

# Investigating absences in cultural heritage collections: A Sloane Lab case study

[XML](#)

“The Sloane Lab: Looking back to build future shared collections” is a 3-year project funded by the UKRI Towards a National Collection (TaNC) programme. The programme aims at breaking down barriers between diverse collections to create a unified virtual national collection that would open up the heritage preserved in the United Kingdom to a global audience (Towards a National Collection 2024). Within the TaNC framework, our project is focussing on the collection gathered by Hans Sloane (1660–1753), a physician and naturalist who amassed over 70,000 disparate objects and catalogued them with the help of an extensive network of collaborators (Delbourgo 2018). Sloane amassed this vast collection — including many objects of Indigenous origin — through the colonial trade networks of the British Empire, and partly funded the effort through the forced labour and knowledge of enslaved people in Jamaica. After Sloane’s death, the collection laid the foundation for the original British Museum and was later dispersed across the present-day British Museum, British Library, and Natural History Museum.

The Sloane Lab project aims at re-establishing connections between the surviving objects, the contemporary institutional records, and Sloane’s historical catalogues, mending the broken links between the past and present of this fragmented collection. This work is carried out through the use of advanced digital technologies and the adoption of a participatory approach, reaching out to communities of interest and to the general public (Sloane Lab 2023). The project has already aggregated tens of thousands of records — both historical and contemporary, and spanning multiple disciplines — that were previously dispersed across the partner institutions. However, the integration of these disparate records and the facilitation of interoperable access to them pose substantial challenges. Sloane’s historical catalogues, in particular, are challenging to represent digitally due to incomplete or inaccurate object descriptions (Ortolja-Baird et al. 2019). Many catalogue entries lack provenance information, and even when available, such data is often partial, imprecise, or inconsistent. To address these challenges, it is useful to apply the framework of critical heritage studies (Smith 2008; Winter 2013), since the uncertainties and biases implicitly present in the datasets cannot be fully understood without considering the systems of knowledge that underlie them and the power dynamics at play (Risam 2019; Roxanne 2019; D’Ignazio / Klein, 2020; Smyth et al. 2020). Moreover, to avoid the perpetuation of past and present injustice and erasure, the history of the collection needs to be re-contextualised through a wide and comprehensive anti-colonial lens (Fanon 1961; Said 1978; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1986; Anzaldúa 1987; Wynter 2003; Tuck / Yang 2012).

In our presentation, we will address the problem of ‘data absences’ found in cultural heritage records (Ortolja-Baird / Nyhan 2022), analysing them in the context of the Sloane collection. These absences manifest in various forms, with the most straightforward being due to the lack of the object itself — objects that are unidentified, lost, destroyed, or relocated, and thus lack a contemporary record in museum catalogues. While heritage institutions focus much of their resources on studying the objects that survive in their collections, an in-depth study of absent objects is a complex and time-consuming endeavour that may ultimately not bear fruit. A more complex kind of absence pertains to provenance information, which for many objects is scarce and unclear. In the catalogues, place names are often vague and do not allow for locating the exact geographical provenance of the object. Moreover, the people who directly provided the objects to Sloane — including a significant number of women — are challenging to identify by the often partial or abbreviated personal names listed in the records; the Indigenous people who created and originally owned part of the objects are usually not named as individuals in the historical catalogues, leaving only broad mentions of entire populations; and the Afro-Caribbean enslaved people without whom a significant portion of the collection would not exist today were erased from the historical record until recent times (Delbourgo 2018).

The Sloane Lab Knowledge Base <sup>1</sup> is an interactive portal allowing the exploration of the data collected from the partner institutions, which has been modelled as Linked Open Data through a data model based on the CIDOC CRM (Doerr 2003). For the first time, the Knowledge Base provides scholars with a wide and high-level overview of the collection, allowing them to perform complex data-driven research that had not been possible before. We can now quantify the absences in several historical catalogues compiled by Sloane and his collaborators, and conversely, we can find out which objects exist in contemporary records but have yet to be linked to historical catalogue entries. Through the Knowledge Base, we can bring to light some of the uncertainties that pervade the catalogues and analyse them in aggregated and quantitative ways to identify interesting patterns for domain experts to investigate in more detail. Finally, we can map vague or implicit mentions of people who have been historically overlooked, allowing these absences to be studied on a large scale.

Our presentation explores methods to identify these historically overlooked data absences that exist in the dataset and sheds light on their broader implications. We discuss the potential impact on the reconstruction of historical context and of the narratives that exist behind the objects. Following the conference theme of “Reinvention & Responsibility”, we investigate how the digital presentation of collection catalogues can be reactivated to answer scholarly questions over the collection, while at the same time doing so in a responsible way that acknowledges and highlights the historical injustice and exploitation that is intertwined with the history of the collection. To bring our study to life, we present experimental visualizations aimed at identifying intriguing objects or groups of objects within the collection which are deserving of further study. On a more general level, our presentation showcases how the consolidation of data from multiple institutions and historical catalogues into a single knowledge base can enable the data-driven exploration of different types of absences and also offer a comprehensive and nuanced overview of the entire collection.

## Appendix A

### Bibliography

1. Anzaldúa, Gloria (1987): *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

2. Delbourgo, James (2018): *Collecting the World: The Life and Curiosity of Hans Sloane*. London: Penguin Books.
3. D'Ignazio, Catherine / Klein, Lauren F. (2020): *Data Fe minism*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
4. Doerr, Martin (2003): "The CIDOC conceptual reference module: an ontological approach to semantic interoperability of metadata", in: *AI Magazine* 24, 3: 75–92.
5. Fanon, Frantz (1961): *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Atlantic.
6. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986): *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Melton: James Currey.
7. Ortolja-Baird, Alexandra / Nyhan, Julianne (2022): "Encoding the haunting of an object catalogue: on the potential of digital technologies to perpetuate or subvert the silence and bias of the early-modern archive", in: *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 37, 3: 844–867.
8. Ortolja-Baird, Alexandra / Pickering, Victoria / Nyhan, Julianne / Sloan, Kim / Fleming, Martha (2019): "Digital humanities in the memory institution: the challenges of encoding Sir Hans Sloane's catalogues of his collections", in: *Open Library of Humanities* 5, 1.
9. Risam, Roopika (2018): "Decolonizing the digital humanities in theory and practice", in: Sayers, J. (ed.): *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*. London: Routledge.
10. Roxanne, Tiara (2019): "Digital territory, digital flesh: decoding the Indigenous body". *APRJA* 8, 1: 70–80.
11. Said, Edward (1978): *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
12. Sloane Lab (2024): *About the Sloane Lab*. Available at: <https://sloanelab.org> (Accessed: 30 July 2024).
13. Smith, Laurajane (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge.
14. Smyth, Hannah / Nyhan, Julianne / Flinn, Andrew (2020). "Opening the 'black box' of digital cultural heritage processes", in: Schuster, K. / Dunn, S. (eds.): *Routledge International Handbook of Research Methods in Digital Humanities*. London: Routledge.
15. Towards a National Collection (2024): *About us*. Available at: <https://www.nationalcollection.org.uk/about> (Accessed: 30 July 2024).
16. Tuck, Eve & Yang, K. Wayne (2012): "Decolonization is not a metaphor", in: *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, 1: 1-40.
17. Winter, Tim (2013): "Clarifying the critical in critical heritage studies", in: *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 19, 6: 532–545.
18. Wynter, Sylvia (2003): "Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation — an argument", in: *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, 3: 257–337.

---

## Notes

1.

The public beta version of the Sloane Lab Knowledge Base can be accessed at: <https://knowledgebase.sloanelab.org>

---

Daniele Metilli ([d.metilli@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:d.metilli@ucl.ac.uk)), University College London, UK and Alicia Hughes ([ahughes@britishmuseum.org](mailto:ahughes@britishmuseum.org)), British Museum, UK and Andreas Vlachidis ([a.vlachidis@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:a.vlachidis@ucl.ac.uk)), University College London, UK and Julianne Nyhan ([julianne.nyhan@tu-darmstadt.de](mailto:julianne.nyhan@tu-darmstadt.de)), TU Darmstadt, Germany

---