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CONTENT TO CONSIDER: EXPLORING GENDER BIAS IN COLONIAL COLLECTIONS

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Abstract

[still need]

"Truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are."
Friedrich Nietzsche, "On truth and lie in an extra-moral sense" (Nietzsche, 46)

Digitisation of cultural heritage collections in and by libraries, archives and museums is never a neutral process. The decisions we make today about what to digitise from our collections are inextricably influenced by past decisions made about which items should even be included in our collections. These selection processes reflect and perpetuate the worldviews of those people making these decisions as well, as power balances, or imbalances, prevalent at that time. In much of Africa, and elsewhere, European colonialism exerted a profound influence over collecting institutions and continues to affect how they operate today. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the selection process and decisions made by institutions were not inevitable and that, very often, collections are imbued with various biases. If we are to avoid replicating and reinforcing these normalised biases, we must first be aware of how and why value judgements were made. Using gender imbalance in collections as an example, I suggest that exposing and interrogating biases during the planning stage of a digitisation project can be a very rewarding process that not only reveals "gaps" in a collection, but creates spaces for other voices to be heard.

Value is in the eye of the beholder

Few cultural heritage artefacts are inherently valuable. Instead, their treasured status stems from subjective statements made about their worth and, based on these, decisions are made as to whether they are worthy of entering collections in museums, libraries or archives (Appadurai, 4). Once part of these collections, their perceived value increases further simply by being included within them. That there is, in fact, nothing inevitable about the decisions made, or values subsequently attributed, is highly significant. As Edward Said and Valentine Mudimbe are at pains to point out, the subjective decisions themselves are informed by worldviews that are likewise constructed and historical. Given the pervasiveness of European imperialism, many of the historical statements made by cultural

heritage institutions about value, both in Europe and Africa, were shaped by a dichotomous colonial paradigm whereby "all that is European is civilized; all that is African is barbarous" (Mudimbe, 169).

Not only are these statements constructed within this framework, they both embody and perpetuate relationships "of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" between the "West" and the rest, where the "Westerner" never loses the "relative upper hand" (Said 2003, 5-7). As such, knowledge is produced according to "categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order" but without ever acknowledging this fact (Mudimbe, x). Indeed, normalising and universalising this process so that its "repressive strategies and practices" are made invisible, is perhaps imperialism's greatest "achievement" (Chakabarty, 45). It is this "possibility of a forgetfulness" that means at the same time as incorporating, producing and conserving, the archive destroys; this is what Jacques Derrida terms the archive's "death drive" (Derrida, 19). This is the inherent paradox of the archive. This death drive is not limited merely to "repression", which, drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis, Derrida explains as "unconscious", but also "suppression"- a "second censorship"- where repression is impossible but displacement is not (Derrida, 28).

While we are, theoretically, in a post-colonial period, imperialism, as Said argues, "did not end, did not suddenly become 'past', once decolonization had set in motion the dismantling of the classical empires" (Said 1994, 341). Moreover, while we like to imagine that scholarship has improved, that it has become more egalitarian since decolonization "as more information is accumulated, methods are refined", we cannot divorce ourselves entirely from our predecessors and the circumstances that provoked their ideas (Said 2003, 202). Recognising and making these structures visible means accepting that even if we were to digitise every artefact or document held by our cultural heritage institution without "discrimination"- what Mats Dahlström, Joacim Hansson and Ulrika Kjellman understand as "mass digitization"- we are not engaging in a neutral process, but are replicating a worldview inherent in our collections, and at the expense of other narratives (Dahlström, 462). "Critical digitization" where "at every step one can make choices, select, leave out and interpret" (Dahlström, 462), does, as Michelle Pickover suggests, mean the digitisation process "merely adds an additional layer of complexity" since decisions made today about what to digitise are also neither made independently of prevailing worldviews, nor of historical circumstances (Pickover, 3).

"Until the lion tells his (or her) side of the story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter" – African proverb

One bias potentially revealed by exposing this long, historical process of selection is gender, or a disparity in terms of representing men at the expense of women. This is an issue taken up by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her influential essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" through her analysis of the ways the British Raj's banned and documented the Hindu practice of sati (widow immolation) in

nineteenth-century India. Perceived by the British as symptomatic of Hindu barbarity, they could frame abolition of sati as perfectly benevolent within their civilising narrative, or as "white men saving brown women from brown men"; at the other end of the narrative, Hindu men were presented as favouring sati since the women themselves "wanted to die" (Spivak, 93). Subsequently, women are doubly denied a voice in the archive, first by the colonisers and then by Hindu men. Similarly, during Waitangi Tribunal hearings in New Zealand, where Māori groups can relate actions or omissions of the Crown since 1840, Māori women have first had to argue that the chiefly, sovereign status of women rangatiratanga was never documented in archival collections since these concepts were framed in a western colonial discourse where chieftanship and sovereignty were "male things" (Tuhiwai, 46). Thus, the normalising gender impulses of colonialism ensured that the potential political power of these Māori women, either through incapability or unwillingness on the part of those "selecting" information to document, never entered the "official" archive in the first place.

In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) archive has more recently been scrutinised for its "skewed" gender bias (Graybill, 1). Part of the problem, Cheryl McEwan argues, was the TRC's mandate to address "gross human rights abuses" including "killing, abduction, torture, or severe ill treatment" that seemed to preclude the more banal but daily violation of women's rights under apartheid (McEwan, 746). When women did testify at the TRC, they recounted instead violence against their sons, brothers, fathers or other male relatives. Perhaps a more pervasive, but less quantifiable, reason for women's absence from the TRC were cultural pressures that shamed them against discussing sexual violence, particularly when those incidents took place within the liberation camps and so might discredit the movement itself (McEwan, 745). Lyn Graybill does recognise that the TRC's agreement, part way through the process, to hold four women's only panels went some way towards unearthing these silences, but insists they did not go far enough (Graybill, 5). Consequently, women's stories were subsumed by a need to build a heroic founding myth for the new post-apartheid regime; accounts that challenged this were, therefore, systematically silenced (McEwan, 747).

"The danger of the single story" (Adichie)

One potential issue with interrogating these silences is to see women purely as victims of the collecting and documenting process. As Zine Magubane's exploration of Africans "displayed" at colonial European fairs suggests, silence can also be used deliberately to express discontent. Nonsenzo, one of the Zulu warriors displayed at St. George's Gallery, Knightsbridge, for example, enraged his "keepers" by refusing to speak to the "audience" (Magubane, 58). In this case, Nonsenzo turns on its head the idea that an absence of voice is evidence of someone being denied agency, and uses this device precisely to assert his agency. Likewise, Annelle Zaloumis, responsible for collecting many of the Ndebele works held in the Iziko South African National Gallery's permanent collection,

recounts how the women who sold her their beadworks requested no evidence of the transaction, otherwise their husbands would demand the money from the sale and spend it on beer! (Zaloumis). Thus, the names of the creators are absent from much of the documentation on this collection. Certainly, the more local reasons for such silences are many. Revealing them is, as Mudimbe, explains, an important first step in a Foucauldian process that allows us to look "upstream of the results", to see what made those silences possible in the first place (Mudimbe, x). Moreover, Mudimbe argues that while "there is no such thing as a history of silence, [this] does not imply there is no way of writing a history of silenced experiences" (Mudimbe, x), suggesting that our efforts to interrogate these gaps will, in fact, enrich our knowledge about our collections.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of this revealing process is understanding why these silences still matter. Fiona Ross insists that "we need to learn to listen to the silence", suggesting that we are not always equipped to interpret discourses if the teller is not employing the tools with which we, the audience, are familiar (Graybill, 6). This is a sentiment echoed in Krog et al.'s analysis of Mrs Konile's TRC hearing which is misrepresented as nonsense if the audience does not have sufficient cultural context (Krog, et al.). As Mamphele Ramphele asserts, developing these listening skills is so fundamental because the ability to speak out and be heard allows women to acknowledge their pain, to be in a "better" position to feel "worthy" of suffering and so be "available to the possibilities of healing" (Graybill, 6).

This is not to suggest, of course, that all women are equally silenced by or excluded from such collections, nor that women can be treated as a homogenous group. As Joan Anderson, Koushambi Basu Khan and Sheryl Reimer-Kirkham suggest, social, economic and cultural as well as historical factors shape women's lives differently (Anderson, et al., 19). Ignoring the influence that race and class plays in shaping women's identities risks propagating a "universalising white feminism" (Frankenberg, 3). Indeed, Oyeronke Oyewumi argues that even the fixed social category "women" is not, in fact, universal. In her discussion of Yoruba culture and kinship ties, she demonstrates how a European, or English, penchant for binaries means the words "oko" and "iyawo" are often mistakenly translated as husband and wife. In fact, "oko" encompasses both male and female. "Iyawo" correctly refers to in-marrying brides, is female and is inferior to "oko"; however, "oko" can also be female and superior to the "iyawo". These identities shift over time within the family structure and so are more fluid than a Western notion of gender (Oyewumi, 316).

Moving forwards

Collections, then, are imbued with various biases and gender, itself arguably a construct, is but one of the issues deserving greater interrogation. Yet, I argue that the process of revealing this representational disparity within collections is helpful in developing an approach that might reveal

other types of silences or forgetting. Taking time to consider and reveal which constructed narratives are at play in our collections before commencing digitisation is a necessary step towards interrogating past (and present) biases and, hopefully, to avoid replicating and reinforcing normalised misrepresentations. Making the digitisation process more transparent and revealing it as a highly politicised process will reveal gaps that show how successfully cultural heritage institutions have silenced other narratives in the past. I do not suggest that libraries, archives or museums determine how these gaps should be filled or which stories should fill them, nor do I believe we will ever have a "complete" archive of the past. Rather, I argue that they create spaces through which other stories, such as women's stories, can be articulated if those storytellers choose.

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