

# Structuring Critical Cataloguing in Museums: A Taxonomy of Museum-Based Critical Cataloguing Project and Activity Types

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## Abstract

Museums are responding to the presence of offensive, biased, and harmful language in catalogue records through the practice of 'critical cataloguing': an umbrella term encompassing a range of tactics such as revising records, applying content warnings, adding paradata, and more. While there has been significant scholarly attention to critical cataloguing in archives and libraries, as well as to diversity, equity, and inclusion work in museums more generally, relatively little is known about how museums are engaging in critical cataloguing work. This paper addresses this gap through the combination of a review of relevant academic, grey, trade, and popular literature and an interview study conducted with two dozen critical cataloguing practitioners working in museums and independently across the UK, USA, and Canada. The findings identify 29 distinct types of projects and activities currently being pursued in museums under the category of critical cataloguing work. Based on these findings, this paper proposes a taxonomy of critical cataloguing projects and activities in order to characterise and thus better understand this area of museum practice. This paper offers the first comprehensive analysis of museum-based critical cataloguing, providing an overview of what critical cataloguing looks like as it is happening in museum contexts today.

**Keywords:** critical cataloguing, inclusive cataloguing, museums, interviews, cataloguers

## Introduction

Catalogue records in museums can contain a wide range of offensive, biased, and outdated language, ranging from explicit and derogatory terminology to clichés, euphemisms, objectification, and more; this is referred to as 'problematic language'. Museums are responding to these issues through 'critical cataloguing' which can include a number of different tactics such as remediating records containing problematic language, applying content warnings to online catalogues, and adding artist demographic data to catalogue records. However, while there are significant bodies of literature on critical cataloguing in libraries and archives, and much has been written about diversity, equity, and inclusion work in museums more generally, relatively little is known about how museums are engaging in critical cataloguing work. It is important to specify museums as these institutions have unique cataloguing practices and requirements that differ from those used in libraries and archives. As a result of this gap in literature, there is no clear understanding at present of the scope of work taking place in museums under the umbrella category of critical cataloguing.

This research emerged in response to the need to understand the state of the field of museum-based critical cataloguing. It brings together existing literature on critical cataloguing in museums, before introducing the findings of a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with 24 individuals who engage in work that falls under this heading of critical cataloguing. Participants represent institutions and independent practice from across the UK, USA, and Canada. In combining the existing available literature with this study, this research aims to

answer the following research questions:

- RQ 1. What kinds of projects are taking place in museums under the heading of 'critical cataloguing'?
- RQ 2. What kinds of work activities are taking place in museums under the heading of 'critical cataloguing'?

This paper brings together existing literature on critical cataloguing in museums for the first time, before proposing a framework in the form of a taxonomy for understanding the kinds of projects and project-independent activities that critical cataloguers are engaging in. In doing so, it produces an overview of critical cataloguing work as it is taking place in museums, a state of understanding that was previously unattainable given the sparse and distributed nature of existing literature on critical cataloguing in museums.

## **Study Design: Learning About Critical Cataloguing in Museums**

### ***Locating Literature on Critical Cataloguing in Museums***

The presence of problematic language in the catalogue records of cultural heritage institutions is a well-documented issue (e.g. Odumusu 2020; Lawther 2021; Perera 2022; Chew 2023; Billy et al. 2024). The ways in which institutions are responding to these issues is known as critical cataloguing: 'a social justice-oriented style of radical cataloguing that places an emphasis on radical empathy, outreach work, and recognizes the importance of information maintenance and care' (Watson 2020: 548). This term emerged in the context of library and archive studies, and the histories of radical, ethical, inclusive, and critical cataloguing work in these spaces have been explored (Perera 2022; Watson 2023; Fox and Gross 2024).

Critical cataloguing is a relatively recent development in museum studies, although the concept of interrogating museum collections data is not (Turner 2016). Critiques of museum information founded in the domain of the object long predate the 2014 American Anthropological Association conference panel 'Producing Anthropology Through Museum Collections: Conversations in Critical Cataloguing' (Turner and Greene 2014), which is the first reference in literature of the use of the term 'critical cataloguing' in museums (see: Simpson 2017; Lonetree 2012; Jules-Rosette and Osborn 2020 for further discussions). While much has been written about diversity, equity, and inclusion work in museums more generally, there is limited existing literature on the subject of critical cataloguing practices in museums. Much of the existing literature on critical cataloguing in cultural heritage institutions refers to work taking place in libraries and archives, such as critiques of Library of Congress Subject Headings and the RDA, MARC, and MODS cataloguing standards, which lack relevance for the museum collections data context. While museums can also contain libraries and archives, museum object collections follow their own sets of cataloguing practices and ordinances. There has been little in academic literature documenting critical cataloguing in regards to museums data, and instead, information about these practices can be found in grey literature sources: events, reports, and blog posts written by practitioners and aimed at fellow museum professionals. For example, in the UK, the Collections Trust has facilitated the sharing of information about museum critical cataloguing projects through hosting webinars and blog posts under the calls to action of 'decolonising the database' and 'rethinking cataloguing'.<sup>1</sup> The literature that was identified by looking to these sources of knowledge detail critical cataloguing work that has taken place at 19 museums, and is discussed in detail below.

Work has also taken place with, but external to, museums in ways that resemble critical cataloguing as they reclaim the power to name and describe through the development of community-controlled digital collections which aggregate and augment records of material culture held in museums and other cultural heritage institutions (e.g. Srinivasan et al. 2010; Christen 2011; Bohaker et al. 2014; Bodenstein et al. 2023). Mukurtu CMS is a web-based content management system built to support the needs of Indigenous libraries, archives, museums, and communities engaging in these types of projects (Christen et al. 2017). While these initiatives engage with museum collections data, the scope of the present research is

on critical cataloguing taking place within the institution of the museum itself; as such, they have been excluded from the current review.

### ***Interviewing Critical Cataloguing Practitioners***

#### *Research design*

In order to address the gap in understanding regarding museum-based critical cataloguing, a review of existing literature was complemented by interviews with two dozen critical cataloguing practitioners from the UK, USA, and Canada. This research explored the experiences, approaches, and challenges of individuals working in or with museums on critical cataloguing projects through a series of 45 minute semi-structured interviews. This project was approved by the University of Oxford Medical Sciences Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee in November 2023 (R81821/RE001). Recruitment took place through calls for participation distributed through email listservs and snowball sampling.<sup>2</sup> The call for participants specified that interviewees needed to have worked at, for, or with a museum and have participated in critical cataloguing work that addressed museum data.

Interviews were conducted by the author online using Microsoft Teams between December 2023 and July 2024. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo following a five-stage coding and memoing model (Saldaña 2021). A combination of deductive and inductive coding methods were used for the first cycle of coding, with a preliminary set of a priori codes used to guide structural coding of the elements of the interviews that related to descriptive elements of the research questions: the kinds of projects and activities participants engaged in when conducting critical cataloguing work in or with museums. The interview contents associated with these codes were analysed for this paper. All data, including participant and institution identifiers, have been anonymized.

#### *Research participants*

25 interviews were conducted and 23 were used for analysis (two were removed because the interview contents were found to fall outside of the scope of the present research after the interview had taken place). In the 23 interviews analysed, 24 individuals represented 19 places of work: three participants discussed experiences at two institutions, and three institutions were represented by more than one participant. In one case, two individuals from the same institution wanted to be interviewed together, resulting in a single interview with two interviewees. In the other cases, when multiple staff from the same institution were interviewed, the interviews were conducted separately.

The majority of participants (n=17; 70.83%) worked for museums, while four (16.67%) worked for universities and three (12.5%) worked as consultants. Amongst the participants who worked for museums, the most represented department was collections information (n=7) followed by digital and information technology (n=3), curatorial (n=3), library and archive (n=3), and interpretation departments (n=1). The university-employed participants were equally split between working as academics (n=2) and working in digital and information technology departments in administrator/analyst roles (n=2). Two of the consultants provided services for collections information departments in museums, and one worked with digital and information technology departments in museums. Of the 19 workplaces represented by the 24 participants, over half (n=10; 52.63%) are located in North America: nine (47.37%) are in the USA, and one (5.26%) is in Canada. The remaining workplaces are located in the UK: eight (42.11%) are in England and one (5.26%) is in Scotland.

### **Critical Cataloguing in Museums, as Discussed in Literature**

#### ***Literature on Museum Critical Cataloguing Projects***

Literature discussing critical cataloguing work taking place in 19 museum was identified. The institutions and types of projects discussed are listed in Table 1 and detailed below.

*Table 1: Museum critical cataloguing projects identified in literature review.*

<b>Institution and source</b>	<b>Project description</b>	<b>Project category</b>
Rijksmuseum <sup>3</sup>	Reparative description.	Reparative cataloguing.
Statens Museum for Kunst <sup>4</sup>	Reparative description.	Reparative cataloguing.
Art Gallery of Ontario <sup>5</sup>	Reparative description.	Reparative cataloguing.
National Museum of World Cultures (Modest and Lelijveld 2018; Zalm 2024)	Reparative description.	Reparative cataloguing.
Minneapolis Institute of Art <sup>6</sup>	Maker demographics.	Documenting diversity.
Victoria and Albert Museum (Clayton and Hoskin 2020) <sup>7</sup>	Reparative description; reparative tagging.	Reparative cataloguing.
	Disclaimer; content warnings.	Acknowledging power.
Pitt Rivers Museum <sup>8</sup>	Reparative description.	Reparative cataloguing.
	Reparative description.	Reparative cataloguing.
Bristol Museum <sup>9</sup>	Disclaimer; content warnings.	Acknowledging power.
	Disclaimer.	Acknowledging power.
Field Museum (Briscoe et al. 2022)	Disclaimer.	Acknowledging power.
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art <sup>10</sup>	Maker demographics.	Documenting diversity.
Birmingham University Art Museum <sup>11</sup>	Maker demographics.	Documenting diversity.
Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture <sup>12</sup>	Reparative description.	Reparative cataloguing.
Philadelphia Museum of Art <sup>13</sup>	Reparative description.	Reparative cataloguing.
British Museum (Christophe et al. 2024)	Language prioritisation.	Reparative cataloguing.
David Livingstone Birthplace Museum (Campbell and Smith 2024)	Reparative description.	Reparative cataloguing.
	Other voices.	Expanding perspectives.
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge (Carreau and Gunn 2024)	Reparative description; language prioritisation.	Reparative cataloguing.
	Paradata.	Acknowledging power.
Museum of Vancouver (Fortney 2024)	Language prioritisation; reparative tagging.	Reparative cataloguing.
National Museum of the Royal Navy <sup>14</sup>	Reparative description.	Reparative cataloguing.
	Content warnings.	Acknowledging power.
	Language prioritisation.	Reparative cataloguing.
Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (Lewis 2024)	Paradata.	Acknowledging power.
	Other voices.	Expanding perspectives.

*Reparative cataloguing*

The type of project most frequently discussed was reparative cataloguing: critical cataloguing efforts that attended to language used in catalogue records were a focus for 15 institutions

(see Table 1). In reparative description projects, museums reviewed existing cataloguing for instances of problematic language.<sup>15</sup> Most literature on these projects described doing so by listing problematic terminology and looking for records where the terms appeared. At the Pitt Rivers Museum, however, the theoretical methodology of the colonial matrix of power was used to frame catalogue review.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, record review at the David Livingstone Birthplace Museum (DLBM) was driven in part by collaboration with community groups who ‘shared their reflections on how the existing labeling and displays made them feel’, which then guided the museum’s efforts (Campbell and Smith 2024: 10).

Four articles discussed language prioritisation projects as reparative cataloguing work (Carreau and Gunn 2024; Christophe et al. 2024; Fortney 2024; Lewis 2024). Half described reviewing fields containing names of cultures and places and ensuring that terms used are a community’s preferred self-identification as opposed to a colonial attribution (Fortney 2024; Lewis 2024). The other half detailed making the Indigenous name of an object the first element of the record, thus deprioritising the English term (Carreau and Gunn 2024; Christophe et al. 2024).

Lastly, literature details two cases of reparative tagging: reviewing subject classifications associated with object records. These describe defining and adding LGBTQ+-related ‘subject’ tags at the Victoria and Albert Museum (Clayton and Hoskin 2020) and expanding the types of ‘subject’ tags used to describe records at the Museum of Vancouver (Fortney 2024).

#### *Acknowledging power and positionality*

The second type of project described in literature covers ways that museums can acknowledge the power that they hold and how their histories impact cataloguing practices and outputs (e.g. Turner 2020). This work was described for the contexts of six institutions (see Table 1). As part of this, four institutions discussed the development of collection-wide disclaimers, which alert users of the institution’s online collection that records may include offensive, biased, and outdated language, and content warnings, which appear on individual records (e.g. Chilcott 2019). Adding paradata—data on the making and processing of data (Huvila et al. 2024)—to document decisions, actions, actors, and reasoning was a focus for two institutions. The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge added details about who wrote catalogue entries, who created catalogue entries, and when (Carreau and Gunn 2024). The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) also recorded why, how, and when information given by community members is used by the museum (Lewis 2024).

#### *Documenting diversity*

The third type of project found in literature was documenting collection diversity by adding demographic information about makers to collections information. This was a focus for three institutions (see Table 1). While neither the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) nor the Minneapolis Institute of Art say explicitly what kind of information is being documented in their projects, both refer to categories of race, ethnicity, and gender.<sup>17</sup> The news article covering work at the Birmingham University Art Museum lists the kinds of identity categories being documented by the museum as Black, BIPOC, and LGBTQ.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Expanding perspectives*

The final type of project described in literature is work to expand perspectives by incorporating multiple voices in catalogue records. This was the subject of two articles (see Table 1). The first discussed work at the DLBM to incorporate knowledge from collaborations with local diaspora community groups (Campbell and Smith 2024). This occurred at the same time as, and in addition to, reparative description work. The second article detailed work at NMAI to centre Native knowledge and ways of knowing (Lewis 2024). These projects move beyond those described in language prioritisation to incorporate varied and multiple ways of knowing.

### **Literature on Museum Critical Cataloguing Work Activities**

In addition to types of projects, critical cataloguing literature detailed types of activities done as part of the work on one or more types of projects. These kinds of activities cut across all four major types of critical cataloguing projects. However, details about these were not always present, especially when information about the work came from informal sources such as blog posts or news articles. The types of project-independent activities for 14 institutions that are discussed in critical cataloguing literature are listed in Table 2 and detailed below.

*Table 2: Museum critical cataloguing project-independent activities identified in literature review.*

<b>Institution and source</b>	<b>Activity description</b>	<b>Activity category</b>
Art Gallery of Ontario <sup>19</sup>	Consult.	Work with others.
National Museum of World Cultures (Modest and Lelijveld 2018; Zalm 2024)	Glossary of problematic and preferred terms.	Develop guidance documents.
Victoria and Albert Museum (Clayton and Hoskin 2020) <sup>20</sup>	Guide for reparative description work; glossary of problematic terms; glossary of preferred terms.	Develop guidance documents.
	Staff group.	Work with others.
Bristol Museum <sup>21</sup>	Glossary of problematic terms.	Develop guidance documents.
	Staff group.	Work with others.
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art <sup>22</sup>	Consult.	Work with others.
Birmingham University Art Museum <sup>23</sup>	Guide for documenting collection diversity.	Develop guidance documents.
Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture <sup>24</sup>	Guide reparative description work.	Develop guidance documents.
Philadelphia Museum of Art <sup>25</sup>	Guide for reparative description work; glossary of problematic terms.	Develop guidance documents.
	Staff group; advocate; host talks + discussions.	Work with others.
British Museum (Christophe et al. 2024)	Glossary of preferred terms.	Develop guidance documents.
	Consult.	Work with others.
David Livingstone Birthplace Museum (Campbell and Smith 2024)	Guide for reparative description work; glossary of problematic terms.	Develop guidance documents.
	Consult.	Work with others.
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge (Carreau and Gunn 2024)	Add paradata.	Customize CMS.
Museum of Vancouver (Fortney 2024)	Staff group; consult.	Work with others.

Table 2 (continued)

Institution and source	Activity description	Activity category
National Museum of the Royal Navy <sup>26</sup>	Glossary of problematic terms.	Develop guidance documents.
	Staff group.	Work with others.
Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (Lewis 2024)	Glossary of preferred terms.	Develop guidance documents.
	Add paradata.	Customize CMS.
	Consult.	Work with others.

### *Develop guidance documents*

The type of project-independent activity most frequently discussed was developing guidance documents; this work was undertaken at nine institutions (see Table 2). Guideline documents provide instructions for staff working on critical cataloguing projects. A guideline for documenting collection diversity was discussed in the context of one institution, while guidelines for reparative description work were described in the context of four museums. In three of these cases, discussion of guidelines was accompanied by description of a glossary of problematic terminology: the guideline detailed what to do when terminology listed in the glossary was encountered.

Three types of glossaries were mentioned in literature:

- glossaries of problematic terminology, which define terms that could be considered problematic and can be used for auditing collections records;
- glossaries of preferred terms, which list language used by a specific community to describe themselves, their heritage, and their material culture, and can guide new as well as reparative cataloguing;
- glossaries of problematic terminology and preferred terms, which contain both types of language paired together and which border on guideline documents as they connect problematic language with preferred, but do not include instructions for use.

Literature covers glossary development at eight institutions: five of problematic language, three of preferred, and one of both.

### *Customize database*

Customizing collections databases was discussed as a part of critical cataloguing work at two institutions (see Table 2). Museums described customizing collections databases by adding fields in order to incorporate paradata (Carreau and Gunn 2024; Lewis 2024) and restructuring modules in order to centre Native knowledge and ways of knowing (Lewis 2024).

### *Work with others (internal)*

The third type of work discussed in literature involved efforts to work with others within an institution. The main way this was described was through the development of staff groups, which took place at five institutions (see Table 2). These groups brought together staff from across the institution so that members could make collective decisions about critical cataloguing and raise questions about language they encountered while working with records. The second way this work was described in the literature, internal advocacy, took place in one museum: practitioners spoke about advocating for the value of critical cataloguing as an important part of their work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.<sup>27</sup>

*Work with others (external)*

The final type of work discussed in literature involved finding ways of working with other museums and stakeholders; this was discussed in the contexts of seven institutions (see Table 2). For most cases, this involved consulting or collaborating with communities whose material culture was the subject of the records being addressed in the critical cataloguing work. The level of consultation described varied: SFMOMA developed an Artist Questionnaire for living artist to self-report their identities,<sup>28</sup> the Art Gallery of Ontario consulted with the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations whose territory was depicted in the artwork whose title was being reconsidered,<sup>29</sup> and four other institutions described their critical cataloguing as taking place within the context of long-standing collaborative relationships (Campbell and Smith 2024; Christophe et al. 2024; Fortney 2024; Lewis 2024). The second way that this work appeared in literature, hosting talks and discussions, was mentioned as taking place in one museum: the Philadelphia Museum of Art stated that hosting symposia on critical cataloguing was part of their critical cataloguing work.<sup>30</sup>

**Critical Cataloguing in Museums, as Discussed in Interviews with Practitioners*****Interview Responses about Museum Critical Cataloguing Projects***

Interview participants discussed the same major types of projects that are seen in the literature; these are summarized in Table 3 and detailed below.

*Table 3: Current or past museum critical cataloguing projects discussed in interviews.*

<b>Participant(s)</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Project description</b>	<b>Project category</b>
P01	Museum	Reparative description.	Reparative cataloguing.
	University	Reparative description; language prioritisation.	Reparative cataloguing.
P02	Museum	Reparative description. Disclaimer.	Reparative cataloguing. Acknowledging power.
P03	Museum	Maker demographics.	Documenting diversity.
	Museum	Language prioritisation.	Reparative cataloguing.
P04	Museum	Reparative description. Ethical cataloguing statement; paradata.	Reparative cataloguing. Acknowledging power.
P05	Museum	Reparative description; language prioritisation. Other voices.	Reparative cataloguing. Expanding perspectives.
P06, P07	Museum	Ethical cataloguing statement; paradata. Maker demographics.	Acknowledging power. Documenting diversity.
P08, P09, P12, P15	Museum	Reparative description. Content warnings.	Reparative cataloguing. Acknowledging power.
P10	Consultant	Reparative description.	Reparative cataloguing.
P11	Museum	Reparative description. Content warnings.	Reparative cataloguing. Acknowledging power.
P13	Museum	Reparative description. Paradata.	Reparative cataloguing. Acknowledging power.

Table 3 (continued)

Participant(s)	Institution	Project description	Project category
P14	Museum	Reparative description. Paradata.	Reparative cataloguing. Acknowledging power.
	Nonprofit	Other voices.	Expanding perspectives.
P16	Museum	Language prioritisation. Paradata.	Reparative cataloguing. Acknowledging power.
		Other voices.	Expanding perspectives.
		Disclaimer.	Acknowledging power.
P17	Consultant	Disclaimer.	Acknowledging power.
P18	Museum	Language prioritisation.	Reparative cataloguing.
P19, P20	Museum	Reparative description; reparative tagging; language prioritisation. Paradata.	Reparative cataloguing. Acknowledging power.
		Maker demographics.	Documenting diversity.
		Reparative description. Content warnings.	Reparative cataloguing. Acknowledging power.
		Ethical cataloguing statement; paradata. Maker demographics.	Acknowledging power. Documenting diversity.
P23	University	Reparative description. Maker demographics.	Reparative cataloguing. Documenting diversity.
		P24	Museum

### *Reparative cataloguing*

Interview participants described reparative cataloguing projects, including reparative description, reparative tagging, and language prioritisation work, at 16 institutions (see Table 3). In most reparative description projects, participants discussed looking for specific terms or phrases, and in all of the cases discussed in the interviews, deciding what to do once a record was identified as requiring remediation was a complex task. Methods for remediating records included changing language, adding preferred terms alongside flagged language, adding contextual information to explain the use of flagged language, and adding content warnings. Participants discussed language prioritisation projects at six institutions. Reflecting the geographic locations of the institutions, all but one of these projects were about ensuring that the preferred and accurate names for Indigenous peoples in North America—along with their nations, traditional lands, and material culture—were used. The final type of reparative cataloguing project discussed by participants was reparative tagging, with only one of these projects being mentioned. In this case, the work involved reviewing existing tags for problematic language and adding new tags that could offer increased access to records by providing new language terms for association with the object record.

### *Acknowledging power and positionality*

Interview participants described initiatives to acknowledge power by adding paradata, ethical cataloguing statements, disclaimers, and content warnings at 13 institutions (see Table 3). Finding ways to document decisions, actions, actors, and reasoning—adding paradata—was a focus for eight of these institutions. In five cases, participants noted that it was essential to record why a change occurred, in addition to what the change was:

The best thing that I can do is be very clear about my intent and why I made the decisions I did, why we made the decisions we did, and have those be really clear so in 10, 15, 20 years, somebody's looking at the work and saying, 'why did you choose this term?': 'this is why and this is what our goal was in doing so' (P07).

Two other participants named information about the person writing or editing the field as the most important paradata. One of these participants described how their institution started recording information about the person stewarding the record: they looked to include job histories, educational backgrounds, and personal histories because they 'wanted to ensure that you knew the kind of perspective and the mindset of the person that was providing you this information' (P13).

For half of the institutions adding paradata, this internal-facing work was accompanied by external-facing ethical cataloguing statements articulating the institution's perspective on cataloguing ethics. For three of these cases, writing this was the first step in their institutions' critical cataloguing projects. Although these have an external audience, participants discussed their internal value as well, as statements detailed the values and beliefs under which cataloguing staff operate:

People are really excited about it because they can show it and say 'this is what we're doing' to higher-ups or to outside folks and say 'these are our values,' and that has been a really important piece (P22).

Two participants spoke about developing collection-wide disclaimers, and three discussed implementing content warnings at the level of individual records. For these three, this work accompanied reparative description projects. For one participant, adding object-level notifications was one part of the critical cataloguing work taking place, for the second it was the primary goal of the project, and for the third, it was the area in which they could implement change:

We just decided to ignore the organizational wider impacts and do what was within our control, so what we decided to do was implement a system mechanism to show a content warning or a trigger warning if one existed (P21).

### *Documenting diversity*

Interview participants described initiatives to document collection diversity by adding demographic information about makers at five institutions (see Table 3). The first of these sought to add a wide range of demographic information about artists in their collection: 'ability and disability, ethnicity, gender, languages spoken, nationality, pronouns, race, religious affiliation roles, sexual orientation, and styles and periods' (P06). They acknowledged that many of these attributes will likely never be known; in these cases, cataloguers are instructed to enter 'unknown' instead of leaving the field blank in order to unsettle assumptions about default identity. Two institutions requested identity information directly from living artists in order to represent individuals in their records the way that they wish to be described. For another institution, the focus was on developing guidance documents and identifying existing vocabularies of demographic terms for the museum to use when adding this information to their collections database. The final case focused on customizing the institution's collections management system (CMS) in order to make it possible to add this information to the museum's system, and to set up data workflow for the incorporation of this data that would be sustainable for the museum staff.

### *Expanding perspectives*

Lastly, projects focusing on expanding cataloguing to include voices traditionally excluded from the record were the subject of three interviews (see Table 3). In the first two cases, this kind of project was closely related to accompanying work in language prioritisation. In addition to terminology and languages of the Indigenous peoples with whom the institutions already collaborated, these projects sought to make space for ways of knowing that better represented

these communities than traditional museum cataloguing practices could accommodate. In the final case, the participant discussed expanding the cataloguing database to include how artworks were used:

Any kind of workshops we were doing, capturing quotes and so forth and adding it to the database so that if works were ever looked at to deaccession, that the voices of our users was taken into account... I was really keen that voices came through in the system (P14).

### ***Interview Responses about Museum Critical Cataloguing Work Activities***

Interview participants also discussed four kinds of work activities that cut across all four major types of critical cataloguing projects; these are summarized in Table 4 and detailed below.

*Table 4: Current or past museum critical cataloguing project-independent activities discussed in interviews.*

<b>Participant(s)</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Activity description</b>	<b>Activity category</b>
P01	Museum	Guide for reparative description work; glossary of problematic terms. Staff group.	Develop guidance documents. Work with others.
	University	Staff group; contribute to authorities.	Work with others.
P02	Museum	Advocate; consult.	Work with others.
P03	Museum	Change data type; change field labels.	Customize CMS.
	Museum	Add non-Roman script.	Customize CMS.
P04	Museum	Guide for reparative description work; glossary of problematic terms. Staff group; host talks + discussions.	Develop guidance documents. Work with others.
P05	Museum	Consult.	Work with others.
P06, P07	Museum	Guide for documenting collection diversity.	Develop guidance documents.
		Participate in user group; contribute to authorities; consult.	Work with others.
P08, P09, P12, P15	Museum	Guide for reparative description work; guide for applying content warnings; glossary of problematic and preferred terms.	Develop guidance documents.
		Flag records.	Customize CMS.
		Staff group; advocate.	Work with others.
P10	Consultant	Add other voices.	Customize CMS.
P11	Museum	Guide for reparative description work; guide for applying content warnings; glossary of problematic and preferred terms.	Develop guidance documents.
		Flag records.	Customize CMS.
		Advocate.	Work with others.
P13	Museum	Guide for reparative description work; glossary of problematic and preferred terms.	Develop guidance documents.
		Advocate.	Work with others.

Table 4 (continued)

Participant(s)	Institution	Activity description	Activity category
P15	Museum	Advocate.	Work with others.
	Nonprofit	Add other voices.	Customize CMS.
P16	Museum	Glossary of preferred terms.	Develop guidance documents.
		Add other voices; add paradata.	Customize CMS.
		Participate in user group; consult.	Work with others.
P17	Consultant	Pressure vendor.	Work with others.
P18	Museum	Add non-Roman script.	Customize CMS.
		Contribute to authorities; consult.	Work with others.
P19, P20	Museum	Guide for reparative description; guide for reparative tagging work.	Develop guidance documents.
		Change field labels.	Customize CMS.
		Host talks + discussions; consult.	Work with others.
P21	Museum	Glossary of problematic terms.	Develop guidance documents.
		Flag records; change data type.	Customize CMS.
		Participate in user group; pressure vendor.	Work with others.
P22	Consultant	Guide for documenting collection diversity.	Develop guidance documents.
P23	University	Add other voices.	Customize CMS.
P24	Museum	Staff group.	Work with others.

#### *Develop guidance documents*

Participants at eight institutions discussed four types of guidelines (see Table 4). Guidelines for reparative description work were described as part of critical cataloguing work in five institutions. In three of these cases, they were accompanied by other guides: once alongside a guideline for reparative tagging, and twice alongside a guideline for applying content warnings. For both of these latter cases, this was because applying content warnings was seen as part of the work of addressing offensive language in catalogue records. For four of the five institutions discussed by participants, reparative cataloguing guidelines were also accompanied by glossaries; the guidelines then provided instructions about what to do when encountering instances of those terms. The final type of guideline document was a guideline for documenting collection diversity which details how to select terminology to use, the standard of research required to justify the assertion of an identity label, and what paradata gets added whenever an assertion is catalogued.

Participants also discussed the development of glossaries at seven institutions; three of these were glossaries of problematic terminology paired with preferred terms for the same concepts, two were of glossaries of problematic language only, and two were glossaries of preferred terminology only. All three glossaries of problematic and preferred terms were accompanied by guideline documents instructing users on how to use the glossaries during cataloguing.

#### *Customize database*

Participants discussed projects to customize collections database software at twelve institutions (see Table 4). The levels of customization varied, with the most common level of complexity being changes that were possible to make in the existing system but which required collaborating

with software providers or hiring developers to enact. These include adding new fields and capabilities to make it possible to flag records containing problematic language, add other voices into the record, and add paradata to fields. Simpler customizations were modifications that a database administrator within an institution was able to enact, including changing field labels on the user interface and changing the data type permitted by an existing field. The most complex case involved building new and custom systems: one museum worked with a software developer to build a bespoke CMS that was capable of recording and displaying non-Roman scripts.

#### *Work with others (internal)*

Participants described working across internal silos such as departmental divisions as part of critical cataloguing work taking place at nine institutions (see Table 4). They discussed the creation and maintenance of staff groups at five institutions. One participant described these meetings as a way to learn and apply solutions from other departments to their own context, giving them confidence in their action and increasing consistency of issue treatment across the museum, while another emphasized how participating in these groups 'is an incredible way of improving your practice' (P15). In three of these cases, the groups are officially sanctioned but with voluntary participation: staff are welcome to attend, but involvement is not mandated and there are no formal goals for the work that takes place within or comes out of them. For the other two, staff groups are more formal working groups where participants are expected to attend and have institutionally directed goals and procedures.

The second way of working within institutions also described by participants from five institutions is internal advocacy. One participant described how, over the course of a reparative cataloguing project, this moved from being a tangential to essential aspect of the work:

One of the challenging things in this area is bringing everyone with you. So it's making sure that others within the staff and the colleagues that you work with share the same view that this is an important thing and we maybe need to be doing things differently to what we already do... That's the big take away I think for me and my job was we've really done some good work here and we've enabled some things technically, but actually the biggest challenge and hurdle here will be having enough time I guess some capacity to actively continue those conversations and that thinking internally (P11).

#### *Work with others (external)*

The final type of critical cataloguing work discussed by participants involved finding ways of working with other museums and stakeholders; this was brought up in the contexts of ten institutions (see Table 4). Participants from six institutions spoke about consulting or collaborating with communities whose material culture was the subject of the records being addressed in the critical cataloguing work. The level of consultation described varied: participants from two institutions spoke about making a questionnaire to obtain information about identity-related language from makers, while participants from four others situated their work within the context of ongoing collaborative relationships.

Participants speaking about work at five museums detailed how they find ways to learn from each other and work together, such as through hosting talks or participating in self-organized interest groups. All three of the self-organized interest groups that participants discussed developed as user groups of specific CMS software. In two of these cases, part of the goal was to pressure vendors to make changes to their systems that are in alignment with the needs of critical cataloguers. Joining together allowed institutions to create a unified voice and advocate more effectively. For all of these groups, sharing resources and strategies and creating a sense of community are key motivating factors.

The final way that participants described working together, raised during three interviews, was in contributing to resources used by the sector such as linked open data authorities. This involved correcting entries or contributing new records of underrepresented<sup>31</sup> content areas to authorities to be used by other institutions.<sup>32</sup> In one case, this meant creating and

hosting linked open data authority records on the area of historically underrepresented cultural heritage that was the subject focus of the institution.

## Characterising Critical Cataloguing in Museums

### *A Taxonomy of Museum-Based Critical Cataloguing*

Findings from the interviews and literature resulted in the identification of nine types of critical cataloguing projects which could be grouped under four major headings, and 20 types of project-independent activities which could also be grouped under four major headings. This final taxonomy of museum-based critical cataloguing projects and activities is summarized in Table 5:

*Table 5: Taxonomy of museum-based critical cataloguing project and activity types.*

<b>Area</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>
Project	Reparative cataloguing	Reparative description
		Reparative tagging
		Language prioritisation
	Acknowledging power and positionality	Paradata
		Content warnings
		Disclaimer
		Ethical cataloguing statement
	Documenting diversity	Maker demographics
		Other voices
	Activity	Develop guidance documents
Glossary of preferred terms		
Glossary of problematic and preferred terms		
Guide reparative description work		
Guide applying content warnings		
Guide reparative tagging work		
Guide documenting collection diversity		
Customize database		
		Add paradata
		Add non-Roman script
		Change data type
		Change field labels
		Flag records
Work with others (internal)		Staff group
		Advocate
Work with others (external)		Consult
		Participate in user group
		Pressure vendor
	Contribute to authorities	
	Host talks and discussions	

### ***Comparing Findings***

The types of museum critical cataloguing projects discussed in the interviews confirmed those identified in the literature: museums are engaged in critical cataloguing projects focused on reparative cataloguing, acknowledging power and positionality, documenting diversity, and expanding the perspectives represented in their catalogue data. The interviews revealed one project subcategory not covered in the literature: writing ethical cataloguing statements as a way to acknowledge power and positionality. Although museums and other cultural heritage institutions have produced these statements, the process of developing them was not a subject of existing literature on critical cataloguing in museums.<sup>33</sup>

There was a greater difference regarding the project-independent activities described by participants compared to those described in existing literature, with more subcategories discussed by participants than had been written about. For the 'developing guidance documents' category, in addition to developing guides for conducting reparative description work and documenting collection diversity, participants spoke about creating guides for applying content warnings and engaging in reparative tagging work. Similarly, for the 'customizing databases' category, participants spoke about four additional ways this work took place beyond adding other voices and adding paradata: customizations required to change data types and field labels, flag records, and add additional scripts. Lastly, participants spoke about additional ways of working across institutions by contributing to authorities, participating in user groups, and pressuring vendors for system-wide changes.

### ***Limitations***

The projects described here do not represent the totality of all of the critical cataloguing work that has taken place, and continues to take place, in museums and with museum collections data. First, this research examines working taking place in English-speaking UK, USA, and Canada. The linguistic scope reflects the author's primary language, and the geographic scope represents the locations of the institutions identified during the literature review as well as those of the participants whose involvement was secured during the recruitment phase of the research. The geographic scope of research participants also likely reflects the position of the researcher being based in the UK and having a history of work and study in North America. This focus does not intend to suggest that these are the only areas in which critical cataloguing work is occurring in museums, but instead represents the range of information and sources that the author was able to engage with using the methods described above.

Second, there is work occurring that is difficult to learn about because knowledge about it has not been published or made publicly available. For example, a blog post about a survey on cataloguing queer heritage in UK museums points at the existence of LGBTQIA+-focused critical cataloguing in a number of museums, but details about what is taking place or where are not available. The only available information about some projects appears to be through news articles (as discussed above) or references made within other articles, such as the Field Museum developing a disclaimer statement for their collection (Briscoe et al. 2022) and the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York being listed as museums working on adding artists demographic data to catalogue records by SFMOMA.<sup>35</sup> In all of these cases, the coverage or mentions of the projects do not provide insight into decisions or actions, they only serve to make known that critical cataloguing work of some kind took place. What all of this does do, though, is give credence to the hypothesis that there is, and has been, critical cataloguing work taking place in museums that is not yet widely known.

Finally, there is critical work taking place in museums that may involve critical cataloguing but which is not discussed under this framing. For example, this was hinted at when participants discussed what they saw as related institutional work but not critical cataloguing, and there is extensive literature on co-curation and other community collaborative work in museums which may involve a cataloguing component. However, while this related work may offer additional subcategories to the taxonomy, the alignment between existing literature and interview responses in regards to the major category types gives confidence that the structure of this taxonomy is consistent with the kinds of critical cataloguing work that are happening in museums today.

## Conclusion

Museums are engaged in a wide range of work as part of critical cataloguing: 29 types of projects and activities were identified in the creation of a taxonomy of museum-based critical cataloguing. This research has introduced a taxonomy of critical cataloguing project and activity types sourced from available literature and both confirmed and expanded by interviews with two dozen critical cataloguing practitioners from the UK, USA, and Canada. Furthermore, through the interviews, a greater amount of detail about critical cataloguing work was unearthed than has been made available in the literature so far. For example, the work of writing ethical cataloguing statements and advocating for critical cataloguing within an institution is known to have happened in museums. These efforts are made evident through the publishing of ethical cataloguing statements on museum websites or allusions made in news coverage by statements such as: 'Ms. Gosselink [head of the history department at the Rijksmuseum] said the project had been in the preliminary stages for a few years, but it went into effect in earnest only in the past month', hinting at behind-the-scenes efforts to move a critical cataloguing project into production.<sup>36</sup> However, the work that has gone into these efforts has largely been absent from literature: this work may be happening, but it is not as of yet the subject of publications. A taxonomy derived from literature alone would therefore risk missing areas of work that interviews have revealed to be crucial elements of the efforts. This combined research reveals a complex and vibrant field of critical cataloguing taking place in museums, providing a response to the question of what is happening in museums under the heading of critical cataloguing: in short, a lot.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Collections Trust, '#RethinkingCataloguing', Collections Trust [n.d.]. <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/blog/rethinkingcataloguing/>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>2</sup> The listservs used were those managed by the Critical Digital Humanities Initiative, the University of Victoria Digital Humanities Summer School, the Museum Computer Group, the Museum Computer Network, Linked Art, and Collections as Data, the American Alliance of Museum's Collection Stewardship membership community, and the Worlding Public Cultures research group email list.
- <sup>3</sup> Carey Dunne, 'Why the Rijksmuseum Is Removing Bigoted Terms from Its Artworks' Titles', Hyperallergic 2015. <http://hyperallergic.com/263180/why-the-rijksmuseum-is-removing-bigoted-terms-from-its-artworks-titles/>, accessed 22 October 2025; Nina Siegal, 'Rijksmuseum Removing Racially Charged Terms From Artworks' Titles and Descriptions', ArtsBeat 2015. <https://archive.nytimes.com/artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/10/rijksmuseum-removing-racially-charged-terms-from-artworks-titles-and-descriptions/>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>4</sup> Carey Dunne, 'Danish National Gallery Removes the Word "Negro" from 13 Artworks' Titles', Hyperallergic 2016. <http://hyperallergic.com/304385/danish-national-gallery-removes-the-word-negro-from-13-artworks-titles/>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>5</sup> Sheena Goodyear, 'Why the Art Gallery of Ontario Removed "Indian" from the Name of this Emily Carr painting', CBC Radio 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-tuesday-edition-1.4672905/why-the-art-gallery-of-ontario-removed-indian-from-the-name-of-this-emily-carr-painting-1.4672934>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>6</sup> Frances Lloyd-Baynes, 'Documenting Diversity', Minneapolis Institute of Art 2019. <https://medium.com/minneapolis-institute-of-art/documenting-diversity-17f55a4118da>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>7</sup> Zoë Hollingworth, 'Tackling Racist Language in Collections', Collections Trust 2021. <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/blog/tackling-racist-language-in-collections/>, accessed 22

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- <sup>8</sup> Jip Borm, 'Pitt Rivers Object Collections: Labelling Matters: The Role of Language in the Ethics of Representation', Pitt Rivers Object Collections 2021. <https://pittrivers-object.blogspot.com/2021/03/labelling-matters-role-of-language-in.html>, accessed 22 October 2025; UAL Decolonising Arts Institute (2021) *Doing the Work: Documenting Collections*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Grru35i78M>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>9</sup> Ray Barnett, 'Decolonising Language', Bristol Museums 2022. <https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/blog/decolonising-language/>, accessed 22 October 2025; Frances Davies and Allie Dillon, 'Decolonising Descriptions', Collections Trust 2022. <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/blog/decolonising-descriptions/>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>10</sup> SFMOMA, 'Artist Identities Data Program', San Francisco Museum of Modern Art 2022. <https://www.sfmoma.org/march-2022-update-artist-identities-data-program/>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>11</sup> Jennifer Micale, 'How Inclusive Metadata Fosters Diversity in Museum Collections', News - Binghamton University 2023. <https://www.binghamton.edu/news/story/4219/data-points-how-inclusive-metadata-fosters-diversity-in-museum-collections>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>12</sup> Sian Woodward and Kirsty Kerr, 'Cataloguing the 'Oriental' in MoDA's Silver Studio Collection', Collections Trust 2023a. <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/blog/cataloguing-the-oriental-in-modas-silver-studio-collection/>, accessed 22 October 2025; Sian Woodward and Kirsty Kerr, 'Cataloguing the 'Oriental' in MoDA's Silver Studio Collection', Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture 2023b. <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2023CatOrientalSilverStudio3BlogPosts.pdf>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>13</sup> Rosalie Hooper and Tara Contractor, 'Bias Remediation in Interpretation and Data', Art in Context III: Philadelphia Museum of Art 2023. [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1XG3i2Z1PePRVEa4i4\\_0GhHNbGpuESTSy](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1XG3i2Z1PePRVEa4i4_0GhHNbGpuESTSy), accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>14</sup> Amy Adams, 'The National Museum of the Royal Navy—Addressing Empire', Collections Trust 2024. <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/blog/the-national-museum-of-the-royal-navy-addressing-empire/>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>15</sup> This term is borrowed from critical archival practice (e.g. Hughes-Watkins 2018).
- <sup>16</sup> Thompson-Odlum 2021.
- <sup>17</sup> Lloyd-Baynes 2019.
- <sup>18</sup> Micale 2023.
- <sup>19</sup> Goodyear 2018.
- <sup>20</sup> Hollingworth 2021; Hollingworth and Windross 2023.
- <sup>21</sup> Barnett 2022; Davies and Dillon 2022.
- <sup>22</sup> SFMOMA 2022.
- <sup>23</sup> Micale 2023.

- <sup>24</sup> Woodward and Kerr 2023a; Woodward and Kerr 2023b.
- <sup>25</sup> Hooper 2023.
- <sup>26</sup> Adams 2024.
- <sup>27</sup> Hooper 2023.
- <sup>28</sup> SFMOMA 2022.
- <sup>29</sup> Goodyear 2018.
- <sup>30</sup> Hooper 2023.
- <sup>31</sup> ‘Underrepresented’ is used here to refer to makers who have been historically omitted from prominent authority records, including but not limited to those from South American, African, Middle Eastern, and Asian countries, as well as Indigenous peoples globally.
- <sup>32</sup> Such as the Getty Vocabularies (<https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/>, accessed 22 October 2025) and Wikidata (<https://www.wikidata.org/>, accessed 22 October 2025).
- <sup>33</sup> For example: Philadelphia Museum of Art, ‘Ethical Cataloging Statement’, Philadelphia Museum of Art 2021. <https://philamuseum.libguides.com/home/about-us/ethical-cataloging>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>34</sup> Arran Rees, ‘Queer Cataloguing in UK museums’, Centre for Critical Studies in Museums, Galleries and Heritage (CCSMGH) 2023. <https://medium.com/centre-for-critical-studies-in-museums-galleries/queer-cataloguing-in-uk-museums-430e192b9d23>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- <sup>35</sup> SFMOMA 2022.
- <sup>36</sup> Siegal 2015.

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