

## “My Soft, Smooth Skin...Cut Deep”: Using Filmmaking to Imagine, Feel, and Perform Colonial Natural History in the Museum

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### Abstract

Museums across the international stage continue to engage in urgent debates about the need to decentre the epistemological foundations of collections and institutions built on colonial expansion. Indeed, industrial cities such as Manchester are beginning to address the uncomfortable legacies of colonial exploitation within their educational and cultural institutions, as well as their civic spaces. Contributing to this discussion, this article revisits a project at Manchester Museum that invited students from a local school to collaborate in the production of a film inspired by taxidermy specimens originating from a 1929 hunting safari in Sudan. Recounting the methods and outputs of this practice-based research project, I suggest that a cross-collection, creative approach to engaging audiences can generate new forms of imaginative and performed knowledge about the colonial histories of collections. Not only can these new forms of knowledge challenge existing accounts of provenance, they have the potential to address historical injustices, inviting audiences to re-tell the histories of these things in their own words, and in doing so, disrupting master narratives within institutional documentation.

**Keywords:** collaborative filmmaking; decoloniality; colonial natural history collections; multimedia archives; performing museology; imagination; feeling

This article revisits a filmmaking collaboration with a group of Year 8 students from Trinity Church of England High School in Hulme, Manchester, in which students generated and performed their own fictionalized accounts of a colonial safari. The film *Articulating Archives* was the result of two creative workshops designed in partnership with the students' class teacher, Manchester Museum's learning team, the North West Film Archive (NWFA), and Cheshire Archives and Local Studies (CALs). This work took place within the context of a wider AHRC-funded research project that investigated the knowledge-producing potential of archival film and film practice for colonial-era natural history collections at Manchester Museum (Everest 2018). The filmmaking project began with a mixed media selection of objects generated from a safari in Sudan during the period 1928 – 1929, taken by the aristocratic landowner and hunter-explorer Maurice Egerton. This consisted of two addra gazelle taxidermy mounts in storage and on display at Manchester Museum, a hand-written hunting diary located at CALs, and a short compilation of archival film footage featuring scenes of tents, camels, and Sudanese adults and children in a desert landscape held at the NWFA. The aim of the research and filmmaking project was to reunite these dispersed collection objects and invite fresh responses to their shared colonial provenance through collaboration across institutions, and with a new user group.

This collaborative approach to creative production contributes to wider interdisciplinary scholarly and practice-led interests in archives and collections as sites for co-creation, contestation and reimagining (see Driver et al. 2021; Dudley et al. 2011; Griffiths 2023; Ishizuka and Zimmermann 2007; Popple et al. 2020; and Erdogan and Kayaalp 2023), and established practices of applied and participatory filmmaking within community media and

visual anthropology (Atton 2015; Pink 2009). Here I present a small-scale case study of collaborative practice, examining the kinds of knowledge that it created and staking a claim for the value of filmmaking as a mode of performing museology within contemporary curatorial and museum learning practice. I begin by outlining the critical and archival contexts that motivated and situate the creative project; I then foreground the process of the workshop, addressing its methods and objectives, before examining the key outcomes of the students' performed narratives. In particular, I focus on how collaboration between institutions with a new audience group to create a shared output involved privileged access to collections and produced imaginative responses that were a) emotionally and sensorially engaged and b) situated in the students' own contemporary responses to the colonial relationship. I suggest that the filmmaking process was a framework through which students were able to 'perform museology', bringing their own understanding of the emotional and narrative strategies of film to the objects and histories they were enacting. In doing so, I enter into dialogue with literature that explores the 'felt' qualities of museum spaces and objects (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 2002; Baker 2015; Watson 2015; Witcomb and Message 2015) and the sensory, affective, and emotional strategies of filmmaking practice (MacDougall 1998; Marks 2000; MacDougall 2006; Pink 2006).

Over the last three decades, scholars have brought steady attention to the colonial acquisition networks and power imbalances that facilitated the development of western museums and their collections (within a growing body of literature see Coombes 1994; Barringer and Flynn 1998; Gosden and Knowles 2001; Henare 2005; Lonetree 2012; Message 2017; Longair and McAleer 2017). Debate around these histories has gathered particular pace in recent years, leading to the repatriation of objects to source communities and further calls to dismantle the material legacies of racism and colonial exploitation in public spaces and institutions. Whilst this period of self-examination has precipitated an existential crisis that challenges the very existence of these collections and buildings, it has also been a generative process for many institutions and their partners. A proliferation of projects have attempted to work 'decolonially' in collaboration with partners and stakeholders from across the world (as well as those geographically close to institutions) to reveal previously obscured histories, revise interpretation, and advise on new futures for collections built on colonial exploitation.<sup>1</sup> These democratized, collaborative, and expanded modes of curatorial practice represent a significant rejection of the institutional and disciplinary boundaries that have historically siloed the collections-facing work of curators from the more people-facing work of learning and engagement. But as Boast has cautioned, questions remain as to who benefits most from these collaborations and the risks of reinforcing historical power structures within these reconfigured museum 'contact zones' (Boast 2011). One response has been to open up colonial collections to creative reinterpretation, producing new outputs with external partners that explore the problematic legacies that many of these collections embody (Everest & Hardman 2021). The multimedia, cross-collection, and audience-participatory collaboration involved in the *Articulating Archives* film project, for example, shares particular aims and methods with Basu and others' larger scale project to explore the 'decolonial possibilities latent in historical colonial collections' through multimedia reassemblage and creative collaboration between different institutions and stakeholder groups (Basu 2021: 47).<sup>2</sup>

When the *Articulating Archives* project originated, there was already a strong legacy of scholarly and curatorial work at Manchester Museum exploring the colonial acquisition networks and power imbalances of their own collection histories (Alberti 2009; Lynch and Alberti 2010; Lynch 2014; Lynch 2016). Significant attempts had also been made to engage audiences as knowledge producers, with local communities invited to co-create new interpretations of the museum's ethnographic collections (see Bodo 2007).<sup>3</sup> My own AHRC-funded research built on Sam Alberti's wide-ranging investigations into the networked histories of natural science collections (see Alberti 2005; 2008; 2009; 2011), to examine the colonial legacies of taxidermy specimens at Manchester Museum and, specifically, those objects that had been donated during the 1920s and 1930s by Maurice Egerton of Tatton Hall, Cheshire (Everest 2011; Everest 2018).

Egerton belonged to an elite group of aristocratic hunter-explorers and landowners that

donated to provincial and national museums in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like many of his peers, he was involved in a long-term mutually beneficial exchange of objects in return for 'scientific' status and recognition as a collector (Mackenzie 1998; Alberti 2009; Mackenzie 2010; Mangan and McKenzie 2009). Egerton owned land in Kenya and spent decades travelling across Africa and other parts of the world killing animals for sport.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the majority of these were displayed as taxidermy trophies in the Tenant's Hall of his estate at Tatton Park, Egerton shot over forty animals for the specific purpose of donating whole mounted specimens to Manchester Museum's growing collection and displays.<sup>5</sup> Wealthy hunter-explorers like Egerton were also amongst the first to bring filming equipment into the colonial field, sending reels of footage back to Britain in addition to animal skins destined for the taxidermist. Egerton was part of a growing amateur movement of wealthy European and American travellers, landowners, and officials that had started to record their experiences overseas using the new portable cameras being produced by Kodak and Bell & Howell (Zimmerman 1995; Gunning 1997; Ruoff 2006). Film, however, was a hundred or so years behind the invention of modern taxidermy as an object considered worthy of collection and study; indeed, amateur film has only started to become valued within public collections in recent decades (see Ishizuka and Zimmerman 2008). Egerton's amateur films made during his travels both in Africa and across the globe only found their way to the North West Film Archive in 2009, when fifty-six 16mm reels were deposited by a relative of the executor of his estate. As a practice-based researcher working primarily with film, I was interested in how this little known collection of films might shed new light on Egerton's objects in the museum, and present creative possibilities for the re-telling or re-imagining of this history.

I set about trying to find connections between these two collections in the archive and museum documentation, drawing on a series of hunting diaries written by Egerton that are now archived at CALS. Working in these different archival spaces, I looked for confluences in the dates and locations stated in the museum and archival documentation (including the dates of the stock labels on the film reels), consulting the diaries for more information about moments when Egerton was possibly involved in both hunting and filming in a single location. One historical relationship emerged more clearly than others through this archival detective work, and this became the basis for the collaborative filmmaking project.

In 1928 Egerton set out on an elaborately organized safari to Sudan, with the intention of hunting gazelles for his own collection and that of the Manchester Museum. Following this trip, Egerton donated two mounted Addra gazelles that are currently on display and in storage at the museum. The museum credits Egerton as the donator and Darfur, Sudan as the place of collection, but other than that no detailed documentation of these objects exists in its records. Egerton also took his Cine-Kodak film camera with him on this three-month safari across the Sudanese desert and nine years later in 1937, edited together a sequence of twenty shots depicting various views of a desert landscape featuring tents, camels, goats, men, women and children. The handwritten label accompanying Egerton's reel in the NWFA states only 'bedouin tribesmen' whilst the inspection record contains little information about the Sudan reel other than a short description stating 'camel and goat herder' and 'camel train with Bedouin tribesmen'.<sup>6</sup>

By cross-referencing the dates of the film stock with dated diary entries I was able to locate the origins of the film and taxidermy objects to the same three-month period between January and March 1929 when Egerton was travelling through the province of Dongola. The filmic depiction of landscape, animals, and people came together with Egerton's textual descriptions to add experiential, circumstantial, geographic, environmental and sensory detail to the accounts of place and practice. I was aware that in re-assembling this multimedia account, I had unsettled existing institutional knowledge about these collection items in ways which were both subtle and substantial. This work had revealed that the gazelles at the museum did not in fact originate from Darfur but Dongola, hundreds of kilometres to the east of the stated location of provenance. Detailed descriptions of each hunt charted the active role of these animals as observed and hunted creatures that influenced the course of events through their own movements and responses. Significantly, the diaries and film footage revealed that the planning and execution of the five-month safari relied on the employment of a Sudanese Hamla, or safari party. These men and boys were well paid by Egerton to lead

the travel, set up camp, cook, and guide each day's hunting activity. Towards the end of the safari, members of the Hamla party invited Egerton to stay in their village. They erected a tent for him to sleep in, introduced him to the rest of the community, and sold goods to him. Rather than the 'Bedouin tribesmen' described in the NWFA inspection record, the party depicted in Egerton's film were a professional network of local hunters, shikaris, gunbearers, and camel men, all involved in a social and economic exchange of skills, expertise, and local custom.<sup>7</sup> Understood together, these sources shed fresh light on each other, challenging the one-directional narrative of colonial power that often dominates scholarly and popular accounts of safaris and travelogue filmmaking, whilst reasserting the agency of the Sudanese hunting party within this collection history.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that these assembled collection items created a complete picture of the social moment they documented. This small-scale assembly project raised many more questions than it answered. Whilst it showed that social relations on the ground were more complex than existing institutional accounts suggested, it still privileged Egerton as the producer, and it could not claim to represent the experience of any of the Sudanese people who were instrumental in the field. Egerton was ultimately the one writing the diary, operating the camera and deciding which animals to get stuffed for the museum. No equivalent accounts existed for the gazelles that escaped or fell victim to Egerton's gun, or the thoughts and motivations of the Sudanese hunting party featured in the footage and the diary. The film project documented in the rest of this article came about as a direct response to these absences and silences. Rather than seeing them as limitations and problems, I wanted to share these findings with collections staff and explore the collaborative and creative engagement potential in this cross-collection, multimedia account. Before I set out the narrative of practice, it is necessary to highlight that this article draws on the specific example of this small-scale project, acknowledging that this is only one example of how film practice might be used to generate new responses to the colonial museum and archive that are emotionally and sensorially engaged. The purpose of this account is to contribute to growing discussions about the value of colonial collections as source materials for collaboration and creativity.

### **Collaborators**

Collaboration within and across the participating heritage and educational institutions was crucial to every aspect of this project. Henry McGhie, who was Manchester Museum's Head of Collections at the time, was central to supporting and facilitating the work, suggesting from the outset that the filmmaking and engagement be designed as a contemporary collecting project. At the time, Manchester Museum was working under the directive that 'interpretation' is itself a form of knowledge production worth collecting. Then-Director Nick Merriman argued that disciplinary museums such as Manchester should see collecting as 'interpretive' and 'thematic' and aim to bring in 'contemporary perspectives on issues that can be illustrated by historical material in the collection.' This type of collecting, he suggested, might place as much emphasis on the collection of 'images, conversations and thoughts' as it does on the collection of specimens and objects (Merriman 2015). As part of this programme to re-contextualize the collection, the museum had launched a collecting theme of 'migration'. This was a unifying theme that cut across the whole collection, tracking the movement of people, animals, and things over time to present new contemporary and cross-disciplinary avenues for collecting. The filmmaking project was designed to feed directly into the continuing collecting theme of 'migration' at Manchester Museum, reinvestigating the colonial movement of animal-objects, film, and people, to thereby capture contemporary responses to this history.

My primary collaborator in the co-design and delivery of the workshop was Catherine Lumb, Humanities lead for Secondary Education at Manchester Museum at the time, who responded to my initial callout to learning and engagement staff at the museum. For Lumb this presented an opportunity to extend the museum's engagement work around colonial histories of acquisition to both secondary humanities and natural history collections. Equally important was the chance to strengthen the relationship with a secondary school that occupies a site very close to the museum. Trinity is an inner-city school with pupils that represent the diverse population of Manchester, including many from recent and historic migrant communities.

Many Trinity High School students pass by Manchester Museum and the University on their way to school every day, without ever stepping foot inside these institutions or connecting their own family heritage with the collections that they hold. Our collaborator at Trinity school was the English teacher, Gareth Shore. For Shore, this project was a welcome opportunity to extend the learning of a group of nine children that he selected from his Year 8 English class. Gareth had recently worked with the museum on another project and was enthusiastic about the value of focused collections-based work that might add value to the curriculum and student experience. The partnering archives also welcomed the opportunity to work across different sites to create a collaborative learning and engagement experience for the students. Will McTaggart from the NWFA granted access for Egerton's film to be screened within the context of the workshop and cleared the rights for its edited use within the final film. Lisa Greenhalgh from CALS generously suggested that she would bring Egerton's diaries from Chester to the museum for the students to handle and study.

### **Workshop methodology**

The workshop design followed the museum's own professional and ethical framework for school partnerships, and an experiential, participatory approach to engaging museum users in new ways of knowing and thinking about collection objects (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 2002; Simon 2010). Constructivist principles of museum learning provided a particularly useful context, with their central argument that knowledge is not something that exists independently of the learner but is constructed in the mind of the individual in relation to their pre-existing understanding and experience of the world (Falk and Dierking 1992; Hein 1998; Falk and Dierking 2013). This thinking helped to guide the questioning and methodology, positioning filmmaking as a way to engender new forms of understanding and knowledge about collections that originated from the subjective and creative perspectives of a co-opted user group.

The workshop was planned to give enough information, structure and stimulus to facilitate learning and creativity within a single allocated lesson time. Working closely with the English teacher Shore, we designed an exercise that would complement the curriculum by combining creative writing with performance, encouraging the students to write and speak from perspectives alien to their own. We wanted their experience to be social and multi-sensory, actively engaging their 'bodies, minds and emotions' with the materials and spaces they were encountering (Hooper-Greenhill 2007). A mix of learning styles was planned in which students would be listening to information and engaged in conversation as well as watching, reading, and writing. The students would also move around different spaces within the museum, accessing areas that were usually out of bounds during a standard museum visit. Wherever possible they were to be allowed to touch, encounter, and read materials typically kept behind glass or in archival stores. Striking the right balance between accessibility and intellectual challenge was key as the school had encouraged us to be ambitious in our expectations of this group. We were mindful of the potentially upsetting nature of the diaries that described the killing and skinning of animals and, although we were reassured by Shore that the material was in line with curriculum content, we ensured that prior consent processes made the content of the workshops clear to both parents and students and gave them an opportunity to opt out if they were uncomfortable with the proposed subject matter and activities.

Over the course of a single lesson allocation, students were brought to the museum and invited to take part in a film project that might become part of Manchester Museum's permanent collection. The students were led to the male addra gazelle specimen on the gallery floor and told that over the next hour they would find out information about how this object came to be at the museum. They were then led through doors marked 'museum staff only' to the basement storerooms, where they were shown the female gazelle and given more information about Maurice Egerton's hunting activities and relationship to the museum. Here they also had time to look at more taxidermy objects in the collection, including others that had been hunted and donated by Egerton. Class discussion was facilitated at this point to address the context of colonialism that made these activities possible during the period of 1928 – 1929. The students led this part of the conversation, sharing their own knowledge about histories of imperial expansion and control in Africa. The students were then led to an



education room in the museum where they were shown a short screening of Egerton's footage of Sudan and encouraged to read and handle the hunting diaries that had been brought to the museum by CALS.

Using these different collection materials as inspiration, the students then wrote fictionalized diary entries from the perspective of either the hunted antelope or the Sudanese hunting party whose accounts were missing from the collective record (see fig 2). In a follow up workshop held at the school, students were then filmed performing their finished diary pieces direct to camera. In the following paragraphs I examine the creative responses of the student participants and the role of the workshop and filmmaking process in creating new ways of knowing the assembled collection materials and their relationship to the museum.

### **Imagining, feeling and performing museology**

The narratives that were first written and later performed by the students for the camera shared some striking characteristics. Their imaginative interpretations all contained a depth of embodied, emotional, and empathetic engagement with the collections and both the animals and people they depicted. These were not outcomes that we consciously set out to achieve at the beginning of the workshop, and yet they resonated with a growing body of scholarship that concerned the felt qualities of the museum, and the emotional, bodily and multi-sensory aspects of individual encounters with museum objects and spaces (see Dudley 2010; Message and Witcomb 2015; Rees Leahy 2012). In the following paragraphs I draw on the recorded documentary footage of the workshop alongside my own reflections and the reflections of my collaborators to think through the role of 'feeling' in this process and the outputs it created. I address 'feeling' in the multiple and intersecting senses of the word, referring to emotion and empathy, as well as the sensory apprehension of collection objects and spaces.

One of the main characteristics of the students' imaginings was that they drew closely upon the tangible historical relationship between the different collection objects. The students' teacher, Shore, commented that 'using physical objects and inspirational materials that were rooted in a specific historical context gave them a "reality" that helped them to anchor their imaginative ideas.'<sup>8</sup> The students' access to the 'reality' of this 'specific historical context' was facilitated by the collaborative efforts of the different collection-based institutions within the confined context of the workshop. It was the first time the taxidermy specimens, film, and diaries had been brought together since the moment of their production in Sudan almost ninety years previously. Lumb, from the learning and engagement team at the museum, later reflected that it was the first time that she had collaborated in this way with other institutions whose collections complemented and overlapped with those of the museum.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Greenhalgh commented that the project represented an unprecedented opportunity to make connections between materials from across different archival institutions.<sup>10</sup> Through the limited information we were able to provide within the workshop, the collections spoke of their relation to one another in a way that was quickly grasped by the students. The diaries gave the taxidermy animals in the museum an account of life and death, a sense of the thoughts and actions of Egerton, and an idea of the role of the safari employees. The film fragment in turn offered a glimpse of the scale of the safari and a visual sense of the living environment of the gazelles and the men and boys on the safari (see figs 1 and 2).

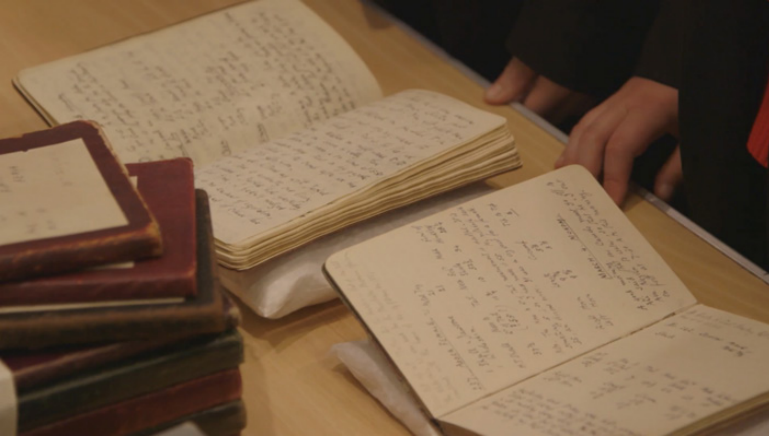


Figure 1: Photograph of students from Trinity Church of England High School handling Egerton's hunting diaries in the Manchester Museum. Photograph taken by author.



Figure 2: Screenshot taken from Egerton's 1929 Sudan film, RR 1557\_8, NWFA. Reproduced with the permission of the National Trust and NWFA.

Shore described how when it came to writing and performance, the students were able to use the historical information from the combined collection materials to scaffold their own creativity, and their imaginations were quickly stretched beyond the information that had been made available to them in the workshop: 'the fact that real objects already have a story (and thus constraints, such as original location, behaviours etc.) actually encouraged the students to be more, rather than less, imaginative, but also provided a framework and a focus'.<sup>11</sup> Rather than being restricted by the presence or absence of information in the materials, the students

adopted a fairly free approach to selecting certain historical or visual details to structure their responses. They then used these details to imagine what their protagonist would feel like in these contexts and situations. These anchoring points were valuable given the need for structure and focus within the very limited timeframe. Frank's piece, for example, closely followed the rhythm of the hunt as described by Egerton in the diaries.<sup>12</sup> He commented that 'there was a lot of detail in the diaries' that had helped him to write his piece.<sup>13</sup> Carla, too, talked later about closely following the diary entries in her piece written from the perspective of Egerton's main shikari, Ali Mohamed Issa. Like Frank, she paid careful attention to the stages of the hunt as described by Egerton to produce her own alternative perspective.<sup>14</sup> Dawn, who produced a powerful piece from the gazelle's perspective, said that whilst the archival film had helped her to imagine the living conditions of the gazelle, she had drawn directly from the diary entry to imagine the process of being skinned: 'In the part where I wrote that I had been skinned, I had to look back at the diary entry to see how they did it'.<sup>15</sup>

For Shore and the students, it was the tangible connection with the 'reality' of the collection objects and their shared context of production that enabled their imaginations to take flight. Greenhalgh also made a related observation about the link between contact with 'real' historical materials and the role of imagination:

I am used to seeing people be affected by an archive. There is a real emotional response to seeing the thing and understanding it as the *real* thing. It was the imagination that was the surprising thing. I am used to seeing the excitement, but where that took them was a revelation.<sup>16</sup>

Greenhalgh suggests that the emotional, excited response generated from close contact with artefacts was translated into a particular kind of imaginative response on the part of the students. Following on from this, I would argue that the sensory, emotional properties of their written and performed narratives can be partly attributed to the privileged, physical nature of their access to the different collection objects in the workshop. In other words, that there was a direct link between the way that the students 'felt' the collection objects within the limited time frame of the workshop, and the expression of emotional and embodied feeling in their written and performed responses.



*"They yanked my skin so hard that, if I was alive, I would have screamed in pain and anguish"*

*Figure 3: Screenshot from the Articulating Archives film featuring a close up of the gazelle in storage intercut and overlaid with Dawn's spoken narrative from the gazelle's perspective*



The material, corporeal character of the student responses was particularly notable in the narratives written about gazelles, which featured descriptions such as the 'hairs on my head on edge', a 'blinding pain erupted in my shoulder', they 'yanked my skin so hard' and 'my soft, smooth skin...cut deep'.<sup>17</sup> I suggest that this owed something to the degree of access that the students had been granted to the taxidermy objects and to the diaries. Asked what they had enjoyed about the experience, a number of the students commented that it was the time spent in the stores that they found most interesting. Ewan, for example, commented that 'museums aren't usually my thing but going down to see all the animals was, like, cool'.<sup>18</sup> In the hand-held footage of the workshop, the students are shown passing through a number of institutional thresholds to enter the mammal stores. They walk from the Living Cultures gallery, through a door that is usually locked, down a long staircase and through another door signed 'NO ACCESS FOR NON MUSEUM STAFF UNLESS SUPERVISED'. Once in the store, the students examined the taxidermy objects on the shelves with intense concentration, commenting animatedly to one another about size, texture, and remarkable features. Sandra Dudley writes:

...when our eyes rove over the details of something, we build in our minds an idea not only of what it looks like but also, for example, of its three-dimensional form and texture, thus developing an imagined sense of what the object *feels* like too. (Dudley 2015: 41-62)

This 'imagined sense' of what an object might feel like to touch, as Dudley characterizes it, seemed to develop into an empathetic engagement with sensory apprehension in the writing and performances that the students produced after their time in the stores. This engagement was further enhanced by Greenhalgh's willingness to let the students handle the diaries later in the museum's learning space. Although these textual objects were very different in their materiality, the idea that the students were enjoying privileged, physical access to these materials was further heightened. We recognized a clear link between the way the students accessed the materiality of these collection objects and the extent of their embodied, emotional response. Having consulted the students after the project had finished, Shore commented that 'being able to see and handle' the objects 'helped them with the empathetic element of their writing, encouraging them to invest more emotion into inanimate objects'.<sup>19</sup> A collaborative approach across different institutions meant that their access to material felt privileged and this heightened their investment in these objects and their histories. Watching the observational footage of the workshop after the event enabled me to revisit and analyse some of these productive interactions, later sharing them with the project's collaborators to try to gain a better understanding of the qualities of the engagement taking place in the museum that day.

The third aspect of the students' narratives I would like to highlight is their empathetic engagement with the power relations implicated in hunting expeditions such as these during the colonial era. This was clearly expressed within the narratives produced from the perspective of the gazelles, which anthropomorphized the animal's understanding of hunting as cruel and monstrous. As I have previously highlighted, these accounts emphasized physical and emotional pain and violation. Three out of four students writing from the Sudanese perspective expressed extreme reluctance to do the work they were being asked to undertake on safari, identifying more with the gazelles they were being asked to help kill than with the agenda of Egerton. These pieces included lines such as 'we have been carrying him around for days now', 'I feel like I have to get away', and 'I don't like killing the gazelles for him'. Bryony also included details about the luxury of Egerton's camp in contrast to the living conditions of the Africans on safari. Interestingly, these responses were at odds with some of the information that had been shared with them during the workshop. The students had seen diary extracts that detailed the significant wages paid by Egerton to his safari employees and described the advanced skill of the shikaris and gunbearers. Their imaginative interpretations of this relationship largely disregarded this information, revealing more about their politically informed take on the wider context of the colonial power imbalance. Nicky, for example, explained: 'I put my own sort of opinions on it but made it in to something I thought the Africans would do'.<sup>20</sup>

These responses then, revealed what Elsa Peralta describes as the intertwining of 'subjective feelings and emotions' with the 'historical contingencies and the political specificities that also determine those relationships' (Peralta 2005: 305). The students chose to write from either the perspective of hunted animals or the Sudanese. Both the anthropomorphized accounts of the animals and those from the human perspective of the Sudanese unsurprisingly showed 'the pressure of the contemporary moment' on individual readings of history (Burton 2005:8). They also demonstrated the constructivist maxim that learners bring prior knowledge and experience to their encounter with museum objects and spaces and that this can at times 'distort' the presented materials (Roscelle 1995: 37-52). Rather than seeing this distortion as problematic, I argue that it is itself a form of knowledge-making that tells us how the past is interpreted in the present by a specific audience group within a certain context. Letting these accounts into the museum, and preserving them as a form of contemporary collecting, is therefore part of the letting-go of authority advocated by experiential and participatory models of museum knowledge production.

Whilst the students were undoubtedly informed by contemporary postcolonial perspectives, my own decision to include the fragment of footage from 1927 of Egerton being carried shoulder high through water to a small passenger boat is also likely to have influenced their politicized response to the material they were encountering. This is the only accessible footage that actually depicts Egerton but it was also selected because of the power of the imagery and what it suggested about the colonial relationship. That shot carried a powerful symbolism that simplified some of the complexities of Egerton's relationships with the Africans who were employed by him on safari. Paying more attention to the historical technologies and dynamics of filmmaking in the workshop may also have produced different results in the students' narratives. None of the students writing from the Sudanese perspective wrote about the process of being filmed by Egerton, despite the obvious awareness of the camera from those who feature in the film. Unlike the gazelle narratives that clearly connected the act of hunting with the materiality of the taxidermy objects, there was a dis-connect between the technologies of filmmaking and what was viewed on the screen. If the students had been able to view and handle the reels and labels that accompanied the Egerton travel acquisition, the nature of their engagement and creative output may well have been different. Indeed, my own handling of these reels had previously had a profound effect on the way that I had constructed an understanding of these things in relation to the diaries and the museum.

The final trigger for the felt, emotional responses of the students that I discuss here is the knowledge that their encounter with these collection objects and spaces was being filmed and would be used to produce a film that would be seen and shared by a wider audience. Shore commented that knowing from the outset that their written exercises would be performed to camera rather than remaining as texts 'provided a focus' that 'helped the students with the personification of their sources, taking their historical origins into account.'<sup>21</sup> Lumb also commented that the use of film practice 'provided the students with a clear objective and outcome for the project' that 'raised expectations' and 'improved the quality of the material produced.'<sup>22</sup> I was, however, surprised by the strength and quality of their performances when I started to use the camera to record them over the course of a one-hour lesson period. They were able to hold the camera's gaze with assurance, directly addressing the lens as they performed their accounts of the animals or individuals that they had inhabited through their creative writing. The camera brought a heightened performativity that was not present in rehearsals and owing, I believe, to their innate knowledge of the narrative and emotional strategies of filmmaking.

Performance scholars have explored how the museum engenders a quality of performed response through the way that visitors experience and negotiate its spaces and objects (see Garoian 2001 and Rees-Leahy 2012). In the same way, Kirschenblatt-Gimblett has suggested that exhibitions which employ narrative storytelling and 'sensory, somatic, and emotional engagement' to stimulate particular qualities of engagement from their audiences have much in common with the strategies of filmmaking (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 2002). I suggest that this project is evidence that collaborative museum filmmaking can produce its own kind of performing museology, in which audiences respond both to the space and contents of the museum or archive and to the affective, emotional and narrative strategies of film. In their

narratives, the students were performing their own understanding of the impact of film as an audio-visual medium and what was produced was influenced by the conventions of narrative storytelling. They wrote and performed, I would argue, *for* film, carrying through their felt responses to the taxidermy objects, diary entries and film footage in their creative writing, and the ways in which they chose to perform these pieces in front of the camera.

## Conclusion

The outcomes of the workshop showed how collaborating across institutions to give a school group access to different collection materials helped them to understand their complex shared history in a relatively short space of time. Being able to cross the usual thresholds of visitor access to touch and observe these different materials first hand also initiated a quality of imagined response that was both emotionally and sensorially engaged. This felt response was additionally informed by both the contemporary politicized perspective of this group of school children and their understanding of film as a performative medium. The workshop and filming session produced nine filmed performances that demonstrated how a combined approach of creative writing and filmmaking was a catalyst and vehicle to capture these felt responses to collection objects and histories. My own creative process when shooting additional content of the museum and objects and editing the narratives together with this material and Egerton's archival footage was informed primarily by the qualities and content of the students writing and performances. Further investigation of my own camera and editing practice is work that lies outside the bounds of this article, but I acknowledge that this act of creativity was also a performance of my own relationship with the technologies and histories of both film and museological practice.

In this case study, filmmaking provided a context and a medium through which the students were able to perform their own response to the spaces, objects and histories they were being introduced to. Methods drew on experiential and constructivist models of museum learning to engage a group of students from a school local to the museum with collection objects across different medias and sites, generating new imaginative accounts of a problematic history that began to address the absent voices and unanswered questions within this collective record. The finished film was used by the museum in future engagement with schools and by the partnering institutions to showcase collaborative ways of working. The project also led to a process of updating catalogue records at the NWFA and CALS. Although it was made to contribute to a strand of thematic contemporary collecting to Manchester Museum, systems are yet to exist to allow the film to be formally accessioned into the collection. Until they do, there is perhaps a risk that projects like this will remain on the margins of curatorial practice.

To conclude, collaborating with institutions and audiences on a creative project like this cannot claim to redress large scale historical inequalities or institute radical social change. Collections and archives are always biased and incomplete, and we can never claim to truly reconstruct a social moment from the remnants of the past. Film, too, is loaded with performativity, subjectivity and historical indeterminacy, factors that for many decades have led to its mistrust as both an object of scholarly historical record and research methodology (Griffiths 1999). But it is this very ambiguity, I argue, that can offer fresh possibilities for the creation of new types of knowledge in the museum that carry the potential to disrupt master narratives in small but significant ways. Collaborative curatorial and engagement practices that use film to invite people to perform their own relationship to the museum and archive are one way to engender subjective accounts of objects and their histories that engage with our imaginations, senses and emotions. These continue to be useful spaces to occupy as museums and archives navigate the uncertain journey from venerated cathedrals of knowledge to shared spaces of belonging and making.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For recent examples see the National Trust's 'Colonial Countryside' project, the '#WMWhereNext' campaign at the World Cultures gallery in the World Museum Liverpool, or the 'Critical Changes' initiative at the Pitt Rivers Museum.
- <sup>2</sup> For the methods and multimedia outputs of the 'Re-Entanglements' collaborative project based on the collected materials of Anthropologist N. W. Thomas, led by Paul Basu, see: <https://re-entanglements.net/> [accessed 27 July 2023]
- <sup>3</sup> Simona Bodo, 'Collective Conversations: The Manchester Museum', 2007. <http://studylib.net/doc/7399514/collective-conversations--the-manchester-museum--uk>, accessed 7 November 2017. Since this filmmaking project was completed, the Manchester Museum has built upon this legacy of work through extensive consultation and co-curation with local and source communities in the expansion of the museum and the creation of its South Asia gallery. See Sadia Habib (2021) for a vital account of her experience working with young people at the museum on the 'Our Shared Cultural Heritage' project.
- <sup>4</sup> In 1934, Egerton was shooting under a licence granted to him by the Manchester Museum. Egerton is listed as donor for forty-six mounts in the museum collections database but archived correspondence between Egerton and the museum suggest that the traffic of donations exceeded this number during the 1920s and 30s. See: *Manchester Museum Collections Database*; *Manchester Museum Reports* (1924-40); *Manchester Museum Reports* (1957-58); Manchester Museum Zoology Archive (ZAC/1/40); and Cheshire Archives and Local Studies (DET/3229/107).
- <sup>5</sup> Tatton Park is now owned by the National Trust and Cheshire East Council.
- <sup>6</sup> *Film Inspection Record* for RR1557/8, NWFA.
- <sup>7</sup> See Egerton's diary entries between 13 March and 19 March 1928 at the Cheshire Archives and Local Studies collection (DET 3229/60/1/5).
- <sup>8</sup> Gareth Shore, Trinity Church of England High School, email correspondence with author, 16 January 2017.
- <sup>9</sup> Catherine Lumb, Manchester Museum, email correspondence with author, 16 January 2017.
- <sup>10</sup> Lisa Greenhalgh, interview with author, 14 March 2017.
- <sup>11</sup> Gareth Shore, Trinity Church of England High School, email correspondence with author, 16 January 2017.
- <sup>12</sup> For this article, all students' names have been changed.
- <sup>13</sup> Filmed conversation with Frank, 21 May 2014.
- <sup>14</sup> Filmed conversation with Carla, 20 May 2014.
- <sup>15</sup> Filmed conversation with Dawn, 20 May 2014.
- <sup>16</sup> Lisa Greenhalgh, interview with author, 14 March 2017.
- <sup>17</sup> These lines feature in Ewan's, Frank's and Dawn's narratives, respectively.
- <sup>18</sup> Filmed conversation with Ewan, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Frank and Carla also comment that this was their favourite part of the workshop in their filmed conversations from 20 May to 21 May 2014.

- <sup>19</sup> Gareth Shore, Trinity Church of England High School, email correspondence with author, 16 January 2017.
- <sup>20</sup> Filmed conversation with Nicky, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014.
- <sup>21</sup> Gareth Shore, Trinity Church of England High School, email correspondence with author, 16 January 2017.
- <sup>22</sup> Catherine Lumb, Manchester Museum, email correspondence with author, 16 January 2017.

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