the Museum of
Transology’s lecture events and exhibition openings. At some locations, I became involved in the contemporary collecting that was taking place. While interviewing staff at the Horniman Museum about the collecting being done in advance of the redisplay of their anthropological collections, I helped them come up with an idea for local object to collect that they used in their ‘Perspectives’ case. When observing the ‘crowdsourced’ collecting open days for the Wellcome Collection’s *A Museum of Modern Nature* exhibition, I also went through the process of contributing a story and photograph.

How people learned to carry out or participate in contemporary collecting became an important focal point of my research (see especially Chapter 7). At the MayDay Rooms Archive, I participated in ‘Scanathons’, open days where volunteer staff helped to digitise and catalogue new or unprocessed material. At the Angela Marmont Centre, I shadowed trainees who were learning to collect and identify insect species. At the London Metropolitan Archives (Chapter 8), I followed the third year of a project training volunteers to collect LGBTQ+ oral histories for the collection.

After completing the main portion of interviews and participant observation, I transcribed audio recordings, interviews, and fieldwork notes into the qualitative analysis software Nvivo. Interviews and notes were coded according to themes derived from my research questions, augmented by text searches. As material was reviewed, inductive themes were also coded. The material was eventually organised and analysed according to three major themes, which are covered one at a time in the next three chapters. Chapter 5 looks at the production of spaces for diversity in collections, Chapter 6 the process of making decisions when collecting, and Chapter 7 the process of forming expertise in collecting diversity.

Near the end of my ethnographic research period, I held a knowledge exchange workshop, which invited practitioners to engage in dialog around my research questions and to share early findings from my data. Rather than being a research dissemination event, where information mostly went one way, the knowledge exchange was intended to be multi-directional. I refined the interpretation of my data based on practitioner expertise and participants were able to reflect on and share their experiences working on diversity and representation in contemporary collecting with other practitioners doing similar work. The Heritage Futures project, which also used knowledge exchanges as part of their research process, has defined them as workshops that bring together practitioners and academics to
explore broad, cross-sector issues around how to share future conservation (Harrison et al. forthcoming).

My knowledge exchange event, ‘Collecting Change/Changing Collections,’ from which this thesis takes its title, was a day long workshop held at the UCL Institute of Advanced Studies on 17th July 2018. I invited my research participants and other archive and museum practitioners from London and nearby. In addition to reaching collecting institutions that had already engaged with my research (See Site Profiles below), individuals from Islington Museum, the London Transport Museum, the Science Museum Group, and Sutton House (National Trust) also took part.

Figure 4.1 ‘Collecting Change/Changing Collections’ workshop participants in discussion. Photo by author.

The workshop was run as a World Café-style event (see their website), where small groups of participants engaged in discussion activities around a series of key questions derived from my fieldwork experiences. These questions were:

How do we know what is significant to collect now and for the future?
What kinds of futures do we want for our collections and how do we communicate these visions?

How does change happen in our collections and wider organisations?

The questions used in the workshop do not correspond exactly to the research questions of my thesis, but they emerged as important, partially unresolved questions following Stage II of my research. Responses to these questions were gathered by the participants themselves, in the form of mind-maps produced during discussions, and through note-taking and reflections by myself and the discussion facilitators. Data from the workshop was written into a report that was shared with participants (Lee-Crossett 2018) and findings from it have been integrated into the rest of the thesis where relevant.

4.2.3 Site Profiles

Of the 14 sites where I conducted ethnographic research, half defined themselves as archives, and half as museums (although some blurred these boundaries, as described earlier in this chapter). More specifically, the sites broke down into three organisation types, following the same definitions used by Figure 2.1 (Chapter 2). Independent archives and museums represent the largest group in the sample, although as I mentioned in Chapter 2, there was a lot of variability within this category. While the collections at these sites were based and focused on London, they often were tied into much larger (national, international) networks of people and ideas.

Table 4.1 Organisation types represented in the interview sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National archives and museums</th>
<th>Angela Marmont Centre for UK Biodiversity, Natural History Museum</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economic Botany Collection, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (not presented in the thesis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authority archives and museums</td>
<td>Hackney Archives</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hackney Museum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>London Metropolitan Archives</td>
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<td>Tower Hamlets Archives (not presented in the thesis)</td>
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</table>
Independent archives and museums

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<th>Bishopsgate Institute Archives</th>
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<tr>
<td>Black Cultural Archives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Horniman Museum*</td>
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<tr>
<td>MayDay Rooms Archives</td>
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<td>Migration Museum Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Museum of Transology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women's Art Library/MAKE, Goldsmiths University**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellcome Collection</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Horniman Museum is a borderline case, since it is sometimes considered a national collection because it is sponsored by DCMS. However, it is not defined by DCMS as a 'national', and it is significantly smaller than the other two institutions I have classed as nationals.

**Although the Women’s Art Library/MAKE is housed in Goldsmiths University's Special Collections and Archives, it retains much of its originally independent status, as I describe in the profile below.

Rather than seeking to have a normative or representative sample of sites from the archive and museum sectors, I looked for collections that were already actively working on diversity. Having established that diversity is absent or marginalised from many collections, I needed to select sites that advertised that they were doing diversity in some respect in order to be able to answer my research questions.

Because of the large number of cases covered in my empirical chapters, this section profiles each of twelve sites dealt with in the thesis, providing a short summary of their location, their collections holdings, aims, and why they helped to address my research questions and/or areas of focus. The sites are listed alphabetically.

*Angela Marmont Centre for UK Biodiversity (AMC), Natural History Museum*

The Angela Marmont Centre for UK Biodiversity is a part of the London Natural History Museum in South Kensington. Opened in 2010 in the museum’s new working science wing (the Darwin Centre), the AMC specialises in UK species identification and biological recording. Staff provide trainings, resources, and expertise for biological recording and natural history organisations, professionals, amateur experts, and members of the public. The
AMC maintains collections of UK species originally assembled from duplicate material in other museum departments, largely for teaching and reference purposes. These are added to from material collected on research projects, courses, and from enquiries sent to the museum. The AMC is also one of the major partners of the National Biodiversity Network and maintains the UK Species Inventory, which provides the authoritative database of UK species names for used for biological and biodiversity recording. These last two functions especially make the AMC a significant site for biodiversity and biodiversity collections in London.

**Black Cultural Archives (BCA)**

Black Cultural Archives website proclaims them ‘the only [public] national heritage centre dedicated to collecting, preserving and celebrating the histories of African and Caribbean people in Britain’. Founded in 1981, the Black Cultural Archives opened in a renovated Georgian building in Brixton after an HLF capital redevelopment project in 2014. The Black Cultural Archives was originally established under the aegis of the African People’s Historical Monument Foundation, and its key founder, Len Garrison collected objects, art, and sculpture, as well as archival materials connected to African history and presence in the UK (Ishmael and Waters 2017). Their website defines their collecting area as ‘original archives [that] constitute a permanent record of the richness of the Black experience in Britain and is accessible to all’. In 2018, the archive came into financial difficulties after their major HLF grant came to an end, prompting discussion and controversy around the lack of sustained support given to black heritage in the UK (Adams 2018; Weale 2018).

**Bishopsgate Institute Archives**

Bishopsgate Institute is an educational and cultural charity in the City of London, which has included a library since its founding in that location in 1895. Its archive is engaged in addressing the ‘experiences of everyday people, and facilitating the study of history from below’ focused on London and the East end, but also including UK-wide collections. The Bishopsgate Institute website describes the archives’ major collecting areas include the British co-operative movement, feminist and women’s history, freethought and humanism, labour and socialist history, LGBTQ history, London history, and protest and campaigning. The long tenure of Bishopsgate Institute as an archive for minoritized and left-wing heritage means that it has served in an advisory capacity for many diversity-related archiving
initiatives, including the Black Cultural Archives and the Lesbian and Gay Newsmedia Archive (the latter which was transferred to Bishopsgate in 2011) (Dickers 2018).

**Hackney Archives**

Hackney Archives is the local archives and local studies library of the borough of Hackney. Like Hackney Museum, the archives are managed by the local authority. Hackney Archives is located in the Dalston CLR James library, which was purpose-built by the council in 2012. Their website states: ‘We collect, preserve and provide access to records that contribute to Hackney’s socio-economic and cultural identity to help everyone understand Hackney’s past and present […] we are always adding to our collections. Our oldest record dates from 1356, whilst our newest are from 2014’. One of their Senior Archives Officers had spearheaded Decolonising the Archive initiatives and could speak about what it had been like to go from working on access and representation in archives as an external individual to a practitioner working on the inside.

**Hackney Museum**

Hackney Museum is a local authority museum in the borough of Hackney in northeast London whose collections ‘predominantly [reflect] working and domestic life in the London Borough of Hackney from about 1850 to the present day. The collection broadly comprises artefacts, artworks, video and oral history recordings and extends to some 7,000 items’ (Hackney Museum 2014). The museum occupies part of the ground floor of a large modern building that houses the Hackney Central Library, a café, gym, as well as other council services and private businesses. Hackney Museum is well-known in the sector for being at the forefront of community-engaged collecting and has advised national museums on community representation and engagement work (Hackney Museum 2014; Lynch 2011; Haswell-Walls et al. 2018).

**Horniman Museum**

The Horniman Museum, built and founded by its eponymous Victorian benefactor in 1901, is a public museum and gardens located in Forest Hill in southeast London. Their website claims that the museum continues Frederick Horniman’s aim to ‘bring the world to Forest Hill’. The museum holds both natural history and anthropological collections, the latter of which were updated and redisplayed as ‘The World Gallery’ in 2018. My fieldwork at the Horniman Museum only dealt with the anthropological collections. The anthropology
redisplay project took place during the period of my research (begun in 2016 and opened summer 2018) and I was able to interview staff involved in contemporary collecting that took place for the redisplay. The Horniman Museum has a history of working with communities in Forest Hill, including its Access Advisory Board (disability-focused), Horniman Youth Panel, and participatory collections initiatives like the Collections, People, Stories Project (2012-2015), which led onto the anthropology redisplay.\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{London Metropolitan Archives (LMA)}

London Metropolitan Archives is the primary local government archive in the UK, serving Greater London as well as the City of London under which it is run. The London Metropolitan Archive’s collection date back to the 11\textsuperscript{th} century, and continues to collect local government, organisational, and social history material (LMA 2017a). The Collections Acquisition and Management policy states, ‘London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) exists to collect records of London’s rich past history and to find and collect records of London’s vibrant and diverse present’ (LMA 2017a). The archive is located in Clerkenwell in central London in a row of large brick buildings that were formerly a print works. The London Metropolitan Archives ran an LGBTQ+ oral history and archival collecting project called Speak Out London: Diversity City with funding from Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) which began in 2014 and continued activities through 2016-17.

\textit{MayDay Rooms Archives (MDR)}

MayDay Rooms website describes their organisation as an ‘archive, resource and safe haven for social movements, experimental and marginal cultures and their histories’. The archives largely consist of documentation of UK-based experimental art and education initiatives and grassroots social organising that date from the 1970s onward. Founded in 2009 out of anti-austerity organising, MayDay Rooms now works as a company limited by guarantee and an educational charity out of the refurbished four-storey Birmingham Daily Post building in the City of London, surrounded by banks. Although MayDay Rooms continue to collect in their areas of interest, their ‘Archives’ webpage refers to them as ‘an active social resource more than a repository’. MayDay Rooms’ large building means they are able to offer space to like-minded groups on both short-and-long term basis for both archive and social movement-related work.
Migration Museum Project

The Migration Museum Project has shared stories of migration to and from Britain since 2013. When I interviewed staff at their co-working office space in London in late 2016 and early 2017, the Migration Museum Project neither had a physical location nor any permanent collections, although they had run a series of temporary exhibitions and events with loaned items and artwork at venues around the country. Since April 2017, the Migration Museum Project website reports that they have been based at The Workshop, a former fire engine garage being used for temporary arts and community projects in Lambeth, south London. Although the Project’s goal is to work toward building a permanent Migration Museum for Britain, staff spoke about the benefits of being mobile and flexible, and the potential trade-offs when (or if) they began to develop permanent collections for representing and engaging with diverse migration histories.

Museum of Transology

The Museum of Transology is a largest collection of objects that reflect the experiences of transgender people in the UK, largely sourced from the South East England. Each object is accompanied with an interpretive handwritten label provided by the donor, now representing more than 117 individuals. Begun in 2016 by trans curator E-J Scott, the collection was established through a series of open collecting events, advertisements, and word of mouth. In an interview with Vice Magazine, Scott said, “We were just overwhelmed with contributions. It’s become a huge community project. It’s not autobiographical for any one person. It’s about multiple voices and multiple stories; diverse stories that are as diverse as the trans experience itself” (Tsjeng 2017). The Museum of Transology was first exhibited at the London College of Fashion in early 2017 and moved to Brighton Museum in summer 2017, where it will be display until October 2019. Although the Museum of Transology has been very successful on many metrics, Scott has not been able to find it a permanent home, nor for himself, a permanent full-time position in the sector.

Wellcome Collection

The Wellcome Collection is a library and museum focused on health, located on Euston Road in central London. They are a part of and located in the same block with the Wellcome Trust, a charitable global health foundation which is the UK’s largest non-governmental funder of medical research (Jack 2012). Wellcome Collection presents health in a creative, interdisciplinary way, incorporating the social sciences, arts, and humanities as well as medical
science. Starting in December 2016, Wellcome Collection ran nearly a year-long programme on how people have studied and connected with nature. As part of the second phase of this programme, entitled *A Museum of Modern Nature*, Wellcome Collection crowdsourced objects from the public that they exhibited to represent the diversity of people’s relationships to nature—blending ideas of representing social and natural history.

**Women’s Art Library/MAKE (WAL), Goldsmiths University**

The Women’s Art Library/MAKE is an archive of women’s art practice begun by a feminist artists’ collective in London in the 1980s. Its ethos was to include 'any women artists who had made a significant impact on our experience of British contemporary art' and it continues to collect from women artists under this wide remit (Allen 1998 quoted in Walsh and Throp 2015, 4). WAL arose in the context of the women’s’ liberation movement, when women’s and feminist art was first being valued as its own distinctive area of study. Previously independent, WAL was gifted to Goldsmiths University in 2002. It has maintained its own governance and management, bringing along a curator who had been involved with WAL for decades, and its own advisory group, and continues to navigate the changes between being a longstanding member-run collection to a more formal university resource.

By reviewing the sites discussed in this thesis, this section contextualises how my fieldwork located what diversity is doing within the field of London archives and museums. Overall, this chapter has described how I have drawn from a variety of ethnographic approaches and methods in order to study diversity as a mobile social project in contemporary collecting. Chapters 5-8 go on to present how I have used these methods and the resulting data to address the research questions presented in Chapter 1.

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**Notes**

1 See Chapter 5 for more discussion of museum geographies.

2 Lisam Given and Lianne McTavish (2010) and Jennifer Trant (2009) argue that the work of archive, museum, and library practitioners has reconverged in the digital age.

3 Pink and Morgan (2013, 353) emphasise that their definition of short-term ethnography as embedded within an ‘ethnographic-analytical-theoretical dialog’ differs from its applications in health and medicine, where they argue there has been a purposeful separation between research and theory.

4 Of the approximately 90% of my interviews who were white, less than 10% of these were not British.

5 About a quarter of the interviewees occupied a senior role, and a very small number were more-or-less new to the archives and museums sector.

6 Since overall my thesis focuses mainly on exploring diversity through race and LGBTQ+ identity, I did not record others potential facets of the diversity of my interviewees, such as disability or religion.

7 The ‘Perspectives’ case in the Horniman Museum’s World Gallery compares material from different cultures and time periods, on themes including ‘Danger, Beauty, Strangers, and Curiousities’. Each theme included one
contemporary object collected from the local area around Horniman Museum. Curators who were struggling to find a local object for the 'Curiousities' theme ended up using my suggestion (a fidget spinner as a modern-day curiosity) for the case.

8 The World Café method has been used by civil society initiatives (e.g. Tan and Brown 2005) and in heritage contexts as a form of open focus group or structured public forum (e.g. Gerbich and Taleb 2019).

9 For the Collecting Change/Changing Collections workshop, I hired three postgraduate students in heritage and museum study to facilitate small-group discussions so that I was able to circulate and focus my attention on data-gathering.

10 Information about all of these initiatives can be found on the Horniman Museum website.
Chapter 5  **Porous zones: research at the borders between collections and publics**

Chapter 3 partially answers the question of what is being done with diversity in collections practice by arguing it has been marginalised within collecting institutions. I now look more in detail at the question of how work on diversity can be located around the margins of archival and museum collections. Building on the methodology established in Chapter 4, this chapter marks a shift in focus from considering broader perspectives on the use of diversity to looking more closely at the use of diversity in practice, drawing on my research cases. Chapter 5 aims to answer the question, ‘How can diversity be located in respect to collections development and practice?’ Locating diversity is a way of beginning to establish how the inclusion of diversity is managed (or managed out) amidst the standard backdrops, routines, and values of collecting institutions. To locate diversity, I work to identify the borders and boundaries of collections spaces, both ones that are physical and ones that are established by practice. This chapter helps to lay the groundwork for answering the question of how decisions are made about the inclusion of diverse materials in Chapter 6.

Over the past twenty-five years, much of museum and archival literature have characterised their institutions, and the collections within, as having increased in transparency and democracy over time (e.g. Bennett 1995; Giebelhausen 2006, 224-225). Equally, barriers for public access to collections are supposed to have been reduced, and reducing still. In this chapter, and more broadly across the next three chapters of this thesis, I argue that although these barriers have changed and been renegotiated in some aspects, they have not dramatically lessened in the way that the literature both aspires to and assumes.

This chapter introduces my concept of the porous zone, which describes the liminal spaces that act as interfaces between collections and publics. The spaces described in this chapter are where the majority of my research took place; in the liminal—or what I term porous—zones that act as interfaces between collections and the publics. As I go on to define in more detail, this excludes exhibition displays and collection stores, which together have received the majority of critical attention, particularly in museum studies. Examples of the porous zone in both archives and museums include offices, workrooms, classrooms, and event spaces. These are places where a great deal of the work of collecting institutions happens.
In addition to the above list, archival reading rooms are also important examples of the porous zone. Unlike other examples of the porous zone, they require drawing some distinctions between the operations of social history archives and museums. Whereas exhibition and displays are considered the central site of interaction between collections and publics in museums, this is not the case in archives. Within archives, exhibition spaces are much less likely to be focal points. Instead, the reading room or search room is already established as the main site of engagement with collections. The reading room thus offers a kind of template for the porous zone, especially in grassroots or community archives, where readings rooms are often mixed-use spaces with relatively unmediated collections access (as I discuss in the MayDay Rooms case). Natural history museums, which also have a stronger tradition of direct engagement (through research and enquiry) with collections also provide examples where the porous zone is less marginalised. Because of this, the cases in this chapter explore porous zones in natural history (Angela Marmont Centre [AMC]) and social history archival collections (Hackney Archives, MayDay Rooms archive [MDR]) to address gaps in museological presentations of collections space.

Importantly, as places that exist outside (or in addition to) the exhibition and the collection store, porous zones are sites where it is possible to capture material, negotiations, and nuances that do not ultimately make it into the museums’ most public or permanent locales. In other words, porous zones are sites of negotiation that act as a buffer to exhibition and collections spaces while also facilitating access to them. Diversity and public engagement work have grown in these zones—around the margins of ‘core’ archive and museum collections’ work.

For the public, these places offer uneven access to the spaces and work of collections: while some forms of contribution and engagement are welcomed, others are discouraged or managed out entirely. What appears as a porous zone to some is a wall for others. It is important to note here that the ‘publics’ I refer in my thesis are mostly not ‘the public’ in its largest, most general sense (even if that is what institutions are trying to appeal to). In practice, the types of publics who occupied the spaces of my research were already enthusiasts (of a subject, or of archives/museums), and included both amateur and professional experts in areas relevant to a particular collection. This distinction, between ‘the public’ and publics is especially relevant in this chapter when looking at what kinds of
engagements are supported by the spaces around collections, and who is able or likely to take part (cf. Keenan 2015).

To orient my discussion of these spaces conceptually, I review historian and anthropologist James Clifford’s (1997) definition of the museum as a ‘contact zone’ space, and subsequent critiques of how public engagement plays out in museum spaces. Since this chapter looks at the design and experience of collections spaces, I also introduce work on museum geographies, particularly work that focuses on ‘backstage’ spaces (from Goffman [1959]). This literature helps to establish my concept of the porous zone and how I identify examples of it in my fieldwork. The aforementioned cases all experienced collections-related building development between 2010-2012. Consequently, practitioners were also to compare how changes in the physical location of the collections impacted collections access and work practices. They also enable reflection on recent trends in the design of archive and museum spaces.

5.1 Tensions of the contact zone

Contact zones are defined as interactive spaces where people ‘establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict’ (Clifford 1997, 194; from Pratt 1991; 1992, 6–7). Clifford’s (1997) development of the concept of the contact zone has been a key source in understanding museums as spaces of encounter that have been shaped by power, history, and conflict. Clifford’s chapter, ‘Museums as Contact Zones’ (1997) argues that the application of the model of the contact zone could shift the museum’s ‘organizing structure as a collection’ to one that is centred around ‘historical, political, moral relationship[s]’ (192, italics in original). This redefinition of the museum challenges the logic of the collection as centre and its relations as periphery (192; also see Byrne et al. 2011). Clifford (1997) posited that the contact zone was descriptive (of spaces of encounter in museums), while also being prescriptive (213); his chapter argues that museums should take on a contract perspective and ‘contact work’. Making this shift, Clifford argued, could help decentralise museum collections from their core of control into a more democratic network of relations, where exchange is central and valued even though it might be bitterly contested. Employing a contact perspective partly works to reveal the entrenched conflicts, clashing values, and asymmetrical power relations around collections:
‘Museum practices of collecting and display look different in a contact perspective. Centres become borders crossed by objects and makers. Such crossings are never “free” and indeed are routinely blocked by budgets and curatorial control, by restrictive definitions of art and culture, by community hostility and miscomprehension’ (Clifford, 1997, 204).

As in the rest of the thesis, I primarily consider how these borders and blockages appear from within institutions and from the perspective of practitioners. Practitioners have largely adopted collaborative and co-production principles like those prescribed by Clifford (1997) (cf. Beier-de Haan 2006; Boast 2011; Graham 2016; 2012, 568; McSweeny and Kavanagh 2013; Simon 2010). Despite this, the idea of the collection at the centre of the institution and its relations (or engagements) at the periphery have remained.

Again, though, there are some differences between social history archives and museums to consider. Museums have, for the most part, discouraged direct access to collections (excluding researchers) and placed spaces of encounter and engagement on the periphery. In archives, as mentioned, direct engagement with collections is part of their public function. Collections and engagement are central. However, where social history museums have been increasingly flexible about what can be included within collections, most archives (and natural history collections) use stricter notions (e.g. through chains of custody, provenance, standards for evidence). So, whereas engagement is more central, the selection of material to be engaged with is generally more restrictive.

Critiques and responses to Clifford’s work on the contact zone help provide an understanding of the ongoing inertia around the ‘collecting centre’ in museums, despite attempts to reform this. In Culture: A Reformer's Science (1998), Bennett claims that the contact zone is not the non-hierarchical space of negotiation Clifford sets up, but instead remains a site of vertical government mentality (203-212). He argues that the communities Clifford envisions as participating in contact zone exchanges have been defined and brought into the public sphere by top-down government activities. He cites, for example, the role museums played in early mass education, in outreach work intended to teach children, especially migrant ones, their role as citizens in Australia, the United States, and the UK (1998, 206).

‘What does [Clifford’s] view of museums amount to if not a new discursive strategy for enlisting objects in the service of government as parts of programs of civic management aimed at promoting respect for, and tolerance of, cultural diversity?’ (Bennett, 1998, 212).
For Bennett, the concept of the contact zone provides museums with a fig leaf genealogy of reciprocal (if uneven) exchange that actually obscures how museums continue to work as agents of governance (212; from Dibley 2005, 13). Ben Dibley (2005) and Robin Boast (2011) add that the democratic ideal proposed by Clifford also has neo-colonial features, because it assumes the possibility of a contemporary participant who can enjoy a perfectly reciprocal exchange (Dibley 2005, 17) and because it does not sufficiently acknowledge that participation in the contact zone is shaped by dominant discourses (Boast 2011).

These responses to Clifford’s work are located within what has been characterised as an ‘insatiable’ cycle of museum critique and reform (Bennett 1995, 91), which pits the persistence of the museum’s functions of governance and control against its potential for reorganization (Dibley 2005; Graham 2012, 568). Helen Graham (2012) offers one way out of this perpetual cycle through her focus on scale. Without contesting Bennett’s theory of governmentality, she argues that Bennett’ perspective is most valid when reading at a certain (removed) distance (568). Clifford’s contact zone, by contrast, is most salient ‘inside’ practice. By finding space ‘inside’ practice, Graham combats Dibley’s conclusion that there may be no place ‘outside’ governmentality to critique from (2012, 569). Working with the space ‘inside’ practice allows us to acknowledge that while the essential governmentality of the archive and museum remains, we can explore where collections practice ‘exceeds’ it, and where it remains ‘bound’ (as Graham 2012 argues, building on Butler [1997] and Dibley [2005]), through the relations and partial connections described by the contact zone.

Within my research, it has been helpful for me to work with a narrower and more specific instantiation of the contact zone, which I have termed ‘the porous zone.’ Drawing from Graham (2012), porous zones more directly refer to physical settings are linked to collecting practice, where the borders and boundaries of collections are negotiated and crossed. These are semi-permeable spaces of negotiation it is possible for both people from inside and outside of the archive or museum to be present, and for materials to move in and out. This specification distinguishes the porous zone from how the contact zone has mainly been used—i.e. to describe exhibitions where museum practitioners may be ‘present’ in an abstract sense, but are unlikely to involve their in-person engagement or the bi-directional movement of materials.
As I stated in the introduction, porous zones are not uniform boundaries or barriers: they can be an open conduit for some publics and a wall for others. The degree of porosity of these spaces can be ‘calibrated’ (Graham 2012, 569, 580): through collections practice, or in response to the qualities of the people or objects involved in the crossing. As a white researcher who has worked and spent a great deal of time in archives and museums, many porous zone spaces were comfortable to me in ways they might have not been to others. As a transgender person who has felt marginalised both by the content of collections and by the surveillance of porous zones, I have also felt uncomfortable in ways many others might not have experienced. These facets of my identity made me sensitive to considering some of the ways that the porous zone enables and disables.

The border tensions of the porous zone can be contextualised in terms of Graham’s (2012) explanation of the conflicting aims of promoting ‘access’ and ‘social impact’ in UK museum practice. Although these terms are often used in complement, Graham argues that they serve opposing functions. Improving access is used to refer to work that dis-intensifies the difference between the museum and everyday life. By contrast, pursuing a social impact agenda requires the re-intensification this difference in order to make the museum more visibly effective (2012, 580-581). Sometimes having a boundary is desired: when the museum occupies a different sphere from everyday life, this can enable different kinds of action and relations than would be possible in an ‘everyday’ context. There is a trade-off between the two functions. And as with the porous zone more broadly, the calibration between them can be experienced differently by different people at different times.

5.2 Museum geographies and backstage

In order to further explore how the boundaries between collections and publics are defined, it is helpful to briefly review literature in museum geographies. Museum geographies literature is helpful for describing the architectural and spatial characteristics across both archives and museums that further contextualise the porous zone. While museum geographies is an active subfield, as far as I am aware, there is not a strong tradition of engaging with the contemporary geographies or physical design of archives. Hilary Geoghegan’s (2010) article was the first to review the scope and context for ‘geographical thinking’ in museums. She highlights a spatial turn in museum studies from the early 2000s that dovetailed with geography’s interest in the spatial organisation of the museum and its role in producing and legitimising ‘identities, knowledges, and spaces, in particular place-
based identities’ (1467). Geoghegan locates the geography of contemporary European museums as beginning with their late 18th century transition from largely private spaces to ones intended to educate visiting publics.

‘Adhering to the principles of taxonomic classification in the acquisition, organisation and display of their collections, an intellectual and spatial division was drawn between the expert knowledge of the curator at work behind-the-scenes and the public space occupied by the museum visitor’ (1462-1463).

As part of the cycle of the museum reform discussed in the previous section, museums’ interfaces with the public have multiplied and diversified in recent years. One of the factors driving this has been the need of public museums to earn their keep in a diminishing funding environment. Geoghehan (2010, 1463) argues this has resulted in the prominence of the museum café and shop, as well as the expansion of the museum into other public-private display spaces like shop windows, airport lounges, and hospitals. This expansion has also included the increased use exhibitions with entrance fees, the franchising of exhibitions (or entire museums), and the museum as an event hire space (Giebelhausen 2006, 240). Some of these expansions have also been used to argue that they increase the public value of the museum, by providing increased or different kinds of access to museum spaces and content.

In addition to market pressures, museum space has also been expanded and renegotiated according to the reflexive, democratic principles of the ‘new museology’ that were developed in the late 1980s (Geoghehan 2010, 1464). This has included work on revising exhibition displays, increasing visitor participation in exhibition spaces, and improving access to collections for different publics. In many cases, the expansion of museum spaces has also created the porous zones I describe: the purpose-build education rooms and event spaces, the glass-fronted labs and collection stores (MacLeod 2005, 1). These spaces exist at the conjunction of the reform principles of ‘new museology’ and the neoliberal economics of museum value.

Work attentive to ‘geographic thinking’ (Geoghehan 2010, 1463) and the politics of space has, like much of museum studies, focused mostly on exhibitionary spaces (e.g. Bennett 1995; Haraway 1984; MacLeod 2005). It is rare that galleries and exhibitions represent true porous zones. In an exhibition, visitors are able to come into (visual) contact with a (pre-selected) assemblage from the collection, but there is not much possibility for objects, people, or knowledge to cross into or out of the space. Exhibitions are also not typically staffed by those working directly in or with the collection, even in more participatory exhibitions, so
there is no possibility for live dialog or negotiation. Compared to the examples Clifford (1997) originally cited, the contemporary exhibition is often set up as a ‘dummy,’ or false contact zone between the museum and various publics. Not only are there unequal relations between the museum and those engaging with it, but often there is no real or meaningful exchange happening.

There’s a clear example of this ‘dummy’ contact zone in Rachael Coghlan’s (2018) review of visitor engagement with Power of 1, a 2014 exhibition at the Australian Museum of Democracy. The subject of Power of 1 was ‘the changing nature of Australian democracy and the power of an individual’s voice within in’ (Coghlan 2018, 798). The exhibition’s tagline was: ‘You have a voice. It counts. (It always has.) Have your say and be heard’ (MOAD 2014 in Coghlan 2018, 798). Because the exhibition’s subject material centred on participation and inclusion, museum staff (which included Coghlan) used the exhibition to trial a number of interactive, participatory experiences for visitors. As noted by Dibley (2005) and Boast (2011) above, the history and politics of democracy—which purposely uneven application of rights and privileges—means that the practice of democracy itself is often a site of contact zone engagements (rather than an aspirational place for the contact zone to move toward).

Although she acknowledges that museums struggle to engage in meaningful power-sharing, overall Coghlan is optimistically reformist about exhibition participation as a tool of democratic practice. Most of the feedback received from visitors to Power of 1 was positive. However, some of this positivity was based on visitors’ assumptions that the exhibition was a ‘legitimate forum [...] for canvassing and capturing citizen views about politics, democracy, and current affairs’ (Coghlan 2018, 804). Interviewees reported that they looked forward to the museum reading and responding to the contributions and comments they’d made about Australian politics, and hoped these would be shared with parliament, the Prime Minister, or other decision makers. In response to this, Coghlan (2018, 804) writes: ‘no one on the development team (including me) ever conceived that [the exhibition’s] impact would expand beyond our institution’s walls’. The museum had no plans to (and ultimately did not) do anything with the contributions it received. Coghlan’s admirably honest reflection that the Museum of Democracy had never thought of responding to visitor engagement in an exhibition about the power of citizen’s voices demonstrates how shockingly shallow participatory practice can be. Visitors’ experience of participation might have been positive, but this has nothing to do with whether it was either a meaningful or democratic exchange. This example
shows how exhibitions can forestall the possibility of establishing relations (even uneven or conflictual ones) with those outside the museum, even while soliciting their participation.

Compared to work on exhibition production and reception, research that locates its starting point in the contemporary geographies and practices of collections is less common. Much of the literature that does exist in this area is purely historical (e.g. Alberti 2005; Cornish 2012), tracing the networks and assemblages of prominent collectors and collections (although see Geoghehan and Hess 2015). The recent edited volume *Museums, Storage and Meaning* (2017) is another example that takes the space of collection storage as its primary theoretical and ethical subject. The editors critique the assumption that display is the most important location and function of the museum collection. Mirjam Brusius and Kavita Singh (2017) also complicate the perception of storage as ‘the inverse of display’ (3) by arguing for the recognition of the historical continuum of museum spaces. They are not simply ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’.

‘[M]useum spaces have always had been organised along gradations that are more complex than the simple binary of display (visitors see everything) versus the store (where nobody sees anything). Behind the galleries of many museums lie liminal spaces that include archives, study rooms and libraries that are not open to the public, but are accessible to scholars, usually by appointment’ (4).

The scholarly access Brusius and Singh describe is now, in many UK museums, at least nominally open to members of the general public as well. And, as Nicky Reeves’ (2017) contribution to the volume recognises, it is not only areas like collections study rooms that make up the museum’s liminal spaces, but also the many spaces of labour: the staff offices, meeting, and break rooms. To return to Clifford (1997)—the example that he uses to introduce the concept of the museum as a contact zone (Portland Art Museum’s consultation with members of Tlingit clans) is in fact set in a basement meeting room, not exhibition space. That Clifford repeatedly describes the consultation’s basement location when he refers to this example is interesting—it emphasizes the submerged and out-of-sight nature of ongoing struggle and histories behind the consultation. Even if all of Portland Art Museum’s staff offices, meeting space, and collections stores were located in the basement (i.e. not only the special site of this meeting), which is potentially the case, it is still worthy of note that this is a defining site of the contact zone.
Although still not especially common, some ethnographic studies of archival practice\(^{10}\) address settings of joint staff and public engagement with collections material. Social historian Patrick Joyce’s influential article ‘The politics of the liberal archive’ (1999) makes an early argument for better understanding of ‘the politics of contemporary encounter with the archive’ (46) and archival spaces, particularly through ethnographies of archival practice and use (37). Joyce’s establishment of the archive ‘as a space of liberal governmentality’ (35) shares intellectual territory with Bennett (1995), but also with Clifford (1997) and the concept of the contact zone. Joyce asserts that middle class archivists’ interests in civilizing ‘local’ urban culture created ‘a parallel “anthropologizing” of the metropolitan and colonial archive’ in the late 19\(^{th}\) century (44, drawing on Dirks 2002). While the archive acted as a force of governmentality, it was also entwined and shaped by contact histories between elites and the metropolitan working class at home as well as colonial subjects abroad (see also Arondekar 2009; Bennett et al 2017; Stoler 2009).

Within the archive, the reading room is a space of potentially generative engagement within grand structures of governmentality. As a key feature of archives and libraries since their development as public resources in the 19\(^{th}\) century, the reading room is perhaps the oldest and most established of inbuilt porous spaces within collecting institutions. Contemporary archival ethnographies directly address the tension between forces of governmentality and democratising efforts (Drake 2016a; 2016b; Pell 2015; Rawson 2009; Sellie et al. 2015).\(^{11}\) In the discussion of cases that follow, I eschew making an appeal for more democratic archival spaces in favour of exploring in detail the tensions and frictions of the porous zone, where collections engagements happen. These tensions illuminate the sometimes-contradictory aims and values (discussed in Chapter 2) that these public collections try to support.

### 5.3 Porous zones

Before introducing the cases for this chapter, I go into more detail about how I have defined the porous zone through my research. I also describe a typology of the types of spaces where porous zones occurred. In my fieldwork, the two significant features of porous zones that emerged were (1) the degree of public access to them, and, (2) once inside the porous zone, the ability for interested publics to contribute to and/or intervene in the collection. I separate out these two different things because, as demonstrated by the *Power of 1* example, people are able to have access to and even participate in collections spaces without the institution being responsive or participating in meaningful exchange. The word ‘intervene’ is useful here,
both because it is associated with potentially conflictual action and also because it implies action that has an impact. When evaluating the porous zones encountered in my research I did so with respect to these two features.

The porous zones I encountered mainly took on four different forms: reading rooms, workspaces, event/education spaces, and offices. I noted and then coded the frequency of these spaces in my fieldwork notes during participation observation and interviews.

5.3.1 Reading rooms

I have mentioned the archival reading room already in this chapter. Although reading rooms are sites where members of the public and staff interact and negotiate direct access to collection materials, it is not traditionally very permeable, i.e. readers are not intended to be able to add to, remove from, or intervene in the collection. However, in small, independent, and/or community-focused archives the reading room can often be a place where donations or donor relations are generated and material is (re)interpreted between visitors and staff. In archives where the reading room is absent (or indistinguishable from the collection) either because of the size or set-up of the archive, the space of the collection itself can be a porous zone. In some (often community, or ‘activist’) archives, where users have direct access to the collection, they are often either encouraged or tacitly allowed to add or remove material as needed (e.g. Gordon et al. 2016; Pell 2015; Sellie et al. 2015). These types of archives sometimes title themselves as libraries (e.g. London’s Feminist Library), or ‘infoshops’ (the latter in an anarchist tradition [Pell 2015, 47]) in order to emphasize their permissive approach to access and use of materials. Although certain reading rooms I encountered allowed a relatively high degree of user freedom, there were not examples of completely unmediated access or ‘library’ collections in my sample.

5.3.2 Workspaces

The second type of porous zone is the workspace. Workspaces (or laboratory space, in the case of the AMC) are places that are set up in order to facilitate work with collections material, and are designed with professionals or staff in mind as well as public users. Workspaces are places where material can be brought and modified so that it can enter the collection, or brought out of the collection in order to be studied (and/or potentially modified). Art historian Michaela Giebelhausen’s (2006) chapter, ‘Museum Architecture’
describes the artists’ workshop as an important component of the design of art museums from the early 1800s, so this is a historic category of space.\textsuperscript{12}

5.3.3 Education spaces

The third type, event and education spaces, had some overlap with workspaces, where material also has the potential to enter and exit in similar fashion. Unlike a workspace, however, event and education spaces have been designed firstly with the public in mind. So, like the reading room, they are not ‘even’ sites of staff and participant overlap. However, they can still be sites where collections material is generated, interpreted, or changed. Event/education spaces, or combined event and workspaces were the most common type of porous zone I encountered (followed by offices).\textsuperscript{13} Because of diversity’s association with education, outreach, and the more marginal spaces of the collection, it is not surprising that these featured prominently.

5.3.4 Offices

The last type of porous space I encountered were the offices of staff. Staff offices were a common location in my research, either as the site for an interview, or in passing when being introduced to staff or given a tour around the collection. Offices were predominantly low porosity places, with restricted public access. There were a few notable exceptions, which I'll discuss in the cases, where offices were part of, or semi-contiguous with workspaces and event spaces, and thus became much more active parts of porous zones.

5.3.5 Kitchens and breakrooms

Although they are not properly porous zones (since they have no direct connection to collections material), I also propose that kitchens and breakrooms as places that are not-unrelated to the porous zone. In my experience, when spaces like these were close to the collections and accessible to the public, they increased feelings of welcome and access. Breakrooms and kitchens provide users with the opportunity for informal contact with staff, making the collections environment feel less formal overall, and making it possible for users to remain at the collection longer (bringing lunch, making tea, etc.).
The porous zones in my fieldwork that were the least porous were offices with no public access. In addition, there were a few local authority archival reading rooms that had fairly heavily mediated access (I.D. and/or appointments required) with very little possibility for intervention. The most porous spaces were predominantly multi-purpose ones, where it was relatively easy to access the working areas of the collection and for public users to engage in dialog about or get involved in the interpretation and management of the collection. One potential explanation for the porosity of these multi-purpose spaces, as I advanced with my semi-inclusion of ‘kitchens’ in this typology, is that multipurpose spaces make it more likely that members of the public will interact with staff. Having spaces with relatively informal, familiar uses (kitchens, event spaces) as well as more official ones (offices or workspaces) might also make these places feel overall more accessible to the public. In the following cases, I have chosen some of higher porosity spaces surrounding collections to explore how they encourage or discourage access and intervention more in depth.

5.4 Cases

In the first case, I look at porous zones at the London Natural History Museum. I put the space of my fieldwork site, the Angela Marmont Centre (AMC) in context by comparing it to the rest of the Darwin Centre (of which it is architecturally a part). The Darwin Centre, completed in 2009, holds the museum’s working science and collections spaces. It, along with the AMC was designed for public viewing and access. By comparing and contrasting the way these two spaces were designed I am able to draw out some of the differences between the public visibility and public accessibility of not just collections spaces, but also of collections (or natural science) work. I then explore the porosity of collections spaces and practices at the Angela Marmont Centre through the work of their identification enquiries service. The final part of the case explores the asymmetry in how staff and members of the public value the spaces and materials of the museum. These differences emphasise how collections practices and collections frameworks (discussed more in Chapter 6 and 7, respectively) draw boundaries between different kinds of knowledge and materials.

5.4.1 Transparency and trash at the Angela Marmont Centre

I carried out research at the AMC during spring and summer (April-July) 2017. During this time, I interviewed five of the seven permanent members of staff and spent an additional few weeks shadowing the work of the centre, focusing on the species identification (ID)
enquiries service and the ID Trainers for the Future programme. In this chapter I talk mainly about the ID enquiries service (Chapter 6 discusses ID Trainers for the Future). At the Natural History Museum, the AMC acts as a hub for building and sharing expertise in UK species identification and biological recording. It also builds and maintains a collection of UK species, which was initially created out of duplicate material from other museum departments. This reference collection is used primarily for teaching and creating resources to aid in UK species identification. The AMC specifically specialises in the less well-studied UK species, and so their collections largely cover insects, fossils, and plants.

Because the AMC was designed as a learning and research hub, my presence at the AMC was not seen as unusual. Researchers, volunteers, and other visitors, including non-specialist ones (like artists) were common. The Identification and Advisory Officer, the staff member whose work I concentrate on here, saw my presence as not unlike the other visits he handled, and was comfortable letting me explore the centre or follow him closely throughout the day. The AMC is not the only space of public science within the Natural History Museum. It is a relatively small part of the Darwin Centre, which as a whole was built to provide visitors with more access to the museum’s collections and to the scientists who work on them (NHM 2010; 2009). The landmark extension was described by the museum’s director, Dr Michael Dixon, as ‘truly putting our science on view for the first time’ (Morgan 2008). The AMC was opened to the public in 2010, shortly after the Darwin Centre was finished, but the AMC and its design has been given much less attention than the Darwin Centre’s flashier standouts.

The Darwin Centre is the newest part of the museums’ complex. Within the building’s glass-and-steel box, the eight-story tall, organic shape of the Cocoon dominates the space (See Figure 5.1). The solidity of its smooth concrete contrasts with the transparency all around it. This glass does not just provide a window to the outside, it gives a view of the inside, onto the work and laboratory space of the museum’s science research wing. Within the Cocoon, internal viewing decks also provide windows on working scientists, as well as the entomology and botany collections. The collections storage itself is shown to visitors in both in the Cocoon and the Darwin Centre’s Spirit Collection area (See Figure 5.1 and 5.2). In the latter, windows onto grey rows of specimen storage racks are embellished with cases of highlights from the collection. Along with the many strange soft-bodied organisms, the storage
apparatus and specimen-making equipment carry labels and interpretation just like the other artefacts (as Reeves [2017, 58] also notes).

Figure 5.1 View of the Darwin Centre, looking toward the Spirit Collections. Photo by author.

Figure 5.2 A display in the Spirit Collection, looking into the collection storage. Photo by author.
The AMC is located at one end of the Darwin Centre, half a flight of stairs below ground level, and not immediately visible to visitors. The displays directly outside of the AMC are recent and interactive (as of August 2017) on urban insects, pollution, and bumblebee identification), but not visually spectacular.\textsuperscript{14} The centre itself is quietly attractive. Like many of the other working spaces in the Darwin Centre, it is glass-fronted. But, instead of the plain glass that fronts the other work spaces, there are colourful transfers of UK-native plants and animals that dot and grow across the panels. The AMC’s glass frontage extends across most of the length of the centre, interspersed with a few opaque panels, pillars, and a lift, so that you can see slices of the different spaces within.

Figure 5.3 Front doors of the Angela Marmont Centre for UK Biodiversity. Photo by author.

As description and the images depict, glass predominates throughout the spaces of the Darwin Centre. It literally makes the boundaries between the public and the museum’s science and collections invisible. This is not just a visual effect; as the museum director stated, the Darwin Centre was designed to make the work of the museum more transparent. The link between glass and the transparency of labour is also more broadly observed. Reeves (2017) writes:
‘Transparency in political, institutional, and managerial discourse is associated with accountability and the elimination of corruption. To be transparent is to be democratic. The metaphor of transparency is achieved with literal transparency in open-plan offices and newly built governmental offices and research laboratories where glass dominates architecturally, and this translation of the metaphor of transparency into literal transparency characterises much museum visible storage discourse. […] Transparency means to be accessible at all times, to always be comprehensible’ (59).

In practice, transparency is partial, often for valid reasons. The view of the research wing through the glass around the Cocoon is predominantly of blank cubicle walls, showing nothing ‘inside’ at all. Still, in light of the momentous architecture, even this non-vision feels dramatic. The lack of view on the ‘real’ internal offices is understandable—much of the office work of scientists is not visually interesting. Mostly, the Darwin Centre offers access to the performance of scientific and collections labour rather than (functional, active) transparency in relation to the work of collections or the collection practitioners.

Although it has similar glass frontage, the AMC offers more access and engagement to scientific and collections labour than the rest of the Darwin Centre. This is in part because the AMC and the Darwin Centre ultimately cater to two different publics. The Darwin Centre’s architectural performance is for the museum visitor to view (more or less casually) while the AMC is intended to be used, primarily by naturalists and amateur enthusiasts. Like the Darwin Centre, the space of the AMC was designed so that people’s engagements with the centre happen in a visible, transparent way. What I discovered in practice was that although the AMC was a site of engagement, the types of access and porosity I observed did not match up exactly with the glass-framed spaces made for them. One example of this is that takes place in the work of the AMC’s ID enquiries service.

The AMC was founded in part to centralise the museum’s role in answering public and commercial questions about identifying specimens. Historically, natural history museums have helped local people identify things they’ve found, and because of the NHM’s national status, this has long been run on a larger scale. Before the AMC, this used to be distributed throughout the museum, with people trying to contact likely departments or individuals (AMC5). The AMC now answers most of these enquiries directly, passing them onto specialist curators for advice when necessary. This also happens the other ways around: other parts of the museum will get contacted about identifying something and then, in most cases, direct the enquiry to the AMC. The Identification and Advisory Officer is person whose role
it is to facilitate this at the AMC. As the member of staff also responsible for public and researcher access to the centre, The Identification and Advisory Officer was my first point of contact at the AMC. In the many days I spent conducting interviews and participant observation at the AMC, I watched the Identification and Advisory Officer answer zoological enquiries of all kinds.15

The AMC was designed with a walk-in ID enquiries desk at the entrance to the centre in order to facilitate ID enquiries work. The desk is one of the things that is immediately visible through the AMC’s glass doors, a sign that the AMC is a readily-available public resource. In the months I visited the AMC, however, I only ever saw the Identification and Advisory Officer use this desk once.

There are several reasons for this, starting with the fact that the AMC’s public enquiries service is not an especially well known or heavily advertised function of the museum. The AMC as the whole has a similar status; some of its staff say that there are even people who work in the museum who do not know about the centre.16 The lack of advertisement for the ID service seems to be for purely practical reasons: the Identification and Advisory Officer had a full workload with the current volume of enquiries already, in addition to his other duties. ID enquiries are only a small part of the work of the AMC as a whole, and walk-in identification requests rare. Although there were frequently museum staff, volunteers, and other visitors who came through the centre during the day, I never saw unplanned or walk-in visitors. While it is technically possible for a casual museum visitor to come into the centre with an ID enquiry or other questions, the glass doors to the AMC were always closed when I arrived.17 You can ring the bell next to the door, but this is something that the museum decorum discourages for the general visitor. It is likely that the enquiries desk was designed for an assumed level of visible public interaction that never arrived.

Because of these factors, the Identification and Advisory Officer never sits behind the (bare) enquiries desk. Instead, he works from his cubicle, which, by contrast, is intriguingly full of identification reference books, posters, papers, specimens, a microscope and two computer monitors.

Talking about the visible storage for a public study room at the V&A, Reeves (2017, 61) notes:
‘As with all interactive or event spaces in museums, most of the time there is no activity. Even at the world’s greatest museum of art and design, the demand for access to the collections is far from constant’.

Similarly, one can say that even in one of the world’s greatest natural history museums, the situation is very similar. There is not constant demand for walk-in collections services, even though the space was designed with interactivity in mind. Instead of happening at what appears to be a transparent entry to the collections, the vast majority of identification enquiries happen remotely: by post, email, or through a dedicated online forum (where members of the public as well as the Identification and Advisory Officer can supply answers to queries).

What crosses the border into the AMC through the ID enquiries service (virtually or physically) are not common, everyday specimens—at least from the perspective of the people who write in. According to the Identification and Advisory Officer, people tend to use the enquiry service either because people think they have something really special (and they’re usually wrong), or they’re worried that they have a pest that will eat or destroy things. People are interested in identifying, then, things that they think exceed the boundaries of the(ir) everyday and belong within the framework of the museum—either in an exalted or profane place. Belonging within the framework of the museum is not always the same as belonging within the museum’s collection. Many people send enquiries without expectation of either a place within the museum’s collection or even the return of their material. However, they do expect the museum to have a taxonomic if not physical place for the unusual in their lives.

The AMC’s postal enquiries are especially interesting to follow in terms how crossing the boundaries of collections space does and does not confer value on material. Although the Identification and Advisory Officer tells me that email, phone, and online enquiries are the most common, he still regularly receives specimens in the mail. On the days I watched him answer enquiries, we opened up envelopes that contain beetles wrapped in tissue, tubes of bees, and smashed insects that are a bit smelly. Unlike in a social history collection, these things are not treated as artefacts, or even really as specimens. First, the Identification and Advisory Officer identifies what’s been sent if he can. Then, unless the sender has requested it to be returned, it gets thrown in the bin. The lack of formality with which the identified insects in were dumped into the regular office trash bin felt abrupt and even shocking.
compared to the detailed and relatively rigid policies around custody of objects in social history museum and archives.

Rather than the entrance of material into the museum being a notable event, or the crossing of a hard border between the AMC and outside, this happened in a more open zone. Objects might cross and re-cross with a number of possible outcomes. Sometimes, if the material is sufficiently interesting, and the sender does not want it returned, it is kept in the AMC’s handling collections, which is held in the cabinets around the Identification and Advisory Officer’s cubicle. The handling collection is eclectic, made up of things that seem to have been selected out of curiosity or happenstance rather than for scientific or even education value. Although the AMC draws boundaries in terms of what it covers and what is scientifically relevant, it does not always maintain these boundaries rigidly. For example, while the AMC purportedly only deals with UK material, in practice it sometimes keeps international material—invasive species, or things that wash up on the coast. What is UK-material is not always clear-cut. And even when it is, the Identification and Advisory Officer is willing to ignore it in some circumstances. For example, since he loves birds, he’s usually willing to identify when people take pictures of parrots abroad. In the handling collection, one drawer of material has been kept seemingly only because of the containers they were sent in: colourful matchboxes, chocolate boxes, cigarette rolling paper packets, a vial labelled ‘Gin!’. Another drawer is mostly rocks and fossils. There is a small dinosaur fossil (The Identification and Advisory Officer describes it as ‘not very good for scientists’), a chunk of fossilized moss (‘much older than any of the dinosaur fossils’), and the tusk of an English elephant.

They also have many examples of the most common type of rock sent to them for identification: rocks that people think might be meteorites. These are so common that staff call them ‘meteorwrongs’. The Identification and Advisory Officer shows me one meteorwrong on the tray that is actually a large piece of slag (wastage from processing metals), another that is a chunk of black glass. One of the email enquiries I watch the Identification and Advisory Officer answer is from a Norfolk farmer who thinks she’s found a meteorite. Her email has some suggestions about what kind of meteorite it might be (marcasite) so we look at image of marcasite on Google. Her picture looks sort of similar to marcasite to me, but the Identification and Advisory Officer seems unconvinced, typing in ‘pyrite nodules’. In a minute, it is clear that the rock is just a piece of pyrite. The Identification
and Advisory Officer selects an image from Google that’s looks similar to the picture she sent and attaches it to his reply. He also has a pyrite fact sheet—the AMC has fact sheets for common enquiry answers—and from it he types into the email body that ‘[Pyrite] is a type of concretion, a crystal that grew slowly rather than falling from space’. I find this negation poetic, and am generally fascinated by these rocks that fail to be special. At one point, I suggest I might look into the meteorwrongs further, and maybe do a piece of writing about them for the AMC. The Identification and Advisory Officer does not feel this romantic tug, and tells me this, that we—experts—are not interested in the meterowrongs. They are not scientifically interesting because they are not really anything at all within the framework of this collection.

The mis-identified meteorwrong reminds me of my own experience maintaining disciplinary knowledge boundaries in archaeology. As an archaeologist working on digs that were open to the public, people often asked my team, ‘Have you found any gold yet?’ Archaeologists, at least where I have worked, almost never find anything monetarily valuable. Instead, they often do manual labour for little pay digging up muddy fragments that might (after months of work) provide only a little historical value. This is to say that archaeologists often find questions about gold and treasure annoying. However, I have always tried to reflect on what I was taught about public engagement, which is that this kind of question can be a way for people who do not know anything about archaeology to try to start a conversation with you. Responding in an open way, ‘No gold, but we’re finding…’ (Not a meteor, but a pyrite nodule which grew…) is a way of drawing disciplinary boundaries while trying to encourage people to continue to engage with the process of scientific identification.

In these types of situations, non-practitioners also often have different ideas about what is meaningful than the people working in collections. People often think the interesting-looking pottery sherd they found while out for a walk is meaningful, even if it has little historical value (because it lacks archaeological context). Even when collections are porous and accessible to the public, it does not necessarily mean that the material is being understood or valued the same way on both sides. If you’ve seen hundreds of pyrite nodules (or tiny, nigh-unidentifiable pottery sherds), then it can be difficult to recall the excitement of feeling like it might fit within an official or even special category, or that it does because of its relation to you. The frameworks that practitioners in both archaeology and natural history use to
determine what counts as evidence (the latter discussed in Chapter 7) do not include these types of personal connections to material.

Although material is not always valued in the same way that donors might hope, in the examples I have discussed above, this does not mean a complete rejection from the collection. Even when rejecting or disposing of material, the collection can still be thought of as performing a service that people value. One example comes with a box of butterflies that a colleague brings over to the Identification and Advisory Officer’s desk. The box was from someone’s great grandad’s collection and had been given to the museum, and the butterflies had been collected in the 1930s, and perhaps earlier. The colleague says that people often donate things like this because they do not know what to do with them. The donor probably did not want to hold onto an antique butterfly collection, but thought that museum would find them valuable and keep them forever. Now, the Identification and Advisory Officer’s job is to throw them out: the specimens are not actually valuable, and in poor condition. The box they’re in, however, is a valuable antique, easily fetching around £500. Once the butterflies are disposed of, the box will be frozen to remove all traces of pests, and then sold to raise money for the museum. This is an unusual example: the specimens discarded while the cases are kept. However, like the meteorwrongs, they represent people attempting to place material they’ve encountered (or inherited) into a potentially valuable context. As with the left-behind or discarded enquiries, the collection also serves as a notional space for taking on material that is unwanted—in the hope that there could be a better use for the material than disposal, but perhaps a tacit acceptance of the possibility that there is not.

In this case, I have described how the AMC is a porous zone for the Natural History Museum’s UK collections, enabled both by its architectural features and the work of the ID enquiries service. With the ID enquiries service, the Identification and Advisory Officer maintains both the boundaries of the collection as well as access to it. Through physical but especially virtual means, the AMC offers a relatively high degree of access to members of the public, including to species identification expertise that generously interprets its remit. There is also the potential for members of the public to participate and intervene of the collection using its public workspaces. Those who go further than the enquiries desk at the AMC’s entrance find themselves in a reception area, doubling as a breakroom, that leads into the rest of the centre. Couches and a low table occupy a corner near the edge of the teaching
space-cum-kitchenette: with the fridge, kettle, and microwave next to the science laboratory-type sinks. The rest of the centre sits off behind a keycarded door, which staff, volunteers, visiting researchers, and others come in and out of for tea, lunch, and other errands. Despite the need of the keycard to enter it, the inner part of the centre is still relatively porous and its workspaces have been designed for volunteers and visitors as well as staff.

This inner workspace is doubly set in glass, with a large panel facing the public galleries, and glass half-wall dividing it from staff cubicles. Decorated with the same semi-transparent flora and fauna as the front of the centre, the back panel presents the centre’s title in large scale. By virtue of this panel, it is literally the titular space of the centre, where staff, trainees, or visitors have room to work on identifying material. Desks are set up with microscopes, specimen photography stations, and surrounded by an open-access reference collection of specimens, books, and guides.

This double setting, between the staff cubicles and the public areas, replicates the porous, in-between nature of the AMC on a smaller scale. During my time shadowing the Identification and Advisory Officer, he says he wishes this inner workspace was occupied more often. Despite clearly enjoying his work, and having been at the AMC for several years, it seems as though the centre remains a slightly awkward place for him. He seems much more comfortable in the ‘true’ backstage of the museum. By this he means the basement passages and back routes that allow you to travel below and through the NHM’s network of buildings. These routes are used by all kinds of staff: catering, security, maintenance, scientists, curators, and more. The passages under the original museum building are lined with additional, antique-looking collections storage, and houses the IT department and a gym. It is an odd, busy place, long and narrow in contrast to the great hall and expansive displays above. For the Identification and Advisory Officer, ‘this is the real museum’. In comparison to the ‘real’ backstage, and the ‘unreal’ exhibitions, the AMC is somehow both real and not-real, where the labour and content of collections is neither fixed (as in exhibitions) nor able to carry on industriously without scrutiny from the outside.

5.4.2 Communities of records in social history archives: Hackney Archives and MayDay Rooms

The remaining two cases of the chapter look at social history archives: first Hackney Archive and then MayDay Rooms. Like the AMC and the Darwin Centre, Hackney Archive and
MayDay Rooms are a pair of places that serve two slightly different publics. Like the Darwin Centre, Hackney Archives is intended to appeal to the borough’s broadest public (whether or not this is who it reaches), while like the AMC, MayDay Rooms is intended to appeal to a smaller public of enthusiasts and experts. This provides them with different abilities and constraints in terms of shaping their spaces and modes of engagement. As with the AMC, these cases first consider the physical architecture and layout of the collections. Then, they explore ways that the borders and boundaries of these collections are drawn and maintained.

**Hackney Archives**

Hackney Archives is the local authority archive for the borough of Hackney, part of the council’s Heritage Services, along with Hackney Museum (discussed in Chapter 6). The archive is located within the Dalston CLR James Library, whose current building was built by the council and opened in 2012. The library is part of a smart, mixed-used development constructed around the same time, matching their stylish brick and glass towers. The building of a public library during a period widespread budget cuts for local government was regarded as a significant achievement and a sign of the borough’s commitment, not just to libraries, but to community space more generally (Hackney Citizen 2012).

The archives are on the second floor, which can be seen from the bottom of the library’s central, curved wooden staircase, whose wood also forms the balcony of each level. In addition to traditional signage, the word ‘Archives’ is carved in large capital letters in the second-floor balcony. Library visitors can walk in and access the open reference collections, provided they put their bag in a locker. Accessing the stored collections require ordering in advance and two forms of ID to be shown. I interviewed one of the Senior Archives Officers at Hackney in August 2017 on a Monday, when the archive is closed to the public. While the archive’s location in the CLR James Dalston Library places it within a highly trafficked and accessible setting, the Senior Archives Officer raised insightful questions about the extent to which archival spaces, particularly local government ones, can or should be spaces where all of the borough’s diversity is represented.

‘People’s experience of local authorities—particularly the people that are put under the “diverse banner”—well, there’s a range of experiences, but there is definitely a kind of hesitation to want to interact with [local government]. As an example, there was a club called Four Aces on [the library] site before. There was a campaign to save it […] but eventually the club was knocked down [by the council], and this library and this big development of flats was built in its place. So [the proprietor’s]
collection, for example, would be [great]. The club had been around since the sixties, in Hackney, and Marvin Gaye played there and all kinds of pretty big artists. And through the years it continued to be relevant to the area. So, his archive would be something that I think would be really exciting to have, but at the same time, he’s not necessarily running to donate it to us. And so, I’m a bit nervous about what collecting means as well. I mean, maybe people don’t always need their things collected.’

Being wary of collecting for collecting’s sake, the Senior Archives officer was instead interested in helping to support and collaborate in what he called ‘communities of interest’ around material.

‘And not just material, but the ideas that surround that material and then a kind of more active preservation. So, you’re preserving stuff but then one way it gains strong meaning is when it’s being activated and used and transmitted.’

As discussed in the last case, donations are one way that people and materials can enter into porous zones and impact archival collections (as discussed in the last case), but the Senior Archives Officer and I spoke about also enlarging the borders of archives in other ways. This idea of ‘communities of interest’ is close to Jeannette Bastian’s (2003, 3-4) concept of ‘communities of records’, where a community is both ‘a record-creating entity and a memory frame that contextualises the records it creates’. In the introduction to Owning Memory (2003), Bastian offers various elaborations of ‘communities of records,’ specifying also that it does not need to refer only to written (archival) records—and in fact decentralises archives (or any institutions) as the heart of heritage.

‘Through the relationship between actions and records, communities are defined. […] At the same time, a community of records is also one in which traditions of record keeping are developed, manifested, and bounded by recognized and accepted conventions […] Forms and modes of expression, or record structures, are shared between record-creating community, creating in turn “imagined communities” of records similar to those envisioned by Benedict Anderson in his classic work on nationalism’ (Bastian 2003, 5).

Before taking on his staff role, the Senior Archives Officer collaborated with Hackney Archives to run the participatory event ‘Dubbing the Archive’ in October 2016 (Decolonising the Archive n.d.-b). This event built on his work with the art and archive intervention group with Decolonising the Archive. ‘Dubbing the Archive’ was an immersive workshop that combined dub poetry with video, music, and performance to respond to aspects of the archive. Dub poetry is a form of performance poetry that evolved out of the
Jamaica and the Caribbean diaspora in the 1970s. Poet and academic Mervyn Morris (1997, 1) describes it thus:

“The word “dub” in “dub poetry” is borrowed from recording technology, where it refers to the activity of adding and removing sounds. “Dub poetry,” which was written to be performed, incorporates a music beat, often a reggae beat. Often, but not always, the performance is done to the accompaniment of music, recorded or live.”

Dub poetry’s practice of layering over, subtracting from, and remixing from the musical record was consciously chosen as a form for intervening in the archive. Done as part of Hackney Council’s Black History Season, ‘Dubbing the Archive’ was intended to be attractive to local African and Caribbean people, who the Senior Archives Officer reported did attend the event. In addition to bringing more, and perhaps different, people into the archives, the event also changed the space by projecting video, visuals, and hosting dub poetry performances. When I spoke to the Senior Archives Officer about ‘Dubbing the Archive’, it was clear the event was successful, but also that the archival space was not designed to support the ways they wanted to engage with it.

Senior Archives Officer: Yeah, we had a dub band in here. It was kind of fun.
Interviewer: I’m not sure many archives have had bands in them.
Senior Archives Officer: No, it was…Yeah, it was a bit of a headache to be honest [laughs].
Interviewer: [laughs]
Senior Archives Officer: Archives aren’t set up for bands. It wasn’t without its issues. […] But, in terms of the actual delivery, it was quite well-received.

Some of the collections used in the ‘Dubbing the Archive’ event included Hackney People’s Press and Centreprise. Hackney People’s Press was a radical left-wing newspaper and the latter was the community centre, bookshop, café, and publisher which part-founded and distributed it (Woodlin 2018). For the Senior Archives Officer, Centreprise suggested one model of archives functioning like a community centre, where people’s pathways through the space are not predefined.
'In an archive or museum or a library even, you kind of have to have a reason to go in there, that’s related to the collections. Whereas [at Centreprise] you could go in and have a cup of tea. And then suddenly have the chance to connect with other things. And I’m more of that mind set. If people want to do stuff and you can make space, make a space. And maybe the connection is not defined yet, but then a connection will come out, doing that piece of work.’

Although broadly advocating flexibility, our conversation went back and forth on the need for a boundaried vs. open archival space. As archival scholar Susan Pell (2015) describes in an article about the London’s 56a InfoShop, there are trade-offs in choosing to have informal, direct access archives. Allowing people to add to and interact with material however they wish increases access, but the lack of a standardized information management framework decreases accessibility. The Senior Archives Officer spoke about the importance of both information management and other framings for archival spaces:

‘[T]he fact of the matter is that you can’t just turn up [to the archives] and say, “Let’s just do something”. You have to have some sort of frame, and then allow enough space for people to move around within it. If it’s completely freeform, it’s quite difficult, because everyone looks back at you and says okay “We’re waiting for you to do something.”’

Rather than try to find a ‘middle ground’ between boundaries and openness, the Senior Archives Officer argued for an ecosystem of spaces and approaches to collections.

‘So, Black Cultural Archives, for example. I think it’s great that there’s a formal site people can go to for that. But then, that became the only kind of black archive, the go-to place, then I think that’s problematic as well. I still think you need people doing thing online or doing things in a much more fluid and flexible way. To augment what the people that are formalised have done. Because, for me, the role of formalised institutions that are switched on is just to advocate for the general importance of those histories. But then, I think it’s important for people to be able to be more agile and a little more tuned in than a formal institution can be. Because I think you know, there’s limits to what you can do once you’re in funding structures and you’ve got all those expectations to deliver particular things, and business plans and god knows what else.’

When archives and museums have been conceptualised as ecosystems, this has mostly referred to ecosystems of collections material rather than spaces, but this is a logical extension, especially thinking in terms of how those spaces condition interaction with collections (Lee-Crossett 2018, 6; Moore 2007). In this understanding of an ecosystem of archives, diversity might look not like a range of material, but different institutions using similar material in diverse ways—for example, Black Cultural Archives’ approach to African
and Caribbean historical material verses an artistic online project like Decolonizing the Archive.

*MayDay Rooms Archive*

Mayday Rooms (MDR) social movement archives is one example of the active, multipurpose community space that Hackney’s Senior Archives Officer envisions. Initially founded in 2009 as a discussion around the need for radical history and anti-austerity spaces, MDR is now a charity run by a small collective of staff and regular users of their building. MDR’s archival collection began by rescuing material from Central St Martins’ influential 1969 experimental teaching programme (the ‘A Course’), which had been thrown out of the university archive due to water damage. Today, MDR holds a variety of art and social movement collections that date from the 1970s to the present. These collections primarily come from the UK, but they also include international material. MDR Archive is able to function as a community space partially because of its sustained charitable funding and its unique location.

Unlike most archives and other community projects that began as grassroots, activist projects, MDR’s funding made it possible for them to obtain the lease to a four-storey building in the heart of the City of London, surrounded by a wealthy business district. The building, formerly the Birmingham Daily Post, was always intended not just as space for the archive, but also for community organising and education purposes. The space not used by the archive is lent, longer or shorter term, to a variety of activist and community groups. The longer term tenants (the Building Collective) include CAIWU (Cleaners & Allied Independent Union), June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive, General Branch of Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and STRIKE!, a left-wing magazine (MDR n.d.-a). I first interviewed MDR’s Archivist in November 2016, and a second staff member in July 2017. I attended multiple events there primarily between July-October 2017, but also periodically before and after these dates.

The formality of MDR’s architecture and the busy business district outside contrasts to the warm, mismatched, and DIY environment within—a honeycomb of offices, archive rooms, and a kitchen organised around a central staircase. A group of activists who were preparing for a meeting with the head of a defence and security sector conference during my initial visit said, light-heartedly, ‘One of the reasons we’re having [the meeting] here is because [MDR] is across from the Goldman Sachs building and not in some crusty community centre.’
Although it shares a similar ethos to the ‘crusty community centre’ (and other left-wing activist meeting and resource sites in London like 56a Infoshop, London Action Resource Centre, and Freedom Bookstore) its wealth of space and paid archival staff means that it can straddle the space between formal and informal institutions.

Where MDR is formal for activists, it is informal for archives. Barriers of access to MDR’s archives are deliberately kept low. Appointments to access the archive are not required, nor is there a need to request material in advance or show proof of identification upon arrival. When studying or consulting the archives, people are able to handle material without supervision although the archivist is often on hand to provide context and discussion if wished. Despite the small number of staff, the archive is often open for events evenings and weekends. Although they have fairly different purposes, MDR serves a similar type of public to the Angela Marmont Centre: enthusiasts, and amateur and professional experts (of left-wing organising and social movement history). Because of the dozens of groups that use the building for meetings and events, a number of potentially interested users encounter the archive on a regular basis.

MDR’s building and funding arrangements directly shape how it operates as an archival space. Because MDR leases rather than owns the building, it cannot be a permanent repository for the collections. The archive also does not own anything that has been donated. This means that maintaining relationships with donors is important, often to facilitate continued self-archiving of their collections or helping to find other, permanent homes for the material. The lack of commitment to permanent preservation, more or less assumed in other archival spaces, has contributed toward MDR’s archival philosophy. As a holding place rather than a final repository, MDR could be described as prioritising ‘communities of records’. MDR’s Archivist calls this work ‘activating’ the archive. Their ‘About the archive’ states in more detail:

‘We consider MayDay Rooms and its holdings to be an active social resource more than a repository; a place where, amidst the austerity driven threats to education and spaces of dissent, the future can be produced more than the past contemplated; a communal space for the incubation of cross-currents and informal, unlicensed knowledge more than a ring-fenced scholar’s retreat. […]

Like the organisation itself, all the collections at MDR are regarded as ‘in formation’, gradually being supplemented by participant visits, group diagrams and audio-visual testimony. Of course, the precise form each evolving collection will take, the kind of
processing involved, and the level and means of dissemination will vary from
collection to collection’.

MDR runs a number of archive ‘activation’ projects. One of these is the London Housing
Struggles Archive, which has brought together collections from grassroots housing rights
campaigns dating from the 1970s to today, and created an interactive map of their holdings
(MDR n.d.-b). There is also the Calais Border Struggles Archive and an Activist Media
Project, which provides a digital platform and support for activist archiving as well as holding
collections of audio-visual campaign material. Events like the MDR Social, a monthly potluck
dinner (or cookout on the roof if the weather’s nice) that runs until late, are not activation
‘projects’, but also serve in essence as activation events, building social links between and
among MDR users and collections stakeholders.

As raised in the example of the AMC, donated material held within MDR’s collection is not
necessarily valued in the same way as it is by external depositors. In fact, MDR’s Archivist
described many of the archival materials as having low historical or informational value. He
said: ‘We have a lot of ephemera, and a lot of it, like this [an undated, A5 leaflet announcing
a Scottish poll tax protest], is not that valuable or useful to people. It doesn’t tell you much’.
Like the tray of meteorwrongs, some things are kept as context or contrast to more valuable
material. However, where the meteorwrongs make up a minority of the AMC’s collection
(although they are a major interest of enquiries users) ephemera makes up the majority of
the MDR collections. Compared to AMC, then, MDR is happy to accept a great deal of
donated material to their collection that is not ‘valuable’ (within a historical framework). This,
I would argue is because activity (including donations) is more valuable to MDR than for the
collections to be valuable. This is not so much the case for the AMC, although the ID enquiry
service creates this room around the edges.

Having this mass of non-valuable context, or contrast seems to relate to making space for
learning (e.g. species identification), exploration, and play. For MDR’s Archivist, growing the
archive is less important than ‘cutting paths through the archive’ with activity. This is a Walter
Benjamin-eque strategy that eschews the historian’s linear accumulations and instead makes
holistic connections across bodies of material (The Archivist had recently completed a PhD
about Benjamin). For this, material does not need to be historically or even informational
valuable in order to generate relationships and share encounters with the past. This is similar
to the approach of Decolonising the Archives ‘Dubbing the Archives’ event, where archival
material was featured in an artistic and partial way, but still aimed at making historical links and strengthening people’s relationships to the archive. At both ‘Dubbing the Archives’ and at MDR, the reduction of access barriers and traditional archival space restrictions helped to encourage these interactions.

One of the types of activation events I attended at MDR were Scanathons. Scanathons, despite their intensive-sounding name, were relaxed monthly drop-in events on a Saturday, where participants could help staff digitize and catalogue a selected archival collection. These were small events, with five to ten people, mostly in their twenties and thirties. Participants at the two Scanathons I attended included staff from Tate Britain, postgraduate students interested in the archive for research, people who knew someone connected to MDR, and people connected to the collection’s material. Not everyone was particularly interested in the archival material—a few people had come primarily to try out MDR’s impressive collection of DIY digitization technology (a book scanner, a complicated set-up that turned U-Matic [early videocassette] tapes into digital video, open source cataloguing software).

These afternoons were alternatively calm and chaotic: people worked away more or less quietly for periods of time, and then new people would arrive, sending the MDR staff member running around to give them a tour, or up and down the stairs to the kitchen for tea, while simultaneously trying to help someone troubleshoot a digitization question, order everyone pizza, or sort out an issue for one of the other groups also using the building. For me, in contrast to experiences of volunteering and participation at more formal heritage sector sites, it felt as if there was no expectation of (or control over) our output. Participants arrived and left at various times and worked until they felt they were finished. Despite this, Scanathons did not feel like dummy participation or an engagement event for the sake of engagement. It felt like we were genuinely contributing to the work of the archive, and we were allowed more or less direct access to material and cataloguing systems as appropriate to what we were working on. Although less performativity designed than the AMC, the workspace of the Scanathon shares a lot in common with its workspaces. They are both designed not just as spaces for access and intervention, but for teaching members of the public the technologies and modes for intervention in these spaces.

One of the things that came up in both the AMC and MDR cases is that staff within the collection valued materials differently, or less, than their donors. As discussed in the
examples of butterfly box and those using the enquiries service at the AMC, this is not necessarily a negative thing. People do not always expect their materials to treasured forever, (even if they like the idea of it). Sometimes, the collection is a place that takes material that you do not know what to do with and does not have a place in the categories of everyday life. In this case, the boundary that separates the collection from everyday life serves and important purpose in marking the materials' exit from everyday space. Following the ecosystems model proposed by Hackney’s Senior Archivist, it is not necessary for all collections to reinforce all potential users’ values, but rather for there to be a number of communities of records using similar materials in different ways.

This chapter proposed the concept of porous zones as a way to locate where work related to diversity was taking place in and around collections. From developing a typology of the kinds of porous zones I came across through my fieldwork, I used the three cases above to investigate some of these spaces. In each of these cases, the degree of access to the collections was relatively high, but the boundaries surrounding them were calibrated or maintained in different ways. One of the ways in which boundaries were set was through creating or expecting people to take particular pathways through the space. At the AMC, one example of a pathway was represented by the ID enquiries desk. In this case, the pathway did not end up becoming a high-volume site of engagement, and staff focused more on virtual and remote pathways. The Hackney Archives case also discussed trying to resist default modes for interaction in the archive by changing the feel and the typical users of the space through the 2016 ‘Dubbing the Archive’ event.

In reflecting on the difficulties of resisting ‘normal’ forms of archival engagement, the Senior Archivist recognised that these pre-set paths are valuable for providing some structure for engaging with publics (‘you can’t just turn up [to the archives] and say “Let’s just do something”’). Nevertheless, ‘Let’s just do something’ is much closer to the ethos of MDR than traditional forms of archival access and use. This works partly because MDR appears to care much less about outputs than most public collecting institutions. Arguably, predesigned pathways are intended to lead to relatively standardised outputs. I suspect MDR’s ethos also works because their publics (activists, community organisers, academics) have already at least partially mobilised into communities of records before encountering the collections. They have thus already determined some of the pathways for their engagement
on their own. In other words, previous experience or expertise with the collections subject area helps to facilitate access to collections.

Where a connection or a community of interest is absent, collections boundaries are much more like barriers. In a conversation with the AMC’s Director about the how engagement with science is dominated by white middle class populations, he said that the AMC was good at reaching people who already had a ‘science identity’, but one of questions going forward was:

‘How do we support people who have that interest to develop a science identity? To see science as something they can contribute to, that they're part of, that is relevant to them.’

The relatively narrow nature of communities of records in collections can be seen both as a failure of outreach and a failure to dismantle barriers—in this case, the persistence of the exclusionary foundations of collecting institutions. Hackney’s Senior Archives Officer offered a measured reflection on his work trying address this through the lens of decolonizing archives.

‘It’s dawned on me over the past four years that I don’t think you can decolonize archives. But, something good comes out when you try to do it. A lot of the procedures of archives—archiving and heritage, actually—are just so wrapped up with colonial projects that I don’t think it’s possible to now go back to a point where that wasn’t the case. But, then the truth is not all of that’s bad. There are some very useful information management skills I’ve learnt that come from that. So, I guess I’m more into trying to take a decolonial perspective on [archives] without assuming that you can come up with something completely new, because that’s not going to happen. But you might come onto something that’s different and useful.’

His words illustrate both the persistence of barriers to democratic engagement with collections and the space for practice-level intervention within that inertia. For practitioners to constantly generate or maintain forms of access that can cut through these frameworks is difficult. While design features like glass walls and windows fronting collections try to visually signify perpetual transparency, these gestures do not in themselves translate to transparency of collections work. While being broadly supportive of increased porosity in the spaces around collections, this chapter has also highlighted how porous zones are shaped by asymmetries and unevenness. People on both sides of the staff/public divide experience collections value and intervention in collections differently. I return to more fully consider
the topic of what it means to be able to intervene in collections a little in Chapter 6, and at length in Chapter 7.

My discussion of the AMC, Hackney Archives, and MDR has aimed to show how archive and museum spaces that are designed for open public interactivity are (1) frequently interactive in ways other than designed and (2) not often as interactive as they were designed to be. This investigation of the porous zone does not aim to prescribe a new kind of egalitarian space to which museums and archives might aspire, but instead offers a critical descriptive model of such spaces that are increasingly prevalent within these institutions.

Notes

1 As I have already done in Chapter 2, I would also argue that the governmental promotion of ‘respect for, and tolerance of, cultural diversity,’ as Bennett (1998) describes, is at least in part a risk-mitigation programme. Bennett’s (1995) ‘insatiable cycle of reform’ is discussed again in the next chapter.

2 See K.J. Rawson (2009) for the ways that access to archives can be more difficult for transgender people as well as other marginalised groups.

3 Graham (2012, 580) also argues that social impact has supplanted access as museum’s major outreach goal, something I think many practitioners would find discomforting or arguable.

4 Although see Jarett Drake (2016a) and Rawson (2009), who address how archival design can exclude, as well as Bonnie Gordon et al. (2016) and Alycia Sellie et al. (2015) for an example of trying to design a less exclusionary space.

5 Knowledge is always intended to go from the exhibition to the visitor’s realm, but objects or people are almost never intended to travel this direction.

6 Visible storage (though not visitable storage, as distinguished by Reeves [2017]) is also excluded from my description of the porous zones because this is also typically a display with low interactivity.

7 Unfortunately, they initially set up this argument by critiquing a repatriation claim that highlighted the fact that the disputed art was not (and was unlikely to be) on display (Brusius and Singh 2017, 1). In this particular example, the authors distort an understandable desire for accountability and transparency (let alone historic redress) in collections practice to make the facile point that museums can not be expected to use all of their collections in exhibitions.

8 Reeves (2017, 60-62) also observes that two of the most invisibilised locations of museum work are the labour at the very top (senior management) and at the very bottom (cleaners, security and other blue-collar staff).

9 Rather than archival ethnographies, which tend to be more historically informed readings of the shaping of particular collections of archival material (e.g. Stoler 2009).

10 Although Drake (2019; 2017; 2016a; 2016b) is more willing than most museum (or archival) reformers to diagnose the fundamental brokenness of the institution.

11 Giebelhausen (206) only discusses art museums in her chapter on ‘Museum Architecture’, so it is unclear to what extent her claims carry over to natural history museums and social history museums, which have different histories of professionalisation.

12 In terms of the frequency of different porous zone spaces, I counted the uses of space rather than individual spaces. In other words, some of the spaces were multi-use and I counted each use-type. For example, somewhere that contained an office and an event/education space got counted as one of each.

13 This is a contrast to the insect gallery in the main museum. Creepy Crawlies is visually spectacular (giant models of insects, a human-sized ant hill, etc.) but also feels dated. Its display conventions and approach are similar to the Food exhibition Sharon Macdonald (2002) wrote on, and Creepy Crawlies was probably developed at a similar date. By contrast, the most recently completed insect display, in Hintz Hall which opened in 2018, takes its visual style from contemporary art and design.

14 Three other staff members were responsible for the botany, geological/fossil enquiries, and commercial enquiries.

15 With NHM staff numbering 800-900, it is certainly possible that some of them do not know about the AMC.
I observed the AMC in weekdays during spring and summer. It is open one Saturday of the month, and I possibly would have seen more visitor interaction then, although AMC staff confirmed my characterisation of (lack of) walk-in visitors.

This is not a unique coinage of the NHM, but used more broadly in geology. Meteorwrongs are commonly received by other universities and natural history museums that offer geological ID services (Field Museum n.d.; Korotev 2011; Natural History Museum of L.A. 2012). The NHM’s ID services team also wrote about their volume of meteorite enquiries and common meteorwrongs in 2012 (Museum ID Team 2012).

Until 2012, the Dalston CLR James library was located in another building in the borough. James’ name was almost dropped by the council from the library’s title in the rebuild, but was retained after public protest. James’ name had been added to the previous Dalston branch library in as part of the council’s ‘Anti-Racist Year’ in 1985, which included initiatives to better reflect Hackney’s African and Caribbean histories and accomplishments (Hackney Citizen 2010; Watson 2014).

Although Bastian (2003) has a relatively open idea of what ‘communities of records’ contain, her definition is very based around shared heritage and collective memory, neither of which I believe need to be a key part of communities of records. Following Heritage Futures, I would argue that communities of records are often truly as much about producing the present or the future as recovering or inscribing the past.

In addition to Centreprise, the Senior Archives Officer cited hearing a talk by members of the activist Interference Archive in New York (speakers at the V&A’s ‘Disobedient Objects’ symposium in November 2014) as inspiration for the event. Some of the work of the Interference Archive has already been cited (Gordon et al. 2016; Sellie et al. 2015).

The role of digital collections spaces (either born-digital or institutionally hosted) would also be relevant to consider in terms of contemporary porous zones and access to archives and museum collections, but this is beyond the scope of this research.

Archives and science collections, as recordkeeping institutions, often have a better sense of their local or national ecosystems of collections than museums, which have not ever functioned as administrative or evidential units in the same way (Moore 2007).

Although MDR works to be accessible in many senses, they are not accessible to those who have significant mobility impairments as there is no elevator (and MDR leases all but the ground floor of the building).
Chapter 6  Object stories: negotiating significance and representation in museums

This chapter is about object stories, or narratives about the processes of collecting. It builds on the work of the last chapter by illustrating how materials considered diverse are introduced into the porous zones around collections described in Chapter 3. Object stories thus present more information about the spatial location for diversity, showing again that diverse materials are frequently managed outside of official or permanent collections. Object stories also provide more detail for locating where diversity appears in practice. This chapter, then, primarily aims to answer the question, ‘How are decisions made to introduce “diverse” materials and perspectives into collections?’. I argue that the introduction of diversity is associated mostly with informal and uncertain types of decision-making. The cases in this chapter show that negotiations around collecting diversity often extend beyond the specific materials in question into larger conflicts about the project of representation in collections. Questioning how representation works in collections leads us into starting to answer the question about how bringing in material from previously underrepresented groups can impact how the collection is conceptualised and managed.

Thinking about object stories began with asking the practitioners I interviewed to tell me about the process of acquiring a recent (and contemporary) acquisition for their collections. This question often led to detailed and nuanced replies about how collecting processes worked in practice. These narratives helped to anchor larger, more abstract theoretical discussions about contemporary collecting practice in my fieldwork. Although I often struggled to talk with practitioners about diversity and representation in their collections on an abstract level, object stories provided a way to get into specifics about how people saw the project of representation in their collections and how new materials fit in with this (or not). Focusing on the most recent materials to enter the collections also brought up still-live questions and debates about selection, representation, and the current and future aims of collections. Object stories also illuminated how collecting processes worked on the ground, in contrast to the more straightforward way these activities were laid out in policy.

All of my interviewees told at least one object story, and so they formed a strong place of comparison across my sample of sites. This chapter selects three cases featuring object stories
to explore in detail. I argue that object stories help show, first: the informal and non-linear ways in which significance is determined in collecting processes. What is determined to be significant within collections, and who gets to decide this, are key issues in my thesis because significance is a key metric for deciding whether or not material is introduced into collections. Whether or not diversity is seen as significant in terms of collections’ value frameworks determines whether or not it is included. Although collecting policies, acquisitions policies, and/or significance assessment policies lay out linear, orderly plans for permanently acquiring new material, things that are considered diverse often circumvent these plans in messy, non-linear ways. The fact that materials considered diverse are not always easy to capture within currently existing processes means they can be perceived as difficult or challenging, irrespective of their content.

Second, object story narratives provide a glimpse of how practitioners’ understandings of how to best represent publics with collections are changing. During my fieldwork many of the practitioners I spoke with expressed ambivalence about collections’ traditional function of permanently (and passively) representing primary or coherent identity, culture, or property. Instead, many practitioners not only tried to collect people’s experiences in more holistic ways but also experimented with how to represent the relationship between materials and the people and contexts they came from. In the Museum of Transology and Wellcome Collection cases, this experimentation took the form of collecting donors’ stories as constitutive parts of their objects (rather than as post-hoc, mediated interpretations).

At Hackney Museum, staff also used the idea of telling stories to drive their contemporary collecting. In order to represent current, unfolding events and experiences, Hackney Museum has tried collecting material more rapidly and more informally than many other museums: acquiring materials first, and then deciding whether or not to formally acquire materials after a period of time has elapsed and the materials have been evaluated for their use in the museum. These flexible and informal practices represent the kind of responsiveness for which many museums strive, but they also present difficulties for materials considered diverse. Although the experimental collecting approaches discussed in this chapter are more likely to engage with material considered diverse or risky than traditional collecting processes, they do not necessarily plan to incorporate these materials into their permanent collections. Diversity is therefore ultimately undervalued as ‘core’ material in informal as well as formal collecting initiatives.
This chapter shows that the existing literature in heritage on contemporary collecting and representation in museums does not fully address the informal and flexible ways that contemporary collecting is taking place, or how museum curators are experimenting with representation and determining significance with contemporary materials and subjects (e.g. Alberti 2005; Fredheim and Khalaf 2016; Macdonald and Morgan 2018; Rhys and Baveystock 2014). To do this, I first more fully define and discuss literature on ‘object stories’, assessing significance and representation. Next, I look at object stories in three cases: first at curator-led collecting at Hackney Museum, and then at crowdsourced collecting at the Museum of Transology and at Wellcome Collection’s A Museum of Modern Nature. The cases and literature in this chapter largely draw on social history museums, with the next two chapters bringing these concepts forward in the context of contemporary collecting in social history archives and natural history collections.
6.1 Object stories

I use the term object stories (although I will go on to discuss a broad range of material, not just ‘objects’) in dialogue with ‘object biographies’. The latter is an approach to material culture analysis and exchange introduced to archaeology and museum objects by Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall (1999), which they derived from work on commodities in anthropology by Igor Kopytoff (1986) and Arjun Appadurai (1986). In the object biographies approach, the 'lives' or trajectories of objects are documented to draw attention to how social meanings and values transform via the relationships between people and objects over time. Since its introduction, the object biography approach has been a popular way to analyse objects in a variety of heritage and heritage-adjacent fields and has undergone revision over time with the impact of actor-network theory and new materialisms (e.g. Byrne et al 2011; Joyce and Gillespie 2015). One of the impacts of these revisions of object biographies has been the attribution of agency to things (as well as people). In other words, objects or things are seen as having the ability to exceed and be involved in relations that go beyond human-interpreted object 'lives' (Joyce and Gillespie 2015, 4-6).

While I am interested in considering ways that objects can exceed their interpretive containers, like Rosemary Joyce and Susan Gillespie (2015) I have retained 'objects', as opposed to the agential 'thing'), because part of what museum and archives do is fix materials as objects of knowledge within collections frameworks. Thus, it is perhaps most productive to think about the museum materials I discuss as being within a dialogue between objects and things in collecting processes. Finally, objects stories are also about the journeys of things, how they go from being things out in the world (with many potential meanings and uses) to objects that are legible within a collection. Within archival literature, there have been parallel developments in understanding and narrating the material histories, networks, relations of archival material. This has happened mostly under the umbrella of archival ethnography, although more at archive studies’ primary unit of analysis, the collection, rather than with individual pieces of material (e.g. Arondekar 2008; Stoler 2008).

When object biographies have been used to tell the story of objects that have ended up in museums, arrival at the museum is usually the endpoint of the narrative (e.g. Gosden and Marshall 1999). However, work on object biography within museum collections has complicated this picture (Alberti 2005; Bennett et al 2017; Byrne et al 2011; Swinney 2011). Speaking in the context of natural history museums, Samuel Alberti (2005) states:
"We might assume that at this point of "discovery" the collector conferred upon the object a stable meaning that endured through its museum career. But for many objects, this was but the first in a convoluted series of meanings and context shifts" (562).

"The museum was not a static mausoleum but a dynamic, mutable entity where specimens were added and preserved, discarded, and destroyed. Museum objects were subject to considerable work during their life in the collection" (567).

In the object stories discussed in this chapter, objects do not always stabilise in archives and museums, but instead are go through change and uncertain states, in some cases leaving, or never fully entering the collection.

One example of this was in my interview with staff from the Migration Museum, a project which has documented and shared stories of migration to and from Britain in venues across the UK since 2013. The Migration Museum's main object story was, in fact, that they do not keep objects in their collection. All of the materials they use in their exhibitions is given to them on loan, many of them sourced from public forums or from communities they work with. At the time of my interview with one of their curators in 2016, the Migration Museum had only accepted one donation. This was a door covered in a piece of graffiti art, which had been was ‘donated’ by the artist. I say ‘donated’, because the door was still in use in its current location, at the gallery where it had been exhibited. The curator explained:

'[W]e say that's the first thing in our collection. But it's not accessioned, it's not formally in our collection. But I like the idea of it being "the one and only". And having a collection of just one thing is interesting'.

The Migration Museum's lack of collections is partly due to the fact they do not have a permanent home, and no storage. However, the staff I interviewed also felt ambivalent about ever having a collection. This was in part because it could be a physical burden for an organisation that is interested in working across the country, but also because being tied to a fixed collection in one place could be a burden in trying to represent an inherently mobile topic. Rather than the Migration Museum being an outlier, post-or non-custodial collecting, where an archive or museum collects or accepts objects but takes either temporary custody (or makes no permanent commitment to custody) of materials they collect was very common across my research. Examples of include object loans, collecting but purposefully waiting to accession, or choosing to add to liminal collections areas like a handling or teaching collection.
were common across my research sites. There were examples of this in the Angela Marmont Centre and MayDay Rooms Archive in the previous chapter. Hackney Museum and Wellcome Collection also offer comparable examples later in this chapter.

The strength of the model of object biographies Alberti proposes in his (2005) article ‘Objects and the Museum’, is that it cuts across typical scales of analysis for tracing object trajectories into collections. Rather than look at individual collectors, or the collecting of institutions writ large, Alberti’s three phases of object biography (‘Collecting and Object Provenance’, ‘Life in the Collection’, and ‘Viewing the Object’) focus on relationships, networks, and processes that operate across these scales. His attention to the continuing processes of interpreting, ordering, and disciplining within the museum matches my focus of following collections work on the ground—a necessarily messy system in practice.

However, I do not adopt Alberti’s three phases, for a few reasons. First, I am not particularly interested in his endpoint, the display of an object and its relationship to viewers. My research is primarily interested in the other kinds of activities collections are used for (although since display is a major function of museums in particular, it inevitably does come up). Second, although Alberti describes an object’s entrance into the museum as ‘being removed from circulation’ (2005, 565) this is often not the case in the contemporary post or non-custodial collecting I have researched, where objects often exit again to different contexts.

Joyce and Gillespie (2015) offer an alternative to this narrative arc when they speak of the itineraries of things rather than object biographies. The openness of ‘itineraries’ combats the assumed end or ‘death’ contained in ‘biography’. ‘Itineraries’ also stay away from equating human and object journeys, and emphasize the spatial aspects of their travel. I have called my approach object stories to capture some of the middle ground between the object biography and thing itinerary. Although my research also looks at the spatial trajectories of materials without an assumed ‘end’ at the museum, object stories also foreground the practitioners’ narrative of the collecting process, although not to the extent of taking a fully discourse analysis approach (e.g. Smith 2006). As I’ll discuss in the following sections and the cases, storytelling was a very important framework for practitioners, and object stories match their emphasis. As a story instead of a biography, my reporting and analysis does not try to capture the entirety of objects’ ‘lives’ but rather their involvement in the collecting
process. Sometimes this also extends into their use, but since my research captured recent contemporary collecting events, the status of objects was not always decided.

6.2 Assessing significance

One of the things that was true of all the work on object biography I encountered (irrespective of the variations described above) was the assumption that the objects written about are significant across time. This is not an assumption that can be made in the field of contemporary collecting. Determining if material is significant and if it will be significant in the future are frequently cited as central issues in contemporary collecting (e.g. Macdonald and Morgan 2018, 23; Rhys and Baveystock 2014). However, there’s a distinction to be made between assessing if something is significant now and assessing if something will be significant in the future—the latter rather than the former was of most concern to practitioners in my fieldwork.

While the question of, ‘What is significant to collect now?’ features prominently in general texts on contemporary collecting, this was mostly not a concern for the people I spoke with. This was I think in part because I did not ask about making decisions in the field of contemporary collecting as a whole, but more specifically about collecting from underrepresented groups. The practitioners in my fieldwork already believed (or worked at institutions which believed) that work on collecting aspects of contemporary diversity was important—so they had already answered the question about whether collecting it was significant (even though they might have had different interpretation of what diversity meant). Diversity provides us with a novel angle to examine contemporary collecting because it bypasses this central anxiety—identifying what material is significant—by focusing on a field that has already been deemed significant to some degree by governmental and sector policy as well as individual practitioners. With that question or anxiety out of the way, we can look more in depth at how and why things are included in frameworks of value and significance, how they get used, and what impact they have or are perceived to have on the rest of the collection.

Although the practitioners did feel that the material around diversity they were collecting was significant, there was more uncertainty about how this significance would change over time. This is reasonable, because much about the future is fundamentally uncertain (Callon et al. 2009). We can look at our own personal inheritances as an example. Archives or heirlooms
passed down from our parents and grandparents are, in all honesty, as likely to be as unwanted or unremarked upon as they are to be cared for or appreciated (Högberg et al. 2017, 639; Rhys and Baveystock 2014, 16). Similarly, it is unlikely that future generations will value the same materials as we do—or even that they’ll value the same materials in the same ways. As the object biographies approach recognises, the significance of material culture varies over time and based on who is associated and involved with it (Fredheim and Khalaf 2016; Carman 2006; Douglas [1966]1991).

Harald Fredheim and Manal Khalaf’s (2016) article ‘The significance of values: heritage value typologies re-examined’ offers a thoughtful review of the rise of values-based heritage management and significance assessment. The authors define significance as 'the overall value of heritage, or the sum of its constituent "heritage values", a definition which I adopt here (Ibid. 466). Values-based heritage management and significance assessment processes became popular in conservation and museum fields in the decades following the 1979 Australian Burra Charter (Fredheim and Khalaf 2016, 466-467; Morgan and Macdonald 2018, 20-21). Their article surveys a range of value typologies used to help practitioners make their assessments of significance more explicit, thus enabling more informed and transparent decision-making. In their analysis, they identify that many of these typologies struggle to accommodate the flexible, multiple nature of heritage values and how they change over time. While their analysis is comprehensive and sound, they misidentify the reasons why values-based typologies like this fail in complex and evolving situations. Fredheim and Khalaf (2016) argue that the failure of values-based approaches is due to an incomplete understanding of heritage values and thus an inability to capture them fully in decision-making. However, the uncertainty of the future, and the consequent impossibility of fully enumerating or assessing the potential values of material means that more knowledge will not necessarily lead to better decisions about significance (Henderson 2018; Callon et al. 2009).

Their own argument contains a number of acknowledgements of this limitation, such as:

'If the language of heritage values is incapable of capturing the full range of ways in which heritage is valued, values-based approaches cannot be expected to result in appropriate conservation decisions' (469).

Fredheim and Khalaf (2016) also hit on the second issue with their argument, which is assuming that significance can be conclusively identified at the beginning of an objects'
engagement with heritage management, noting that: 'Within objects conservation, identified values are often "potential" values' (470). In other words, decisions about object significance are often made based on necessarily incomplete and assumed information, not rationally concluded or projected from known, stable values. Jane Henderson and Robert Waller’s (2016) article ‘Effective preservation decision strategies’ helpfully lays out how both of these forms of decision-making (heuristic and rational) show up in heritage conservation, which I extend to collections management contexts. They define the primary mode of decision-making promoted in conservation as analytic-deliberative, or structured and systematic. At the other end of decision-making spectrum is naturalistic or heuristic decision making, which is intuitive and pragmatic. Both forms of decision-making can be reliable and effective but have strengths and weaknesses in different situations. Heuristic approaches have the advantage of being quick, relatively simple, and good for situations of uncertainty, while being susceptible to personal biases and experience. Analytic-deliberative decisions are based in systematic evaluation of evidence and can be good for assessing risk, but they are time and resource-heavy, while also being less well suited for uncertainty.

Despite these relatively balanced strengths and weaknesses, analytic-deliberative decision-making is held as superior in almost all scientific, quasi-scientific, and institutional contexts. Because it tends not to cope well with unexpected variation, i.e. uncertainty, it privileges concepts and things that are already legible and established within existing (Anglo-European art historical and scientific) value frameworks. Part of Henderson and Waller’s (2016) argument is that 'within the cultural heritage sector there are many benefits to be had from recognizing heuristic decision-making and accepting its appropriateness in many situations' (310). They also observe that heuristic decision-making is already highly used, although underreported because of 'discomfort in acknowledging the validity of the process' within more scientific decision-making frameworks (310). The type of decision-making presented in the object stories within this chapter, and throughout my research, was primarily heuristic. I would argue that this is particularly appropriate for contemporary collecting and its conditions of uncertainty. However, as I have noted in the introduction to this chapter, although more flexible decision-making has enabled more experimental modes of collecting that include diverse materials, their permanency in the collection is often unresolved.

The on-the-ground decision-making around collecting that I encountered did not reference value typologies or formal tools. This use of fluid processes also points to another
fundamental misconception (more pervasive than in Fredheim and Khalaf [2016]) about how
the process of assessing significance functions in contemporary and post-or non-custodial
collecting contexts – especially when dealing with ephemeral or challenging materials.
Fredheim and Khalaf (2016), like many others, present significance assessment as something
that happens linearly: an object's significance is identified before or at the point when it is
brought into the collection, after which its use and management in the collection (or within
another heritage framework) is properly determined. My research, which follows earlier
critiques (e.g. Carmen 2006), shows that in contemporary and post-custodial contexts,
significance is not determined until after the object is brought into the collection, and often
not until after it experiences collections management processes and use. This is not to say
that practitioners do not have assumptions and ideas about the potential values of an object
they collect, but that these potential values are tested and realised though their use.

One example where this is already (implicitly) acknowledged is in crowdsourced collecting.
The term crowdsourcing was originally coined by journalist Jeff Howe in 2006 to refer to
‘taking work once performed within an organisation and outsourcing it to the general public
through an open call for participants’ (Ridge 2014, 1; paraphrasing Howe 2006).
Crowdsourcing was coined in in the context of digital labour. At minimum it usually
involves recruiting participants via social media, and more often crowdsourcing projects are
entirely online. Collecting institutions have used crowdsourcing mostly to deal with
transcribing and annotating large data sets; for example, having online participants digitize a
museum’s collection of 19th century letters (e.g. Ridge 2014). However, in the last few years,
museums ‘have used social media and the internet as a means to obtain [physical] content
for collections and exhibitions, particularly at Art Museums’ (Kieffer and Romanek 2019, 139).
C.L. Kieffer and Devorah Romanek’s (2019) article ‘Crowdsourcing a Current Events
Exhibition on Community Activism Against DAPL[Dakota Access Pipeline]’ was the only
academic paper I could find which addressed crowdsourcing in the context of non-digital
collecting, suggesting that there has not yet been much consideration of this trend.
Figure 6.2 proposes a diagram of the processes of significance assessment in post- and non-custodial contexts. In most crowdsourcing models, staff at an organisation (1) identify and frame the potential values of the material they want to collect. However, they cannot assess the significance of any of crowdsourced material until it has come in (2), when they begin to process and use it (3). From here, the material's individual significance and relation to the rest of the (pre-existing or just-amassed) collections can be assessed (4), when it either continues to be used until it is re-evaluated (5) or discarded. Re-engagement with the material in the future begins the cycle again, although the material does not need to be brought into the collection the second time around. Arguably, this model could be applied to not just contemporary material but to all museum collecting. The model also applies to archives in my fieldwork that collect more like museums, where material is collected on an individual basis (rather than as a ‘fond’ or ‘collection’) or in a post- or non-custodial archival context. In more traditional archival collecting, materials are first accessioned by the archive (i.e. the archive assumes permanent custody of the collection) but appraisal and cataloguing of the
material might happen significantly later. Cataloguing, both in archive and museum contexts, is a way of assessing material’s significance in relation to the collections and institutions that can also be updated if necessary.

Even if a formal significance assessment tool has been used at the beginning of the collecting process, the values identified in the material are still potential ones, neither confirmed nor exercised within the object’s new museum context. While Fredheim and Khalaf (2016, 467) argue for a flexible model of significance that can be revisited, their model is still based on a closed circle, which does not address when an object’s significance might change over time, or that there might be paths that lead an object to exit collections management frameworks.

While I have disagreed with some of Fredheim and Khalaf’s conclusions (2016), their analysis of ‘aspects of value’ is useful to discuss the potential values that are determined throughout the collecting process. Fredheim and Khalaf use ‘aspects of value’ to characterise the types of significant connections, processes, and activities participated in by heritage material (Ibid., 473-4). This is a very ‘use’-focused idea of value, and dovetails with the object biography’s relational approach. The four aspects of value they define are: associative (used to express connections to people, events, places, stories...), sensory (used for sensory pleasure), evidentiary (used for conducting or communicating research) or functional (used for sustaining relationships or processes) (473-4).

In ‘Collecting Change/Changing Collections’, the workshop I ran with archive and museum practitioners in July 2018 (described in Chapter 4), I asked participants to respond to the question 'How do we know what is significant to collect now and keep for the future?'. Participants’ responses were not shaped by a single set of formal value typologies (e.g. UNESCO World Heritage Site frameworks; Burra Charter) but they did share norms around what informal frameworks they used to identify the potential value of material they collected. These could be described as professional practice norms, some generated internally by ideas about best practice and other influenced by external sources like funders, policy, etc.. Most of the frameworks that participants identified as important (Figure 6.1) can be described as drawing on a combination of associative and functional aspects of value (using Fredheim and Khalaf’s [2016] typology).
Table 6.1 Informal frameworks used to identify the potential values of contemporary material

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value Framework</th>
<th>Participant definitions</th>
<th>Aspects of value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Tells a story’</td>
<td>When something might be valuable because it represents experience and emotion or helps to ‘put people back in the collection’.</td>
<td>Associative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trends</td>
<td>Using instinct and analysis of media coverage, fashions, and the zeitgeist to determine what might be valuable.</td>
<td>Associative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-driven</td>
<td>Being in constant conversation with communities to determine what might be valuable.</td>
<td>Associative/functional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past-good practice</td>
<td>Using past good practice to determine what might be valuable. One participant described, ‘When we’re collecting, we think about all the good collecting that was done in the 1980s and try to make choices that will feel relevant to our equivalents in the future’.</td>
<td>Functional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haphazard</td>
<td>Things might be valuable dependent on opportunistic, realistic, budget-based, or storage and resource reasons</td>
<td>Any/none</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the informal frameworks listed in the table, practitioners also acknowledged the influence of pre-set frameworks, where there are few decisions to be made about what might be valuable, i.e. an organisation’s legal or other remit to collect some things and not others. This is often hierarchical, for example: something might be deemed to be valuable because it is locally, nationally, or internationally important (in that order). Pre-set frameworks could be both associative and functional. In Table 6.1, I have used functional value to describe frameworks that sustain relationships or processes both ‘inside’ and ‘outside' the museum. For example, within museums, using pre-set value frameworks sustain certain types of heritage and collections processes. Outside of museums, using a ‘community-driven’ value framework could be about being about sustaining relationships within a community or sustaining relationships between a collecting organisation and a community. Community-driven frameworks are thus functional in both of the ways that I have described. The first three frameworks listed in Table 6.1 were the most prominent across my research
and they feature in the contemporary collecting cases that follow. In the next section, I lay the groundwork for showing how past frameworks of systematic, universal representation within museums are shifting into more fluid and fragmentary forms. The illustration and discussion of this argument continues through the object story cases.

6.3 The politics of representation

As I outlined in the first three chapters, there are two dimensions of representation to consider, active and passive. When we talk about representation in museums, we are most often talking about passive representation, or representation as a kind of mirroring. ‘Mirror’ representation is often promoted in inclusion-based models, where the emphasis is on getting the inside of the institution to look like outside populations by bringing in new people or materials. This is sometimes where the call for representation stops: at the idea that if the museum was a better mirror for society, it would constitute a better museum. Materials are often selected for their use in the value frameworks above because they are thought to be help address the (passive) underrepresentation of particular populations or topics. For example, an object that is representative of a media trend, or materials that helps represent a migration story.

Without devaluing the importance of passive representation to many people and groups, I have argued that this is insufficient on its own. If we think of archives and museums as part of our civic life (which has long been argued, both by academics and these institutions themselves, e.g. Bennett [1995]) then then we can see that the ‘mirror,’ or passive, definition of representation is inadequate. Within the civic sphere we expect the people and institutions that represent us to be more than just a mirror of the populace—we expect them to actively maintain and improve our governance and conditions of life. This is active representation, which organises, arranges, and intervenes in how representation is managed (Douglas 2017; Hall 1997, 17-18; Sandell and Dodd 2010, 3). Museums often mistake ‘mirror’ representation with democratic systems of representation (Douglas 2017, 20, 56). Although having a more representative museum can be part of creating a more democratic one, passive representation on its own does not create democratic processes. Understanding representation as this kind of active system helps to moves away from equating representation only with museum display (the mirror again). Representation is pervasive throughout collections processes.
The power of museums to influence representation in the civic sphere has been used directly and indirectly by government and elites (Bennett 1995; Hall 1999, 4). Museums’ Early Modern and Renaissance progenitors, exemplified by the private curiosity cabinet, were intended both as a mirror of creation and as an extension of the sovereign and elite power that went into assembling them (Bennett 1995, 95-96; Macdonald 2006, 83-84). Materials were valued not for their representativeness of stories or trends, but for their rarity and unusual nature. In the 17th century, the hidden sympathies and resemblances which organised curiosity cabinets began to be replaced with taxonomies. Taxonomies grouped and represented the nature and the relationships between things by systematically observed differences (Bennett 1995, 95-96; Macdonald 2006, 84-85). Within taxonomies, materials are valued for their ability to visibly represent these systematic differences. Taxonomies are still a key feature of the natural sciences (which I’ll return to in Chapter 7) and were augmented rather than supplanted by the historical, evolution museum.

In the ‘modern museum’, defined in reference to national museums that were founded from the 19th century onward, the dominant system of representation was historical. This merged with taxonomy to represent differences over time (evolution), ending with representations of present and future life (Bennett 1995, 96-97; Macdonald 2006, 85-87). Within evolutionary representation, materials are valued not in their representation of categories, but in their representation of origins, epochs, trajectories, and emergent change. The taxonomic-evolutionary order’s interpellation of the public created a space for the categories of representation to be responded to and questioned. Bennett’s (1995, 97) chapter ‘The Political Rationality of the Museum’ concludes:

'Like their predecessors, [modern] museums produced a position of power and knowledge in relation to a microcosmic relation reconstruction of a totalized order of things and peoples. Yet, and as a genuinely new principle, these power-knowledge relations were democratic in their structure to the degree that they constituted the public they address—the newly formed, undifferentiated public brought into being by the museum’s openness'.

The museum’s claim to universally represent the public leaves it open, as Bennett (1995) observed, to continued calls for reform by those who claim either that (1) the museum does not represent sections of public adequately or (2) the museum is not accessible to all, or both. In terms of my research framing, the former is a critique about passive representation and the latter a critique about active representation. While changing the picture in the mirror is
one important form of diversity, so is changing how representation functions on a more structural level. This is more complicated than just including more material or more kinds of material. In the last chapter, I discussed this ‘insatiable’ discourse of reform (Bennett 1995, 91) as it related to Clifford’s (1997) concept of the contact zone and the development of the spaces of public engagement that surround collections. In this chapter, I return to the same literature to discuss the development of frameworks for significance and representation in museums.

In his analysis in ‘The Political Rationality of the Museum’ (1995), Bennett depicts the public space created by modern museums as having been 'hijacked' by discriminatory ideologies, such as racism and sexism, that have prevented it from fulfilling its true democratic function (Bennett 1995, 97; Dibley 2005). Critiquing this, and the broader literature of museums reform, Dibley (2005) has argued that the perceived failings of the museum are not because it is broken, but rather because it is working exactly as it was designed. ‘Universal’ systems of representation are based on a number of exclusionary principles about what can be represented, how knowledge works, who it is for, and how is shared. The systems of representation used by museums are inherently discriminatory against things that earlier elite social systems have ignored, repressed, or devalued, such as the voices of people of colour and women, among many others. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1999, 3-4) puts it:

'To be validated [heritage] objects must take their place alongside what has been authorised as ‘valuable’ on already established grounds in relation to the unfolding of a 'national story' whose terms we already know'.

Although Hall (1999) also uses the language of the 'mirror', he also radically questions the systems of representation embedded in heritage and museum practice. Hall’s enquiry was part of a broader trend towards questioning 'universal' representation and its accompanying value frameworks, emerging from the social and social history movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Beier-de Haan 2006, 186-187; Hall 1999, 7; Macdonald and Morgan, 2018, 22). In museums and archives this has led to the inclusion of oral histories and an emphasis on everyday life and social identities. Common categories of representation, like gender (e.g. Figure 6.1) and nature have been questioned and altered even further since this period, as I explore in the cases section below (Beier-de Haan 2006, 187).
Rosemarie Beier-de-Han (2006) summarizes some of the contemporary questions that those who work in museums are grappling with, including how to work with collections without relying on ‘universal’ systems of representation, and thus stable conceptions of significance and value. Echoing some of Hall’s questions (1999), she states:

'[Contemporary practitioners’] questions are: Who owns the past? What gives me authority to speak for others? Who do I include and who do I exclude? Whose memories are privileged, whose fall by the wayside? How can I generalise without ignoring? And how can I mediate between individual memory and general interpretation of histories?’ (187).

How practitioners answer the above questions inform how they make decisions. Discussion of the following cases builds on the value frameworks established above to address the core research question of this chapter: How are decisions made to introduce ‘diverse’ materials and perspectives in collections?

6.4 Cases

6.4.1 Challenging representations at Hackney Museum

Over the last decade, Hackney Museum has done a great deal of reflective work on increasing community representation and engagement with their collection (Hackney Museum 2014). In 2009–2011, the museum was involved with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation’s major museum engagement and participation project (2009–2011; see Lynch 2011) and then its 2012–2016 follow-up, ‘Our Museum: Communities and Museums as Active Partners’ (Haswell-Walls et al. 2018; Lynch 2011). National museums, like the V&A, come to Hackney to learn from their community working practice. This has positioned them as a vanguard in active and reflective community-engaged collecting, and thus a good example through which to examine changes in museum collecting and representation.

Hackney Museum’s depth of experience with these issues meant that when I interviewed two of their staff in summer 2017, they were grappling not only with how to increase the collections’ representation of their local communities in the normative, positive sense, but also what the value of increasing the representation of contentious and difficult material might be. The example we talked about, as the Heritage Learning Manager expressed, was, ‘What is the role of the museum in collecting far-right material, the stuff that nobody’s collecting?’ The staff’s process of thinking about this question, which I go into in detail about
in this section, was still actively being discussed by staff at the time of my interview, even though the event—collecting placards from a contentious protest—had happened months earlier.

The protest signs collected reflect both sides of a demonstration at the Dalston art gallery LD50 in February 2017. In January, shortly after inauguration of Donald Trump, the gallery had been in the art world press and then in wider media for having put on an exhibition of white nationalist material and for comments made by the gallery’s funder expressing sympathy for Trump’s immigration policies (Elbaor 2017; Ellis-Peterson 2017; Gelder 2017; Shea 2017). Critics of the gallery said that LD50 had a history of providing a platform for racist and far-right speakers and campaigned for the gallery to be boycotted and closed. The gallery’s defenders argued that LD50 was being unfairly punished for exploring a controversial topic and characterised the call for boycott and protest as tantamount to restricting freedom of speech.

The Heritage Learning Manager at Hackney Museum described the moment of collection as semi-accidental, although not mistaken. Unusually, as it was a weekend, she was in the museum the day of the protest, giving tours of Hackney’s protest-related collection in partnership with a day of talks being held on activism and people’s history across the street. During the day, she noticed that the Mayor of Hackney had retweeted a statement in support of the protest, saying that discrimination and prejudice was not welcome in Hackney.

So, she started talking about the LD50 protest on her tour as a live, contemporary example. At the same time, she started receiving tweets from a friend saying that the protest was a positive and well-attended event.

'She texted me images from the protest and said, "Look at the banners everyone's made, look at the placards—do you want them?" And [since] I'm talking about protest in the museum, I say, "Of course I do. Bring them up!" [...] She gives them to me when I'm standing at my desk, and on the computer at my desk is the tweet that she's put up on Twitter with people protesting.'

'So, there's a picture of the placard there, and she's just given me the [real] placard. She takes a photograph of me, holding the placard, with the image of the protest with the placard in the background. It's great! We put it on Twitter. Because the Mayor had supported this, I did think this through, "Okay, the Mayor's supported this so it's absolutely fine to take this in". I wasn't thinking about formally collecting at the time. I was thinking this is really going to help me tell my story of the history'
of Hackney. However, in my tweet, I do say the word donate. I said: "Protestors have donated their placards to the museum". Then I used them in the tours I was doing in the museum. It goes down really well; it's one of our highest engaged tweets ever. And, it's really good for the museum, to be publicly sparking this debate about collecting stuff that's really current and really political.

Figure 6.3 The pictures of the placards posted on Twitter. Credit: Hackney Museum.

But, as the day goes on, the protest takes a nasty turn, and one protestor has a placard saying, "I'm here to defend the right for free speech."8 [Those protesting the gallery] turn on him and start calling him a Nazi and destroy his placard. So, he picks up on the activity on Twitter, contacts the museum and said: "This was a really nasty march. We've got some of it filmed, about how they physically attacked me. I'm just telling you my side of the story."

[...]. The Exhibitions Officer had a great response to this, she said, "Well can we have your placard as well, so we can tell the two different sides of the story?" [...] But he said no, because they'd destroyed his placard. But he's going to re-create his placard and tell the story that goes along, why he had to recreate the placard and then give it to the museum so we've got a more representative—a fairer representation of what happened. But apparently the person who filmed the altercation is also a member of the EDL [the English Defence League, a far-right nationalist group]. [...] So, what of this material do we actually want?! But it's really important [to show that sympathy for fascist ideas is] happening in Hackney, because people ignore that in Hackney [as opposed to other less liberal parts of the country]."
This instance of collecting fits with what the Heritage Learning Manager described as Hackney's orientation as a 'campaigning museum'. This follows the current Mayor of Hackney setting a priority to be a 'campaigning Council' since his election in 2016 and is complementary with the museum's history of engaging with social issues and activism (Hackney Council n.d.). Reflecting on the day, the Heritage Learning Manager said:

'Maybe I shouldn't have gone public on it straightaway. But I want this material because it could be the start of a similar story [to compare to protest in the past] that we could then use to tell the story of Hackney.'

In her opinion, it was not so much the actions of LD50 that were the reason for the museum's interest in collection. Instead, it was the ability of the protest and debates happening around it to help tell 'the story of Hackney'.

The Exhibitions Officer was more circumspect in how she articulated the museum's political activity (although she generally promoted community-engaged collecting around contemporary social issues). Ideally, from her perspective, the museum would wait until the material 'get[s] a little less politically active' except in cases where the material is at risk (of being discarded or destroyed) or could be clearly tied to an ongoing programme of work. Her slightly more cautious position was prompted by the concern that collecting could be seen as an act of political endorsement, which has the potential jeopardise both the museum’s relationship with donors and with its status as a neutral local government entity.

There are a number of threads to pull out of this example. First, the self-aware nature (on both sides) of collecting from the LD50 protest. Managing the perceived rise in ‘self-aware’ collecting was one of the key topics raised at the day-long workshop I ran for archive and museum practitioners, which included Hackney Museum staff (Lee-Crossett 2018, 5). Both institutions and donors are increasingly aware of the political nature of collecting and the presumed positive power of being represented in a museum. A museum’s acceptance of funds or materials can be seen as their endorsement or participation their particular views, politics, and experiences (Ibid., 4). Whether it is done in good faith or not, collecting has the potential to be used by either donors or organisations for political or marketing purposes.

A focus on either the political or marketing elements of collecting can also create issues in object interpretation. With the LD50 donation, the Exhibitions Officer said, 'I've never
known a case study where you've got protestors who go have a protest, and then immediately they're like, "To the museum!". In the rush for immediate donation, the donors of the anti-galler / anti-Nazi placards left without filling out the necessary paperwork (although they did leave some personal details and photographs). This lack of contact information became a problem because of how staff felt about the rhetoric of some of the placards, like the one made in the shape of a brick which says, 'This machine kills fascists' (This is pictured on the left side of Figure 6.3, but it is partially obscured). The Exhibitions Officer said her initial feelings were:

"This [sign] does not match the values of the museum." Which was weird because I didn't realise I had a value judgement when I'm collecting stuff, because obviously you collect historical stuff that you don't agree with. But [...] it was very clear that if we did take it in any form, it would need to be...contextualised.'

However, without being able to engage with the signs' donors about how they might be represented in the museum, the Exhibitions Officer felt uncomfortable being harshly critical of them.

'There's a big breach of trust if you take their stuff and then use it in a way that they would be uncomfortable with. And, it doesn't take long to find videos or photos of the people with these signs who are involved. So, if you're being critical, there's a moral obligation to that person. [...] You have an impact on the donor, when they're a contemporary person around today, this is all very recent.'

There are a number of potential ramifications for breaching trust of contemporary donors, especially around active political material, which could impact either negatively on the donor or the organisation involved. I encountered one example of the former at the MayDay Rooms social movement archive, which holds the Latin American Workers Association archive (active in the early 1980s and then 2002-13) (Mayday Rooms, 2018). The staff member I interviewed talked about what was in the archive, but also what was not in the archive. He called these 'shadow stories,' which had been left out because of how they might negatively impact former members’ immigration status. An example of a negative organisational impact can be found in the high-profile removal of artwork from a Design Museum exhibition on activism in August 2018. More than 40 artists removed their work after the museum allowed an arms company to hire their space for an event. The artists concerned decided that they did not want their work on display in an institution that implicitly endorsed arms manufacture, and publicly withdrew their work before the
exhibition had finished its run (Marshall 2018). Thus, despite archives' and museums' aspirations to represent stories and populations as fully as possible, there will always be objects and materials that cannot and will not be contained in public collections.

Second: The story of the protest signs, although perhaps more complex than most, tells us that representation is a messy business. Even if the project of representation is understood to be a never-ending or ‘insatiable’ one, it is generally assumed to be a positive project. Within contemporary collecting, it is usually assumed that increasing representation means including members or aspects of a population that have been unfairly excluded, and that inclusion will benefit them as well as the dominant group. But, the above examples emphasise that increasing representation can equally be a project of increasing conflict or confusion, which may not confer benefits either on the dominant group or the previously marginalised group. In this case, trying to increase representation of protest in Hackney meant including material that had unclear provenance and/or uncomfortable messages. Although there was ambiguity and variation in staff perspectives, it was clear that the museum did not want to provide an unqualified endorsement of either side. In terms of how the Exhibition Officer and Heritage Learning Manager talked about the episode, they were not so much trying to reflect populations within Hackney as trying to represent the ongoing story of Hackney. Telling the story of Hackney and the story of the protest was of shared importance to the majority of stakeholders in this example.

When Hackney Museum developed its current permanent gallery in 2003, it used more standard ways of representing their local community. Staff brought in community consultation groups for different demographic categories (ethnic, religious, etc.) to feedback on gallery designs. While this did result in new acquisitions and positive engagement, the Exhibitions Officer today said that they would have moved away from engagement that builds on the idea 'that people have one key identity that represents them'. Ironically, they find that the larger museums which want to learn from their community work are principally concerned with these 'old fashioned' methods of identity-based representation that Hackney Museum no longer use.

In addition to changing forms of representation, the influence of social history collecting in museums has led to an increased emphasis on ephemera. Because of their intended temporary and often fragmentary or partial nature, ephemeral materials are used less to build
structured representations and more to evoke stories about everyday life. Ephemeral materials were not often part of traditional collections meant to represent these more stable universals. However, stories and ephemera have the potential to offer more reflexivity than traditional representational systems of ordering. Unlike, for example, taxonomic systems, the concept of 'story' itself invokes a narrative perspective and the attendant choices that come with it. But, like taxonomic or other systematic forms of representation, representing stories can also suffer from the assumption that including more 'sides of the story' is an unqualified good.

Third: Even though representation is messy (see Law 2004), the fact that this messiness is evident is a testament to Hackney Museum's open, active engagement with complex issues. I was gratified by how openly the museum staff shared this story with me, and others. In addition to their long-term, proactive work with communities, the Exhibitions Officer has a Google News alert set for every district in the borough, and, as demonstrated by the LD50 example, active social media accounts. Without this kind of responsive monitoring of the local context around them, Hackney Museum would not have been able to engage in timely interpretation of life in the borough.

Hackney Museum's engagement with the LD50 protest has been longer term and arguably more nuanced than the majority of the news coverage. As Rhys and Bavestock (2014) highlight, museums have the ability to proffer a mediated interpretation of events, more distant and considered than news coverage, but more immediate than historical narratives (30-31). Larger news outlets did not examine the clash between protestors or set it within the wider local context, such as the gentrification of the area in which the gallery was located. The Exhibitions Officer argued that the controversy and conflict at the protest actually 'had a lot more to do with class, and concerns about inequality in area, and the resentment of new communities moving into the area' (LD50 opened in 2015). She also framed the protest as a specific temporal event: 'back in summer 2016 [when the gallery held the events that eventually sparked the protest] this type of [right-wing] stuff wasn't seen as a threat, but within twelve months the public attitude had shifted so far'. With this context, the protest against the gallery is perhaps best framed as a proxy for local political and social tensions. Depending on your point of view, this could either make it a very good lens through which to tell the story of Hackney, or a less useful one.
Finally, this object story digs deeply into issues around the politics of representation, but it is also an informative example about how contemporary collecting challenges the time frame and linearity of collections practice, as discussed in the section on significance. With the protest signs, the collecting process was triggered by staff publicly using the word 'donate'. Although some people assumed that their Twitter post had meant the museum would formally accession the material, this was not how staff at the museum had viewed the situation. As was said by the Heritage Learning Manager, acquiring the protest signs would help tell the story of Hackney, which for the museum was not synonymous with formally accessioning material. Instead, staff saw bringing the material into the museum as something that might elicit discussion on the tours that were happening that day—help them to determine significance through use.

In contemporary collecting, creating a conceptual space between collecting and accessioning is one way to help deal with the anxiety of whether or not recently created material will have long-term significance. I use ‘anxiety’ rather than ‘uncertainty’, because although uncertainty about whether collected materials will be significant over time is common to all types of collecting and collections, the focus of the discussion tends to concentrate on contemporary material. Michael Terwey, a former chair of the UK Social History Curators Group, argues that there is an assumption that significance can only be assessed 'after a period of time has elapsed and a consensus has formed (2014, 80). As a consequence, contemporary collecting usually means collecting material without this agreement from peers and so is an activity which presents risks. In actuality, avoiding the collection of contemporary material is also a risk, since it could lead to missing out on items that will prove to be significant in the future. However, many people prefer to avoid the risk of potential losses which could arise from incorrectly assuming significance, then taking a risk that has the potential for gains of the same or greater value (Holtorf 2014).

In the case of Hackney Museum, they have embraced these potential gains, creating a holding space so they can wait to figure out how to connect the history of the borough to life today. Holding material in this liminal space was not unique to protest material. The Heritage Learning Manager shared other examples:

'I'm collecting material about housing campaigns—for the future, really. That's not officially gone into the collection, but it's in the museum, there. To provide a
snapshot of what's happening now. And then when it's historical, we can put it into the collection. But if I'm not collecting it, then it won't be there'.

Pauses, or liminal holding spaces in collections point to gaps between what collections practitioners are doing to try to engage with contemporary materials and what traditional collections processes allow. Practically, this liminal space at Hackney Museum is also partially created by museum working pressures. Only ten percent of the Collection Manager's work time is allocated to collections management (although she has a team of volunteers) and with a stretched workload it is hard to find the time to resolve tricky issues around accessioning material (or not). The holding space serves as both a material and temporal buffer. It functions to protect ephemeral material, like housing campaign flyers, which staff identify might be difficult to collect in the future, and as a place to wait until such unidentified time as material becomes historical. The liminality of the holding zone also functions as a kind of buffer for dealing with challenging values. It is a place to put material until staff can wait and see how a situation develops. Part of why the LD50 placards live in a liminal space is because of the uncomfortable feelings staff had about their values. As the Exhibitions Officer said, not all of them 'match the values of the museum' and staff either need to figure out how to contextualise them over time or let them go.

This need to orient materials to the institution's values is perhaps a unique feature of contemporary collecting. This is something the Exhibitions Officer acknowledged in her quote about not realising that she had been making value judgements about material when collecting, 'because obviously you collect historical stuff that you don't agree with'. Whole organisations can act as buffer zones for challenging values, as the Bishopsgate Institute archive (Chapter 7) describes itself. In the example of Hackney Museum, the holding zone is being used productively to figure out how to facilitate a complex story, working with participants who are actively trying to influence it. To the Exhibitions Officer, it had actually felt like 'the engagement happened to us' rather than the other way around.

6.4.2 Crowdsourcing stories: Museum of Transology and Wellcome Collection

Crowdsourcing collections material is one way to address (or perhaps bypass) some of questions about decision-making and representation raised by Beier-de-Haan ('What gives me authority to speak for others? Who do I include and who do I exclude?') (2006, 187). Asking the public or a community to self-select content that will represent them in some way
is a departure from the traditional collecting narrative, where staff control the collecting process and attribution of significance. Crowdsourcing challenges these processes both by being less selective than typical collecting, by definition, and also by (to some extent) de-centring the expert by encouraging members of the public to decide what is significant content to offer. As will be demonstrated in the following two examples, facilitating and managing a crowdsourcing process still requires a great deal of supervision from collections staff. It also does not have to involve staff giving up much control, since members of the public might be given limited genuine scope in how or what they are able to offer, or how the content is subsequently evaluated or managed.

Nevertheless, crowdsourcing is a form of collecting that presupposes public engagement. The representation generated from crowdsourcing is as much a representation of the process of engagement as it is of the content or contributors. In this way, it is not very different from 'normal' collecting. As in the object biographies model of collecting, all collected objects can be looked at as a representation of their interactions and engagement. However, the (usually quite large) scale of crowdsourcing and the intentional visibility of the crowdsourcing process draws attention to how it both continues and diverts from traditional representation and collecting practices. In this section, I look at two examples of crowdsourcing in my fieldwork. The first case, The Museum of Transology, draws on an interview and engagement with a recent crowdsourced collection. The second, A Museum of Modern Nature at the Wellcome Collection, draws on participant observation during the crowdsourcing process for a new exhibition.

The Museum of Transology

The Museum of Transology is the largest exhibition of objects about transgender experience in the UK. Like the Migration Museum, it has no permanent home, but similarly, its title reflects the project's ambition to for extend its work, including impacting the museum sector. The Museum of Transology was crowdsourced and curated as a largely solo project by E-J Scott, a trans fashion and dress historian. The crowdsourcing was done through a variety of events in the community and open calls for submission (largely advertised through social media). I interviewed Scott in August 2017 at Brighton Museum where the exhibition was being shown after it moved from its first home at the London College of Fashion (Bagshawe 2017). I also attended several events held by or featuring the Museum of Transology between March-July 2017.
The Museum of Transology started in 2016 when Scott took a second-hand art deco display case of personal items collected from a recent transgender visibility project into a LGBTQ pub in Brighton. He strung the case up with fairy lights, and watched people bend over and peer into it with fascination (‘Now that’s engagement!’ exclaims Scott when he tells me this). People connected with the little handwritten tag on each object, which shared informative, funny, and touching statements and stories about trans identity and expression. Scott realised that 'the magic was the story unedited in the donors voice' and the tags subsequently became a dominant feature of the collection. Not only were the original, handwritten tags always displayed alongside their objects, but the tags also became the project’s logo and exhibition feedback tool (Figure 6.4 and 6.5). The tags are modelled after luggage tags, providing the story of each object’s journey.
Although the effort required to promote and maintain the Museum of Transology was intensive, Scott only lightly regulated the crowdsourcing process itself. Beyond requiring the label tag to be filled out, he did not define the format of contributions further than the prompt for self-identified trans donors to choose an object personal to them to include (Scott 2016). Scott accepted all subsequent submissions and put everything on display, after arranging the material in themes. The lack of formal selection has resulted in a fair amount of overlap and duplication in types of materials. In our interview, Scott said: ‘I love that people have donated the same thing [referring to a row of boxer shorts hanging on open display]. But the tags are different.’ Scott knows that it is a curator’s job to decide which objects are the best representation of different themes, but since this exhibition was about giving voices to an underrepresented group he was not sure how to edit things out ethically. He notes that there are downsides to this approach: the current size of the collection (over 200 objects at the time of writing) restricts what types of spaces can take the collection on (Scott 2018). But ultimately Scott’s feeling was: ‘What if somebody [who donated] turns up and their object isn’t in it?’
In some ways, the Museum of Transology is a very traditional story of increasing the representation of an underrepresented group. The collection and exhibitions were created out of Scott's experience as a trans person working in the heritage sector. He noticed that his experience was missing from museums, and more broadly, that this gap or lack of reflection of transgender experience negatively impacted the community's relationship with institutions of history and culture. Like with Hackney Museum, story was the key value framework through which this representation was constructed. But, unlike Hackney, these stories were not primarily told through curatorial facilitation and interpretation. Instead, they were attached to the label tag that came along with each crowdsourced object. Providing people with the opportunity to label or interpret their own materials in a heritage setting is increasingly common, but to my knowledge, Scott's emphasis on the interdependency of the label and the donated material was fairly unique. Initially, the Museum of Transology accessioned both the label and material together as one object. They have since been re-catalogued separately, but only to ensure that the pairs of tags and objects do not get separated, and to try to ensure the tags are recognised as important 'object' materials in their own right.

This joint nature served a doubly representative function. First, the tags contextualise and elevate the ordinary, mass-produced stuff that makes up most of the collection (e.g. accessories, ephemera) into objects that can represent aspects of trans experience. Second, making the tags part of the overall object attempts to forestall any revision of this representation by non-transgender voices. When I asked Scott what he thought the future would be like for museums and his collection, in one hundred years, he was not particularly optimistic. He said that even with more engagement in the heritage sector, he did not think things would change much. But, he added that the joint nature of the Museum of Transology's objects meant that 'In one hundred years when cis white men are still running the museum, they cannot overwrite our stories'.

I expected to spend more of the time in my interview with Scott discussing representing diversity in museums and the diversity of the trans experience. Instead, we spent a lot of it talking about the nitty-gritty of collections management issues related to curating a crowdsourced community collection in a traditional museum. As I have argued however, these object stories were another way to talk about trans diversity and representation. To talk about the Museum of Transology collections' management, we were joined partway through
by one of Brighton Museum's Collections Assistants. For the museum, working with the Museum of Transology has been very different than their dealings with other collections or exhibition loans. Unlike the majority of their collections, the Museum of Transology’s objects are contemporary and 'not typical museum objects'. By this, the Collection Assistant did not appear to mean the content or the topic of the collection, but rather the diverse physical materials they are made from, most of which were not intended for long term preservation.

For example, when the Collections Assistant pointed out to the cracking in a pair of silicone breast forms to a visitor, who was a transwoman, she responded: 'Well, the trouble is, dear, they're only supposed to last long enough for you to grow your own [via hormone therapy]'. The tags also present conservation challenges. They are likely to fade, since there was no control on the type of pen used, and people wrote in every colour including yellow felt pen. Purely for conservation purposes, it would be best if the tags were not on display at all, but that is not something Scott would ever consider. He asks: 'How do you reproduce the tags without losing impact?'. You could have a facsimile, but this would be very costly and perhaps still not achieve the same effect.

The Museum of Transology has also presented challenges to the museum's boundaries around visitor behaviour and loaned material. Early on in our interview, Scott gave a mother and child who came up to compliment him on the exhibition ones of the display guidebooks to take home (there's a large photo of Scott on the wall in the gallery, so he's recognisable). Later, the front desk staff awkwardly apologize for stopping the woman on her way out for trying to leave with a gallery copy until she told them that Scott had said it was okay. A fair amount of the Museum of Transology exhibition is on open display (i.e. not under glass). The Collections Assistant says that the only other places the museum has things on open display, is where they have not been accessioned or treated like museum objects, such as dress-up costumes and a few natural science artefacts. Open display is very unusual for them, and Scott had to fight for that to be maintained. In its original showing at the London College of Fashion, much more of the collection was on open display, but this was also more in keeping with the norms of fashion and art installations. The open display requires a high level of care: people touch and move things around. While we're talking, Scott and the Collections Assistant notice that a hat is not in its normal location. While the Collections Assistant expresses some concern and annoyance, Scott jumps in and explains he saw a child trying it on. As we move through the exhibition, Scott and the Collections Assistant compare
approaches to tucking a speedo back into a drawer (from where it is supposed to artfully hang) and arrange tags on the feedback tree.\textsuperscript{12}

For Brighton Museum, the Museum of Transology has also been different than having objects loaned from another institution; the Museum of Transology is on loan from a community group and does not have a permanent home. Scott and the Collections Assistant discuss some of the challenges in Scott's search for a home for the Museum of Transology after it ends its run at Brighton Museum in April 2019. Scott wants the Museum of Transology to be accepted as a touring collection so that it can remain mobile (though it is not necessarily to a museum’s advantage to take a community touring collection, investing money in something that may not spend a lot of time 'at home'). He thinks the project should be travelling to places like America, China, and Cuba, where he's talked to people about the project, and where it could be used as a model to generate new localised versions of the collection.

Scott argues that for the Museum of Transology to work, you need a layer in the liminal zone between the museum and the community which currently does not exist. Scott describes his role as 'part collections, part conservation, part community engagement, and part curating'. This role description could characterise staff at other small archives and museums (for example Hackney Museum), but Scott also felt it was important not to be beholden to fulfilling a museum’s objectives, and so at least remain partially independent. This is sometimes a role that community groups, experts, or members are expected to fulfil with little financial remuneration or decision-making power (Lynch and Alberti 2010; Kassim 2017; Wajid and Minott 2019). Scott is insistent that The Museum of Transology's collecting and exhibitions were successful only because he is a trained curator—'The navigation I've had to do—a community group would have drowned', he says. In truth, Scott is not just a professional curator: his charismatic nature eases the friction that the Museum of Transology creates in occupying the museum. Our walking interview was full of pauses as Scott chatted with all the museum staff we saw including security, front-of-house staff, and gallery attendants.

Even though curatorship of the Museum of Transology is a passion project for Scott, it has also been a precarious and difficult role to maintain, with an uncertain future. Scott put thousands of hours into the Museum of Transology, but after the first exhibition at London
College of Fashion he was paid only £1000, which did not even cover his travel (he is based in Brighton). This wasn't because Scott did not deliver value; as the Museum of Transology was the most-visited exhibition the college had ever had. In an October 2018 piece for the Museums Association, he draws attention to the transitory nature of ‘diversity’ projects, often tied to anniversaries (Scott 2018). In the Museum of Transology's case, this was the 50-year anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality (in 2017). In the piece, he asks: 'which museum has room for a trans exhibition in its upcoming programme? Queer is so last year'.

One of Scott's reasons for promoting trans visibility in museums through his work is to encourage trans people to enter the sector, both by building new Museum of Transology collections and in looking through historic collections for trans narratives that 'won't be seen by cis eyes'. Scott (2018) has said that although people in the past will not have identified as trans or been trans in the same way, you can create ‘co-narratives' between historic gender variance and modern transgender identity. '[Trans people entering the museum sector] is vital, because without them becoming heritage workers, trans narratives will continue to remain unrecognised and unspoken' (Scott 2018).

* * *

_A Museum of Modern Nature, Wellcome Collection_

Scott’s lightly regulated, independent crowdsourcing contrasts starkly with the Wellcome Collection's exhibition, _A Museum of Modern Nature_. The Wellcome Collection is a London library and museum focused on health, with an interdisciplinary and creative approach to its remit. They are part of the Wellcome Trust, a charitable global health foundation which is the UK's largest non-governmental funder of medical research (Jack 2012). _A Museum of Modern Nature_ was the second half of a year-long exhibition and event series exploring how humans relate to other animals and the natural environment. The first half was entitled _Making Nature: How We See Animals_ and ran from December 2016-May 2017. _A Museum of Modern Nature_ ran from the end of June 2017-October 2017. The crowdsourcing project in May 2017 was intended to generate the majority of objects for display. It was the first time that the Wellcome had done a crowdsourcing project of this kind. This was advertised as part a programme of events called ‘Remaking Nature’, held at the Wellcome in May. The programme invites members of the public to:

'Bring us an object that tells a story about your relationship with nature. Whether it’s something you’ve made, used or found, we want to hear how it represents your
experience of nature and what environmental issues you feel are important today. We’ll photograph your object and collect your stories to create a digital portrait of the many different ways we relate to nature in the 21st century’ (Wellcome Collection 2017).

Instead of collecting all of objects solicited during the three-day drive and then making decisions about which would be selected, Wellcome collected ‘story forms’ and photographs of all the objects. They then the contacted people whose objects and stories had been selected to ask that they bring their objects back for the exhibition period. I observed Wellcome’s collecting process for some of the collecting window on each of the days, and attended events in the series. In contrast to Scott, who went out into the community (collecting at events, meeting individuals in person, etc.) this was an invitation for Wellcome audiences to come into the institution.

The question posed by Wellcome’s collecting process: ‘how do people represent their relationships with nature?’ was broad and reflective. It is not the kind of question that is possible to answer satisfactorily under traditional systems of museum representation. Again, using stories from individuals was extremely important. This shift in modes of representation was described by the exhibition’s curator on the art and culture website Hyperallergic:

‘In contrast [to Making Nature’s focus on relationships with the natural world portrayed in zoos, museums, and wildlife documentaries], A Museum of Modern Nature moves away from the narratives found in these formal institutions and presents the stories about our everyday relationships with nature as told by our visitors.’ (Meier 2017).

Mirroring this shift, the exhibition space underwent a physical alteration as well, with the installation of the first exhibition being adapted for use in the second.

For the crowdsourcing period, there was a small collecting point set up near the entrance and a larger room devoted to the activity on the first floor at the end of the main exhibition gallery. The collections point at the entrance was used both to send people to the main room, and also to form a barrier for people trying to bring in objects that were not permitted, including living, perishable, or ‘wet’ animal or plant specimens, endangered species, drugs or chemicals, and more (see details below). In this way, the collecting process was mediated out of concern for conservation as well as content.

The ‘Remaking Nature’ event programme’s ‘Guidelines for Object Collecting’ specified:
'You must own your own object and have the right to either loan or gift the object to the exhibition. Any objects that are gifted to the exhibition rather than loaned will not become part of the permanent collection and will be disposed of at the end of their usable life.

The object must be safe, comply with all applicable laws and not contain any prohibited or hazardous materials, including but not limited to the following:

- Living animal and plant specimens
- Human remains
- Wet specimens and liquids
- Perishables
- Endangered species
- Ivory
- Wild flowers
- Birds’ eggs
- Mercury
- Highly flammable/explosive materials
- Firearms
- Drugs/Chemicals

No objects can be left with us this weekend – we will get in touch afterwards if your object is selected for the exhibition.’

There was some anxiety around maintaining these boundaries. On the first day, when not busy, staff in the main collecting room (of which there were up to eight at a time) frequently asked each other or told stories about people who had been turned away from either the downstairs or upstairs location. Staff appeared to have particular worries that someone would bring in a gun as their nature object. Despite this barrier, the 'Sharing Nature' online gallery, which contains images of all the crowdsourced donations whether selected for the exhibition or not, clearly includes material that was banned in the guidelines. The materials were put (and photographed) in plastic bags, presumably the staff’s solution to prevent pests from entering the building. The borders of the collecting process itself were also not so clear, as people frequently wandered into the main collecting space asking if an exhibition or an event was going on. Staff would then explain the collecting activity and encourage people to take part if they could think of an object that might be on their person that related to their relationship with nature. Occasionally people came in and did this, but more often they moved on.
The ‘Guidelines for Object Collecting’ made it explicit that the materials chosen for the exhibition would not enter the Wellcome’s permanent collection at any point but instead be returned (if loaned), or destroyed if gifted. The collecting advertisement carefully specifies that the collecting process would photograph your object and collect your stories’ (italics added). The staff nevertheless spent a fair amount of time communicating this boundary and making sure people consciously chose one of the two options. The collecting process was heavily staffed, mostly by people who would usually work as gallery assistants. Staff actively engaged in conversation with donors, using ‘provocations’ which were taped up on the wall. These were questions designed to guide and draw out people’s (150-word maximum) story contribution on the form. Story was clearly recognised as a unique and valued part of the collecting process by the staff. For example, one staff member commented to another 'last night we were talking about a deer antler—a totally cliché object, but the story that came with it was wonderful'. When donors asked about the selection process for the exhibition, one staff member said 'They’re going to put up all the photos in this room and decide. Mostly I think based on the stories. It will be hard.'

Figure 6.6 My contribution to the Wellcome Collection’s crowdsourcing: an early 1990s map of the Great North Woods. Photo by author. The photo that was taken at the crowdsourcing event was included in ‘Sharing Nature’ online gallery along with my story about how 18th century artistic depictions of the woodland have influenced contemporary conservation planning.
Following the three days of collecting, *A Museum of Modern Nature* had received over a hundred (story form and photograph) donations. These were reviewed by a small team, including a dairy farmer, a horticultural scientist and a plant medicine shaman, who all work with nature in their daily lives (Wellcome n.d.). In the end, 56 objects, including ones donated by the deciding team, were put on display, meaning that approximately one out of every two objects were selected (Meier 2017). ‘Sharing Nature’, the online gallery where both the selected and non-selected object photographs were displayed, added interactive content on different themes throughout the duration of the exhibition. ‘Sharing Nature’ is now only available to view (with limited functionality) through the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, following Wellcome Collections’ archiving of their pre-2018 website material there.

Scott and the Wellcome’s crowdsourcing projects provide good comparison. Although the Museum of Transology has more objects than *A Museum of Modern Nature* (around 150 to 200) they have had similar numbers of donors, since some of the Museum of Transology’s donors gave more than one object. They also both use story and object pairs as a primary way to try to answer relatively complex questions around representation that would not have been answered within traditional systems. Although the Museum of Transology’s attempt to fill a gap in collections is a more traditional diversity project than trying to represent people’s everyday relationships with nature, the Museum of Transology’s focus on everyday trans experiences means that both projects produced a holistic and interestingly varied collection.

The two projects do provide contrasts in process, with the Wellcome offering a much more managed collecting encounter. Since the Wellcome's crowdsourcing only took place within the institution, and Scott worked independently, this is not surprising. But rather than see a neat contrast between Wellcome’s borders and boundaries vs. the Museum of Transology’s flexibility, it is more accurate to think of the borders and boundaries as coming in at different times. At the Wellcome, borders and boundaries shaped the beginning of the process. This included the collecting environment itself, what could be collected and how it should be narrated and managed. Although the Museum of Transology lacked these initial borders and boundaries (like conservation treatments and touch restrictions), some of them came in after the collection was established and it tried to cross over into a more formal institutional home.

These descriptions of how diverse materials and experiences occupy tenuous and liminal spaces in the collecting process build on the last chapter’s work of locating diversity. Porous
zones, like event and education spaces, show up again in the cases above, but this chapter expands its exploration of the location of diversity to the more conceptual ‘spaces’ in collecting practice. The chapter’s answer to the question of how decisions are made about the introduction of ‘diverse’ materials similarly emphasises liminality. Even when diverse materials are introduced, they are held outside permanent collections by framing them as temporary or with uncertain significance.

Collections policies, which seem like an obvious tool for making decisions about what to collect, mostly did not come up in object story narratives. When I asked about policies, most practitioners were ambivalent about their use as day-to-day tools. In some ways this is surprising, given that collections policies are necessary for museum accreditation, and increasingly for archives (suggesting that professional bodies think they are a useful tool). There was a sense that collections policies were supposed to serve as structured, rational decision-making instruments. For example, my interview with Hackney’s Heritage Learning Manager began with her summarising the collecting process as: ‘We’ve got a collecting policy and the Exhibitions Officer will make a decision based on the collections policy whether or not [the material] fits’. However, from the Exhibition Officer’s perspective, this was not what usually happened.

'I don’t really refer to [the collections policy] very often. It’s something that we have for protection. You know, whenever I accept an object, I’m not going, "Okay, let me look at the policy". There’s probably a bit more of a gut reaction about whether it’s something we want, or not, based on just knowledge of our storage, of our programmes, our interest.’

In the Hackney Museum case earlier this chapter, the Heritage Learning Manager described their collecting process in similarly complex and subjective ways, indicating their perspectives are less of a contradiction and more of an example of the role collecting policies are assumed to play. This is not to say collections policies are not used or useful. Practitioners described using them in collecting as a kind of institutional back up, something to point to in order to justify a decision or direct responsibility away from staff. Several of my interviewees described their collections policy as useful primarily for when they needed to turn things down. Others spoke about their collections policy as proactively narrowing what can be collected due to staff time or resource constraints. Policies also appeared more positively in practitioners’ descriptions as opportunities for staff to work through (or rework) their approach to collecting and collections. To use Hackney Museum as an example again, a new
collections development policy was written in advance of their redisplay in the early 2000s, in order, as a former curator described, that they could go out and collect what they wanted to collect.

The majority of the time, as demonstrated through object stories and practitioner perspectives (i.e. Table 6.1), decisions about collecting material considered as diverse appear to be made heuristically, using informal or experiential references. These decisions do not conform with linear collecting processes or policies, and instead occupy more liminal and contested places within practice. It is important to recognise the role of informal decision-making in collecting contemporary diversity for several reasons. First, because this is not a well acknowledged practice within the heritage sector, despite it being very common (Although see Geoghehan and Hess 2015; Henderson and Waller 2016; some contributions in Rhys and Baveystock 2014). Second, because heuristic and informal decision making is often appropriate, since making decisions about the significance of contemporary materials will always involve a non-reducible amount of uncertainty about their future value (i.e. more information is not necessarily going to lead to better decisions). Third, recognising the role of informal decision-making (alongside rational/analytic-deliberative) is important for supporting collections practitioners to be able to pursue collecting contemporary diversity in arenas where there is not yet consensus and acquisitions are considered risky (Terwey 2014, 80). In my July 2018 workshop, participants described a willingness to take risks in collecting, but a risk aversion at higher levels in their institutions. If it went well, taking risks was celebrated as a bold achievement for the institution. If it didn’t, it was only those on the frontline that bore the costs (Lee-Crossett 2018, 10). Workshop participants emphasized that if museums want to engage with what is current and cutting edge, including diversity, then embracing risks and failure in practice, not just in theory, is part of this process.

The gap between formal and informal practice and processes framed in this chapter is exemplified by the challenges the Museum of Transology faced when engaging with the institutions where it was displayed. Whilst A Museum of Modern Nature and the Museum of Transology engaged in crowdsourced collecting, the Museum of Transology presents greater potential for intervention in traditional collecting processes going forward. These interventions include being anti-selective, making interpretation labels equally valid 'objects' and proposing a model for a perpetually travelling, reproducible collection with new attendant staff roles.
The interventions trialled by the Museum of Transology are somewhat complicated by the fact by the challenges in finding a permanent home for its collection in a museum. The other collecting projects in this chapter were not introduced into permanent collections – and in the case of Wellcome Collection, permanently taking on materials was explicitly avoided. As I have highlighted in the Hackney Museum case, and the discussion of accessing significance in the first section, the ability to use objects while determining their significance (and discard them when their significance lessens) allows for flexibility with difficult and uncertain material. Terwey, however, raises concerns about the consequences of this for contemporary material:

'Any cooling off period would raise the possibility of contemporary material being considered of a different class to the "proper" collection, at least in the short term. It could be argued that this is a reactionary step; that contemporary material, perhaps donated by communities and cultures previously excluded from the museum's collections and displays, should be accorded the status of a full part of the collection. Equally there is the danger that at the end of the cooling off period the reassessment of significance and value simply reverts to a traditional curatorial authority' (2014, 85).

Clear to Terwey (and Scott) is that liminal areas of collecting practice do not necessarily carry over into impacting a permanent collection, even if that might be the desire of those involved. Based on the analysis of decision-making in this chapter, neither informal nor formal decision-making appear to particularly support the introduction of diverse materials and perspectives into permanent collections—even if informal decision-making is more likely to engage with materials that seem new and uncertain in the context of the collections.

This chapter outlined a variety of informal frameworks that practitioners used to determine the potential values and significance of contemporary materials. If, as I argue, the significance of materials is determined through their use in collections, then addressing ways that diversity is marginalised by collections processes is important. The cases in this chapter have shown that while collecting practices in social history have been changing, core collections’ frameworks and processes have not. This leaves practitioners struggling to bring contemporary material into the collection in ways that preserve the complexity and diversity they are trying to include. With this chapter, I have tried to paint a more complex picture of the work around contemporary collecting and representation in museums, where I have observed practitioners negotiating, shifting, or chafing against traditional systems of representation (although not reforming them). Since these examples are relatively recent,
some of their impact on processes and ways of working may yet to be seen. The next chapter moves from the introduction of objects and materials to the establishment of new conceptions of collections material and collections expertise. It builds particularly on some of Scott's proposals and concerns for how collections use and value diverse expertise. Instead of practitioner collecting narratives, it focuses on situations where contemporary collecting expertise is taught and learned.

Notes

1 Significance assessment policies have a longer history in heritage site management but have been applied in the museum context since around the turn of the century (Fredheim, Macdonald and Morgan 2018, 16). These and other types of collections development and management policies are often, but not always, developed as part of the UK museum accreditation process (established in 1988), which benefit museums in part by making them eligible for most funding schemes. Formal policies for collections development are increasingly common in the archives sector since the roll out of The National Archives’ Archives Service Accreditation scheme in 2013.

2 The majority of things held in museum collections are not displayed, although statistics vary as to the percentage (e.g. Byrne 2011; Macdonald 2006, 88).

3 The closest to object biography work on 'non-significant' objects might be within contemporary archaeology, some veins of which have focused on 'excavating', or applying the frame and techniques of archaeological analysis to everyday contemporary objects, including things like a Ford Transit van (Bailey et al 2009; Harrison and Breithoff 2017).

4 Personal biases do also apply to the application of rational-deliberative decision-making structures, but heuristic decision-making's lack of structures potentially make it more susceptible.

5 Interestingly, one of Howe’s (2006) examples in his article defining crowdsourcing is about a professional photographer whose livelihood is cut into by museums’ use of stock photography websites to procure photos for exhibitions.

6 The data that makes up Table 6.1 was developed from the ‘Collecting Change/Changing Collections’ report (Lee-Crossett 2018, 4).

7 The Mayor's tweet is no longer visible on the platform, so cannot be referenced verbatim. The coverage of the LD50 protest by The Independent cites the Mayor’s support of the protest, and Hackney Gazette quotes him as saying that Hackney 'support[s] artistic freedom of expression and free speech' but, 'There are clear limits, Racism, misogyny, anti-Semitism and xenophobia have no place in Hackney' (Gelder 2017).

8 It is important to note that 'free speech' is a banner which contemporary far-right groups have used to argue that violent and discriminatory language must be allowed a platform in the public realm. In this case, the sole counter-protestor and free-speed advocate was an art critic who flew from Berlin specifically to attend the protest. He had also been linked to far-right views (Nolan 2017).

9 For example, Hackney museum staff have also presented on collecting the LD50 protest placards in professional forums.

10 Both of the Museum of Transology exhibitions had curatorial framing and organisation by Scott, but this was relatively light, primarily offering definitions and a summary context for the kinds of topics raised in the objects and labels.

11 'Cis' is the abbreviation for ‘cisgender’. The Museum of Transology exhibition guidebook defines as 'non trans people whose gender identity happens to align with their biological sex' (Scott 2017).

12 Despite the Museum of Transology going through up to hundreds of feedback tags within a week, Brighton Museum did not plan in-house staff time for the exhibition after its installation. So, unlike in-house exhibitions, there are not any staff attached for continuing maintenance besides routine case cleaning. Currently, volunteer labour is used to help refill feedback tags, archive completed ones, check objects conditions, do any repair, arrange the open display items, and update the collections database. Scott says that if the museum had known how many hours of work the exhibition required, they could not have paid, and would not have taken it.

13 The final number of objects for A Museum of Modern Nature is inclusive of the photographs that were added to the 'Sharing Nature' online gallery after the in-person collecting drive had finished.
Chapter 7  Future expertise: evidence and learning in archives and natural history

This chapter considers how evidential frameworks in archives and natural science have evolved since the latter half of the 20th century. It addresses the question, ‘When does bringing in material from previously underrepresented groups impact how the collection is conceptualised, managed, or accessed? by examining how widening ideas of evidence in these fields have altered collections management and practitioners’ roles. The chapter considers cases where diverse materials and perspectives have impacted how collections are managed and used, and so is concerned with what I have called active representation earlier in this thesis. It argues that work on collecting contemporary diversity can be most impactful when it is allowed to influence the high-level frameworks of collections—namely, what is considered to be evidence, and by extension, expertise. Where the previous chapter focused on practices of determining significance when collecting, this chapter will focus on how people gain expertise in identifying and making significance. It revisits the earlier question, ‘How are decisions made to introduce diverse materials and perspectives into collections?’ This time, rather than place the emphasis on materials, it looks at how people (and their perspectives) come into collections and learn how to use their infrastructure and conventions.

In order to make my argument about evidence and expertise, I establish how evidence has been defined within archival studies as a chain of relationships made between authorised materials and experts. This is an understanding of evidence that is relational in terms of the material, people, and standards or frameworks involved. A relational theory of evidence corresponds with the use-driven theory of value discussed in the last chapter: an object's connections and engagements are key to shaping its significance over any 'intrinsic' features. Evidence comes with the experts who present it—these are the people who are often literally defined as such, whether in the courtroom or in the laboratory. When I talk about being an ‘expert’ in this chapter, I am referring to someone who is acknowledged as being able to make authorised relationships with, and add to bodies of evidence. This definition understands expertise as an ability to engage in knowledge production, rather than, for example, purely technical expertise (although these are not mutually exclusive). The second part of this chapter explores two cases that consider the processes by which people, particularly those associated with diversity, learn how to create evidential relationships and enter expert positions.
The literature and the cases in this chapter are focused on archives and natural history collections because of their shared understanding of material as records and evidence. Although social history museums might also broadly understand their collections as being part of the historical record or historical evidence, they do not share the established disciplinary frameworks for treating their collections in this way. This chapter’s cases contain examples of three different programmes geared toward supporting participants to gain skills or experience for their professional or vocational practice. The first case discusses the Angela Marmont Centre’s (AMC) ID Trainers for the Future programme (2014-2018), which helped to train the next generation of experts in species identification to support biodiversity monitoring. The second case looks at experiences of collecting material around gender and ethnicity at the Women’s Art Library. Before discussing these learning and training experiences, I establish the core concepts for this chapter: evidential value, frameworks, and expertise.

7.1 Evidential value

To understand the frameworks that underpin archives and natural history collections, it is helpful to return briefly to the discussion of heritage and collection values in the previous chapter. While associative value (connection to people, places, stories) was most strongly connected to social history objects, it is evidentiary and functional value that are most strongly associated with archives and natural history collections. The archives selected for my cases are relative outliers in their emphasis on associative value, and in sustaining community processes, alongside formal archival ones. However, they remain shaped by and operate within an evidential framework. Previously, I used Fredheim and Khalaf’s definition of ‘evidential value’ as related to conducting and communicating research, and ‘functional value’ as related to sustaining processes and relationships (2016, 473-4). In this section, I’ll show that the research potential of evidence (and by extension evidential value) is fundamentally based on sustaining particular types of relationships and processes. Thus, a key issue of the chapter is about who, and what conditions, are able to sustain these evidentiary relations.

The evidential value of records has been a core concept of archival management since the mid-20th century. Archival records are still frequently defined as a kind of evidence or as having intrinsic evidential value (Yeo 2007, 319-320). Geoffrey Yeo (2007), an archival scholar who has written extensively on archival infrastructure, has argued that evidence is
one of the affordances (the potential property or function) of records. As ‘persistent representation of activities, created by participants or observers of those activities or by their authorised proxies,’ records have a number of different affordances, including, for example, associative ones (Yeo 2007, 337).

In both the archives and the sciences, records are also understood to be, or to have, the properties of information and data, which can then be transformed into evidence. In the archival realm, information is usually a more general category than evidence, associated less with processes of judgement or evaluation. Data is a base unit: raw data can become information when purposefully concentrated and communicated (Ibid., 326-328). In my observation, these definitions are more often used in the reverse in the sciences. Data is the more formal category for talking about a set of information that has been improved and put into a larger recording framework (e.g. a database). Data is often seen as being equivalent to records (of insect specimens, for example) and a record as equivalent to the specimen (Latour 1999; Ilerbaig 2010; Shankar 2004; Yeo 2007, 341). In actuality, these equivalences obscure the chain of translation and abstraction they are a part of (See Figure 7.1). At an even deeper level than the record-specimen equivalence, an individual specimen is meant to stand in for the entire species it belongs to, although this is also not an exact correspondence given natural variation.

As in the archival context, natural history collections keep two outputs, or proxies, of the central ‘activities’ in the field: both the record and the specimen (which is its own persistent representation of species activity). As I’ll discuss, in reference to the UK Species Inventory and the ID Trainers programme, keeping both facilitates a number of activities that refine and generate scientific evidence. Having both the record and the specimen allows for the record to be updated by reconsidering the specimen (if it was originally misidentified). Conversely, it also allows specimens to be recontextualised based on new structures of biological recording data. And finally, it allows for those who are building expertise in species identification to verify the accuracy of their skills by testing them on a specimen that has already been correctly identified.
Different types of expertise and expert activities are needed throughout the process of biological sciences collecting, and in collecting more generally. First, there is the needed expertise to create records and specimens from the field. Then, the expertise to manipulate specimens and records so that then can be made into usable scientific data. And finally, the expertise to turn the data into evidence. The different types of expertise are not always, or necessarily, present within the same individual or group. Sometimes these translations are carried out by unconnected groups of individuals. As the chapter continues, I’ll explore the
separations and tensions between different types of expertise, and what kinds of expertise different groups of people are afforded.

The crucial aspect of Yeo’s establishment of evidence as an affordance of records is that it removes evidence as a property that is intrinsic either to a record or a recording framework. Yeo argues that looking deeply into definitions of evidence shows that it should be seen as a word of relation. He quotes Luciana Duranti: ‘evidence is not an entity, but a relationship...between the fact to be proven and the fact that proves it’ (2002, 9; in Yeo 2007, 324). In other words, something becomes evidence when a strong, relevant link is established between a record (or data) and a proposition. Since people have different judgements and standards for what is a strong and relevant link in different contexts, whether or not something constitutes evidence can be subjective (Yeo 2007, 324). For example, both science and law have sets of standards for evidence, and in either field, interpretations about the validity of evidence can differ between sub-disciplines and even individuals. To speak of materials having contextual or subjective values is not to argue for a post-truth notion, where fact is completely relative. I am instead trying to describe a more layered notion of relational or contextual value, where there are irreducible things and facts, but these can enter into different kinds of relationships with different effects. Evidentiary value can also appear to change based on who tries to make the evidentiary relationships. Yeo touches on the social negotiation of evidence, but doesn’t go into the implications of this in detail (2007, 324-325). For that, we can turn to feminist and queer perspectives on the archive.

Queer and performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz explores the question of who, as well as what, gets to make evidence in his landmark article ‘Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts’ (1996). In essence, Muñoz shares Yeo’s understanding of a relational theory of evidence, but employs an analysis of how evidentiary relationships are shaped through societal inequalities and oppressions. Muñoz notes that traces of queer lives and experiences have often purposefully fallen short of accepted standards of evidence: in many social and historical contexts, to be proven to be queer was dangerous. Other minoritised identities have also experienced the suppression, lack of access to, or loss of, official records throughout history (e.g. Bastian 2003). Consequently, the ephemera associated with minoritised subjects are often dismissed as something less than evidence.
Scholars like Muñoz and Kate Eichhorn (2010, 2013) have challenged this, arguing that anecdotal, ephemeral, and emotional archival traces are evidentiary links that grant ‘entrance and access to [the archive for] those who have been locked out of official histories’ (Muñoz 1996, 9). Muñoz (1996; 2009) would also be in accord with Eichhorn’s assertion that ‘Rather than a destination for knowledge already produced or a place to recover histories and ideas placed under erasure, making archives is frequently where our knowledge production begins’ (Eichhorn 2010, 625; also see Arondekar 2014; Stoler 2009). In reference to feminist archives, Eichhorn writes that the archive has been ‘the primary apparatus through which we have continued to authorize new forms of feminist knowledge and cultural production at a time when prevailing political forces have often suggested that feminism is no longer relevant or necessary’ (2010, 627). Discussion of the Women’s Art Library in the second profile of this chapter engages directly with how evidence and expertise have been created and challenged in a feminist art practice context.

7.2 Frameworks and expertise

The engagement between minoritized evidence and archives throws into relief what is more broadly true about them: that archives are apparatuses that produce and hold authorized knowledge (Cook and Schwartz 2002; Joyce 1999). Archives and natural history both feature established frameworks for records and data. These frameworks can be described as ‘holding up’ evidentiary relationships, creating pre-set channels that allow experts to easily make the links that turn records and data into scientific or historical evidence (Keenan 2015). However, as within the museums sector, these authorized frameworks have experienced significant challenge and change since the mid 20th century. This has resulted in identity shifts within professional practice, and consequently what it means to be an expert in these fields. In this section I’ll first discuss documentation strategy as an example that influenced both collecting and the role of practitioners in archives. Then, I’ll use the development of the UK Species Inventory as an example of changes in biological recording and taxonomic representation in natural history. Both these examples, of new (or evolving) frameworks, were designed at least in part to increase the capability of collections to include underrepresented material and keep up with changing contemporary populations.
7.2.1 Documentation strategy

Documentation strategy, developed in the 1980s, arose as a response to critiques of passive acquisitioning (identifying and accessioning material) in archives. Documentation strategy is worthwhile to briefly discuss here both because of the social changes that drove it and because of its ambition. Practitioners and scholars of community archives (who have since taken up many of documentation strategy’s precepts) have rarely proposed such wide-ranging, generalisable approaches documentation strategy’s advocates did.

In 1980s, passive approaches to acquisition in archival practice were seen as increasingly unsustainable in part because of the growing profusion of documentation in society. Simultaneously, there was a growing recognition in that passive acquisition resulted in elite bias in collections (Johnson 2008, 193; Malkmus 2008, 384-395; Zinn 1977). Before documentation strategy established, Doris Malkmus (2008, 385) states that:

‘archivists [were grappling] with problems in selecting from the mass of modern documentation to document contemporary social movements, underrepresented groups, and cultural shifts not well represented through traditional acquisition practices’.

Similar to the rhetoric around increasing representation in museums, the need for documentation strategy was often expressed as a desire to better ‘mirror’ populations (Ham 1974, 8). Documentation strategy was thus defined by proactively and cooperatively addressing archival selection and representation in order to create ‘a more useable historical record’ (Malkmus 2008, 384). This represented a shift from the predominant professional identity of archivists as neutral stewards of the records given to them. Documentation strategy was thus thought of as an activist archival strategy, in that it focused on outwardly reassessing which materials should be collected on a given topic or area rather than relying on an existing collection as a guide.

Documentation strategy was also developing in the context of the growth of active archival planning and assessment (Hackman 2009). As it was initially set out, the process of documentation strategy involved a study of any chosen topic or (geographic) area with ‘a group of experts, record creators, archivists, and users,’ who then create priorities and categories within it (Malkmus 2008, 386). Working across relevant institutions and communities, this steering group would oversee the acquisition of materials. Documentation
strategy was thus intended to be more comprehensive than a collecting policy (i.e. outlining broad aims for a single organisation) and more sustained than collecting initiatives (i.e. facilitating placement of material as it is identified) (Malkmus 2007, 378, citing Samuels 1986, 111-114). This vision of documentation strategy was heavily resource intensive within collections and relied on inter-institution cooperation, which critics argue contributed to its lack of success in early test cases. Despite broad consensus that documentation strategy was unsuccessful in its proposed form, its legacy continues. Interest in documentation strategy has revived with the growth of the digital, which has lessened the transaction costs of inventorying and sharing materials between institutions and other groups (Malkmus 2008; Williams 2012).

Many of the principles of documentation strategy have been recreated in contemporary community-based or participatory collecting models (Daniels et al. 2015; Flinn et al 2009, Johnson 2008, 193; Stevens et al. 2010). These models emphasize the archivist as facilitator, and attempt to move the project of representation away from documentation for the archives and toward supporting community-led interests and priorities. In many cases, this has been successful, leading to increased flexibility and recognition amongst archivists about the evidence and expertise brought forward by communities (Stevens et al. 2010). Still, there is a tension around who archival engagements with diversity are for: are they for the benefit of the repository, or for communities outside it? Is expertise being produced outside the archive as well as within in?

7.2.2 Biological recording: UK Species Inventory

Natural history collections have not been so affected by questions of the subjectivity of expertise as their social history counterparts. However, not dissimilarly to documentation strategy, they have had to cope with the huge volume of contemporary species documentation. Amateur experts have always had a recognised role in biological recording in the UK, although this was diminished somewhat by the mid-20th century professionalization of the field sciences (Ellis 2011; Ellis and Waterton 2005; 2004). In recent years, and organisations like the AMC and the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) have begun to invest more in supporting non-professionals’ record-making. Also, like archives, natural history collections have had to grapple with reorienting taxonomic structures to address the demand for biodiversity monitoring that has grown since the late 20th century. Connecting to the discussion of representation in the previous chapter, the example of the
UK Species Inventory (maintained by the AMC) shows how a relatively static framework of representation has been shifting to a more flexible and contextualised tool that is responsive to what people are doing on the ground.

The UK Species Inventory is a public, searchable, online database of all UK flora and fauna. The Species Inventory holds an authoritative list of up-to-date scientific names and taxonomic relationships. Although it is not in itself a repository for biological recording data, it serves as a reference point from which accurate biological recording can be done. This makes the Species Inventory the backbone for all biological recording data, and thus all biodiversity data, in the UK. The Species Inventory’s centrality shapes biological recording practices both in collections, and in the field, making it tightly bound up in the practices of amateur and professional species identification expertise. The data model for the Species Inventory was constructed in 1998 by Charles Copp, who would go on to be influential in founding the NBN two years later (Raper 2012, 3; Stroud 2016). The NBN is an umbrella organisation supporting a wide partnership of UK wildlife conservation organisations. Like the NBN, the Species Inventory was created to help bring together and coordinate professional and amateur biological recording networks and data sets on local and national levels (Stroud 2016). After a few years of operation, the Species Inventory’s maintenance and management transferred to the NHM (Raper 2012, 3).

The Species Inventory is now used as the principal database for the majority of UK biological recording schemes and software. For example, if you are a keen amateur naturalist, you can download the popular iRecord app on your phone, take it out into a nearby field and record the species you see. Regardless of how you choose to record the species (e.g., with a scientific, common, or even a partial or outdated name) iRecord takes what you’ve put in and checks it against the official names in the UK Species Inventory. Returning to Figure 1, tools like iRecord draw on the Species Inventory to simplify the translation of material from records to data. People who are already experts in species identification in the field can ensure that their records are not just correct by their own standards, but scientifically accurate. And for many amateur experts, producing data that can be used by the scientific community is one of the reasons their work feels valuable (Ellis 2011). Even before this stage, the beginner-friendly resource iSpot can help people with an earlier step: correctly identifying photographs of their specimens using image reference galleries (ultimately backed by the Species Inventory) and community input.
The Species Inventory Manager (SI Manager) is the sole staff member that maintains the database for the NHM.\(^4\) He is also an amateur expert in the identification of parasitic fly groups and active in a number of recording schemes. As I will go on to discuss, his background as an amateur expert is a significant part of his success in the role. The SI Manager's work is probably the most technical of the staff at the AMC, and perhaps because of this he seemed the most sceptical of being interviewed by a qualitative social scientist. We had a few informal chats over coffee and lunch before I convinced him that my questions were detailed enough to warrant an interview. During the interview itself, the SI Manager seemed excited by my interest and was generous with his time walking me through how the Species Inventory and other recording databases worked on the computer as well as responding to my questions.

Before the SI Manager, the Species Inventory was a single user database. In other words, it was a backend resource, maintained by an individual and not accessible publicly or online. To update it, recording schemes and experts periodically sent in 'checklists'. Traditionally, checklists are lists of species that define a taxonomic group, which are updated when new species are added or species names change (NHM n.d.). For example, there are checklists for UK flowering plants, dragonflies, and birds. The SI Manager described his predecessor's approach to the database as 'a taxonomic exercise', in that he wanted a list of all UK species with their taxonomy made up-to-date-and correct. The SI Manager described the taxonomic approach as a presentist one, which comes at the expense of understanding change over time (the aim of biological recording).

The SI Manager explained:

'Taxonomists deal with the now. [...] And they present a list of species that are now, with the names that are now. They don't always then look into the past and see what the situation was 10 years ago or 20 years ago. And as you know, taxonomy changes, people make up new species, or they split things, or they lump things together. [...] And what that means is, if you're interested purely in taxonomy, then you don't worry about that previous concept.'

Of course, taxonomy and biological recording aren't mutually exclusive. Taxonomy, and particularly the concept of species, underpins how we count and measure biodiversity (Convention on Biological Diversity 2007).
In the past, people primarily submitted data to the Species Inventory. Data didn't usually come out. In terms of how this worked, the SI Manager described:

'[The Species Inventory] has always been a database that's crowdsourced informally and in a very primitive way, in that the experts in lots of different groups send me a checklist of species, or send in a checklist and say, 'This is the list of British species in this group.'

This has changed because of the database's shift from a taxonomic tool to a biological recording one, which is used to monitor biodiversity and change (See Figure 2). Now, it is more common for people to get data out of the Species Inventory (to use in biological recording) than to put it in (to create a more perfect taxonomy).

Figure 7.2 The UK Species Inventory’s shift from taxonomic evidence to biodiversity evidence. Elaboration from Figure 7.1.

As described in the Technical Overview of the Species Inventory,

'[t]he most important feature of the Inventory is that it is not a single checklist of taxa but a mechanism for storing many checklists and versions of checklists, together with the means for translating from one to another. This is what makes it very different from virtually all other taxonomic database projects’ (Raper 2012, 3).

In other words, the Species Inventory is able to translate across checklists’ varied data frameworks, to compare historical and contemporary data, or data collected by different parties for different reasons. This is particularly significant for biodiversity, since it is dependent on comparison (at minimum across time).
Data checklists stored by the Species Inventory are increasingly used to describe 'mixed' species groups (not from one taxonomic group) that are of statutory or research interest, like protected or non-native species (NHM n.d.). These checklists can either be used for recording or to act as a filter on existing data sets (rather than as a data input tool). For example, the Non-native Species Secretariat used the Species Inventory to create a checklist of all the non-native species in the UK, with around three and a half thousand species on it. With the checklist created from the Species Inventory, the Secretariat could go to a database like the NBN's Atlas and run a query to see the data for all non-native species in any given locality. Without the checklist, they would have to physically pull out the data for each individual species from the database. The SI Manager concluded '[The Species Inventory] then becomes an amazingly powerful tool. [...] When you start doing this, you don't realise quite how people use the data'. He describes another instance where the Crop-Wild Relatives project wanted to know which species of wild plants were most closely related to farmed varieties, in order to assess the risks of genetic pollution from crops to wild plants. Using the Species Inventory, they were able to add a code for genetic relatedness to existing records and create distribution maps of crops and their wild relatives, including the potential risk of genetic pollution.

Mixed species checklists are also a response to changes in the ways that people are recording in the field. The SI Manager says that while in the past people would have gone out to record a particular taxonomic group, today people, 'go out there and they want to record everything they see. Perhaps they go out wanting to record flowers. But if a bird flies over, they want to record that too'. Emphasis on biological recording and biodiversity has changed not only how people use the database, but the structure of the database itself. For the Species Inventory to be most useful for biological recording, it has to maintain an imperfect taxonomy: one that keeps account of outdated concepts and current ambiguity. This creates what The SI Manager calls 'fuzzy concepts,' where 'you have to be able to retain a concept that is different taxonomically to the pure taxonomy'.

The SI Manager further defines fuzzy concepts as 'a vague concept or a previous concept that you're recording against'. Including fuzzy concepts in the Species Inventory enables the comparison of records when concepts have changed. For example, if you're using an outdated guide to species of fly to create records, you might put in a species name from the 1950s that would later go on to be split into five different species. When you entered this
1950s name in, the Species Inventory would come up with two names you could choose from: the broad 1950s species concept and how the name is being used now. If you wanted to look at species maps over time, to see if the population of these flies had grown or declined, then you would need to know that it had previously been lumped together with four other species. Not knowing this would distort the data, but a perfect taxonomy would not retain this information. Fuzzy concepts, then, can actually produce more accurate data by allowing for the comparison of species whose boundaries or identification have changed over time.

A fuzzy concept can also help cope with the practical limitations of field recording, such as not being able to identify something down to the species level. The SI Manager gives the example of creating a fuzzy concept in the database for a whale recording scheme. Lots of whale recorders 'stand by the sea, with binoculars and scan the horizon for the sign of whales going past certain key points around the country' (AMC3). In order to identify species, people look for the shape of the back, head, and fin as they stick up out of the water. These recorders had asked the SI Manager to make a concept that combined two different species, the fin and sei whale. The SI Manager asked the recorders, “Well, is this useful to you, is it interesting to know whether it's either one of these two species?”. They said, “Oh yeah. We get a lot of records that we can't put in the database, because [fin and sei whale] species are defined by the shape of the lower jaw. And when they're in the water you can't tell”. In this situation, it is less important that recording maps on to the most specific taxonomic name possible, but that the category is specific while remaining functional.

Fuzzy concepts like this appear both necessary and somewhat undesirable for experts, as expertise in biological recording is judged by the ability to do species-level identification. The SI Manager said that when he records, species is really the only scale that is interesting to him. Although my interview with the SI Manager focused on the Species Inventory, we also talked in depth about how the SI Manager had chosen and developed his area of amateur expertise. Developing his species-level expertise in tachinids (a family of parasitic flies) took years of study. I examine his narrative about this a way of introducing the AMC’s ID Trainers for the Future programme, since it establishes the state of expert species identification in the UK to which the programme responds.
7.3 Cases

7.3.1 Identification Trainers for the Future at the Angela Marmont Centre

The SI Manager explained to me that his choice to study tachinids was partly about the challenge—he was someone who liked to identify things, whether that’s ceramics, coins, or insects. He continued:

'So you want something [to study] that’s a challenge, but not something that’s absolutely impossible, where you physically need to do DNA—I don’t have a lab at home. It’s got to be an accessible group that you can get into. Also, it’s useful where there’s a group of amateurs already studying, who help each other. If you’re starting [to learn] a [family] group, you don’t want to be the only person floundering around visiting museums, trying to work out what something is. You want to be able to meet up with somebody at the weekend and just go, "Have you seen one of these before?" And they’ll go, "Ah, yeah, yeah. Use this book". There’s also the accessibility and the ease of catching and keeping specimens. Certain groups need you to keep material in alcohol, use chemicals to identify them—it’s a pain in the butt. And those things are difficult to get if you’re an amateur. And I don’t particularly want my house full of vials of alcohol which could be inflammable. Or formaldehyde, which can be toxic. So, I collect things that are dry pin. Reasonably compact, easy to set and pin and box. There was a logic to [choosing this family]. And also, I like these quirky parasitoids that attack other insects, with these weird lifecycles where they live inside the body of the host like an alien and burst out. So, it’s pretty cool, and amazing stuff goes on.'

The SI Manager’s experience highlights a number of features about the experience of developing species identification expertise. First, expertise is shown to be a social, relational process (as has been recognised by a wealth of work in social studies of science and other skilled practice, e.g. Ellis 2011; Ingold 2013; Latour 1999; Latour and Woolgar 1979). The SI Manager had easy access to an expert community, and other people studying the same material—although he also got lucky in this respect, since he happened to live down the road from the British Etymological Society’s collection. The SI Manager’s chosen area of expertise is also driven by the relative accessibility of his subject. This includes its material accessibility: the SI Manager emphasized that studying Tachinae is something you can do at home, without needing a laboratory or much specialised equipment. Collecting flies requires its own kind of technical expertise, but also has lower barriers to entry than other amateur field science activities one could take up. Compared to archaeology, for example, natural history collecting in this country (especially insects) doesn’t require land access or other kinds of permits. It is difficult to participate in the collection of what would be recognised as sound archaeological
data collection without the resources now typically provided by universities, companies, or other official heritage bodies—but this isn’t the case for much of natural history.

Although the SI Manager chose a group to study partly based on accessibility, he also partly chose it for its relative inaccessibility. The SI Manager tells me that since he knew he wanted to become an expert in something, he:

'chose a group where other people weren't studying it particularly. There were one or two people, but I could get in. [...] So, you know, it's a bit of ego and a bit of fun, and bloody hell, years later somebody gives you a job at the Natural History Museum.'

Discussion with the SI Manager also highlighted a further feature of what, for most people, would be an inaccessible feature of his expertise: the time involved.

'You have to study a long time [to learn how to identify parasitic flies, i.e. Tachinidae]. Most people haven't got the attention span these days to even take it up. It's only when people retire very often that they go back to an interest they had when they were younger and then decide to study it with more interest. Because they've got the time to do it. They can physically sit there, all day, and you know, I find even with--I don't have a family--but if I'm distracted just with my job and with my social life [...] I'll put [tachinids] away for like six months and get distracted. I can understand, if you've got a young family and a busy career, you're not going to have time to sit and do that.'

The SI Manager’s description here highlights how the inaccessibility of making time for expertise is not just about a lack of devotion or concentration, although he makes a slight dig about that at the start. His description points succinctly to how the time to develop expertise is structured in our society. We are able to devotedly pursue expertise in something specific when we are very young (e.g. insects, trains, sport). Then, except for the few of us who are able to continue into ‘expert’ careers (through university or other routes) we are not able to return to consuming passions until we are much older unless we are willing to make significant trade-offs in how we structure our work, social, or family lives. People who have access to the freedom to pursue either careers or devoted participation in what are deemed expert practices are overwhelmingly those with access to a fair amount of power and privilege, economic and otherwise. The data on workforce diversity and participation in heritage and field science bears this out (Arts Council England 2019; CILIP and ARA 2016; Dawson 2019; Fredheim 2017; Wajid and Minott 2019). So, although natural history has
lower boundaries in obtaining expertise than other similar fields, it is still only taken up in a significant way by a very small subset of the population.

The accessible potential of species identification and the recognition of its barriers were part of the formative context of the AMC’s Identification Trainers for the Future Programme (ID Trainers). In the next section, I’ll discuss the ID Trainer programme’s efforts to broaden the accessibility, and the nature, of species identification expertise.

ID Trainers was a programme funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (now Heritage Fund) run by the AMC in partnership with the NBN and Field Studies Council. The goal of the programme was to train the next generation of experts in identifying the UK’s ‘cryptic taxa’, the name given to species groups that are particularly hard to identify. From 2014-2018 the AMC hosted three year-long cohorts of 5-6 full-time trainees (16 in total) who were supported by bursaries. Trainees developed skills in species identification and biological recording in order to begin careers in biodiversity and nature conservation (Roach and West 2017). In June and July 2017, I interviewed the coordinator of the ID Trainers programme and then spent a several days with the third cohort of ID Trainers on one of their species identification courses. Additionally, I generally discussed the programme with staff and participants as part of the time I spent interviewing and doing participant observation at the AMC.

The cryptic taxa targeted by the ID Trainers programme include pollinators (e.g. bees, flies), biocontrol insects that can help control pests (e.g. parasitic wasps), and lichen. AMC staff contrasted cryptic taxa with the 'big, fluffy things', which dominate the key protected species that have been the focus of the UK biodiversity sector: animals such as bats, birds, dormice, and the great crested newt. However, many of the cryptic taxa are equally important for managing and monitoring the environment. Even lichen, for example, can be used as an indicator of environmental quality.

In the last 10-15 years the naturalist community has increasingly raised the issue of declining wildlife identification skills in Britain, particularly in specialist and hard-to-identify groups like the cryptic taxa (Roach and West 2017, 2). While many universities offer degrees in the biological sciences, few offer the skills necessary for developing expertise in species identification. These skills are mostly not valuable for the general survey skills needed by the
Species identification is really the foundation of natural history evidence: how the messy, living concept of species is distilled into something that can be reliably read from of individual specimens. While shadowing the ID Trainers on their Hymenoptera identification course, I observed how collecting was a form of learning to identify features of significance. Being able to identify feature of significance is what makes the translation of species to specimen (its representation) possible. Being able to represent the central activity of collecting in an authorised way also makes further translation possible: the representation of the central activity is what is intended to be preserved throughout the chain of translation (Figure 1) (Latour 1999). However, species identification was not the only thing that the ID Trainers learned. They were also trained in how to support all of the expert activities that go into the creation of scientific evidence. 7 ‘ID Trainers for the Future’ was intended not just to create new identification experts, but ones who could train others, multiplying their effect (Roach and West 2017). This meant that the ID trainees weren’t just expected to become new sources of records and data in critical area, but experts who could shape and advocate for participation in the production of scientific evidence.

Teaching and outreach activities made up a quarter of the ID Trainers programme. Participants spent as much dedicated time on skills transfer and/or outreach as developing their area of specialism, in addition to ongoing outreach opportunities. In other words, gaining species identification expertise didn’t just include the study processes described by Species Inventory Manager, but also included how to communicate with a variety of audiences, gaining a teaching qualification, and experience facilitating popular citizen science activities like a BioBlitz. 8 The inclusion of these kind of activities was partly a practical way to expand the impact of the programme beyond the relatively small number of individuals involved (Roach and West 2017). However, designing the programme like this also alters the

ecological consultancy sector or for the cutting edge of DNA and genetic research. Part of what was attractive to the SI Manager about the family Tachinidae—that there were only one or two experts on the group—can be a disadvantage for the recording community as a whole. If the sole expert on a species group becomes elderly and can no longer contribute to recording schemes or confirm the identification made by less experienced recorders, this can halt or skew species data for the entire country. Additionally, since most of these experts are voluntary amateurs, there is no guarantee that they will pass on their skills, or that there will be someone to take their place when they retire (Roach and West 2017, 4).
formation of expertise in the field. Although the process of developing species identification skills has always been networked and social, the ID Trainers programme made the nature of the expertise itself more socially involved. Within the ID Trainers programme, becoming an expert was also shaped by learning to communicate and share species identification skills both outside as well as inside amateur recording networks. This diversifies what species identification expertise means and the translation processes it is concerned with.

During the second phase of the ID Trainers programme, I joined the trainees on their introduction to the Hymenoptera family (which includes ants, bees, and wasps). In addition to myself and the five ID Trainers, there were six other participants (twelve participants total). These additional participants included staff and trainees from the London Wildlife Trust and other local conservation organisations, and well as NHM volunteers and staff hoping to improve their skills. Those coming from outside NHM were ultimately (as with the ID Trainers) there to learn in order to train their own organisation’s volunteers. Two of the external participants had been unsuccessful applicants to the ID Trainers programme. Similar to my interview sample, most of the ID Trainers and participants on the Hymenoptera identification course were white people with university degrees. While the ID trainers were younger (20s-30s), NHM staff and volunteers were older (40s-60s). The primary instructor for the course was the Head of the NHM’s Insect Collections. He was assisted by Jasper, an ID Trainer from the second cohort who had temporary employment in that department. Other NHM associates joined to give insight on their particular specialty within the Hymenoptera family.

The first day of the training introduced everyone on the course to the order Hymenoptera, composed of the families of ants, bees, sawflies, and wasps. New species of Hymenoptera are named regularly in the UK, in part due to climate change. Species that used to stay in Europe have migrated and remained the UK because of increased temperatures, so the NHM is constantly updating their checklists of these groups. According to the Head of Insect Collections, having centralised checklists for Hymenoptera is particularly useful because the literature is scattered. Different recording communities have developed their own systems for naming and identifying morphology. For example, as the Head of Insect Collections said, there are the bee people: ‘who outnumber all others’, and the ant people, ‘who stick to themselves, because they collect so differently grubbing around on the ground’.
The Head of Insect Collections and Jasper are part of another group, ‘wasp people’, so our tour of Hymenoptera in NHM collections showcased their variety. We saw jewel-coloured wasps in trays, bags full of unsorted specimens from overseas, and wasp nests made out of wood, paper, and even sweater wool. The NHM’s Hymenoptera collections are international, with the majority of the specimens, including the largest and most decorative, coming from outside the UK. At one point in the work I overheard the Head of Insect Collections and the SI manager have an argument they’ve clearly had before: The Head of Insect Collections says he doesn’t have time to build up a big British reference collection, and can’t justify spending the time because there isn’t enough interest. The SI Manager, who primarily focuses on the UK in both his amateur and professional work, says that if the Head of Insect Collections built it, the users would come. As must have happened before, they left this discussion unresolved.

Over the course of the week, we listened to lectures from experts in different Hymenoptera families and groups. Few people took any notes. The key learning seemed to come from interactions with the specimens themselves. Even on the first day, we spent almost an hour watching the Head of Insect Collections lecture on identifying features of specimens under a microscope whose viewer was displayed on the projector (Figure 7.3). Every station in the science classroom-like meeting room has a microscope where we tried to do the same. Hymenoptera are supposed to be one of the hardest species groups to learn to identify. Like the majority of cryptic taxa, identifying Hymenoptera usually requires deciphering a series of minute features under a microscope using a technical guide called a key (Figure 7.4).

In contrast to the difficulty of the Hymenoptera, ID Trainers I spoke to described the process of learning to identify British mammals as ‘something you can do with a picture book in an afternoon’. The majority of key UK protected species (the ‘big, fluffy things’ like mammals, birds, as well as amphibians, etc.) can be easily identified without using collections—by sight, or with photos and other recordings. Since their identifying features are so small, Hymenoptera have to be collected. Because you can’t learn to identify these species without collecting them, collecting is primarily a way to build expertise, rather than a process with an expected collections output (e.g. acquisitions, or an exhibition). As a novice and outsider to species identification, people on the course frequently asked me how I was coping with trying to identify specimens under the microscope. I did struggle, probably more than others, but I also realised that my experience in archaeology had trained me to practice
a similar form of learning. In an excavation, fieldwork is also a process of learning to identify significant features in the environment (in this case, in the soil) through fieldwork and collecting. Both natural history and archaeological fieldwork also result in a great deal of laboratory, and sometimes microscope, time.

Figure 7.3 Identifying specimens on the projector microscope.

Figure 7.4 Image of the specimens I eventually learned to collect, identify, and pin, atop a key.
The fieldwork for the course took place on Barnes Common, near the London Wetlands Centre. We met early outside the train station with the butterfly nets and specimen jars taken home from the museum the day before. The day covered a variety of techniques for field collecting. The variety of individual approaches to these techniques was notable, as was demonstrated to us by four different experts over the course of the afternoon. George and Anya, curators in the NHM entomology collections, and Jasper, the former ID trainee started out the day with us. Since George, Anya, and Gilbert (who joined us later) were experts in calcids, a group of microhymenoptera, the day was focused on collecting these families. When we arrived at the field, Anya gave us an overview of where in the field we should be targeting Hymenoptera (the long grasses) and demonstrated how to sweep the net over the grass in order to collect insects and keep them inside the net. Collecting insects with a large net does not seem like something that there is much of a knack too, but in practice it was treated as both a technical and quasi-superstitious affair. Unlike the butterflies of the proverbial 'butterfly' net, because of the small size of most Hymenoptera it is very difficult to target individual specimens. Therefore, everyone (including the ID Trainers and other participants who had experience in other kinds of insect collecting) employed their own mix of experiential, scientific and 'lucky' tips for trying to target more of the kind of insect you wanted.

In this way, collecting insects is also comparable to archaeological excavation. To the casual observer walking by archaeologists’ excavating, what’s going on might just look like digging in the dirt. But, similarly to insect collections, individual excavators will follow scientific methods combined with their personally preferred techniques. And, of course, experienced archaeological investigators will also have their own, trusted trowel. Anya's personal net is heavier than the ones we've taken to use from the museum, and its mouth is covered with a semi-fine wire mesh. This excludes larger insects from the net, which is useful for her microhymenoptera speciality. For Anya's net sweeping technique, you have to make long, strong sweeps of your net through the tall grass for around five minutes. This is different from George's technique, who (to Anya's incredulity) counts exactly to 100 sweeps for each round with the net.

Gilbert, our fourth expert, is a retired Natural History Museum staffer and world expert in calcids, some of the very smallest of the Hymenoptera. He cycled into the field mid-afternoon with a collecting net strapped across the entire length of his bicycle. Gilbert
demonstrated yet another version of the sweeping technique. He mandated 80 sweeps close to the ground, trying to cover a two-metre area with each one. When I tried out using a net for myself I'm amazed by how full it gets in such a short period of time: everything from crickets, spiders, bees, flies, and the as-yet-unidentifiable tiny flying things. To keep it this way I grab the netting together under the rim so nothing comes out. Once the butterfly net is full of insects, there are a number of options for what you can do next. The approach that most course participants use involves sticking your head inside the net and using a pooter (an aspirator)\textsuperscript{10} to select the insects you want, while keeping everything relatively contained.

Using the pooter, you can attempt to suck the specific insects you want from the net into the specimen jar. Because I wasn’t yet ready to stick my head inside a bag full of insects, Jasper offered to show me the other method. This is to empty the entire net, spiders and all, into a bag that's been squirted with ethyl alcohol. This is much quicker option in the field, but it can increase time in the lab tenfold. For calcids, Gilbert told us that any one hour in the field will result in around 12 hours in the lab to identify and prepare specimens. Jasper uses the bag method because he says that you can't really see calcids in the net anyway. Anya, who was nearby, disagreed and enthusiastically pulled me over to her net to show me. Anya shows me that microhymenoptera tend to have longer antenna and tear-drop body shapes (as opposed to small flies, for example, which can be mistaken for microhymenoptera). As she sucked out examples into her pooter to demonstrate, I began to really feel like I can see them, even in the writhing mass of the net.

On the third day of the Hymenoptera course, we brought the specimens collected on Barnes Common back into the museum and learned how to prepare them so that they were usable for identification and storage in a collection. We were then able to continue to practice our identification skills on our own specimens, trying out different keys. Although we continued to have lectures on different Hymenoptera groups, this was the main activity of the remaining days of the course. The identification keys we used were formed of couplets, like a technical choose-your-own-adventure story. A starting couplet might provide choices of body shape, or number or wings, offering different paths through the key for each.
As the SI Manager says, keys:

'sound cut-and-dried, but when you look at a specimen, sometimes you just think, 'Ahhhh, but that's not quite one or the other, where do I draw the line?’, because natural things vary: colour, shape, etc. So, sometimes you’ve got to allow for natural variation, and that’s where the experience comes in. Reading a key and knowing, when you look at a specimen: that falls into that [category]; that falls into that’.

Rewriting keys to be more accessible in their area of specialty has been the final outreach project for number of the ID Trainers in each cohort. The ID Trainers’ emphasis on communication and outreach as part of their expertise follows a larger trend toward the promotion of ‘soft skills’ particularly in fields associated with technical or academic knowledge. Some have attributed this shift off expertise to a ‘crisis of confidence’ in experts, where a lack of transparent communication with publics has led to a lack of trust in expert option (cite). In fields that are considered somewhat esoteric (like archaeology or specialist identification knowledge) this lack of transparent communication is also perceived to include a failure to justify the relevance and value of that expertise (Latour 1999). Communication and outreach skills make species identification skills expertise more explicitly relational, and thus more shaped by people’s personal experiences. However, neither this shift nor the accepted variety of personal collecting practices translated into much demographic diversity among ID Trainers or course participants, despite significant efforts by AMC staff.

Practices of species identification and monitoring biodiversity present an interesting comparison to social diversity in museum and archives. Whatever the allowance for personal practices, the chain of scientific evidence is relatively rigid. Variation in field collecting and identification styles do not ultimately influence the formats of records and data. Collecting diversity in social history archives can have a different effect. When diversity impacts not just the activity of collecting, but how the central and collecting activities are represented, it can shape the chain of evidence all the way to the top. One of the ways in which we can assess whether diversity projects make a significant impact on collections practice is whether people involved in them are able to participate across the chain of evidence—not just at the bottom. Are people’s experiences only valid as content for the collection, or are they able to shape what are considered expert practices? In the next case, I’ll discuss one example where changes to expert practices have been happening.
7.3.2 Forty years of experience at Women’s Art Library/MAKE

The second case of this chapter discusses the Women’s Art Library/MAKE (WAL) archive. I shift focus from how people become experts in collecting and identifying (bio)diversity to how more diverse expertise might shape collections (and evidence) processes. Like the AMC, WAL deals with identifying and collecting material around underrepresented aspects of diversity. In this case, the underrepresentation is of women’s art practice. However, there are important differences in why the aspects of diversity in these two profiles are underrepresented. The cryptic taxa at the AMC are understudied and underrepresented in natural history collections because they are difficult to identify accurately, even under a microscope. By contrast, there is no intrinsic difficulty in finding and identifying the art and stories of women. This is difficult only because dominant systems of representation have purposefully not included or valued them.11

This devaluation has an impact on how expertise works in these contexts: it is more difficult to gain recognised expertise in areas that are excluded, devalued, or suppressed by dominant systems of knowledge and value. Although fields like Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, and LGBTQ or Queer Studies have attained recognition as areas of academic expertise over the past 30-40 years, they still are devalued in comparison to other, 'more traditional' subject areas. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the knowledge produce by these fields is often considered to fall short of standards of evidence. Within academia, and also within archive and museum collections, this can create a divide between those who are experts with knowledge built on accepted evidence and those whose knowledge is 'only' based on experience.

As I argued in Chapter 5, many of the attempts to reduce physical boundaries to collections have also implicitly tried to reduce barriers around expertise. Glass-fronted spaces, like those at the AMC, not only attempt to increase the visibility of a collection, but also try to make the work of collections known and accessible to broader audiences. Social history archives and museums have also increasingly tried to erase the boundary between expertise and experience. A common saying in fields where practitioners work with minoritised groups is that 'people are experts of their own experience'. While this is a good principle, in practice, individuals’ experience/expertise—particularly that of underrepresented and minoritised groups—are typically not genuinely held in equivalence with formal expertise (Alberti and Lynch 2010; Kassim 2017). Even when people from underrepresented groups, like Scott
from the Museum of Transology, obtain formal expertise, they can still experience the marginalisation of their work (Scott 2018).

The Women’s Art Library/MAKE (WAL) offers one example of where underrepresented material and perspectives have been brought into a traditional archive framework and become part of recognised expert knowledge and collections practice. I discuss WAL’s embrace of alternative forms of evidence-making in feminist art practice, and how this has benefited its continued salience almost forty years after its founding. WAL is a collection that was started by a feminist artists' collective in the 1980s to raise the profile of women’s art practice. Its ethos was to include 'any women artists who had made a significant impact on our experience of British contemporary art' (Allen 1998 in Walsh and Throp 2015, 4) WAL arose in the context of the women’s’ liberation movement, where women’s art was being carved out as its own distinctive and separate field of study. Today it is the 'largest public research resource dedicated to the work of women artists in the U.K.' (Greenan 2018, 39).

From its beginning, the archive created a new body of evidence that could support the development of expertise in women's and feminist art. Initially a member's slide and reference library (called the Women Artists Slide Library) WAL became a charity funded by the GLC/GLAC and other sources. As part of its work, it published a newsletter, which became a journal and then a magazine. These publications drove WAL’s activity until 2002, when the magazine and the archive shuttered due to a lack of funding and the perception of a lack of necessity for a magazine dedicated to women's art practice (Walsh and Throp 2015, 3). Despite this, since WAL was gifted to Goldsmiths in 2002, it has become the most consulted of all the library’s Special Collections (Greenan 2018, 16). This is reflected in the physical layout of WAL’s archive within the library. WAL is the collection you see first when you enter the stacks, next to the door for ease of use.

My interview with WAL’s curator, Dr Althea Greenan, took place largely in these stacks in July 2017. Because of the importance of WAL's publications to the work and make-up of the archive, I spent an additional day in the archive reading through selected issues of the magazine and exploring the 'To be catalogued' boxes, discussed below. Then, I attended an event at the August 2017 London Feminist Film Festival that featured a panel on WAL and feminist archiving, chaired by Greenan. The panel also included Samia Malik, one of the
founders of the Women of Colour Index (WOCI) Reading Group, which originated at WAL (also discussed below). Finally, I draw on Greenan’s doctoral thesis (2018) and other writing on WAL (2015a; 2015b) as additional valuable sources of historical, ethnographic, and personal experience about WAL.

WAL was brought to Goldsmiths in Greenan’s care. Greenan has been involved with WAL since 1989, supporting it while it was active as a publisher and arts organisation, and remaining with the collection as it transitioned to Goldsmiths (Greenan 2018, 16). When she came to Goldsmiths, Greenan was officially a 'Senior Library Assistant' ('that's how they got me in', she tells me). Neither a trained librarian nor archivist, over the years Greenan has made herself an essential curatorial role. As the curator, she manages the collection, exhibitions, events, artists’ residencies, collaborations, and making the archive a research resource for the future. Greenan's background in art practice means that she is more comfortable with the collection being involved and transformed by others' artist practice and other engagements. A WAL-specific advisory board has also supported the archive in developing semi-independently of Goldsmiths. It is unusual for an institution to prioritise someone with experience with the material and community over formal archival expertise—perhaps even risky for an institution that will be judged on its ability to be a 'responsible' custodian. By contrast, the Black Cultural Archives, which opened in 1981, had never had a black archivist until 2019. With their national profile, it was deemed more important to hire a qualified archivist (of which more than 95% are white) than someone who might have lacked formal qualifications but brought on other kinds of collections expertise (CILIP and ARA 2016).

WAL’s collection is primarily made up of material which came directly from women artists. In addition to collecting catalogues and written material on women artists, the WAL artists’ collective solicited female historians, critics, and students to send in copies of their writing on women’s’ art to the library (Issue 2 Spring 1984). As the slide library and then the magazine grew, women artists also directly sent in slides, statements, and publicity about their work, and the magazine received material for its work (review copies of books, exhibition promotions, etc.) (Greenan 2018, 38). WAL presents an interesting complement to the crowdsourcing discussed in the last chapter, because unlike the Museum of Transology or the Wellcome Collection exhibition, WAL is long past its peak period of collecting. It
provides one example of the possibilities for crowdsourced collections after the activity of their founding.

WAL does still collect and accept some donations. Greenan says that her job is 'so easy, because I just look for women artists, not [even] a particular theme or anything'. The archive is very much a representation of feminist and women's art, but as I understand it, was never intended to be demographically, disciplinarily, or otherwise 'representative' of UK or broader women's art practice. In the early days of the archive, they used to receive copies of press for anything that was identified as by a woman artist, 'which could have been a landscape [painting] in a hotel in Hull'. Greenan continues to collect zines and art books post-dating the 1970s and 80s. She admits to getting a bit lazy about ordering books since the archive was moved to Goldsmith's Library, where there are subject specialist art librarians. Most of what you could describe as collecting for WAL now is documentation of engagement with the archive.

During my interview, Greenan and I spent most of our time in front of the 'To be catalogued' shelf (See Figure 7.5). Greenan says that the material on this shelf is 'To be catalogued' not because the materials are new, but because they are 'weird' and difficult to catalogue within the rest of the collection. Over the course of the archive's history, collecting engagement has also meant accepting materials have been purposefully made to trouble familiar archive and art material categories. Although building an 'evidence base' for women's art can be seen as one of the driving forces of WAL, this has not been done without challenging some of the principles and forms that shape it. For example, the 'To be catalogued' shelf includes a standard archival box that is labelled 'Cybernetic Resistance Kit' and another that had been spray painted a shiny gold. Both are from projects in the last several years where contemporary artists responded to aspects of the archive. The gold box is from a project on working class superheroes. Inside the box is a gold Mexican wrestling mask and suit, and documentation in gold lettering. The artist told Greenan she would document her work in the Women's Art Library archive on the condition that she was allowed to take the standard archive box away and fill it as she wanted. This is how it was returned.
'To be catalogued' also includes older material, like the box of 'Food art'. 'Food art' contains a few art pieces like a cookie in the shape of a person baked with wasps, representing 'the darker side of family life which often remains unspoken' (Edmonds 2001). There is also what might be called ‘food art advertising’: things that were sent to WAL to try to get their attention about upcoming exhibitions and shows. Food art advertising includes a yellow lollypop shaped realistically like a fist that announces the 'HANDS ON' exhibition opening in 2002. A press release from the Tate in the same year has a package with two Haribo fried eggs attached to it. The yolks have now discoloured and slid. In its own little box near 'Food art', a custom bottle of Beck's advertises an art exhibition sponsored by the beer company in 1994. About the food art advertising, Greenan (2015a, 6-7) has written:

'Unlike the images and information routinely requested for publication that we endeavored to keep for the collection, these items usually arrived in the post out of the blue, usually for the attention of the Editor. Even if they were edible we would not eat them. [referring to the fist-shaped lollypop] […] No one in the office would have known who this artist was'.
Engagement is not only what drives continued collecting; it is the key driver of the archive today. This is supported by ongoing royalties from the WAL magazine, which pays for some artists' residencies, and they receive a little funding from an established feminist art historian. Greenan says that archives have been having a moment in the art world, which is both 'fabulous' and hard to keep up with. Simultaneously, though, for Greenan, 'activity is what generates the archive' and she doesn't think they can have too much of it. When the product of an artists' residency or engagement becomes part of the collection, it becomes another way of understanding and identifying significance in the archive. Greenan puts this in terms of the benefit to the archive: 'the archive comes alive when someone outside it becomes inspired by it', but it is a benefit that is shared as a relationship between the archive and those involved in the collecting. Collecting the results of engagements builds expertise for the people involved and incorporates that into the evidence base of the archive. This is one of the ways that the work of collecting at WAL is similar to the training in collecting and identifying at the AMC, despite looking very different.

The Women of Colour Index (WOCI) and later the WOCI Reading Group is another example that demonstrates how engagements with the archive make new evidence and build
expertise for those involved. The WOCI, compiled by the artist Rita Keegan in 1980s-90s, is a sub-collection of slides and papers relating to black artists of that period. This included both a physically distinct sub-collection ('paper documentation collected in folders and organised by the artists’ surnames' [Greenan 2018, 41]) and an integrated one (slide files were put within the larger collection, distinguished by 'a gold dot label on the hanging bar' [ibid.]). Thus, instead of having to decide whether to make black women's art a separate category (with the possible segregation that entails) versus not highlighting it at all, WOCI does both (Greenan 2018, 41). WOCI has always been an important sub-collection of the archive, but following the 2012 funded residency by the art and art research collective X Marks the Spot (XMTS) it also became the most active sub-collection (Greenan 2018, 41; WOCI Reading Group 2018). XMTS's publication Human Endeavour: a creative finding aid for the Women of Colour Index, published in late 2015, helped to inspire the creation of a WOCI Reading Group in early 2016.

*Human Endeavour*’s creative finding aid differs from the finding aid as normally encountered in archives and archival science. In *Human Endeavour*, the inventory and contents description of the WOCI archival materials are sandwiched by a 'cluster' of texts, images, and interviews that offer many kinds of context and responses to WOCI (Greenan 2015b, 3). Of the 135 pages of the publication, the traditional finding aid runs on just 26 of them (which includes 13 pages of just photographs). Evidence is heavily layered with the writers’ personal experiences and engagement. XMTS positions this work as fulfilling the role of a typical finding aid, partially citing a definition given in Caroline Williams' (2006) *Managing Archives: Foundations, Principles, and Practice*: 'A finding aid helps to identify and locate [the collection] in order to undertake the further work necessary to make it accessible for research' (71; [misquoted] in XMTS 2015, 10). In this case, 'exploring the real significance of these artists’ files [...] require[d] the collective work of its constituency: practicing black women artists' (Greenan 2015b, 3).

This collective work has continued with the WOCI Reading Group, which runs a regular discussion events about the work women of colour artists in WOCI, and beyond the archive. Samia Malik, one of the founders of the reading group, said that one of the first things she did was Google search artists in the WOCI index. Very few of them came up, even those who were alive today, and even the most popular. Malik said that the experience was eye-opening in terms of the mainstream forgetability of women of colour’s art, which she realised
could happen to her as well. Like the creative finding aid, the WOCI Reading Group was a way of activating the archive and ‘discussing issues that [those involved] don’t normally have the space to talk about’ rather than studying the archive material. This is not a bad thing for Greenan since the WOCI Reading Group is ‘really for what the students want to do’, and, the archive ‘a space to be heard as well as a space to find things’. The WOCI Reading Group is an example of one way to activate the evidentiary relationships of the archive, both to solidify the knowledge of past practice and to create a base for future remembrance.

In terms of continuing to inspire engagements with its material, WAL is a very successful example of an archive that has transformed over time, and it continues to build expertise in feminist art practice. I would argue that WAL is also a relatively unique example, even within the sites discussed, because of its disciplinary location within contemporary art. This allows WAL to access a more flexible, experientially-based set of expert ways of working than many collections would recognise as being within their practice.

To answer the question, ‘When does bringing in material from previously underrepresented groups impact how the collection is conceptualised and managed?’ this chapter has argued that it is necessary to adopt a relational understanding of evidence. By understanding evidence as material that has been rigorously transformed through its relationships, it is possible to see that some of the standards for relationships of proof are discriminatory, and also that it is possible for evidence to be created within alternative frameworks. Collections are impacted, then, when their relationship frameworks change.

I present the dominant frameworks for evidence in archives and natural science in Figure 7.1 in order to outline the relationships and activities that turn materials into evidence. I do not argue that these frameworks should be rejected, but that active engagements with diversity could substantially redefine their parameters. The examples of documentation strategy and contemporary biological recording (via the UK Species Inventory) do demonstrate that these frameworks are not fixed. Documentation strategy, although it was not widely adopted, helped to lay the foundations for the rise in community-based archival collecting by widening the scope of activities and material considered for collection. Despite being mostly pre-digital, documentation strategy also proposed more distributed, democratic frameworks for interpreting and managing these materials. The UK Species Inventory was also created during a period where goals for representing activities and material were changing—from
static taxonomies to fluid populations. This change in goals led to the use of ‘fuzzy concepts’, which would not previously have been acceptable, but better serve the needs of those contributing to biological recording today. In both of these examples, changes in the nature of the evidence frameworks were shifted in part to make engaging with the frameworks of evidence more accessible.

To a certain extent, making the frameworks of evidence more accessible also made collections expertise more accessible. The cases in this chapter have sought to show that collections expertise is formed when creating new relationships with and adding to evidence—instead of simply resulting from learning to work within (and accept) an existing system. In the case of the ID Trainers for the Future programme, this meant species identification fieldwork. At WAL, this included the work of artists residencies and the WOCI Index and Reading Group. One of the issues that arises when understanding evidence as a type of relationship is that relations require work to maintain. Without this maintenance, non-dominant or marginalised relationship pathways can be overwritten or forgotten. Greenan (2018, 17) raises this question of continuance in her thesis, asking what will happen to WAL after the direct link with its founding mission disappears.

‘My work with the Women’s Art Library suggests a template for future curatorial positions in Special Collections and Archives prioritizing the importance of connecting archives with contemporary creative practice as well as academic research. But there is a question that remains in preparing the care of the Women’s Art Library for future generations of curators: where will their sense of responsibility come from? Through this dissertation I have become acutely aware that my specialist work with the collection—including this thesis—is driven by the Women’s Art Library’s originating feminist vision as the Women Artists Slide Library that drew me as a volunteer in 1989.’

This concern was also raised by Scott, curator of the Museum of Transology, in the previous chapter, both about the collection itself and about the similarly unique expert role he developed in relation to it. Collections engagements do not last forever into the future, nor is it necessarily true that they should, but diversity work in collections is perhaps most susceptible to being made temporary. In the discussion chapter I draw out a final example of a diversity project that was in the process of fading away during my fieldwork. Engaging with a successful project at an untimely point—when its major outputs and funding are finished, turns the thesis back to reflecting on the ambivalences and frustrations of doing diversity work that have been brought up in this thesis.
The three thematic chapters (5-7) have attempted to create a holistic picture of what is being done with diversity in collections work by covering where it happens (porous zones), how collecting practices and decisions are carried out (object stories), and now, the frameworks of knowledge and expertise that drive those decisions. The thesis draws together these findings and analysis in the final two chapters to more fully answer the question of when bringing in material from previously underrepresented groups impacts how the collection is conceptualised, managed, or accessed. Synthesising the work of these chapters also makes it possible to answer the final research question: ‘What are some of the collections practices that have prevented diversity from being embedded there?’

**Notes**

1 Yeo ultimately concludes that ‘it remains debatable how far information and evidence are (objectively) contained in a record and how far they are (subjectively) conveyed by it’ (2007, 329; italics original).

2 The Species Inventory Manager’s salary at the NHM is counted as part of the NHM’s contribution to the National Biodiversity Network.

3 iRecord is a free app developed in 2016 by the governmental advisory body Joint Nature Conservation Committee and the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (Burns 2016). It was possible for amateurs to access free biological recording software through NBN before this, but iRecord was the first widely available easily-portable mobile version.

4 According to the Species Inventory Manager, the equivalent database in Australia has half a dozen people working on it.

5 The NBN Atlas is an open-source gateway to all UK biological recording data from both professional and volunteer services.

6 Dry pinning is a common method of preparing insect specimens. Unlike a ‘wet’ specimen, it doesn’t necessitate preservation in alcohol, or more specialist material for slide preservation.

7 The ID Trainers programme did not teach the trainees to be research scientists, so they did not learn create scientific evidence in that sense.

8 A BioBlitz is usually a 24 hour (or other continuous period) of intensive recording of all the living species in a designated area. It can be undertaken by professionals, but is typically a citizen science or volunteer-driven event.

9 I have used pseudonyms in this section where identifying people by their titles is either less applicable or awkward for representing activities and dialogue.

10 A pooter is another term for an aspirator, which is a portable suction device that draws insects in through one tube while you suck on the other. The two-tube design prevents the insect from being sucked into your mouth.

11 There is some systematic devaluing of ‘non-charismatic species’ like insects in favour of charismatic megafauna, but this isn’t quite the same (Bowker 2000, 665; Rosenthal et al. 2017).

12 The 35mm slide is a 2 ½ inch square of transparency or diapositive film in a plastic frame that was ‘the principle means of disseminating [professional] images of artwork until the advent of digital imaging’ (Greenan 2017, 25-28). It was used to make reproductions of artwork for publication and was what an artist or their agent would send to galleries and agents to promote their work.

13 The magazine changed its name several times in its lifetime to eventually be titled MAKE: the magazine of women’s art. The archive’s current title thus reflects its final name (MAKE) and its most enduring name, the Women’s Art Library. It is still mostly referred to as WAL, or as WAL/MAKE.

14 According to Greenan, ‘Gender fluidity’ is ‘so far not a crisis’ for WAL.

15 WOCI was initially called the ‘Black Women Artists Index’. It used the inclusive, political definition of ‘black’ more common in the 1980s-90s, which included not just people of African and Caribbean descent, but all non-white and all non-European perspectives (XMTS 2015, 6). More contemporary references to WOCI, including Human Endeavour and the WOCI Reading Group Website use either ‘women of colour’ or ‘black’ to broadly discuss the material and artists.
Chapter 8 Discussion

In this chapter, I return to some of the enduring questions and tensions brought up by the work on diversity that has been documented in Chapters 5-7. Before reflecting on how my research questions have been answered across the course of the thesis (as I do in Chapter 9), I consider my ambivalence toward the process of collecting and ‘recuperating’ marginalised experiences that I first raised in Chapter 2. I also address the final research question, which asks what practices within collections have prevented diversity from being embedded there. As material for this discussion, I bring in a final case, the Speak Out London: Diversity City project (hereafter Speak Out), which collected LGBTQ+ oral histories and other archival material for the London Metropolitan Archive (LMA). Unlike the cases discussed in Chapter 7, Speak Out provides an example of when bringing in material from a previously underrepresented group does not appear to have significantly impacted how the collection is conceptualised and managed. I argue that cases like Speak Out demonstrate that in most cases diversity is ultimately thought of as a temporary concern that does not reflect on core collections structures and frameworks.

In the second part of the chapter, I argue that the lack of frameworks for developing diversity in collections mean that most attempts to make changes to either active or passive forms of representation have not had a lasting impact. These discussions lay the groundwork for when, in the second part of Chapter 9, I re-engage with the overarching issue of institutional reform to which my research responds.

8.1 The afterlife of diversity work: Speak Out London: Diversity City

Of the cases discussed in this thesis, Speak Out most looked like what I had imagined when I initially began to study diversity work in collections: a mainstream institution successfully undertaking a substantive project to collect material from underrepresented groups. I introduce Speak Out at this stage in the thesis in order to act as a comparison to the others previously discussed. The case helps to draw out some summative points about the aims and impacts of diversity initiatives.

LMA is the primary local records repository for London and is owned managed by the City of London Corporation. Its collections date back to the 11th century, recording early city governance and institutions (LMA 2017a). Since the rise of social history collecting in the second half of the 20th century, LMA has also collected a broader set of materials from individuals and community
groups that reflect Londoners' lives and stories. Unlike other collections such as the Women’s Art Library or MayDay Rooms archive, the LMA is a repository for traditional archival collections, i.e. ones that are considered complete, normally not individual items or selected ephemera (cf. Stevens et al 2010, 60).

Speak Out trained LBGTQ+ volunteers to create and interpret LGBTQ+ archival material for LMA. Speak Out focused on the creation of new oral histories, but it also involved creating guidance for searching and interpreting historical LGBTQ+ archival content, and digitising LGBTQ+ ephemera from their own collections and from Speak Out contributors. The project began in September 2014, and was funded by a two-year Heritage Lotter Funded 'Our Heritage' grant (City of London 2018). Consequently, the main activity of the project took place from 2014 through the summer of 2016, concluding with a three-and-a-half-month public exhibition at LMA and a Speak Out website (funded until 2021). During 2014-2016, Speak Out volunteers (of which there were 71, with a core group of about ten) were offered training opportunities in ‘oral history, digitisation, handling and managing collections [personal and institutional], writing personal and local history, catalogue terminology, designing websites, research skills and creating exhibitions’ (LMA 2017b, 3-4). Volunteers were also able to take the lead on presenting the work of the project at events and academic and professional conferences. This phase of the project collected 50 oral histories, 30 of which are available at LMA’s onsite Mediatheque, with short excerpts on the catalogue online.

In many ways, Speak Out is an example of good practice. It not only included material from underrepresented groups, but it provided people with access to the expertise needed to create and modify records. It also continued LMA’s commitment to working more flexibly with community materials, including utilising non-custodial approaches (see Stevens et al. 2010). As (now-former) LMA Head of Development and lead on the Speak Out project commented: 'it's not our job as an institution to cherry pick things from communities; we hold things that communities put forward as histories'. For its work with volunteers, the Speak Out and the LMA were selected for the 2017 Archives and Records Association Volunteering Award (ARA n.d.-b). As documented in the Volunteering Award application and by personal testimonies, Speak Out was very meaningful for its ten or so core volunteers. More than this, it served as an access point for one or two people to gain significant expertise in collections. Volunteering with Speak Out helped one individual launch a career as an LGBTQ+ heritage academic and practitioner and has led to one or two other long-term volunteer involvement in LGBTQ+ heritage at the LMA.
Despite these outputs, it is also worth considering how collections diversity projects like this can be successful on some fronts while still upholding some of the barriers that keep 'expertise' from being significantly impacted by diverse experiences. The critical points developed here are not criticisms of Speak Out but explore broader systemic issues around how the benefits of ‘diverse’ expertise accrue to institutions, and how momentum for diversity work stalls even when ‘community-led’.

My experience with the Speak Out London project started not during its HLF-funded height, but in February 2017, after the project’s planned activities had concluded. In this way, it was awkward, or ‘untimely’ as I describe working on diversity in Chapter 2: an engagement that happened not-at-the-right-time, with something that was both finished and unfinished. In 2017, activities around LGBTQ+ heritage and Speak Out continued at LMA, but they no longer had the momentum or structure of HLF project funding. Typical of the patterns of diversity described by methodology chapter (Chapter 4) activity related to Speak Out happened in dribs and drabs that were difficult to follow. When they did happen, they often appeared to do so through the personal dedication of an individual staff member, like the Head of Development.

After interviewing the Head of Development and a Senior Archivist responsible for communities at LMA in January 2017, I attended a training for new Speak Out volunteers in February 2017, with two other participants. The following month, I attended day-long oral history training in a group of eleven, including myself. Participants for the oral history training in February 2017 were predominantly older (50+) white women, many of whom were involved in groups for older LGBTQ+ individuals, with a few younger (mid-twenties, early 30s) white women and men who were students of or employed in history and heritage fields. These were the same two demographics as the training course at the AMC (Chapter 7), although in reverse proportions—at the AMC there were more younger participants. Also, where the majority of those on the species identification course at the AMC planned to apply the training to their professional roles, the oral history training at the LMA was connected to career roles and aspirations for only a few.

Oral history training was delivered by a verbatim theatre practitioner who had been hired as part of the HLF project. Her experience with Speak Out had led her to join the Oral History Society and found an LGBTQ+ special interest group within it. She presented oral history as one of the most powerful ways of ‘filling gaps’ in the LMA’s collections, particularly for transgender and bisexual identities that have very low visibility in LMA’s paper collections. Her sense of having
developed LGBTQ+-specific expertise was evident during oral history training, where the handouts with Oral History Society guidelines were augmented by her personal rebuttals to standard practice typed in purple underneath.

Some of her rebuttals challenged notions of how to create oral history evidence, including rejecting guidelines for structuring an interview around 'typical' (e.g. heterosexual/cis-gendered) life milestones. She, along with other Speak Out team members also suggested interviewing younger people as well as older. Although there was a sense of the potential for the loss of the stories of older LGBTQ+ people, Speak Out team members also saw the value of collecting youth experiences now to capture the current moment in a way that might be valuable for the future. However, when trainees paired up to practice interviewing, each pair chose to interview the older person. Participants retained a fairly rigid sense of how oral history should be done, and ironically, so did the trainer, who was keen for her personal approach to oral history to be followed.4

Despite the promise that these new trainings would bring about a new wave of activity for Speak Out, this did materialise. The oral history training session was the last Speak Out training held to date. Following this, I remained on and attended events advertised in the Speak Out volunteer list. This involved taking part in the Speak Out-linked LGBTQ History Club events in May and July 2017, running a session on my research at July’s meeting. In July, I also volunteered to promote Speak Out at Tate Britain’s Queer and Now festival. Although I have continued to follow the project, it is not evident that either these trainings or events led to significant new Speak Out or LMA collections activities going forward; there have not been new oral histories made available after the project’s first phase nor other project updates.5

In conversation, the Head of Development appeared relaxed about the lack of continuing outputs of the projects, suggesting that people would come and engage as they were able and interested. This matches LMA’s overall description of Speak Out as a ‘community-driven’ or ‘community-led’ archiving project (City of London 2018; LMA 2017). However, it is not clear what ‘community’ means in this context. As many have pointed out, the idea that a community, (like the ‘LGBTQ+ community’) is an obvious or uncomplicated group is misleading (Bennett 1998, 201-203, citing Williams 1976; Flinn and Stevens 2009).6 In the context of Speak Out, ‘community-led’ neither meant that the project originated in the community, nor that the community provided the momentum. LMA conceived of and funded Speak Out7, and the project involved paid LMA staff-time and a pre-planned timeline of outputs. We could look at ‘community-led’ as describing the
activities Speak Out carried out, but this is also inaccurate because the outputs of the project (if not their content) were mostly pre-determined and owned by the LMA.

At best, ‘community-driven’ and ‘community-led’ refers to the fact that LGBTQ+ volunteers did much of the work and were able to take some ownership of it, via speaking about it at conferences or writing about it through various formats. Ultimately, however, much of the benefits of the archival evidence and experience gained or produced by volunteers goes to the institution, both in terms of collections outputs and ongoing engagements. Speak Out reporting shows that as a result of the project LMA has been asked to assist or advise on eight different LGBTQ+ oral history and heritage projects—they have become the experts (LMA 2017, 4). To say this is neither to devalue the benefits of engagements experienced by volunteers, nor in institutions sharing ‘good practice’. It is instead an observation that the outcomes of engaging with ‘diverse experience’ can broaden institutional expertise without necessarily resulting in ongoing institutional commitments to work on diversity and representation in their collections. In Chapter 3, I described this this type of ‘doing diversity’ as extractive.

Perhaps the most frustrating thing about the project’s ‘community-led’ rhetoric is the implication that the project’s lack of significant activity after the conclusion of funding is a failure of ‘the community’, not the institution. Though the community (in some sense) fails, the institution benefits.

“The history or archive that observes the absence of [underrepresented materials and perspectives]—and even acknowledges their critiques—becomes successful in its articulation of failure, and usable as a measure of accountability, without actual transformation of the presumably observable principles that describe a historical continuity or coherence. In this manner the [underrepresented material/perspective] provides some value (whether as color or critique) but no structure to the economies that otherwise inscribe [social and cultural history]’ (Nguyen 2015, 19).

As I used Nguyen’s (2015) article to argue in Chapter 2, the institution recuperates itself and moves on, leaving untimely, unresolved feelings of forestalled possibility. This matched my experience, more than a decade ago, of feeling first excited and then somehow disappointed by boxing away the early history of the LGBTQ+ charity I had volunteered on. Projects like Speak Out, which do address aspects of active representation, such as training volunteers to be able to produce their own archival evidence (although not at the highest level) register largely as passive representation in the collection after the fact. Collections engagements do not last forever into the future, nor is it likely that they should. However, my research suggests, along with others, that the impact of
diversity work in collections is perhaps most susceptible to being made temporary. In contrast, the preservation paradigm tells us that what has been valued should be preserved forever.

Cases where ‘community’ (in some sense) collections initiatives are less project-based and owned more directly by the non-practitioners (while being supported by a collecting institution) do appear to show longer-term impacts on how collections are managed and governed. Examples in this thesis include the WOCI Index at Women’s Art Library from the last chapter, MayDay Rooms Archives (Chapter 5), and the amateur biological recording experts who engage with the Angela Marmont Centre (Chapter 7). These projects are less concerned with universal (i.e. passive) representation and more with shaping ongoing collecting with respect to the changing needs of those they work with and their materials (i.e. active representation). Even in collections where diversity has mostly been undertaken within temporary initiatives, it is evident that there is growing awareness of the issues with this type of project-based work and passively representative projects (see discussions of the Museum of Transology and Hackney Museum in Chapter 6).

However, there is still an assumption, held at the highest levels, that the most active and challenging elements of diversity work are essentially temporary distractions. This was on show in a July 2019 editorial in The Guardian by Tristram Hunt, former Member of Parliament and current Director of the Victoria & Albert Museum. Entitled, ‘Should museums return their colonial artefacts?’ his editorial purports to present both sides of the repatriation debate, while ultimately arguing against repatriation and decolonising museums (which Hunt bundles several times with ‘diversity’ work). There are a number of things that are objectionable (and inaccurate, see [Kassim 2019; Museum Detox 2019]) about the piece, including his minimisation of the harms of colonialism and his mischaracterisation of ‘decolonisation as decontextualisation’ (see Heal 2019; Kassim 2019; Museum Detox 2019; Trilling 2019 for rebuttals on these points). Here, however, what I want to respond to is Hunt’s characterisation of decolonisation and diversity work as a new or ‘passing agenda.’ As curator Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp argued on Twitter on 6th July, ‘to say [repatriation] is a passing agenda for “national political actors” ignores and disrespects the fact that repatriation and other forms of heritage justice has been a continued call from national political actors in post-colonial states since independence’.

In his editorial, Hunt is unwilling to consider decolonial work as something that could impact museum collections long-term. He first argues that statutory preventions to repatriation in England protect museums from ‘the dispersal of “unfashionable” items from the collections (or, indeed, fundraising through the sale of valuable works), which later generations might have
lamented’ (Hunt 2019).° Hunt thus defines looted and imperial collections as ‘unfashionable’—for the moment. Should we object to the characterisation of these collections as necessary for UK museums to retain custody of, Hunt warns us that changing the current restrictive legislature would open the door to the unscrupulous selling-off of collections.

Hunt continues:

‘There remains something essentially valuable about the ability of museums to position objects beyond particular cultural or ethnic identities, curate them within a broader intellectual or aesthetic lineage, and situate them within a wider, richer framework of relationships while allowing free and open access, physically and digitally (2019 [italics added])’

That Hunt sees museums as ‘beyond cultural or ethnic identities’ but not other forms of context is both racist and more broadly in keeping with the heritage sector’s implicit devaluing of diverse materials and expertise. Hunt’s desire to keep colonial objects in the museum that have outstanding repatriation claims as a kind of diverse, cosmopolitanism is troubling. First, because increased (passive) representation is not necessarily an automatic good, either because of the negative impacts of representation in some cases (as raised in the Hackney Museum case [Chapter 6]). Second, because passive representation without active representation is a form of control of social difference—both literally in terms of the objects in question, and also in terms of how diversity is interpreted (as a positive, supressing and discrediting conflict). This approach not only devalues diverse perspectives and expertise but also assigns them as ahistorical and fleeting, not to be considered for the long-term futures of collections. It is relatively straightforward to demonstrate (as I do in the next section) that diversity’s failure to become embedded in collections and collecting institutions is due to the lack of systemic frameworks for addressing it. But diversity’s failure is about more than inadequate frameworks and practices. Such temporary, inadequate approaches to diversity are allowed to function because diversity has been fundamentally conceptualised as an ‘of the moment’ issue, ignoring its historical genealogies and claims on the future.

8.2 The absence of frameworks for collecting diversity in social history

Since the loss of universal, taxonomic frameworks for social history, there has something of a vacuum in determining what and how to collect contemporary diversity. Chapter 6 discussed how practitioners have turned away from these traditional frameworks (for both practical and ideological reasons) and their resulting anxiety around how to determine the value of
contemporary, diverse materials. This chapter reflects on the lack of frameworks and strategies for pursuing diversity in social history collections, expanding the discussion about vague policy aims and informal decision-making in Chapters 3 and 6. I argue that because diversity is seen as essentially temporary (rather than essentially permanent or valuable) it should not be surprising that in practice frameworks for developing diversity in collections are absent or piecemeal. Even practitioners who have attempting to pursue diversity as a key part of collections development lack established frameworks for assessing or contextualising the (passive or active) representation in their collections. Documentation strategy, an archival collecting framework I evaluated in Chapter 7, has mostly been critiqued as non-viable in practice, despite some recent renewal in interest.

The lack of frameworks for collecting diversity in social history collections comes into sharp focus when compared with biodiversity conservation, where diversity does act as a shared strategic lens. Within biodiversity conservation, Heritage Futures Diversity colleagues have argued that diversity functions as a normative conservation target in response to a pervading sense of endangerment and perceived ongoing loss of biodiversity (Briethoff and Harrison 2018; Harrison 2017). Biodiversity both functions as an overarching conservation target in its own right and provides frameworks through taxonomies that facilitate drilling down to smaller, more discrete conservation targets, such as individual species or even the DNA of individual species. In this way, samples function as ‘proxies’ for the larger conservation target: DNA in blood samples for animal species, seeds for crops, and each of these for the overarching target of biodiversity (Briethoff and Harrison 2018; Harrison 2017).

Each of the studied institutions engaged in these ex situ conservation practices utilise data structures that demonstrate how they understand, and work to conserve biodiversity. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) maintains the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, which is the most comprehensive source of information on the global conservation status of biodiversity. While the Red List boasts almost 100,000 entries, it remains incomplete and only provides information regarding the conservation status of less than 5% of known species on Earth (IUCN n.d.). Nevertheless, it provides a resource to guide the collection practices of organisations such as herbaria and frozen zoos and a framework against which they can claim to be contributing to the conservation of biodiversity (Harrison, Breithoff and Penrose forthcoming).

In the UK, accredited museums are required to have collections development policies that outline the types of objects they do and do not collect. While some of these policies outline priority areas
for collecting, most are very general, for example indicating that they only collect objects with connections to the local area. The Profusion theme’s reporting on their contemporary collecting and disposal survey showed that the vast majority of social history objects are acquired by museums through unsolicited donations (Fredheim, Macdonald and Morgan 2018; cf. Cannadine 2018). As such, engagements with the range of material that could be collected tends to be limited to ‘what not to collect,’ with collection development policies mostly being used as a tool to reject material in a fairly subjective way (Chapter 6; Macdonald and Morgan 2018).

Unlike biodiversity data structures and frameworks, there has been little development of equivalents that guide social history practitioners in collecting ‘diverse’ objects, or metadata fields that allow collections to show they are meeting cultural diversity conservation targets. Arguably, such ‘passive collecting’ has exacerbated the lack of diversity in social history collections. As a Documentation and Collections Officer based in the South West of England commented in response to the Profusion survey (Fredheim, Macdonald and Morgan 2018, 22):

‘because donations are donor led we only really have what other people think is of value - the collection is definitely a patchy record of life in times gone by’.

As I discussed in Chapter 7, this is partly due to narrow and exclusionary nature of evidence and expertise in social history more broadly. Archives and museums have moved from away representing the world through formal taxonomic orders, but nothing has effectively replaced them. The purpose of this thesis is not to argue for the introduction of a new universal framework for social history, but to explore practitioner’s approaches in its absence.

8.2.1 ‘Gaps in the collection’

When I asked practitioners in my interviews about how they assessed diversity and representation in their collections, they frequently spoke about being driven by ‘gaps’. These gaps were defined more-or-less as fuzzy areas of missing content that could be filled (without much reference to the fabric around them). Diversity gaps were holes, but temporary ones—possible to fill by pursuing the right project—though whether or not it would ever be possible to find the time or resources to do so was always unclear. In practice, then, gaps referred to more than just particular kinds of ‘diverse’ content considered to be missing. They also indicated a lack of necessary frameworks and skills in collections to address the kind of representation and diversity they wanted to achieve. At the Horniman Museum, which holds ethnographic and natural history collections in southeast London, I interviewed curators about the new collecting that was happening as part of the
redevelopment of their anthropological ‘World Gallery’ over 2017-2018. For one curator, the World Gallery presented an opportunity to turn away from the trend of ‘introspective’ work that had made museums ‘much more about museum studies than they have really been about people.’ In her words, while it was necessary to acknowledge unethical and colonial collecting frameworks, at the moment it felt more generative to focus on ‘how people are really important’ and being human (the latter is the new gallery’s theme). A big focus of the contemporary collecting done for the gallery was acquiring contemporary art ‘as a voice’ that complemented and responded to the existing collections. That said, this curator also described the World Gallery collecting ‘as filling gaps’ instead of: “want[ing] to tell this new story that we can’t tell [with our currently existing collections] and let’s collect that as a whole”’. In some ways, she felt that this was a shame—that ‘filling gaps’ was only used to extend collections material rather than to break into new or different areas. Material that fills gaps has to be different, but not too different. A second curator from the Horniman described the process of selecting new material: ‘Does it fit a gap in the collections, or is it just yet another club from Fiji? We don’t need 16 of those, why are we getting another one [?]’. New material can’t be so different that it breaks away from the shape of the existing collections entirely.

The first curator’s focus on stories and voices as opposed to doing an exhibition ‘more about museum studies’ than people can be read as a critique of new museology’s emphasis on reflexivity. It also reflects a tension between a desire to break away from collecting under these structures that have been exposed, and the reality of having to work within the patterns they’ve set. A focus on stories and voices was common among the curators I interviewed and the participants at the ‘Collecting Change/Changing Collections’ workshop. Similar to the first curator’s descriptions, practitioners often spoke about collecting objects in service of representing people (mostly individuals). The stories or voices of these individuals were felt to transcend the taxonomic categories or often unremarkable properties of their associated objects.

Similar to the Horniman Museum, curators at Hackney’s Museum also spoke about gaps as absences in their collections which could often be filled by the stories of individuals. Objects were explicitly secondary to these stories, for example in the work of Hackney’s migration suitcases. Hackney’s migration suitcases are a set of luggage, each filled with artefacts that represent a particular individual’s journal and arrival to Hackney. The suitcases are used for school visits and other handling activities; they often employ replicas or proxies to help tell someone’s story. The Heritage Learning Manager walked me through the process of creating a migration suitcase that
tells the story of a man who had come to Hackney as a child refugee from Biafra after the Nigerian civil war. Since he came to London with very little, they worked with him to find artefacts like Biafran money on eBay and commissioned someone to build a catapult like the one he had described using to catch his own food. From her perspective, ‘we’re collecting authentic material, but we’re helping to build stories where there isn’t the material as well. Because that’s really important—if you don’t tell those stories, because you haven’t got the material, then you’re not helping to fill in those gaps.’ In this case, in contrast to what was described at the Horniman, filling in gaps could address broader absences that didn’t rely so much on the existing collections, and in fact could be ‘filled in’ even in the absence of readily available objects for collection.

Perhaps since Hackney Museum’s remit is smaller than the Horniman’s global ‘being human’ theme, curators at the former were more invested in trying to tell the story of the borough as a whole. ‘[W]e’re constantly trying to collect as much of [significant personal] history as we can so that we can tell a more rounded story of Hackney.’ This has meant working in concert with a variety of community groups, for which Hackney Museum is well known (Haswell-Walls et al. 2018; Lynch 2011). Hackney curators described a more complex relationship with communities than simply using their material to fill gaps in the collections’ coverage. Working with communities was seen as helping to fill gaps in skills and resources both inside and outside the museum. The Heritage Learning Manager stated:

‘There’s the need in the museum where there’s a gap in the collection, then there’s the need in the community for coming to a local authority museum, as [local authority budgets] get tighter there are groups in the community that need to access to activities and local amenities.’

‘We don’t have the staff and the money to go out and do that project, fill those gaps. And I also find that when we have the money and the people—freelancers—and we go and we deliberately try to do something, it’s not as effective as waiting for the right spark to happen […] We form our relationship and then we find money or we find people to support those relationships together with the communities, which builds a much more equitable partnership then us having money to dish out. Or, we support community groups to write that bid and collect’

The first quote explains that, as part of the local authority, Hackney sees itself as potentially being able to help fill in gaps in funding for community activities and support. Communities, in turn, might also fill in for the staff’s lack of time and resources to address gaps in coverage in their collection. Although, as the Heritage Learning Manager points out in the second quote, the choice to work with communities is not simply because of lack of funds. Hackney Museum staff recognise
community expertise as more effective in filling gaps than similar work they could undertake. This indicates the larger, perhaps obvious, point that ‘gaps’ rarely refers to absences which are completely internal to collections or could be ‘filled’ by a curator just accessioning relevant material. Gaps seem to indicate not just a lack of content but a lack of appropriate expertise and relationship networks.

Stories, as discussed in Chapter 6, are one way in which relevant expertise and relationships are brought into the museum. Another is via targeted project work. Like Hackney’s migration suitcases, practitioners from across a wide range of collections spoke about filling diversity gaps in their collection as part of targeted outreach or exhibition projects with communities. Staff at the Angela Marmont Centre for UK Biodiversity (AMC) at the Natural History Museum in London spoke about ‘work[ing] with the curators to plug the gaps where there’s a defined need, so where we know naturalists or a citizen science programme we’re running will be looking at a particular species group’. The AMC specialises in providing training and resources in recording underrepresented species groups (so-called cryptic or non-charismatic species, like insects and lichen). Collecting for these outreach projects doesn’t only fill gaps in the AMC’s collection, but teaches others how to fill collections and data gaps in other repositories and recording schemes. The lack of documentation of these groups reflects a corresponding gap in expertise within the conservation sector, which the AMC has made it one of their key goals to address (Roach and West 2017).

At the Black Cultural Archives (BCA) in Brixton, the only national repository dedicated to heritage of African and Caribbean people in Britain, there is also a link between the gaps within the collections and gaps in collections expertise. However, in contrast to the relatively stable taxonomies of biodiversity, BCA faces more questions about how these gaps should be defined. BCA’s former archivist told me, ‘We know there are some gaps—basically we need a more strategic approach.’ In the past, she described material as often coming in unsolicited through grassroots and community networks or from irrefusible donations from patrons. In 2012, an Acquisitions Subcommittee, made up of historians, had been formed to review the collections policy and propose new areas for collections development in a more proactive way. From her perspective the Subcommittee ‘was and wasn’t successful,’ in partly due to ‘bones of contention’ within the Subcommittee, which included how to define and approach historical periods for the history of African and Caribbean people in Britain, and whether or not to accept African American materials. These are concerns not just about the type of content to be included, but about what its organising
frameworks and boundaries should be. The absence of this structure can be partially understood in light of the dearth of black archivists, historians, and curators in the UK (CILIP and ARA 2016). This is not to argue that the presence of more diverse practitioners leads automatically to more expertise in ‘diverse’ collections areas, but that heritage professions have often excluded diverse expertise and limited its impact on shaping collections.

8.2.2 Beyond the Gap

A minority of practitioners in my research eschewed ‘filling gaps’ within their collecting practice. Instead, they implemented strategies of accessibility and deliberate non-selectivity. Interestingly, these collections were ones that often saw their collections as addressing underrepresentation (or ‘filling gaps’) in the sector as a whole (for example, transgender identity in museums collections, or women in art practice history). Being cognisant of the exclusions of their material from established collecting institutions perhaps meant that these places prioritised accepting and valuing the material they received over trying to achieve traditionally ‘representative’ collections within their target area. I conclude by discussing the approach of one of these sites, the Bishopsgate Institute archive. Bishopsgate Institute is an educational and cultural charity, whose archive aims to explore the ‘experiences of everyday people, and facilitating the study of history from below’ (as their website describes). Bishopsgate Institute archives focuses collecting from London and the East end, but also including UK-wide collections. I interviewed the Bishopsgate Institute’s Library and Archives Manager in December 2016.

The Bishopsgate Institute’s Library and Archives Manager described their archive as being open to collecting things that ‘maybe wouldn’t make it in [else]where’. In the Library and Archives Manager’s many years at Bishopsgate, he’s been instrumental in shaping their collections development, not only building on the historic collection areas, but (as the Horniman curator put it) collecting ‘new stories’ ‘as a whole’ as well. We discussed gaps and absences in the sector, particularly within LGBT archives, which tend to be biased toward upper and middle class gay white men to the exclusion of transgender people, people of colour, and more alternative sexualities (i.e. leather and fetish—Bishopsgate recently became home to the UK’s first Leather Archive). While recognising the importance of monitoring and addressing underrepresentation within collections, including at Bishopsgate, the Library and Archives Manager also argued against their taking a ‘filling the gap’ approach.
‘I’m always very wary about how easily it can be really horribly naff and patronising to people to say, “We’re going to form a diverse archive that will represent you”. I’d rather encourage everybody to deposit an archive and see what comes. Rather than, “We’ve got a gap here, we’re not diverse enough”, and going to target those people. I just want them to feel like this is an archive where they’d be welcome. That it’s an environment that they’d be welcome as well […] And I’m always very wary about the term itself. What is diverse? Are we the right people to decide what is diverse?’

Rather than targeting particular people or materials, the Library and Archives Manager said he preferred to work to make the archive as accessible as possible, including not requiring appointments or identification to see materials. This was informed by his professional experience.

‘[B]ecause of how long I’ve worked in archives, archives that are frankly terrifying and very off-putting environments. Environments that are not about everybody, they’re about academic research. So basically, I’m quite committed to trying to break that down, I think that reaps its own rewards in terms of inclusivity.’

In the block quote above, the Library and Archives Manager highlights the subjective nature of identifying diversity gaps and who is identifying them. Given the relatively narrow demographics of the archival profession, he rightly perceives that this analysis can be patronising and othering. In addition to pursuing accessibility as a strategy for inclusive representation, the Library and Archives Manager has also worked to build an impressive set of external relationships that go beyond short-term collecting projects. ‘I will talk to anyone at any time and do a talk for any group at any time, and a lot of them come in. I had cabbies in here the other day. A trans youth group the week before. It’s a wide [range’]. He also sees it as his role to encourage people to recognise the value of their material and to make the acquisition process as easy as possible. He gives the example of their diary collecting project as one that needs a lot of nurturing—they often have to convince people that their diary isn’t boring, but rather, as the Library and Archives Manager put on an extra sunny voice to explain, ‘a vital part of social history to illustrate for future generations’.

The Library and Archives Manager at Bishopsgate acknowledges that his ability to take risks and be generous in accepting material is due in part to the relative security of the archive’s funding and of his long tenure. By contrast, ‘filling gaps’ in social history collections can in some ways be seen as a response to contexts or risk-avoidance and scarcity, where a gap is thought of as something that can be pre-defined by the collecting institution and managed within a relatively short-term project—even if the structural or expertise issues underlying it longstanding and extensive. In other words, there is an assumption that gaps are things that can simply be filled in, instead of acting as indicators of ongoing insufficiencies in the practices that surround where the absence has occurred.
Although gaps in natural history collections exist also due to biases in practice (e.g. towards charismatic megafauna), there is more widespread acceptance of continuing to revisit collections diversity and collecting new material over time. As the Director of the AMC reflected, ‘And obviously our species diversity in the UK changes, and we’ll get a new species each year.’ In contrast, there is much more conservatism within social history practice, where newer and more diverse material is devalued in comparison to conserving existing collections.

Assessing a collection for its gaps is not a ‘bad’ practice. On the contrary, it can be a useful endeavour, if used reflectively by practitioners as part of drawing attention to structural issues of representation. Relatively straightforward work ‘filling gaps,’ however, can often be a practical approach to managing the risk that doing challenging diversity work within collections poses to practitioners. For those less supported and financially secure than the staff at Bishopsgate, diverse collections development or exhibition projects can put their jobs or reputations at risk (e.g. Kasim 2017; Lynch and Alberti 2010). Why? Because working on contemporary diversity often means working on controversial topics upon which there is no professional consensus, meaning that practitioners are liable to be judged on the visible exposure the bring to their institutions (positive or negative) irrespective of the quality of their work.

In the ‘Collecting Change/Changing Collections’ workshop, practitioners spoke of a willingness to take risks in addressing diverse and challenging collecting at lower levels of institutions, but risk aversion at higher levels. When practitioners took successful risks, they were celebrated by the institution, but if they were less successful they were forced to bear the costs on their own (Lee-Crossett 2018, 10). Some museums and archives have tried to institute the culture of an experimental laboratory where failure is expected, but this is not widespread or applied in practice (Lee-Crossett 2018, 10; Ashby 2018).

‘Gaps’, as I have discussed them here, are reflective of the larger lack of commitment to diversity as a strategic aim in collections (as discussed in Chapter 3). The concept of ‘filling gaps’ acknowledges underrepresentation in collections, but is often addressed in piecemeal ways and deprioritised compared to what is considered core collections work and material. There is an increasing shift toward recognising that gaps need to be approached by addressing issues of how collections are organised and managed, and by valuing outside expertise. There has been a parallel shift from diversity as an aim to reflect a wider range of demographics in collections to diversity, not as an aim, but an expected result of aims to democratise collections practice. While this is positive in some ways, the continued devaluing of diverse materials and perspectives does not
suggest that it wholly realistic to assume that democratisation in some areas will increase representation for underrepresented groups. In Chapter 5, I highlighted how critics have argued that aspirations for fairer models of collections engagement does not usually consider how, from the start, some types of people will be systemically excluded or disadvantaged from democratic exchange (Boast 2011; Douglas 2018; Dibley 2005).

When attending the 2016 exhibition *Is it even worse in Europe?* (discussed in Chapter 3) I spent a few hours reviewing UK art institution’s responses to the Guerrilla Girls’ diversity survey. In response to the survey question: ‘One hundred years from now, will a visitor to your institution be able to say “Wow, they got it right”?’ I was struck by the number of replies that emphasize the institutions’ efforts, above anything else, as an answer. Replies of this kind included:

‘No [visitors will not say we got it right]. Perhaps they could say that we tried.’
‘No, but hopefully they’ll say “They tried hard.”’
‘I hope they just think we did our best.’
‘I do hope so.’
‘If we continue to work toward our mission, we hope so.’
‘We like to think so.’

Sharon Macdonald and Jennie Morgan’s (2018, 24) article on uncertainty and significance assessment in museums also identifies ‘a deep concern with the act of trying’ by curators engaged in contemporary collecting. Macdonald and Morgan continue, “I hope they will know that we have tried” is a sentiment that has often been expressed to us by museum professionals in our research’ (24). For Macdonald and Morgan (2018), this expression of effort is read with some sympathy in light of the challenges facing curators as they attempt to make decisions about collecting contemporary material that has as-yet-unknown significance within their institution. By contrast, the Guerrilla Girls’ exhibition is far less sympathetic to collecting institutions’ desires to have tried—despite documented failures to address diversity and representation in their collections. While we cannot expect collections practitioners to make collections decisions that are all ‘right’, or that we would agree with, it is also unreasonable to equate ‘making an effort’ to actually making progress on representation and diversity.

Demonstrating that you have tried to do diversity can both be an honest expression of effort as well as an attempt to evade accountability for falling short of standards (Ahmed 2012). The Mayor of London report, *Delivering Shared Heritage* (2005, 23), discussed in Chapter 3, strongly draws a link between representation and accountability:
increased representation is the key channel whereby cultural diversity can be embedded within institutional values and practices and begin to influence and develop the sector’s direction and identity. Adequate representation is the path along which greater accountability to diverse communities can be forged (emphasis added).

In my thesis, I have argued that for diversity aims to be implemented successfully it is necessary for materials considered diverse to be valued within core collections and for underrepresented groups to have greater agency in assembling and governing collections. In this chapter, I have argued that diversity has not been embedded within collections because it is seen as temporary, as well as less valued. This devaluation of diversity means that it is not often reflectively or systematically pursued.

It is difficult to know how much archives and museums can or should be held to account for falling short of supporting ongoing, transformative work in their collections. On the one hand, the time and resource pressures that constrain practitioners and institutions are very real. On the other, if aims for increasing representation and democratising collections are to be achieved to collections, this must happen. In my concluding chapter, after re-engaging with my research questions, I consider how the issue of intuitional reform can be contended with at two different scales—that of the practitioner and that of the institution—offering possible responses to each.

Notes
1 LGBTQ+ material digitised from Speak Out contributors was not physically collected by LMA, just scanned and added to the Speak Out website in a ‘Gallery’ section.
2 The Mediatheque is an area within the LMA that provides on-site access to video, audio, and large map collections.
3 Verbatim theatre is a form of theatre in which performance pieces are put together using only passages from interviews on particular topic or event. Hence it has a fair degree of overlap with oral history.
4 Some of the Speak Out oral history trainer’s recommended interview techniques appeared to be based on her opinion rather than based in evidence. Her training handout warned that middle- and upper-class people typically gave worse oral history interviews than working class ones. The handout also warned oral history trainees ‘to watch out for […] political animals. Anyone who has worked in politics, the union movement, even feminists – and I’ll also include academics here.’ In her opinion, ‘such people tell you about the events that happened in their lives, but very rarely about how they FELT about the impact of those events’.
5 LGBTQ+ History Club does still continue to advertise more-or-less monthly meetings at LMA and there are other LGBTQ heritage guided tours and workshops listed on the LMA’s Eventbrite, but these no longer reference Speak Out or appear to be about gathering, contributing or reinterpreting LGBTQ+ collections material (instead they are described as opportunities to explore already-existing LGBTQ+ collections or sites).
6 In a major metropolitan city like London, the idea being able to refer to a LGBTQ+ community that is not seriously atomised by aspects like class, race, and other demographics and affinities is arguable at best.
7 Speak Out advertised to and worked with members of a number of already established community groups and charity, but none were dedicated partners.
8 The brackets within my quotation from Nguyen’s (2015) article replace her term ‘minor object/s’, which she coins in order to describe ‘those marginal forms, persons, and worlds that are mobilized in narrative (including archival) constructions to designate moments of crisis’. This definition articulates with my political definition of diversity and (passive and active) representation in the thesis.
9 That UK heritage legislation is necessarily a barrier to repatriation is challenged by Trilling (2019) as well as by legal scholar Sarah Keenan (2017).
As also noted in Chapter 6, archival The National Archives’ accreditation scheme only began in 2013.

For the migration suitcases, Hackney Museum collects one set of materials for the museum and another set for the story donor to keep.

The Horniman’s finished World Gallery provides windows into a selection of different lifeways around the world, supplemented by the perspectives of different individuals and art and doesn’t try to present any kind of comprehensive overview.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, other sites discussed in the thesis that had similar approaches to Bishopsgate Institute archive (neither basing their work on ‘gaps’ nor short-term projects) included Mayday Rooms archive (Chapter 5), the Museum of Transology (Chapter 6), and the Women’s Art Library (Chapter 7).

The exhibition, *Is it even worse in Europe?* was based on a survey about diversity that the Guerrilla Girls sent out to European art museums and galleries in 2016. See Chapter 3 of this thesis for more context. The complete records of survey responses were available in open volumes set out in the exhibition, but have not been published.
Chapter 9  Conclusion

This chapter concludes my thesis by reflecting on the research questions introduced in Chapter 1 and how they have been addressed by the empirical research presented in Chapters 5-7. It then presents the findings from my research that archives and museum practitioners might find applicable for ongoing work on diversity and representation in collections. Finally, the conclusion returns to the question of the reform of collecting institutions that has been raised throughout. If, as Sara Ahmed (2012, 173) argues, investigating what diversity does is not simply a question about who or what is included, but a question about the process of institutional transformation, then addressing it should provide a response to debate about reform (Bennett 1995; Dibley 2005; Drake 2016a; 2016b; 2017; Graham 2012). Based on my research, I argue that the archives and museums do not seem likely to reform in ways that will make them more diverse and representative, either through their core collections content or in how they are managed or governed. Although the difficulty and even impossibility of reform has been acknowledged before, I end by exploring an alternative to continuing to pursue insufficient and unsatisfactory reforms: working to abolish institutional archives and museums. To do this, I draw from both the visionary and practical work that has been done in the field of prison abolition.

9.1  Reflections and connections across themes

The opening question of my research was: What is being done with ‘diversity’ in collections practice? I first investigated this through my thematic review of London archive and museum webpages. The review showed that ‘diversity’ and related words are most often being used to describe a range of differences, or variety, within collections (Chapter 2). I traced these relatively shallow uses of diversity back through historical genealogies that demonstrate that diversity has been used not just to present difference, but to manage the risks of difference in colonial and then liberal governmental projects (Chapter 3). Diversity has also been an extractive project, where differences not deemed to be risky are harnessed for the benefit of Anglo-European institutions.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, diversity has also been mobilised as a socio-political project with the goal of acknowledging and redressing the structural exclusion of marginalised groups. Because archives and museums have represented themselves as civic
spaces where ‘everyone’ can address historical and cultural legacies (including exclusion), they have also aligned themselves with this use of diversity. However, this strand of diversity has often been in tension with the use of diversity to manage risk and extract value. In my review of English collections development policy since the introduction of the Labour government social inclusion platform in the 1990s, it can be seen that although diversity has been invoked in collections policies, it has mostly been subordinated to the aim of preserving existing collections. Instead of being used to redress structural exclusion, diversity has often been treated as a risk to the value of existing collections.

Where diversity has been used within collections practice, it has most often been associated with passive, assimilationist projects to include underrepresented groups within existing collections. I have described many of these projects as lacking frameworks for collecting diversity (Chapter 8). They ‘fill gaps’, in an ad hoc way rather than deliberately collecting diversity in a way that is informed by an analysis of structural exclusion in archives and museums. In my research I chose to look at cases where practitioners articulated some of this analysis and had an interest in active representation, although sometimes this did not fully translate into practice.

The remainder of my research questions focused on these cases, asking first where work on diversity and active representation took place in collections. In Chapters 2 and 4, I observed that it was difficult to find work on diversity taking place in collections rather than in more public-facing areas of museums. In Chapter 5, I established that my fieldwork on diversity most often took place around the edges of collections, in liminal spaces I termed porous zones. These porous zones were interactive arenas where the public could access and participate in collections. In the cases in Chapter 5, porous zones where shown to be frequently interactive in ways other than designed and not always as democratically interactive as they were designed to be. The chapter concluded by arguing that while barriers to participation in collections were persistent, collections practitioners were able to help manage these barriers to support pathways for engagement that were more accessible to traditionally excluded groups.

I have argued that locating work on diversity is not only related to establishing where it physically takes place, but also where it can be found within the routines of collections practice. Chapter 6 aimed to address the question, ‘How are decisions made about the
introduction of diverse materials in collections?" through the device of the object story. These narratives of contemporary collecting processes helped to reveal how the introduction of diverse materials is associated with informal practices of determining significance. Informal practices attempt to work around the limitations and exclusions of past representational frameworks in collections. Examples of this Chapter 6's cases included challenging the ethos of liberal representation (Hackney Museum) and challenging collections management norms that don’t serve new collections (Museum of Transology).

Chapter 7 considered examples of how formal frameworks for collecting and interpreting materials have evolved to be more flexible and inclusive of diverse types of evidence and expertise. In response to the question, ‘When does the inclusion of diverse materials and perspectives impact collections frameworks?’ I have defined this impact as when diverse materials and perspectives are allowed to intervene in what constitutes evidence (what is significant) and expertise (how this is identified). Impact is thus concerned with active representation, and changes in how collections frameworks are structured and managed. The Women’s Art Library, one of the cases in Chapter 7, created an archive of feminist art practice that has challenged traditional archival evidence and has continued to let its users shape that archive as feminist art practice continues to develop. The Museum of Transology in Chapter 6 does a similar thing with regards to evidence about trans people’s experience of gender, uplifting trans people’s expertise by accepting donated objects without exclusion and preserving donor interpretations as a vital artefact. Two important dimensions of these types of interventions are the longevity of the interventions and their centrality—to what extent they impact core collections in an ongoing way. Although I described how many of my cases had an impact on evidence and expertise, the longevity and the centrality of their impact were often uncertain.

This uncertainty brings us to the final research question addressed in Chapter 8: What are some of the practices within collections that have prevented diversity from being embedded there? In my thesis, the association of diverse materials and perspectives with short-term, project-based work has been shown to have often jeopardized the longevity of their impact. The lack of centrality of these impacts have also been seen in a number of ways. While the development of porous zones in collecting institutions have created more flexible and approachable spaces of interaction, they could still contribute to the marginalisation of diverse materials and perspectives from core collections. Either, again, because of their
temporary nature, or because of how they could be used to manage the boundaries of permanent collections in order to exclude forms of difference perceived as risky, challenging, or irrelevant (e.g. ID enquiries at the AMC [Chapter 5]; *A Museum of Modern Nature* [Chapter 6]).

These practices are at odds with the narrative of the increasingly democratic museum or archive, where collections are meant to reflect everyone and be open to all. I have argued that the marginalisation of diversity work can partly be understood in the context of the persistent devaluing of diverse materials and perspectives. More than other types of collecting, collecting contemporary diversity is associated especially with ephemeral and everyday materials that have not historically been collected or valued by Anglo-European collecting institutions. This association with lower-value materials is a contributing factor to diverse materials being consigned to areas outside of core collections. Most archives and museums have not consciously chosen to continue exclusionary and discriminatory ways of making and managing collections. However, they largely continue to value the preservation of pre-existing collections over new materials, which is arguably more-or-less the same thing.

My research and fieldwork were not able to identify widespread frameworks (formal or informal) that support the ongoing, active representation of diversity within social history collections. Some of my research participants did propose rejecting passive, assimilationist representation in favour of facilitating evolving communities of records using their collections. This included practitioners at Hackney Archives, Mayday Rooms Archives (Chapter 5), the Museum of Transology (Chapter 6), and the Women’s Art Library (Chapter 7). As I discuss in the next section, prioritising communities of records involves de-prioritising the collections themselves. However, de-prioritising or de-centralising collections has only been able to happen when archives and museums have lacked ‘valuable’ pre-existing collections to begin with. Generally, there is not strong evidence that the marginalisation of diverse materials in collections will improve in the near future. My analysis of what is being done with diversity in collections practice in London thus largely reinforces findings of previous studies by Dibley (2005) and Graham (2012) which question the ability of collecting institutions to truly reform their representational practices.

With the space remaining in this chapter, I extend this conclusion in two ways. First, in the next section, I take up Graham’s (2012, 569) suggestion about the potential for intervention
into museum processes at the scale of front-line, practice-level work. Then, I outline some possibilities for taking the conclusion about inability to reform to its full extent: abolishing cultural collecting institutions. I narrow my argument about abolition in this way because of the scope of my thesis, which has mainly centred on the field of Anglo-European social and cultural history, and has not done such in-depth work on natural history or on other archive and museum contexts. I also specify ‘collecting institutions’ as the target of my abolitionist argument because I target the structures of Anglo-European collecting institutions rather than practices of making and keeping collections in all contexts. Rather than abolishing social history collecting institutions being a wild suggestion, I argue that it logically derives from the existing academic debate on this issue. Dibley (2005), taking perhaps the hardest line against the ‘redemption’ of the museum, observes:

‘Unlike Foucault, whose politics would not have not have aligned him with the prison, or the relations of governmentality he subsequently analysed, Bennett, like museum reformers before him, commits himself politically to that institution and its processes of subjectivation’ (13).

Here, Dibley sets up a parallel of Foucauldian critiques of the prison and of the museum. Critiques of prison, via the field of prison abolition, provides us with the example that Dibley does not quite draw out: where critics of an institution do explicitly align themselves against its continued operation.

9.2 The scale of practice

In Chapters 5 and 6 I engaged with arguments made by Dibley (2005), Boast (2011) and Graham (2012) that respond to Bennett’s (1995) influential argument that the museum operates within an ‘insatiable’ cycle of critique and reform. Bennett (1995) argues that the museum’s claim to represent the public leaves it open to calls for reform that can never be truly resolved, because while the museum purportedly aims to be representative of and accessible to all, it actually functions as a site of governmentality, which differentiates and regulates the public. According to Bennett (1995), the cycle of reform is created both because the aim to be ‘universally’ representative is a never-ending project and because reformers mistake the museum’s rhetoric for its function, i.e. they misrecognise it as a space of democratic participation (cf. Douglas 2017). In Chapter 5, I relate how Bennett (1998) and others have critiqued Clifford’s (1997) concept of the contact zone, which aspired toward
creating spaces of democratic exchange, for not sufficiently acknowledging the top-down, governmental nature of museum relations.

Graham (2012, 585) argues that while it might not be possible to escape the governmental nature of museums, we can ‘make space for the initiative of the front-line worker,’ whose practice is only partially connected to (or determined by) the governmental structures of policy and institutions. Because my research has largely taken place at the front-lines of contemporary collecting practice, I have tried to make and advocate for this space throughout the thesis. In this section, I present insights that were either observed from practitioners’ work or based on their contributions. For the most part, these arose out of the ‘Collecting Change/Changing Collections’ workshop (Lee-Crossett 2018). This series of insights does not present their own argument, but return to and expand on a set of concerns that have been addressed across the thesis. Here I move from a critical mode to an applied one, which acknowledges that smaller-scale practices are always being adjusted in ways that can benefit public and practitioner interactions with collections (Graham 2012; from Bennett 2007, 626).

9.2.1 Learning from natural history collecting

One of the comparatives of this thesis has been between collecting diversity in social history and natural history collections. This comparison was enabled through their shared genealogy of collecting and managing diversity. Although the histories of collecting socio-cultural and biodiversity are strongly linked, contemporary natural history collecting is not usually discussed side-by-side with social history counterparts. More integration across disciplines was one of the things that practitioners at the ‘Collecting Change/Changing Collections’ called for with in response to the question about what type of futures they wanted for their collections (Lee-Crossett 2018, 9). My research on natural history practice, primarily through the work of the Angela Marmont Centre in Chapters 5 and 7, identified aspects that are potentially generative to bring further in conversation with social history practice. I want to return to these here to show how the critical explorations of diversity which I have presented in my thesis might find application within contemporary collections.

At the AMC, the focus of collecting was not creating more diverse collections (passive representation) but learning about how to identify difference in the natural world. One of the ways that this focus was evident was in the lack of emphasis in producing collections
outputs (e.g. acquisitions, documentation, exhibition material). Instead, collecting was primarily a way to build participant’s expertise, partially for the practical reason that the species groups specialised in by the AMC cannot be identified unless you physically collect them. In this context, collecting specifically teaches species identification, but more broadly, it teaches how to understand and monitor changing environments. This is different from a definition of collecting that is based on preserving materials or cultures. A definition of collecting as a process of learning to identify significance and change makes the focus of collecting the activity itself. Framing collecting around activity, or exploring phenomena, makes it possible to understand collecting as a co-produced activity where responsibility and ownership can be distributed more equally between collecting institutions and other parties (Graham 2016).

One of the things that helped to distribute responsibility within natural history collecting was the flexibility of outcomes for collected material. Rather than having to manage all of the materials involved as collections materials (increasing the institution’s responsibility/control), many were allowed to take alternate paths. While some of the specimens collected through AMC activities entered the museums’ collections, others were used temporarily (for learning) or taken home into personal collections. As well as having a long tradition in the field sciences, these more fluid types of collections practices have commonalities with other forms of post- or non-custodial collecting in social history (Lee-Crossett 2018, 6). Archaeology, which I use as an example alongside natural history in Chapter 5, is an interesting middle ground. Archaeological fieldwork practices behave more-or-less like a natural science, but are subject to much stricter social history-type retention practices, leading to problems like overflowing archives of questionable value and use (e.g. Merriman and Swain 1999; Museums Association 2007; 2005; Pogrebin 2019). Moving toward understanding of collecting primarily as a learning activity within social history archives and museums might have the potential to challenge the necessity for institutional preservation in all contexts (cf. DeSilvey 2017; Holtorf 2016). While this has the potential to disadvantage material considered diverse (as I discussed in Chapter 6), if applied broadly, it also has the potential to deprioritise institutional ownership of the outputs of collecting.

9.2.2 Facilitating the right to research

Building on the definition of collecting as a learning process, another way of framing collections practice is through what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2006) has called ‘the
right to research’. Instead of defining ‘research’ as a specialised professional task, Appadurai (2006) defines it as a universal capacity to make systematic enquiries into the world around us. Within archives and museums, the capacity to engage in serious enquiry is usually assigned to exhibitions, high-profile programming, or academic and curatorial research instead of within the province of collections management. However, collections can facilitate access not just to physical materials but to research as Appadurai defines it (Lee-Crossett 2018, 11-12). In *Museum Activism*, Lynch (2019, 121) has also connected the expression of Appadurai’s ‘right to research’ with the work of museums, arguing in her chapter that ‘[m]useums involved in upskilling people as researchers is a continuous theme running through the best of the “activist” museum programmes cited in this paper’.

According to Appadurai (2006), increasing people’s capacity to research will increase their ability to gain strategic knowledge about the complex systems and phenomena that govern contemporary life. In this sense, the ‘right to research’ can act both on and through archives and museums. The right to research goes beyond vocational or technical training, so not all examples of learning in the thesis rise to Appadurai’s definition. Like my distinction between types of expertise in Chapter 7, the right to research involves being able to enquire into how knowledge and evidence are made (2006, 173-176).

In the ‘Collecting Change/Changing Collections’ workshop, participants spoke about ‘the right to research’ in terms of using collections ‘to engage people with their lived experiences, and to provide them with the tools to ask questions about their social realities’ (Lee-Crossett 2018, 12). One way I think that collections could be challenged to demonstrate that they do value the process of contemporary engagement with collections is by collecting the products or results of their engagement programmes—valuing the materials of their engagements as they value the pre-existing collection. This is something that is already done by the Women’s Art Library, one of the cases discussed in Chapter 7.

9.2.3 Imagining collections futures

Part of discussing my research with practitioners involved introducing the work and principles of the Heritage Futures project. Within the ‘Collecting Change/Changing Collections’ workshop, this took form as one of the day’s key questions: ‘What kinds of futures do we want for our collections and how do we communicate these visions?’ This question arose from the findings of my thematic review of London archive and museum
collections webpages. In Chapter 2, I presented the review’s findings on the use of diversity, but data was also collected about the use of the future (and similar words) from the same sites. Uses of ‘the future’ showed similar patterns to those of diversity. References to the future were present, but in most cases did not appear to play an active role in collections management.

Although some language about the future was present in slightly over half of websites, analysis showed that much of content about ‘the future’ rested on implicit, generic assumptions about the continuance of the status quo. When the future was mentioned in the collection webpages surveyed for the thematic review, as in other similar research, it overwhelmingly appeared as a continuation of the present (Holtorf and Högberg 2014, 3; Högberg et al. 2017, 643). This was most often expressed in phases like ‘[we collect material from the Romans (for example)] up to the present day’. This is invariably not a literal expression (the collection is not acquiring material from today today), but it acts as a placeholder for the assumption that the collection will continue to acquire items in more or less the same way. Used like this, there is a sense that the present can be substituted for the future without worry of major alterations.

Figure 9.1 The author presenting findings from the thematic review at the ‘Collecting Change/Changing Collections’ workshop in July 2018.
Having presented the findings from my thematic review on the often-empty rhetoric of the ‘future’ in collections, workshop participants shared their experiences of pressures that caused them to remain relatively short-term and present-focused. Despite archives and museums’ implicit commitments to preserve things ‘forever’ and ‘for future generations’, collections practitioners’ ability to undertake forward-thinking collections development and engagement processes were often limited. Precarious funding, impacted by Tory government austerity policies, and in many cases, precarious employment, were some of the limiting factors. Project management frameworks were also identified by practitioners as limiting factors for future horizons in their work (Lee-Crossett 2018, 9-10). Future planning in the archives and museum sector is dominated by project planning and the timescales of funding bodies. Major National Lottery Heritage Fund grants ask for plans that extend 10 years past project completion, but this is on the longer end, with 1 to 2-year timelines for exhibition planning being typical (Heritage Fund 2019, 26, 28). Since their work often dealt with these immediate futures, some workshop participants struggled with workshop exercises that explored imagining longer-term futures.

Can shorter term projects create better futures? The precarity of funding meant that practitioners felt pressure to obtain ‘quick wins’ with public money, making it hard to envision or track longer-term impacts (Lee-Crossett 2018, 10). Similar to individuals and organisations involved with other aspects of the Heritage Futures project (Harrison et al. forthcoming), practitioners involved with my research said they appreciated being able to have space to think more deeply about the futures they were creating with their work. One of the insights from Heritage Futures’ that I have applied in my research has been recognition of the constant presence of (future) uncertainty in collecting practice (Holtorf and Högberg 2014). As Cornelius Holtorf and Anders Högberg (2014, 4) have noted, the expectation of the continuity of the future in the majority of collections is ironic because the only thing we can be sure of about the future is that, by its nature, it will be different from the present.

As I argued in Chapter 6, although uncertainty in collecting is especially associated with contemporary materials, the value of all material within collections is uncertain in the future. Because practitioners working on contemporary collecting face this most directly, they have the potential to be leaders in how to respond to the uncertainty of the value of archive and museum collections into the future—whether this means arguing for their continued relevance, or arguing that not all collections material needs to be permanent.
Near the end of Chapter 5, I introduced the concept of ‘communities of records,’ from Bastian (2003), which form around the process of making or activating collections. As described in the cases in Chapter 5, communities of records can form across the boundaries of a collection, encompassing people and material that operate both inside and outside collections. Communities of records offer a distributed framework for the work of collections where ‘the collection’ is just one node in a complex network of materials and relationships, rather than the core. Communities of records can be observed functioning in the natural history collecting I describe in Chapters 5 and 7, where a mix of people with amateur and professional status, using a wide variety of techniques, come together to create records within a biological recording framework. Combined with the flexibility of outcomes for natural history specimens collected in the UK (able to enter the museum, personal collections, or be discarded), this creates a community of records that is centred around activity rather than a collecting institution.

The different types of collections resulting from these activities also articulates with the idea of ‘ecosystems of collection’ described by Hackney Archives’ Senior Archives Officer in Chapter 5, where duplicate or similar materials could be collected by different types of collections. The duplication of material across collections of different kinds has the potential of opening up materials and heritages to many more types of uses than possible within the context of one site. To a certain extent, materials that are circulated, collected, and reinterpreted online already live within this kind of ecosystem, and the adoption of digital tools like iRecord and the UK Species Inventory is evidence of already existing hybrid online/offline collections networks.

The longevity of the UK natural history and biological recording communities of records somewhat assuages the concerns raised in Chapter 8 about the sustainability of collecting activities and networks over time (Ellis and Waterton 2005; 2004). However, curators like Althea Greenan of the Women’s Art Library and E-J Scott of the Museum of Transology were concerned not just about the persistence of their communities of records but that their collections would persist without these communities. There is a justified, I think, fear that communities of records are considered to be as valuable as the collections materials themselves. Those who advocate for co-production and participatory methods often seem to assume that re-
framing practice in this way can do the work of de-centring collections orders (Boast 2011; Graham 2016; Simon 2010). For example:

‘Part of bringing co-production into the heart of what museums are is a richer politics of display which might take phenomena, rather than objects, as the starting point’ (Graham 2016).

My thesis suggests that even when trying to reframe collections practice, permanent collections materials—and the exclusionary frameworks of evidence and expertise which are integral to them—largely remain at the heart of archives and museums. They endure as that which is truly valued. It does not seem likely that co-produced or participatory practices (taking phenomena, rather than objects as the starting point) can displace them unless these alternative models accompanied by active work dismantling existing collections frameworks. Collecting institutions are unlikely to de-prioritise what they consider to be their core value on their own.

Figure 9.2 Close-up of participants’ mind-mapping during the ‘Collecting Change, Changing Collections’ workshop in response to Question 3: ‘How does change happen in our collections and wider organisations?’ Text reads: ‘Can the historical context of collections themselves be a barrier [to change]?’ Photo by author.
9.3 Refusing institutional reform: abolitionism

There are a number of ways to reject the inevitability of Bennett’s (1995) ‘insatiable’ cycle of museum critique and reform. Following Graham (2012), I have rejected the totality of the model by understanding front-line practice as only partially determined by governmental relations. Another way is to reject the representational principle the model is based on. Those who have pursued this line of argument propose that the work of collecting institutions might better operate through non-representational ontologies and countermonumental interventions (Douglas 2017; Graham 2016). Dibley (2005, 22; from Foucault 1982, 216) proposes a related option: rejecting the totalisation and individuation of governmentality by ‘promoting new forms of subjectivities capable of moving beyond or refusing current regimes of governmentality’, although Graham (2012, 569) argues that this is ‘just as redemptive – though of humanity and not only the museum’.

Without arguing for the exclusion of these options, what I have been struck by when reading the literature on museum reform and critique is that no one appears to be willing to consider refusing the museum. Partly because of this absence of work, this is the form of refusal I end my thesis by exploring. I have not been able to find any published work that deals with, by name or otherwise, the abolition of the archive or the museum as a response to the neoliberal perpetuation of its colonial, racist, and exclusionary structures. Although it is mostly museum literature that deals with the theory of governmentality and reform, Jarrett Drake, working in archives, comes closest to investigating abolitionism in this context. His writing has drawn on comparisons between the archive and the prison (Drake 2019; 2018) and draws brief parallels between his belief in the inability to reform institutional archives and prison abolition (Drake 2016a; 2016b).

I not only explore abolitionism because it is mostly absent in archive and museum discourse, but because I believe it is a valid option for those wishing to address the entrenchment of systems of marginalisation and inequality within collecting institutions. In many ways ‘refusing the collecting institution’, seems no more radical than trying to ‘refuse what we are’ (Dibley 2005, 23; from Foucault 1982, 216). Dibley (2005), as I mention earlier in the chapter, uses the failure of prison reform to critique Bennett (1995) and others’ commitment to reforming museums despite having analysed their governmental regimes (Dibley 2005, 12-13).
‘Paradoxically, Bennett has mis-recognised his target, as he believes the museum’s own rhetoric, much like the penal reformer who has faith in rehabilitation’ (Dibley 2005, 12).

The prison and the museum are thus implicitly catalogued as irrefordable institutions. Dibley continues to rehearse Michel Foucault’s (1991[1975]) argument by asserting that prison reform is ineffective because it misrecognises its target, since the political logic of the prison serves to ‘separate a manageable criminal sub-class from the population’ not rehabilitate individuals (2005, 10). However, Dibley over-generalises when he states that ‘no matter how ineffective these reforms have proven, the prison’s actual viability is rarely questioned’ (2005, 10; also echoing Bennett 1995, 90). This statement was more true at the point when *Discipline and Punish* was published—but only just, as the 1970s began a wave of prison abolitionist thought and organising that has continued since (Carrier and Piché 2015; Ryan and Sim 2016; Ryan and Ward 2015). While the viability of prison remains an unquestioned assumption in public discourse, it is not unquestioned within abolitionist thinking—and it is the latter which is the correct comparative to theory critical of museum reform.

Abolitionist thinking is a diverse set of strategies and ideologies that broadly aim to eliminate prisons and create alternatives to punishment and imprisonment (e.g. Carrier and Piché 2015; Davis 2003; Lawton and Meiners 2014, 12; Ryan and Sim 2016, 728-729). In their (2014) article on feminist scholarship and prison abolition, Jodie Lawson and Erica Meiners elaborate:

‘Abolitionists advocate for a world in which incarceration is not the answer to political and social problems; instead, they advocate for resources like education, housing, and jobs to be accessible and drawn on to make communities safe. Working toward the end of incarceration and committing to imagining, practicing, and proliferating other responses to harm and need in our communities without locking people is part of feminist work to build abolitionist futures’ (12).

Prison abolitionists, almost by definition, have correctly recognised the political logic of prisons identified by Foucault:

‘abolitionists have consistently opposed the state’s “truth” that prisons were concerned with benevolent reform. Instead, they presented an alternative discourse—namely, that “prisons were primarily places of punishment and/or containment…Abolitionists put politics back into penal reform, identifying the prison as just one of a series of disciplinary institutions at the disposal of the State to order and discipline the working classes”’ (Ryan and Sim 2016, 712).
Foucault himself was neither a prison abolitionist nor a reformer. He refused to engage on the question of contemporary prison reform, instead arguing that while society effected marginalisation of people through prisons, neither reforming nor abolishing prisons would remove the underlying systems that created marginalisation (Catucci 2018, 329; Dillon 2016, 259). Some abolitionists have taken on these wider systems of marginalisation as part of their work, with some using abolitionism as a discourse that refers:

‘to a much wider, eminently racialized capitalist system of oppression […]. The result is that prison abolitionism aimed at the dismantling of the prison industrial complex, in fact frequently corresponds to much wider revolutionary projects concerning, but not limited to, the legacies of colonialism and slavery, globalised Capital, representative democracy, and gender binaries’ (Carrier and Piché 2015; see also Davis 2003, 108 for a similar statement).

Prison abolitionists thus would recognise that broader systems of marginalisation are at work in society, but argue that it is still worthwhile to take steps to abolish prisons and imprisonment. In this sense, prison can be thought of as a target for abolition, as political theorist Andrew Dilts describes, ‘because [prison] sits at the intersection between an entire series of institutions and practices that are predicated on the massive elimination of populations, of the marginalisation of persons, and of the exposure to premature death of the many for the sake of the few’ (interviewed in Wolters 2016). The collecting institution can similarly be thought of as a target for abolition, having already been studiously identified as a central site of the cultural logics of governmentality and control in critical literature (e.g. Bennett 1995; Bennett et al 2017).

Before continuing, I wish to make clear that I am not trying to equate the museum or archive with the prison. In the past, archives and museums have been directly complicit in and profited from (especially but not only) colonial exploitations involving death, violence, and oppression on a large scale (e.g. Arondekar 2008; Bennett 1998, 205-206; Bennett et al 2017; Das 2019; Das and Lowe 2018; Davis 2019; Stoler 2009). This is not the reality of UK and Euro-American collecting institutions today. But as noted by criminologists Nicholas Carrier and Justin Piché (2015) above, abolitionist work has not been confined to the prison. It has also been applied to other sites of less literal incarceration, including sites of knowledge and cultural production (e.g. universities and schools) that are closely related to archives and museums (e.g. Reddy 2018; Stovall 2018; Undercommoning Collective 2016).
Much of this work articulates with the decolonial frameworks I have mentioned elsewhere in this thesis (Das 2019; Decolonising the Archive n.d.-a; Kasim 2018). Decolonial work appears to be at the edge of reform and abolition, with many decolonial archive and museum practitioners both identifying the need for deep, systemic reform while acknowledging that existing structures make this fantastically difficult. The curator of UCL’s Galton Collection, Subhadra Das (2019), asks, ‘If [museums] are so bound up in colonial ways of thinking and doing, we must ask: is it possible to decolonise museums without getting rid of them altogether?’ Das answers yes through her commitment to trying to tell more complex and honest histories in her role, but this is an open question that lingers through much of this kind of work.

What abolition, specifically, offers is an alternative to the goal of reform, including a decolonial one. This does not mean in practical terms that abolition is incompatible with all reformist work. Lawston and Meiners (2014) cite feminist, anti-prison activist and scholar Karlene Faith (2000) in order to highlight that everyday local work (akin to what I have discussed as the scale of practice) may involve working on reforms, but should be oriented to larger abolitionist goals and movements (Lawston and Meiners 2014, 4-5).

As Lawston and Meiners (2014, 12) explain:

‘An abolitionist stance is not in opposition to reform, but rather asks us to question the goal and impact of reforms. Reforms that expand the life, scope, or legitimacy of the prison system are not abolitionist […] Reforms that liberate more people, that delegitimize the carceral state, that do not animate logics that dehumanize others or that make material differences in the lives of the people impacted are good reforms. […] Reform work requires careful negotiation, and political movements capable of collective assessment must ask: How does our work contribute to a larger goal of structural change and liberation? For example, the current abolitionist response to overcrowding in prisons is not to build more prisons, but to reevaluate and change the policies that move more bodies into detention and confinement’.

So, what could the use of an abolitionist framework mean for archives and museums? To start, one aspect would include being sceptical in the face of assumptions that the expansion of archives and museums (their collections, buildings, or social role) is automatically a public good, especially for people from marginalised communities. Black Studies scholar Kehinde Andrews’ critique of the proposal for building a British Slavery museum in London is one example of this. Andrews’ (2019) article, entitled, ‘A new slavery museum will have no impact on racism in Britain,’ points out:
'we are on very dangerous ground if we believe a museum is any kind of solution to the deep-seated problem of racism. Although it is a nice fairytale to believe in, racism will not melt away if only people are exposed to the light of the truth. Slavery and colonialism embedded racism into the fabric of society and it cannot be educated out. […] Some of the most “educated” people end up in government, yet still manage to pursue policy agendas that entrench racial disadvantage. Racism is not in our minds; it is in the schools, prisons and on the streets – it results in inequalities across every area of society.’

Andrews ultimately doesn’t come out against the proposed museum, only against the assumed logics of what the museum would do. This is also important, but an abolitionist framework would more broadly challenge the creation of new archives and museums, instead advocating for de-centralised communities of records (while remaining critical about ideas of community, see Drake [2018] and Flinn and Stevens [2009]). Within existing archives and museums, abolitionism would support work that minimised collecting institutions’ control over managing heritage materials. It would work for mass repatriation, welcoming the ‘empty’ collection. It would also work to dismantle professionalism, in the way that Drake (2017) argues (drawing from Zinn [1977] and Kivel [2009]):

‘Professionalism emphasizes “the work” — its completion, its evaluation, its perpetuity, etc. — without a meaningful critique of how “the work” mandates a replication of the patriarchy, oppression, and violence many in our world experience.

The dimensions of impact I outlined in the first section of the conclusion, centrality and longevity, could also be directed toward evaluating whether reform work supports strong abolitionist goals to de-grow and dismantle institutions. My aim in this section has not been to produce a comprehensive argument for museum and archive abolition, but rather to argue that my research has led me to believe it could be a viable part of critical diversity work in these institutions. As evidenced by the scholarship and practice covered by this thesis, work already exists which questions the value of the normative operations of collections and collections representation—abolitionism takes this a step further by arguing that this work could truly reject collecting institutions instead of trying to reform them. In this way, abolition offers a truly alternative future to consider and orient toward.

The benefits of utilising an abolitionist framework, besides offering a way out of the cycle of institutional critique and reform, include being able to learn from the forty years of work grappling with what it means to refuse reform. Prison abolitionists have had to confront how to respond to state and neoliberal discourses that coincide with or appropriate abolitionist
techniques. Lawston and Meiners (2014, 4-5) describe their mixed feelings in the face of economically-based prison closures where they are based in the US, which shrink prisons, but won’t impact the underlying systems that marginalise people to begin with. There are also concerns, based on the ‘rehabilitation revolution’ (Ryan and Sim 2016, 726) in the penal system, that prisons might be replaced by new sites of incarceration that use liberation discourse to go by other names, for example ‘community correctional facilities’ (Lawston and Meiners 2014; UK examples in Ryan and Sim 2016, 723-727). Archive and museum abolitionism might face similar binds, where declining funding might force the minimisation of current institutions, but not in a way that strengthens heritage in communities (e.g. Fredheim 2018). Prison abolitionists have also thought through and worked on a variety of initiative that explore real alternatives ‘to respond to harm and violence without engaging the state’ (Lawston and Meiners 2014, 14). Like many social history archives and museums, this work shares the goal of helping to build stronger communities that resist marginalisation and can directly participate in shaping society.

Notes

1 For example, archives and museums were able to de-prioritise their collections when the collections were relatively new and contained ephemeral materials not assigned a great deal of independent monetary or historical value (MayDay Rooms archive, Women's Art Library). This was more difficult in older, more traditional collections holdings, as the Hackney’s Senior Archives Officer discussed in Chapter 5.

2 ‘Social and cultural’ collecting institutions slightly expands the scope of my argument, which has mostly dealt with social history collections that contain everyday materials from the present and recent past. However, I have also extensively engaged (in both literature and fieldwork) with archives and museums who collect material with historical and other kinds of cultural history. In short, my argument about abolition would extend to, for example, the British Museum, as well as local authority archives.

3 ‘The scale of practice’ does not provide is comprehensive framework for ‘doing diversity’ in collections. Those looking for a more comprehensive approach to addressing diversity and active representation in practice might find publications from Glasgow Women’s Library ‘Equality in Progress’ research (e.g. Glasgow Women’s Library 2018) or the Interference Archive (Cornell 2019; Gordon et al 2016; Sellie et al 2015) useful.

4 The idea of growing collections via encouraging institutions to collect the results of their engagement work (potentially incentivising them to increase control of engagement outputs) does not go very well with my argument for the abolition of collecting institutions. However, it would potentially help to combat the devaluation of diverse, contemporary materials by forcing the preservation of materials that are otherwise likely to disappear (see Vickers and Bolton 2017). Because of the latter, I have left it in as a suggestion.

5 Although beyond the scope of this thesis, looking at the curation of heritage materials outside of Anglo-European contexts could also offer many examples of longstanding communities of records not centred on institutional collections.

6 Archaeologist John Carman’s (2005) Against Cultural Property explores some anarchist theories about the abolishment of property and traditional forms of property ownership, but does not really explore how this would impact cultural institutions.

7 The prison abolition movement has a longer history ‘that dates back to the historical appearance of the prison as the main form of punishment’ (Davis 2003, 9, 48, 52). However, modern organising and publications advocating abolitionism emerged in the 1970s, notably Thomas Mathiesen’s (1974) The Politics of Abolition and Radical Alternatives to Prison (1970), a UK pressure group of ex-prisoners and others that campaigned for prison abolition and research into alternatives to prison (Ryan and Sim 2016; Ryan and Ward 2015).

8 Here Ryan and Sim (2016) quote Ryan and Ward (2013, 9-10). At the time this article was unpublished, but now has been published as Ryan and Ward (2015) with slightly different wording and pagination.
Although Foucault was not a prison abolitionist, before writing *Discipline and Punish* he was one of the founding members of the GIP (Group d’Informations sur les Prisons), a radical activist group commitment to facilitating French prisoners to circulate information about their living conditions. GIP had significant effects on the French penal landscape, which had almost no public transparency, and at the time were completely closed to the public barring family members of incarcerated people and their lawyers (Wolters 2016; Zurn and Dilts 2016). The methods used by the GIP, such as centralising the voices of those imprisoned and organising with (rather than for) them also have a lot in common with approaches used by prison abolitionists today.

The prison industrial complex can be defined as ‘an array of relationships linking corporations, government, correctional communities, and media. [...]’ The term "prison industrial complex" was introduced by activists and scholars to contest prevailing beliefs that increased levels of crime were the root cause of mounting prison populations. Instead, they argued, prison construction and the attendant drive to fill these new structures with human bodies have been driven by ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit’ (Davis 2003, 84).

This refers to Foucault’s idea of ‘massive elimination’, which Foucault used to refer to his visit to Attica Prison in New York, a year after the Attica Prison uprising where state police murdered nearly 40 inmates and correctional officers rather than accede to prisoner demands for reform after they took over the prison (Simon 1972). Massive elimination is thus literal but also more broadly refers to the incarceration of populations, e.g. the disproportionate imprisonment of African Americans in the US, and of the detention of non-white immigrants (Wolters 2016).

Also notable in its connections to incarceration and violence is the key role played by English archaeological collections in the development of eugenics (Challis 2013).

Although refusal to repatriate the human remains of indigenous people’s ancestors and the widespread refusal to engage with repatriation (e.g. Hunt 2019) could easily be described as a form of contemporary incarceration in museums.

In the same article, Das (2019) describes the Galton collection as: ‘one of several historical science collections at University College London. It contains the personal effects and objects relating to the work of Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911). In addition to his pioneering work in the fields of exploration, meteorology, criminology, biometrics, psychology and statistics, Galton coined the term “eugenics”. Influenced by the work of his cousin, Charles Darwin, he believed it was possible to breed better people. More specifically, he believed that it was imperative to breed better white people in order to ensure the continuing success of the British race and empire’.

See the websites of Bent Bars, Critical Resistance, Incite!, and the Prison Activist Resource Centre for examples of ongoing US and UK prison abolitionist and community justice-based projects.
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222


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