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**PEOPLE -
CENTRED
CATALOGUING**

KATHLEEN LAWTHOR

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INTRODUCTION

“People-centered design is a practice where designers focus on specific people’s needs, taking the time to learn from particular population.”

INTERACTION DESIGN FOUNDATION

Cataloguing is “...the ongoing process of recording and managing information about collections, often from multiple perspectives, to meet the needs of a range of users.”

COLLECTIONS TRUST’S DEFINITION OF CATALOGUING, UPDATED IN 2022

The definition of cataloguing was updated in 2022 as part of Collections Trust’s #RethinkingCataloguing campaign. The new procedure ‘shift[s] the focus of cataloguing from the needs of only the museum to the needs of a variety of users’.

Cataloguing practice in museums has centred the needs of the institution, prioritising supposedly objective descriptions which deny any bias in the cataloguer. This has resulted in a body of records that privilege certain individuals and cultures, contain offensive assumptions and generalisations about others, and can fail to capture what makes objects meaningful for people.

As museums strive to make their collections relevant and accessible for diverse audiences, a people-centred approach is needed.

This document is a provocation for those responsible for museum collections to:

- centre the needs of users, so that our work has real impact
- consider what we record about all the individuals connected to collections, so that we can address historic imbalance and cultural bias.
- record information about ourselves to help future custodians of collections understand our work

This publication was made possible through a Headley Fellowship with the Art Fund. From March to September 2022 the author worked with the Powell-Cotton Museum to research and catalogue a collection of photographs taken in Somalia in 1934 to 1935, with the aim of making the collection more accessible. The project provides suggestions and case studies for how museums might approach people-centred cataloguing.

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USERS OF COLLECTIONS INFORMATION

THE FULL RECORDS OF OUR MUSEUM COLLECTIONS are often only accessible to internal staff. Museums may make some or all of their records available digitally, but this is usually the catalogue entry, written with these internal users in mind, simply republished online. Users visit digital collections sites for different reasons, but their information needs are not always catered for in the way museums present their collections.

Museums need to think more carefully about the information they include when they catalogue their collections, who this information serves, and where and how the information can be found. Rather than assuming that online collections information can and will be accessed by everyone, a people-centred design approach to collections information would focus on the needs of a specific group or groups.

CASE STUDY: SOMALI PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTIONS

Being people-centred means focusing on specific people's needs. The Powell-Cotton Museum already knew that they had a significant collection of material from Somalia (one of the largest in Europe). They knew from previous work with Somali participants that many people were more interested in the photographs than the objects in the collection. The museum was also aware that their target audience was not one homogenous 'Somali community'. The project focused on the needs of three specific groups:

- Direct descendants of some of the people in the photographs and their extended networks.
- Somali diaspora communities in East London. The museum is located in Birchington, a village in Kent. The area is predominantly white, and the nearest city with a significant Somali population is London.

- Somali and Somali diaspora communities online. I worked to engage this broader group using social media, and having written on my blog about [using Instagram to engage people with these collections](#).

For the first group, the museum was already in contact with members of the Bajuni diaspora community in Kenya who had recognised family members in photographs from the Bajuni islands. Such a direct connection was a rare opportunity for the museum, both to share more of the photos with the family and their networks, and with their permission, to record more information about the individuals in the photographs. [You can see some of these photographs and read about the process here](#).

To better understand the second audience, I used some of my Headley Fellowship research and development budget to organise a workshop with [Women's Inclusive Team \(WIT\)](#), a Somali-led organisation in Tower Hamlets. [You can read more reflections on the process here.](#)

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THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE COLLECTIONS

MUSEUMS HAVE HISTORICALLY RECORDED the contributions of only a very few individuals – those with the influence, wealth, and privilege to collect, donate and ensure their names were remembered. Yet there were usually many other individuals who contributed to historic collections. This includes the original makers or owners of objects, the people who facilitated collection by translating, navigating, or locating specimens, and the people who prepared and documented collections so that they could formally enter the museum collection.

How can museums ensure that people's names and contributions are respectfully recorded and acknowledged?

CASE STUDY: MUSEUM MAKERS' NAMES

The Powell-Cotton Museum was founded as a single room collection by Percy Powell-Cotton in 1896 and was run by the Powell-Cotton family until 2006. Now the independent trust that runs the museum is working on a programme of [re-imagining the museum](#) inspired by the vision statement 'people matter'. As part of this work the museum has been researching and sharing the stories of more 'Museum Makers' - the people who contributed to the Powell-Cotton Museum and its collections.

The museum has been able to do this because the Powell-Cottons were more diligent than most collectors in recording names. However, they would sometimes just record the first name of a person who was working for them. This was often an anglicised nickname rather than the name the person may have used for

themselves. The museum team recognises that they may not ever be able to recover the full, or most appropriate name for each individual, so took the following approach:

Rather than aiming for a standardised form for all names, separated into title, first name, surname etc, it was decided that the name would be recorded in one field, without the requirement to split parts of the name or title into different fields. We also recorded alternate versions of names elsewhere in the record so that people could be found by searching different versions of their name.

[Personal names around the world](#) on WC3 is a useful resource for thinking about names. Note that this deals with scenarios where you are creating a new form to collect data about people's names. With historic museum collections, staff have the challenge of recording the information that has been preserved in a way that is respectful to the individual and makes sense to contemporary users of the data.

CULTURAL GROUPS

Because of the way in which collections, and collections information, have been gathered over time, many individual people's names have not been recorded. This is especially true for people who have been historically marginalised and othered. In ethnographic collecting, where items were selected as 'typical' of a culture or group, it is usually only the group name that has been recorded. Cultural group names attributed to museum objects are often outdated exonyms, some of which are offensive to people who are descended from those communities. Even when terms are not offensive, an old, anglicised spelling of a term may make it undiscoverable to someone searching for the contemporary term.

CONTEMPORARY TERMS

The best way to find out the most appropriate term to use would be to conduct [user research](#) with interested people with links to that cultural group in order to identify terms that are accurate, respectful, and useful to them in connecting with their heritage. This requires dedicated time and resources. In addition to staff time, museums should be prepared to offer payment to, or negotiate a mutually beneficial exchange with, any potential users they reach out to. The museum also needs to have a fairly good idea of who descendent communities are in advance of reaching out, and to have done some initial work to identify which collections might be of interest to them.

Where this level of research is not possible, there are some steps cataloguers can take:

- Read historic documentation critically. If you are unfamiliar with a term, check before reproducing it
- Don't assume terms used on other museum sites are correct, they are likely dealing with the same issues as you
- Wikipedia can be a good starting point for terms. As with all sources read critically and check citations where possible
- Refer to resources such as the [Inclusive Terminology Glossary](#) created by Carissa Chew
- Once you have identified a suitable term, check for other items in your museum's collections that it might also be usefully linked to
- Consider creating a working terminology document that is specific to your collection, in which you can include your sources and detail any research already done

INACCURATE, OUTDATED AND OFFENSIVE TERMS

The bias inherent in descriptions is most obvious when we come across a record which uses derogatory language to describe objects or people associated with them. Words which are now recognised as offensive were considered appropriate by the people who wrote those descriptions. This is evidence of the prejudice and inequality in society which is reflected in how the object has been interpreted and what meanings have been attributed to it since it has been in the museum's collection. This evidence should be retained in the museum records because offensive terms are part of the history of the museum. However, such terms should be included with care and with consideration for the potential users of the collection.

CONTENT WARNINGS

You may want to include either be a blanket content warning for the whole collection or specific warnings at the start of a record where the offensive content is reproduced.

For public records it is also useful to include:

- Information about the history of the collection (This explains why the content is there).
- A commitment to action (This shows that the museum is not only aware of the issue, but is actively working on improving the records).
- An invitation to feedback (This shows that the museum is open to criticism, and it values new perspectives and other sources of expertise).

[Read more about content warnings, with examples from museum websites.](#)

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THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE RECORDS

OUR DATABASES AND PAPER RECORDS contain information compiled by many people over many decades. Yet the person who writes the description of the object is rarely acknowledged. There is an assumption that a description is neutral and objective.

To make sense of legacy catalogue information, it is useful to know when it was written, and in what context, for example:

- field notes at the time of collection
- a description of an artwork from a sale at auction
- during the museum acquisition process
- an inventory following disassociation from the original information

It is also useful to know who wrote it:

- the collector
- a specialist curator
- a collections manager
- a volunteer

Each of these individuals will have brought different levels of skill, knowledge and lived experience to their work.

Approaches to cataloguing can vary depending on people's roles within organisations, their training, and the discipline that they work in. Our cataloguing work is also influenced by personal factors: interests, bias, positionality.

RECORDING INFORMATION ABOUT OURSELVES

One of the consequences of viewing museum documentation work as objective and neutral is that we have not considered it necessary to record information about our sources or when and how information contained in our records was collected.

A simple way to address bias in contemporary records is to record who has written a description or interpretive text.

A named author of a record can then be linked to a person record in your collections management system.

Spectrum lists several [units of information](#) that it may be necessary to record about a person. There is scope here for museums and

teams to decide how best to record information about staff members and collaborators.

A brief biography as part of the person record could include:

- dates of when the person worked at or with the museum and in what capacity
- projects and exhibitions they have been involved with
- particular collections specialisms or research interests
- references to publications or other work
- a copy of information reproduced elsewhere (for example if the museum website has staff profiles)

RECOVERING INFORMATION ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO WROTE OUR HISTORIC RECORDS

By acknowledging that past cataloguers also brought their own experiences and ideologies to the records they wrote, we can examine gaps and omissions, and start rebalancing the record to include information and perspectives that have been excluded.

Collections Trust advises that museums should have a [documentation procedural manual](#), to include a section on the history of your documentation systems. This document can also be used to record information about the people who have been responsible for cataloguing in your institution in the past and/or to refer to where information can be found in people records on your collections management system.

CASE STUDY: DIANA POWELL-COTTON

The photographs which this project focuses on were taken by Diana Powell-Cotton. She recorded information about the people and places depicted in them. How can thinking about Diana as an individual help the museum to identify gaps and omissions in the collections records?

- Diana had no formal training as an anthropologist, and these photographs were taken on her first visit to the African continent. She therefore did not have knowledge of Somali culture before she arrived in the country
- She had contacts among other white Europeans in the area including Italian colonial governors and Swedish missionaries
- She visited the National Museum of Somalia in Mogadishu (which was run by the Italian colonial authorities) and made notes about

Somali people and culture based on the content there.

- She worked with translators and fixers, including Hassan Sceek Ali, who were Somali men. Their position may have affected the accuracy of the information they were able to give her, particularly about women, and people from non-Somali minorities.
- She sent her notes and diaries back to England where they were typed by Miss Fuller, a private secretary at the Powell-Cotton Museum. The repeated copying of information increases the possibility of human error in these records.

This context reminds us that the information Diana recorded is not neutral. What she wrote, and the way it was recorded, was both shaped by her personal experience, and influenced by many other people.

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