Towards a policy and plan for dismantling oppressive practices with the Collections of Shakespeare's Globe

Introduction

This paper outlines the policies and plans for dismantling oppressive practices in the management of the Collections at The Shakespeare Globe Trust (SGT) and the proposed work towards rebuilding those practices through 'establishing a reparative archive that engenders inclusivity'.[1] This includes decolonising and diversifying our approach, our collecting and the ways we show and tell the story and history of SGT through our Collections. As a fundamental principle, we acknowledge the mainstream activities of racism, sexism, homophobic, ableist and other discriminatory traditions as failures.

This is a working document, which is iterative, flexible and subject to change and development. We are open to documenting our mistakes and reversing them and acknowledge that we will make mistakes but our intention is to openly engage and tackle oppressive practices.[2]

It is particularly important that in our efforts to decolonise, we do not do this in a tokenistic way that serves to recolonise and centre whiteness; we must be self-critical of and in the processes. It is also important that we do not reinforce white supremacy by exploiting the voices and stories of the marginalised without adequate reparation. For example, if a community member is invited to collaborate on a display, then we acknowledge their expertise with an appropriate payment and will not treat it as voluntary.

Context

The Collections at Shakespeare's Globe have a particularly white supremacist context. A 2015 survey of the UK archives and library workforce demonstrated that 96.7% of workers identified as white, which is almost 10% above the national average. In addition, a survey of visitors to archives showed 96% self-classify as white.[3] In 2021, the staff of SGT Collections are 100% white.

In a similar way, our Collection's reflect the work of Shakespeare's Globe, which is predominantly presented through a white lens and only represents diversity in a marginal way. The organisation's commitment to Anti-Racism and Diversity will begin to change and challenge this and this paper works hand in hand with those new strategies. Set against the white supremacy surrounding Shakespeare and Shakespeare studies it is an ethical imperative that we make conscious actions towards dismantling oppressive practices to provide an inclusive service and Collections.

Positionality Statement:

I identify as white, European, cis-gender, feminist, ally, working in a specialist performing arts theatre archive as the Library & Archive Manager. I professionally trained as an Archivist.

Why we need to decolonise and diversify:

- To support institutional accountability recognised in SGT's Anti-Racist policy and to recognise and challenge power imbalances
- Decolonising adds depth, context and new knowledge to collections, which have been deliberately ignored

- It will identify gaps
- Offers the opportunity to challenge narratives representative of power at SGT and open our minds to new interpretations for and from marginalised communities and audiences which will support our Cause: 'to make Shakespeare accessible for all'
- It will allow for the misrepresentation in the description of our Collections to be redressed
- Open up new audiences to those who have been silenced

We will attempt to build in the following principles and practices to our work with the Collections:

Collections Management

- Review our policies and procedures and consider how these have contributed to the erasure and marginalisation of underrepresented groups

Staff and volunteers

- Collection's Team and volunteers will be encouraged to undertake training in diversity, inclusion and intersectionality, for example the SAA's free online course Cultural Diversity Competency by Helen Wong Smith https://www.pathlms.com/saa/courses/4839
- Collection's Team to read and research on dismantling oppressive practices as part of our continuing professional development
- Add this as an agenda item on the L&A Team meetings
- Ensure our recruitment practice for both volunteers and staff embraces diversity

Collection's Development

- Identify gaps through a Collection's survey
- Review our Collection's Development Policy and include a specific intent to collect inclusively, especially on class, race, gender and disability
- Continue to include and develop recordings that demonstrate how we make performances accessible, e.g. the Touch Tour and signing of performances

Collection's Information

- Actively denounce archival neutrality found in positivist archival descriptive practices and endeavour and to make our subjective archival interventions accessible and visible to users. Purportedly objective and neutral descriptions are positivist and uphold whiteness by their invisible authority[4]
- Acknowledge that description cannot escape the inherent biases of its creator
- Introduce a positionality statement for the cataloguer in the Archivist's Note and make this field accessible on-line in CalmView
- Create cataloguing guidelines for decolonising current and future collections
- Audit for oppressive, euphemistic or misrepresentative language within our archival description and any for omissions

- Acknowledge any racism or discrimination in our descriptive practice and do not excuse it
- Advocate for the re-description of collections to be undertaken to rectify false historical narratives and oppressive language, where relevant, using a framework of cultural humility[5]
- Where Collections are re-described, record this change in a transparent way, dating, contextualising and documenting changes and allowing access to previous versions of descriptions and findings aids
- Work with communities represented in the Collections to employ description that is reflective of the language communities use to describe themselves. To collaborate and consult with these communities in a participatory, respectful, appropriate and sensitive manner and to give proper payment for any work they contribute
- Critically re-examine our history from a decolonial and anti-oppressive perspective

Collection's Access

Visitors to the Library & Archive

- Ensure our services are inclusive to everyone, in particular seek to address DDA compliance of the reading room
- Our webpages on access to the Collections state 'we welcome scholars of colour' but further ways of signposting that we encourage diverse and inclusive researchers needs developing
- Review our existing access procedures and guidelines and consider how these have contributed to the marginalisation of underrepresented groups.
- Re-evaluate the content of our tours and talks on Collections

Exhibitions and displays:

This outlines our approach to showing and sharing our story of Shakespeare's Globe. It recognises that our collections do not tell stories for everyone but will endeavour to include unheard voices in our approach.

Displays and exhibitions:

- will primarily use and showcase our collections
- will respond and highlight aspects of the current programme
- be agreed with the relevant Hub
- have a digital presence, either on Shakespeare's Globe's website, where possible or on Google Arts & Culture, where rights permit

Our approach will attempt to represent and provide a more inclusive platform. This will do this by:

- Starting to tell different and inclusive stories with our Collections
- Including other voices or historical silences, either digitally or by engaging with different audiences and highlighting their responses
- Including diverse voices in our labelling of exhibits
- Allowing different voices to co-curate; to relinquish control to relevant communities
- Create opportunities for diverse responses that we do not necessarily host (i.e. control) but point to through partnerships in an iterative manner

- Critically highlight where collections do not provide adequate representation of a subject or represent colonialism or social injustice (i.e. where we got it wrong) and do not excuse it

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[1] Hughes-Watkins, Lae'l, 'Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: A Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogenous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices', Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies, Vol. 5 , 2018, p.3. I acknowledge my debt to the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine archive who highlight Lae'l's work and their approach to decolonising archives, see: https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/research/library-archives-service/archives/decolonising-lshtm-archives

[2] Tai, Jessica. 'The Power of Words: Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description,' in 'Radical Empathy in Archival Practice,' eds. Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith. Special issue, Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies 3, 2020

[3] Quoted in Chilcott, A. et al, Against Whitewashing: The Recent History of Anti-Racist Action in the British Archives Sector, The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion, 5(1), 2021, p.33

[4] See: Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," Archival Science 2, no. 1 (2002): "The power to describe is the power to make and remake records and to determine how they will be used and remade in the future. Each story we tell about our records, each description we compile, changes the meaning of the records and re-creates them." Also see: Wendy M. Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings," Archival Science 2, nos. 3-4 (2002): 263

[5] Tai, Jessica, 2020, ibid.