

Power of Stories: Engaging and Supporting Communities in Urban and Rural Suffolk

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between museums and minority communities in the UK through the context of the *Power of Stories*: an exhibition project, held in Suffolk between 2019 and 2021, which aimed to attract more visitors from these communities. Victoria Hollows' idea of power-over and power-with will be discussed, while I argue that White fragility and the White gaze shape the power dynamics within collaboratively created exhibition projects in significant ways. Evaluations written by Rebecca McDonald from the start of the project in 2019 to the end in 2022, interviews with individuals involved in the project, an analysis of the theory of 'invited' and 'invented' spaces, and contextualised experiences and insights into Suffolk, will be used to outline what other museums can learn from the curators' experiences. Through this paper I will argue that vulnerability and trust, from both sides, are fundamental to addressing racialized power dynamics and to building a lasting relationship between museums and their communities, but Whiteness – as an inherited legacy of White supremacist colonial relations - remains an operative factor that can be detected in the behaviours and experiences related to such work, even when projects are considered 'successful' by those involved. This points to the need to anticipate and navigate tensions and complexities in the work, and to actively create ways of working that minimise harm for all involved.

Keywords: co-curation, power, identity, communities, White fragility.

Introduction

There is a delicate, shifting power dynamic between museums and their communities. Viv Golding (2013: 16) asks 'how the traditional role of curatorial scholarship [is] affected by specific, possibly conflicting community concerns over museum collections'. This dynamic has been under scrutiny recently with high-profile museums working to decolonise their ethnological collections. In the UK in recent years, Manchester Museum has prioritised giving voice to Indigenous and diaspora communities in their galleries.¹ Bristol Museum is actively open to reparation discussions and have returned a number of contested objects.² The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford has removed some of their most popular displays of human remains, tsantsa or 'the shrunken heads', and have held longstanding partnerships with indigenous groups around the world in relation to their collection.³ Decolonisation, a process that challenges museums' supposed neutrality, structural inequality, and aims to build long-lasting relationships with communities, is central to the journey that many museums in the UK are currently on, and there has been a push to lead 'by a strong ethos of collaboration while at the same time maintaining strong curatorial integrity' (Golding 2013: 25). The UK's Museums Association's guidance on decolonisation calls for museums to 'challenge neutrality', emphasising that to challenge 'colonial values and biases [that are] embedded in many museums [...] can ensure museums mean more, for more people'.⁴ Sense of belonging in museums is not a guarantee for everyone; when people step into a space, they bring their own set of motivations, expectations, understandings, and identities (Black 2012: 11).

Museum staff are accountable for the delivery of a project under a multitude of constraints: political, financial, time, and historical integrity. Many of these constraints form the structural boundaries and expectations of museum work, and navigating these issues effectively forms the basis for professional legitimacy and success in the sector. There is increasingly an expectation of community collaboration and engagement as a mode for curatorial projects, and this has brought new layers of hierarchy and often racialized and class-inflected power dynamics within project work (Golding 2019; Lynch 2011). Nuala Morse (2013) focuses on the importance of accountability in community engagement work, and the need for a pre-determined idea of what exactly the museum is hoping to 'get' out of the community and what kind of work they will be doing. Curators have often understood their role to be 'mediators' between the museum, with its complex and formalised structures and expectations, and communities who are being 'invited' to interact and change the space (Lynch 2011). At the same time, community members entering into a partnership with a museum are accountable for the insights they bring (Morse 2018). Bernadette Lynch (2015) comments on the dynamic between museum staff and communities after going into a project brimming with assumptions. She reflects that the community made it clear they did not want or need representation or recognition from her, that they had an abundance of knowledge and opinions that they were willing to share with an unassuming ear. Museum staff need to be diligently considerate of these factors, and recognise that their assumptions will be laden with structural and professional norms that continue to marginalise certain communities and uphold predominantly White spaces in the sector (Lynch 2011).

The *Power of Stories* project tells the story of a local museum working with Suffolk's rural and urban communities in the East of England and the challenges they faced. Identity and power of both the museum and their communities in the co-curation process will be discussed while considering embedded forms of Whiteness - a form of racialized power and privilege that benefits White people - at play in collaborative community work (Lynch and Alberti 2010; Ali and Byrne 2022). *Power of Stories* will be explored as a case study in three parts in order to draw attention to different manifestations of racialized power within community-focused work: the original exhibition, the touring exhibition, and the legacy it left behind.

Power of Stories started life as an engagement project, running from March 2019 to October 2021, leading on to an exhibition that ran from 26 June 2021 to 24 October 2021 at Christchurch Mansion, part of Colchester and Ipswich Museums Service (CIMS) (McDonald 2022). The project then continued as a subsequent tour, visiting three locations around Suffolk: Moyses's Hall Museum, The Food Museum, and Snape Maltings Concert Hall.⁵ I am a White local resident in Ipswich and visited the exhibition at Christchurch Mansion, The Food Museum, and at Snape Maltings. As a White researcher, at a time of significant focus on Whiteness within the heritage sector amidst the surge in Black Lives Matter protests, I wanted to explore the power dynamics that I may not have previously understood in my professional and personal life. The intent for the paper is to draw on reflections from the people involved in the project at different stages and to explore the ways in which Whiteness manifests at different moments. I chose the *Power of Stories* project as it is a unique example of a regional museum curating a cultural program *with* community members, not simply *for* community members, and allowing them the space for a considerable amount of ownership of the final product. Ultimately, my paper offers insights into the challenges of this project, and the ways in which racialized power dynamics played out, while also indicating the important impact and legacy of the project for the project's stakeholders, and I will suggest how these tensions can be acknowledged and addressed in future collaborative work.

Interviews

In order to explore the experiences of the people involved in the *Power of Stories*, I used a qualitative approach to the research and interviewed a number of professionals who worked on the project.

All interviews took place as 60–90-minute-long video calls on Microsoft Teams recorded with hand written notes. Interviewees were sent a list of questions prior to the interview, although further questions were asked during interviews to clarify or widen understanding.

For the purpose of this paper, the interviewees' names are anonymised and will be referred to as follows: Museum Curator A, Museum Curator B, Community Curator A, Community Curator B, Community Curator C, Ipswich Museum employee, Food Museum employee and Suffolk County Council (SCC) Development Officer.

Interviews were the most effective way of gathering information because accurate first-hand accounts from participants involved in a variety of capacities were integral to forming a broad picture of the project, alongside the evaluation report.

The emotional labour undertaken by the interviewees is important to recognise here.⁶ The participants were open and candid in the interviews and it is clear the project was extremely meaningful to them. Ipswich museum is a fairly typical UK regional museum and so this case study offers some insight into the barriers these institutions face when addressing racism and lack of diversity within audience groups through programming initiatives.

The Suffolk Context

There are a range of social factors that affect Suffolk and its Black communities.⁷ Suffolk is considered a 'mainly and largely rural' county (Bibby and Brindley 2017: 9). Compared to national figures, the population that identify as Black, Black British, Caribbean or African, and Mixed or Multiple ethnic consistently fall below the national average.⁸ Identity can be formed through community participation (Sims and Joseph-Salisbury 2019: 61) and being surrounded by other people who share identity factors helps to build one's idea of self. If, however, the community with which you identify is much smaller compared to the overall population, it can lead to feelings of not belonging. Although Ipswich is significantly more diverse in terms of ethnic identity, the town has a history of friction between the county council and its Black constituents. On 19th December 2009, a shooting took place outside the Ipswich Caribbean Association (ICA) building, which was owned by Ipswich Borough Council, and the building was immediately shut down. The council subsequently withdrew £50,000 of funding and the ICA, an organisation that had been running for 34 years, closed. The building was then demolished in 2012 and the ICA has not found another permanent venue since.⁹ This event has led to distrust between the Black community and the council and continues to affect the way people experience council-run museum initiatives. Rebecca McDonald's evaluation report for *Power of Stories* comments that 'this [project] was a missed opportunity for the council to engage with the local Black community and to work towards healing its relationship with them' (McDonald 2022: 47). Community members were swift to make their feelings clear about the lack of support from Ipswich Borough Council, commenting that: 'the Black community needed to see [the exhibition] because there is a history of Ipswich Borough Council just treating them like absolute dirt' (McDonald 2022: 47).

Alongside this, creative endeavours in the area, such as the 'Scallop' sculpture that resides on Aldeburgh beach have been viewed as problematic. The shell was installed in 2003 and created by Suffolk artist Maggi Hambling, a very well-known artist in the region, who has been described as a 'national treasure'.¹⁰ In 2014 Maggi Hambling was delivering a lecture at the University of Suffolk in Ipswich and made a series of 'jokes' about the film *12 Years a Slave* which, she claims, were misconstrued as racist. She 'joked' that 'slaves would be very handy [and she] wouldn't mind a few'.¹¹ This incident has been specifically mentioned because it was referenced by two separate interview participants, both of whom identify as a person of colour, as something that they found jarring in their Suffolk experience.¹² The scallop sculpture is still in situ on the beach and, for some, has been interpreted as an acceptance of racist behaviour in the area.

On the other hand, John Ferguson's 2021 'Black Suffolk' exhibition celebrated people from the African and Caribbean community who live in Suffolk (*Power of Stories*, 2023). Drawing on conceptions of Whiteness from Critical Race Theory,¹³ Ferguson has spoken openly about how what he terms 'the White gaze' affects society and how the 'Black gaze' can empower Black communities and individuals.¹⁴

The 'White gaze' is omnipresent, we conform to unquestionable White bias without even realising. The White gaze adds specific pressures, predetermined and subconscious ways for Black people to act in public. When one learns the

Black gaze for themselves, they're purposely allowing their presence to be seen, heard and challenged, with or without prejudice.¹⁵ (Ferguson 2021).

Within predominantly White contexts marked by a history of White supremacy, Black people tend to 'face frequent and systemic experiences whereby they are viewed, interpolated and evaluated through the lens of Whiteness' (Rabelo et al. 2021: 1852). The Suffolk context paints a picture of a county that is made up of mainly White citizens and has a history of marginalising its Black community.

Invited and Invented spaces

'Invited' and 'invented' spaces, a concept taken from societal engagement in migration politics, can easily be transcribed to museums. 'Invited spaces' are characterised by their specific intent to open conversation and engage civilians with some form of governance. These platforms are created by the governing body or an impartial body. 'Invented spaces', on the other hand, are created by citizens themselves in order to engage with social issues and rights and give citizens more autonomy (Bisong 2021: 2951; Rother 2022: 5). Invited spaces give a clear sense of hierarchy and the participants can usually go in with a fairly clear idea of the discussion topics and their requirements. However, invited spaces have significant limitations. The engagement is closed in the sense that the idea prevents wider discussion and, because the space is run by an overruling body, there is very little participant autonomy. As Lynch (2010: 14) points out, 'some speakers are well equipped to make themselves heard in particular social spaces; others are labelled by the way they speak or the words they use,' making the outcomes of discussions laden with social bias. Invented spaces lend themselves to be more open to wider discussion and exploration. They are not run by an organising body but can be led by a community member or group, which can result in a more relaxed atmosphere and a greater sense of safety. This can then influence participant's willingness to be vulnerable and open. Alongside that, however, invented spaces can lack focus and, without institutional guidelines to adhere to, become less effective (Rother 2022: 5). There will always be a problematic power dynamic because 'there is nothing 'post' about colonialism,' Lynch (2010: 14) states, as 'encounters between museum professionals and external individuals, particularly those from Diaspora communities, still bear traces of *coloniser* meeting *colonised*'. Closing the power gap is one way to tackle the issue. For example, V&A Dundee has a project that trains local people from minority communities to deliver guided tours of their permanent galleries in multiple languages. The tours are not just translated versions of the ones already in existence but rather, the participants choose 'five objects that interested them or held meaning for their communities', bringing a personal angle to the tour which could resonate and form a connection with visitors from the same communities and the museum itself (Nurick and Logan 2021: 14-15).

Power Over and Power With

Victoria Hollows' (2019) research explores people who are simultaneously part of the museum staff and identify as part of the community they serve or represent. It builds on the notion that actions are driven by a set of both intrinsic and extrinsic values, revealing that people working in museums feel they are associated with intrinsic values but the organisations they work for hold more extrinsic values. She considers powers in two ways: 'power-over' (a form of dominance and oppression) and 'power-with' (the ability to find common ground through dialogue, even where there is a conflict of interest and/or values).

The idea of 'power' is at the forefront of my analysis. Historically, 'the museum', as a concept, has held almost all the power over their stories and collections with the idea that they, as an institution, are the experts on what collections they house without re-educating themselves on the communities they represent through those collections or how their objects came to be in their museum. Part of the British Museum's collection, one of the most contentious in the UK, was inherited from Sir Hans Sloane, who was able to 'acquire' objects with family money from slave plantations in Jamaica.¹⁶ In the 1980's a renaissance of museum-visitor dynamics occurred, putting an emphasis on the purpose of a museum and its responsibility

to offer an experience which allows visitors to have an emotional response when interacting with its collections (Virgo 1989: 3). Now, when attempts are being made by museums to build connections with communities,

the tension between museums' colonial legacy, together with different views about the types of knowledge that is privileged by that legacy, and a democratic vision of museums is at the core of the discussion around the process of negotiation of power and knowledge in contemporary museums (Hohenstein and Moussouri 2018).

Museums struggle between power-over and power-with when considering funding, time, staffing, and, significantly, how much value they place in the importance of power sharing. All museums have the ability to 'take advantage of the wealth of knowledge both inside their walls and inside their communities to build significant experiences that support visitor understanding, perspective, and ways of knowing' (Wood 2013: 219). Contextual understanding from both museum staff and communities on a philosophical level is integral to successful co-curation (Fouseki and Smith 2013).

The Original Exhibition

The catalytic exhibition, *Power of Stories*, at Christchurch Mansion consisted of a single gallery in the ground floor of the site with a number of objects from the existing world cultures collection at Ipswich Museum and a number of loaned items from the community, for example a collection of records. The exhibition aimed to 'reinvigorate the Ipswich collections' by:

- 'Broadening Christchurch Mansion's visitor profile by engaging families, teenagers, young adults and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities;
- Re-invigorating [their] collections by framing them within current popular culture;
- Collaborating with local National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs)¹⁷ and other organisations;
- Developing staff and community expertise and confidence in developing future programmes of exhibitions and activities;
- Supporting [their] plans to decolonise Ipswich Museums and
- Co-creating, building, and delivering new opportunities to enrich life chances, aspirations and wellbeing of people in Ipswich.'

(McDonald 2022: 4)

None of the aims included target numbers for audience data, but of the approximately 24,000 visitors to the first exhibition at Christchurch Mansion there was a 'significant shift towards an audience that is representative of Ipswich's population' with 'a 2% increase in the number of visitors who identified as Black or Black British, and a 7.4% increase of people who identified as being of mixed or multiple ethnic backgrounds' (McDonald 2022: 100).

The community and museum curators all testified to the huge amount of time and emotional labour that went into every facet that led up to the exhibition. The curators used the popularity of costume exhibitions to attract more people from the minority communities and three costumes from the *Black Panther* film (T'Challa, Shuri, and Okoye) were loaned to the museum after the curators contacted Marvel to ask for the loan.¹⁸ The original timeline was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic (McDonald 2022: 3). Then, on 25th May 2020, George Floyd was murdered by police officers in Minneapolis. This event sparked worldwide protests under the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. In Ipswich, a protest attended by nearly 1000 people was held in Christchurch Park on 6th June 2020.¹⁹ This event prompted the curators to question if the exhibition was entirely appropriate at the time. Community Curator A remembers feeling that it 'intensified the importance of getting it right'.²⁰ After that, on 28th August 2020, the news of Chadwick Boseman's death broke. For many, Chadwick

Boseman's role as T'Challa, the king of the fictional African nation of Wakanda - a place that had not been touched by colonialism and represents pride in one's African heritage - in *Black Panther* represented more than just another Marvel superhero. This prompted the museum curators to, once again, approach their community members and question if having this costume on display would be appropriate. They were met with a unanimous voice that this would be needed more than ever and a part of the exhibition was curated as a shrine with a storyboard featuring a warrior dying.²¹ It is unusual for a project, whose funding was obtained on a specific brief, to reactively program, highlighting the curators' alignment to the concept of power-with.

The way that these significant outside events were handled is indicative of how the entire project was run at this first stage. The project was led by a group of community curators who were brought onto the project at different points, supported by two museum curators, who were both White. The museum curators admitted that, if the exhibition had been solely run by 'two White women' then 'it would have been a disaster' due to their lack of lived experience in the subject matter.²² As it was, the team from the museum made a conscious effort to behave as conduits of the story being told, as opposed to the over-ruling body, by applying power-with. Lived experience was integral for the project because the curators' aim was to create a platform for the unedited voice. If the curators were to edit out something that they deemed to be unimportant then they felt they would be in danger of the project becoming tokenistic. The team worked with the community to 'share knowledge and research together' (McDonald 2022: 78) in a number of ways, for example creating a comic that tells the history of a local organisation, Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality (ISCRE).

Elizabeth Edwards (2018) talks about aphasia - the inability to speak - in relation to Britain's colonial history. I would suggest that, in the museum space, there is also an element of atelophobia - the fear of not doing something perfectly. Where histories and stories are being retold more accurately, there is a fear that it will be wrong again. One will always question how to work with a community in 'the right way' but, as Katy Bunning (2024) observes, programmes of this nature, where Whiteness is so prevalent, rarely 'get it right' on the first try and there needs to be space for both personal and institutional growth to take place.

In McDonald's evaluation report there is reference to multiple concerning comments made to community curators by both the museum leadership team and local councillors. The community curators were regularly asked not to share what had been said to them for fear that these comments, which ranged from concerns about the political implications of the project to racist statements, would make the individual who said them 'identifiable and that this might have negative consequences' (McDonald 2022: 43).

Community members were concerned that the senior management and local authority did not take this project seriously and this, in turn, undermined the value of the decolonisation process, with one member of museum management commenting that they were 'not interested in replacing one form of colonisation with another' (McDonald 2022: 43). Edwards suggests that 'capacity-building projects', such as this one, 'while far from unproblematic...set up new and permanent sets of emotional, political and cultural relationships'.²³ The Ipswich Museum employee stated that interim analysis undertaken by McDonald exposed a lack of management involvement, which gave the impression they were not committed or on board. Management reacted by going to more meetings and taking the lead on the Arts Council funding application, enabling the curators to focus on the community work. They were weary of the balance between spectatorship and micromanaging on the part of managers.²⁴ The degree to which managers are involved, however, emerges as a key tension within a context where relationships and trust needed to be built.

Power of Stories and the museum curators who worked on the project 'aimed to rebalance institutional power' by 'sharing [it] with members of the local community' (McDonald 2022: 20). One member of staff points to this as a learning point for them. "'Let's put on an exhibition for this community", is usually the starting point but we went at it from a 'this is your space, what do you want to do with it' angle', reminiscent of Lynch's (2010) concept of 'radical trust', where the museum will relinquish control of the outcomes and facilitate more genuine freedom for participants within the process.²⁵ '[The curators] fought for this to be in the Arts Council application. It was about handing over the space and not patronisingly creating

something for a community'.²⁶ The exhibition report goes on to acknowledge that 'in practice, this raised many questions about the process of how power can be better shared, and best efforts were often challenged by the organisational structure of the museum's management,' with one community curator recognising this by saying that '[there were] barriers to community ideas [and] resistance in museum/council hierarchy' (McDonald 2022: 20).

Stereotypical representations in museums deprive communities of the power to authentically depict their identity and feeds institutional control of power dynamics.

This is why the use of collections has come under such fierce debate and is intrinsically linked to the wider questions of 'who constitutes the community and who defines its identity' (Duncan 1995: 8-9).

According to McDonald's exhibition report, the open call on social media to be involved with the exhibition was 'ineffective because the museum communication channels struggle to reach excluded audiences, and, where they did reach local Black communities, they were met with a distrust of the museum; with no previous examples of good practice, members of the community did not trust that engaging with the museum would be a positive experience' (McDonald 2022: 26). Community Curator C highlighted that the museum's choice to hold invited space meetings outside the museum building made a difference to the participation.²⁷ There are logistical factors - the parking outside the museum is metered and limited and the opening hours are not conducive with working people – but the museum is also not seen as an open and welcoming space for Black community members. She also asserted the idea that Black people can often feel over-consulted without adequate incentivization, such as pay. Yet although pay was an issue in this project, the community was always made to feel listened to and their voices not taken for granted by the museum leads. The fact that the museum curators actually recognised, admitted, and expressed frustration about this injustice was appreciated.²⁸ The museum team made a conscious effort to include community members in the planning of meetings, usually via polls, and were flexible in timings and location. After a while, the invited spaces became invented ones as the community slowly took the reins and asserted their power in the process.²⁹ The time it took for this to evolve and the trusting relationships to be built is significant; the project ran for nearly 3 years up to the exhibition opening.

This level of accommodation was not always easy. The museum had set deadlines and, when working with multiple people or organisations, aligning these from all angles can become tricky. One incident that stood out was the correspondence between the curators and the Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute. The museum has a series of photographs taken of the Canadian Moose Factory in the 1920's by Sam Waller that they wanted to display to 'celebrate and shine a light on [their already existing] World Cultures collection' as part of the *Power of Stories* exhibition.³⁰ These photographs depict indigenous children who had been 'forcibly taken from their families to attend these residential schools' (McDonald 2022: 58-59). When the curators emailed the Institute, asking if they would approve of the photographs being used as part of the exhibition, they were met with a resounding 'no'. The Institute's authorities expressed that these photographs were not indicative of their culture and they perpetuated racial stereotypes. The community then offered alternative photographs demonstrating how 'the resilience, power and strength of the Eeyouch [indigenous people] continues to this day' (McDonald 2022: 59). When recalling this incident, Museum Curator A said 'two years later and I still can't believe we asked. The audacity of a group of White museum curators saying "we'd like to show photos of your kidnapped and abused children for the entertainment of other White people", what was going through our minds?'³¹ The issue that arose, however, was the time it took to gather all the information the curators needed. The Eeyouch community were in the middle of goose hunting season when this correspondence took place and so getting the information across to the museum was, understandably, not their priority. The curators recall feeling pressured to simply forge ahead without the community's approval, but they ultimately stood their ground and waited for the information to come to them, under the understanding that the community had been gracious enough to help rectify their mistake and offer to participate in a meaningful way.³² When discussing this incident, the Ipswich Museum employee referred to the Colchester and Ipswich Museums (CIMS) decolonisation strategy, consulted on in 2021 with Yasmin Khan, which states that 'unwillingness to genuinely

engage will likely result in tokenism whilst radical, urgent approaches may sow division and likely result in unhelpful backlash'.³³ However, this employee went on to say that there is a fine line between the practical and the authentically decolonised and that becomes even more prevalent when you are dealing with people's feelings and identities. Balancing the curators' needs with the needs of the process requires consideration.³⁴ I interpreted this comment as a case of the aforementioned balance being about whose feelings are more 'important' and the need to make decisions, which may not align with someone else's priorities, for the overall benefit of the project.

Pay was a significant point of contention throughout the project. The curators vocalised their displeasure that the museum failed to prioritise paying their community curators in the project budget. For *Power of Stories*, the community curators were being asked to go through the emotional labour of talking about their experience of being Black in Ipswich. A lot of the time, the curators were the only people in the room being paid, and, usually, some of the only White people there. 'This wasn't an accident and we are trying not to ignore that this is what systemic racism looks like and how it manifests'.³⁵ Voicing this issue repeatedly led to change. The Museum has paid community members involved in subsequent projects, including the narrative stories project run for the decolonisation and redevelopment of the museum in 2023.³⁶

The initial engagement project - which lasted from March 2019 to October 2020 - was led by Community Curator A, a social activist who has had a long career in Public Relations before going on to be involved with Aspire Black Suffolk, a 'not-for-profit community interest company dedicated to tackling the causes of inequality by creating meaningful and lasting creative and educational solutions'.³⁷ They joined the project after being invited to an initial community meeting chaired by Phanael Mutumburi, Director at the Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality (ISCRE), organised to draw in community members who would not ordinarily participate in council-run events of this kind. Community Curator A recalls her hesitation prior to the meeting as she was worried about the agenda being tokenistic. This is understandable considering that, although museums are 'places that can offer a space for critical reflection and conversation', they are simultaneously 'at their worst, a reminder of the power and privilege they choose to perpetuate' (Kohl and Halter 2021: 5). Her reservations were quickly set aside when she saw the diversity in the room and heard the important discussions being had. She is one of the few people who was involved with *Power of Stories* from (nearly) the beginning to the end. She saw the importance of the costumes being in the area and thought there was a lot more work that could be done with them. She worked with Suffolk County Council to apply for funding and, from this, Aspire Black Suffolk was born.³⁸

The Touring Exhibition

The community curators, fuelled by the success of the original exhibition, wanted to bring it to other areas in rural Suffolk. The first venue for the exhibition was Moyses's Hall Museum, who pushed back one of their temporary exhibitions to house *Power of Stories*.³⁹ According to Community Curator A, this was one of the few positive actions taken by the museum. Alongside the tour, there were a number of 'satellite events' that happened - lectures, workshops, and so on - with all the venues. Moyses's Hall Museum had intended on hosting a lecture with an academic from University of East Anglia (UEA) about the history of the transatlantic slave trade. When talking about this, Community Curator A makes the point that the goal of the whole project was to give a platform to Black voices and celebrate Black heritage, and that the academic chosen - a White man - became the antithesis of that. She offered alternative options but her opinion was dismissed. The communication department at West Suffolk Council, who were responsible for marketing the lecture, then produced an online leaflet promoting the event that, as she put it, 'used really racist imagery, the sort of imagery that dates back to the transatlantic slave trade with the big lips and the big bum and headscarves'.⁴⁰ According to her there were a number of complaints lodged and a call for an apology, which never came. The talk was eventually cancelled and the online leaflet taken down from all platforms. This was one of a number of incidents that caused friction and failed to build relationships between the community curators and Moyses's Hall Museum. Nevertheless there were some positive

experiences with the museum. For example, Community Curator C recalls the space being 'inclusive and accessible' and feeling 'well supported' when she was involved in a talk about African Queens in the space.⁴¹

One thing that the curators pride themselves on is the platform they gave their community in the original exhibition. Highlighting the racial power dynamic here of a space being handed over to a community is noteworthy as, while important, such approaches also have the ability to serve Whiteness through embodying a 'White saviour' approach, where space is given by the Museum, and where lived experiences are 'extracted from others and repackaged in a way that is palatable to White audiences' (Khan 2021: 106).

For example, it was suggested that comments made by community curators in the original exhibition were edited to remove certain contentious words such as 'stolen'. Authenticity was a priority for the curators so aesthetic choices were made to make the community voices stand out - the museum's information displays blended in with the overall exhibition and the speech bubbles, with the community curators' words, were bright and colourful and so stood out more.



Figure 1. Museum text and community curator's voice displayed at the *Power of Stories* exhibition in Ipswich. Copyright McDonald, R. (2022) *Power of Stories* Evaluation Report.

Editing of the community curators' interpretive text was minimal, with the author being consulted prior to change. However, this process was not observed in every instance at Moyse's Hall Museum. One story included in the exhibition captured the lived experience of a Black resident of Bury St Edmunds, but his words were edited by the curatorial team at the Museum because they were deemed 'problematic', with the Museum purportedly concerned with not upsetting their tourism partners.⁴² By editing this man's words, the Museum can be understood to have continued the erasure of Black voices, a process that has been happening for centuries, and within a project that aimed to address exactly this issue. This incident, in particular the lack of consultation over the edited text, can be seen to fall short of the MA's suggestions to act with integrity when collaborating by being transparent.⁴³

At The Food Museum, *Power of Stories* was slotted into their 'Dining with' series as 'Dining with Heroes'. Marvel required the costumes to be monitored at all times. The museum

and Community Curator A thought it prudent to hire people from Black backgrounds for these roles to align with the project's goals.⁴⁴ In the end five people were hired for the duration of the exhibition, four of whom were from Black backgrounds. One of the 'satellite events' that took place was an art workshop with the students from a local Special Educational Needs school as part of Jubilant!, a mini Youth Arts and Culture festival in Stowmarket. The children contributed a mini exhibition they called *Finding Superheroes* with masks and costumes they had made, with the intention they be placed alongside the *Black Panther* costumes. The products of the workshop were a series of costumes and masks that were 'quite brutal looking' and 'reminiscent of slaves that had been whipped, making it inappropriate for the exhibition'^{45, 46}. Community Curator A explained the 'visuals of using slashes on the t-shirts and its association to knife and gang violence' and 'the connotations of the slashed t-shirt imagery and its links with the transatlantic slave trade' and was met with two things; firstly, an acknowledgement that these links had been overlooked and secondly, that although this was an unfortunate mistake, the children's hard work still needed to be displayed.⁴⁷ The compromise was that the costumes would be placed in a different room to the exhibition. Community Curator A claims that, although this was an incident where something was being looked upon with a White gaze, all the people involved were open to compromise and she felt listened to and heard, highlighting the importance of inclusive dialogue in designing exhibitions.⁴⁸

Community Curator B, an Aldeburgh local, was employed as the curator for the Snape Maltings Concert Hall section of the tour by the cultural charity, Britten Pears Arts (BPA), housed at Snape Maltings. For her, the exhibition was significant because it was the first time she was associating her race with her professional work. When being interviewed, it became clear that the biggest challenge was the emotional journey she and her community members went through in the build up to the exhibition. She prioritised making people feel safe, giving them the opportunity to express their sadness, frustration, and anger and then channel that in an artistic way. She describes her role as a buffer between community members and the public:

I was surrounded by people with all different skin colours and the one thing that really bound us together was racism and that was quite dark. This is scary for some people and an unexplored territory which means that you have to listen and sit back to really understand where everyone is coming from.⁴⁹

Community Curator B recognised that there is a presence of, what I am interpreting as White fragility surrounding what is acceptable in Suffolk, and the need to be 'respectful of people's views and experiences', even if they don't align with yours.⁵⁰ She spoke about understanding that some views will come from a 'place of fear; fear of the unknown and fear of change'.⁵¹ This was the first time a Black fist, an image associated with Black Lives Matter, had been on show at Snape Maltings, and that was bound to invoke a reaction. She feels they 'made a noise, but respectfully, and that this [project is] one of the most important things she will ever do'.⁵² Respect is an interesting concept to explore in this context. I interpret her respectful noise-making as symbols, like the Black fist, being displayed in-keeping with the aesthetic of the institution – high quality printing and nestled neatly between posters for other exhibitions and performances to create the 'feeling that we're all singing from the same hymn sheet'.⁵³ Again, my interpretation here is that she did not want White people to feel discomfort, unlike at the Ipswich exhibition, but rather create a sense of harmony.

The evaluation report for the *Power of Stories* tour outlines the success of the project at Snape Maltings. Analysis of the feedback from a small group of 14 visitors revealed a significant difference between Black and White visitors' responses, with Black audiences giving an average approval rating of 94%. When asked to give ratings next to statement, Black audiences responded more positively to 'this is celebrating my heritage', 'connection' and 'excellence' compared to White audience but the highest rating was for the 'importance of this happening locally,' with 96% of Black respondents responding positively to this. These responses demonstrate the success of a project that was created by community members and the positive influence it had (*Power of Stories and Aspire Black Suffolk 2023: 1*). The evaluation study also reports that, despite significant issues, the project met every one of its original aims. The tour was recognised as being 'impactful, evocative and reach[ing] new audiences, [and] being radical and long overdue. It brought the lives, stories and voices of

Black people in Suffolk into the mainstream' (Power of Stories and Aspire Black Suffolk 2023: 5). It also pointed to the absolute need to provide a safe space for a 'journey of progression' (Power of Stories and Aspire Black Suffolk 2023: 5).

Unfortunately, and perhaps unsurprisingly, instances of racism still occurred, 'despite advice and guidance being provided' (Power of Stories and Aspire Black Suffolk 2023: 5). There was:

conflict with other exhibits from artists who are known to be racist, although the report does not go into more detail about these instances, that were explored in a constructive way and has provided an important learning opportunity (Power of Stories and Aspire Black Suffolk 2023: 10).

On the other hand, a sense of pride was reported from multiple audience members: "it was there in the space - I feel heard and seen now" (Power of Stories and Aspire Black Suffolk 2023: 5).

The Legacy

The community curators involved in the project have seen the success of the endeavour not only in increased visitor numbers and positive responses to the exhibition itself but the legacy it left behind and the opportunities it opened up.

One of the main features at Snape Maltings was a drum display courtesy of Wooden Roots, a Suffolk company that builds, supplies, and runs African drum workshops.⁵⁴ Unbeknownst to the curators when they approached the company for involvement in the exhibition, Wooden Roots had supplied djembe drums to the *Black Panther* film, which can be heard in the fight scenes.⁵⁵ Museum Curator B encouraged the company to apply for Arts Council funding, which they were granted, and the organisation is now on their third round of delivering high quality music training in schools, widening the network of impactful community work.

Aspire Black Suffolk, founded as a result of the exhibition, is now a thriving organisation 'led by Black female professionals with a shared passion and vision; to change lives, empower communities and raise awareness of the key issues surrounding race, equality and inclusion in Suffolk and beyond'.⁵⁶ Franstine Jones, one of the co-founders, now works with Colchester and Ipswich Museums as a volunteer and training coordinator. Elisha Soanes, the director of business development, is the Head of Equality Diversity Inclusion at West Suffolk College and a few other higher learning institutions and, as a result of the *Power of Stories*, has been given more platforms to speak on and deliver training, for which she has won awards.⁵⁷ Organisations like Wooden Roots and Aspire Black Suffolk are now having a wider impact in the local area as a result of the project. The museum curators were invited to speak about the project and were always accompanied by community curators, who were paid for this. An academic paper was written for a museum journal by one of the museum curators with help from a community curator.⁵⁸ The Ipswich Windrush Select Committee was granted funding to continue to work with Ipswich Museum in their decolonising efforts. In particular, they are trying to strengthen connections with local schools in an effort to have a more accurate teaching curriculum (McDonald 2022: 97).

Aurogeeta Das' position at the museum to lead the decolonisation initiative has been extended with Arts Council and NPO funding. The role was originally curatorial but it was brought up to a senior curator post because it was felt they would need a voice in the wider management team and have authority to see things through and make training mandatory.⁵⁹ Aurogeeta has delivered regular training workshops, giving people the opportunity to talk very specifically about the sector in small groups. For someone who works with Aurogeeta, workshops really 'get to the understanding of things [like] unconscious bias and with White fragility [and are better than a] lecture environment where you don't really have to engage or challenge [bias]'.⁶⁰

Finally, one of the most tangible successes of the project came in the form of the prestigious Temporary Exhibition of the Year award at the 2022 Museum and Heritage Awards ceremony for *Power of Stories* community engagement and impact.⁶¹ Traditionally, the museum

would be the primary beneficiary from the award, a 'congratulations' for the hard work put into engaging a previously disengaged community. However, it also gave the project national legitimacy for the community curators themselves and can serve as a concrete example to other communities when the museum embarks on an engagement project.

Ultimately, the project cannot be understood in isolation of its significant legacy, which has offered a turning point in museums' engagement with Black heritage work and community engagement in Suffolk. The legacy clearly emerges from the ongoing dedication and collective support of a number of individuals and organisations who were able to navigate an often problematic and challenging environment where trust was lacking, and who were able to act as a mediator, and 'buffer' between the museums and communities. At the same time, this project was an important catalyst that has empowered those involved to develop new platforms and opportunities that have transformed the heritage landscape of Suffolk.

Conclusion

This paper explored the experiences of a collaborative project through the lens of power. Underpinned by Victoria Hollows' (2019) theories of power-over and power-with, and the advantages and disadvantages of both, the shift in dynamics when engaging in co-curation was discussed. Recognising that a sense of belonging is not a privilege everyone has when entering a museum is important (Black 2012: 11), especially considering the strong colonial ties and misrepresentations museums have historically enabled. Finally, the political concepts of 'invited' and 'invented' spaces were applied to a museum context, framed within the societal context of Suffolk and the *Power of Stories* project. *Power of Stories* successfully built lasting relationships between the museum and a community it serves; created an exhibition that resonated with locals; and elevated the profile and handed autonomy to its community curators. Recognition of their failings from the museum curators built a trusting relationship - something that White fragility has often squandered. There are three lessons that can be taken from this - be humble: understand that as a museum curator, you do not always have the intellectual or cultural authority and mistakes will happen. What matters is how you handle them. Be open: open to what your community is telling you and actively listen to this. Take it on board and understand that everyone brings their own lived experience to the table. The museum curators addressed the forms of Whiteness that can emerge in this work and were not shy to bring this to the forefront. Be stubborn: the museum curators often positively described themselves as 'difficult women', meaning they pursued what they believed to be the most ethical practice and, although this was not always achievable, this approach did have a considerable impact on the outcome of the project.⁶² Successful exhibitions demand people who are willing to challenge themselves and others. Moving forward, museums can take the lessons learnt from this process and adapt for their own endeavours, with the understanding that, when sharing power, Whiteness, white fragility, and the white gaze are often unacknowledged (Lynch 2011), and it is essential to create spaces where this harmful power dynamic can be carefully surfaced and navigated before a project begins in order to mitigate the harm it can bring for all concerned.

Notes

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 - ⁶ Emotional labour is the 'additional emotional work, particularly undertaken by people from marginalised backgrounds when facing uncomfortable or offensive situations'. See Museums Association, 'Collaboration', Museums Association [n.d.]. <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/supporting-decolonisation-in-museums/collaboration/>, accessed 1 June 2023.
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 - ¹² The Cambridge Dictionary defines a person of colour as 'someone who does not consider themselves to be White' See: Cambridge Dictionary, 'Person of Colour', Cambridge Dictionary [n.d.]. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/person-of-colour>, accessed 28 August 2023.
 - ¹³ Critical Race Theory is the idea that racism is built into a western society that has been built by and designed for White people (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 8).
 - ¹⁴ White gaze is 'the process of a White person seeing everything through the lens of Whiteness. The White gaze distorts perceptions of people who deviate from Whiteness and is unable to see another perspective' (Rabelo et al 2021: 1).
 - ¹⁵ John Ferguson, 'John Ferguson talks photography with The Blk Gaze', LinkedIn 2021. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/john-ferguson-talks-photography-blk-gaze-john-ferguson-/>, accessed 12 September 2023.
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- 32 Museum Curator B, interview, 3 July 2023.
- 33 The strategy works on the idea that its museums are not neutral spaces and that it currently hosts problematic displays which include the questionable provenance of certain artefacts. It provides alternative language that is aligned with the decolonisation process, outlines an ethos for staff to adopt and outlines objectives, challenges (both national and Ipswich Museum specific) and provides a tailored action plan.
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- 38 Aspire Black Suffolk is a 'not-for-profit community interest company dedicated to tackling the causes of inequality by creating meaningful and lasting creative and educational solutions'. The organisation was created originally as a programme of events alongside the *Power of Stories* and then developed into a Community Interest Company (CIC) to further its goals.
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- 48 Community Curator A, interview, 27 July 2023.
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