Challenging legacies: making the British Library's collections and metadata more inclusive

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CERL Equality, diversity and inclusivity.
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Anti-Racism Project (ARP)

In July 2020, following the brutal murder of George Floyd and the global protests against racism that resulted, the Anti-Racism Project (ARP), a pan-Library working group was set up.

The ARP's work is to develop an action plan to transform the British Library into an actively anti-racist organisation.

Designed as bottom-up, staff led, project

Subgroups

- Audiences
- Behaviour values & Experiences
- Cataloguing & Metadata (CAM)
- Collections & Content
- Data Research and Insights
- People & HR Policy
- Leaders and Coordinators

Audiences

- Commission research into non-users
- Increase community-led programming
- Ensure diverse voices are present in the planning and delivery of exhibition projects.
- Include diverse voices in our exhibitions and displays
- Content statements and additional interpretation onsite and online.

People and HR Policies

- Sign up to Race at Work Charter and implement the Charter's principles.
- Review all policies and processes to remove unfairness and bias
- Develop a strategy to recruit, develop and promote more diverse staff into senior leadership positions
- Set targets to improve BAME representation in key areas

Data, Research and insight

- Develop relevant Key Performance Indicators following data gathering and research analysis
- Identify data requirements to monitor progress and propose areas of improvement
- Publish an annual report of progress

Collections and Curation

- Undertake provenance research
- Build collections working closer with communities
- Include community engagement in curatorial roles
- Deliver Black Studies action plan
- Publicise Race Equality work we are doing this area

Behaviour, Values and Experiences

- Run staff survey on experiences and attitudes with recommendations for improvement
- Develop networks to provide continuous improvement and learning opportunities
- Use staff performance review to reinforce values
- Consider other values and wellbeing models
- Establish clear procedures for dealing with racism onsite and online

Cataloguing & Metadata

Recommendations from the British Library's Anti-Racism Project's subgroup on Cataloguing & Metadata

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Cataloguing & Metadata Subgroup: Purpose

- To understand and expose the extent and impact of discrimination and bias in the Library's cataloguing practices and metadata.

- To facilitate the development and enhancement of descriptions, interpretations and presentations of collection items

- To collaborate with colleagues involved in these areas of the Library, and to learn from best practice beyond the Library, to make recommendations to enhance the safety, inclusivity and accessibility of the Library’s collections for all potential users.

Cataloguing & Metadata subgroup: scope

- Definition of metadata : **“the information we record to describe, contextualise, manage and preserve our collections”.**
- Audit existing cataloguing and metadata content, practices and processes to capture the full extent of racial bias and offence.
- Audit external spaces that make use of BL metadata (e.g. Flickr)
- Gather expertise and opinions of colleagues across the Library and make full use of international collaborations and policy groups we are already part of to inform our work.
- Develop ambitious recommendations that fulfil the Library’s responsibility as a significant international institution, and that set an example as to how to embed an ethical metadata approach.

Outcomes

3 Broad objectives covering:

- Metadata
- Access & Discovery
- Policy & principles

Making the case for resources:

“Communicate the centrality of cataloguing and metadata to the production of knowledge and to the presentation of cultural heritage for our diverse communities “

“Provide greater resource to cataloguing and metadata teams through the creation of new projects and posts and greater resource to Technology to support our infrastructure.”

Metadata

- We will establish a comprehensive glossary of inclusive terminology to support a multifaceted collections audit.
- We will create a flexible approach for treating problematic terminology that ensures descriptions are contextualised and accurate, and that ensures users are able to experience the catalogue and website safely, warning them where necessary of the potential for discriminatory and harmful content

Access and Discovery

We will develop more flexible subject terminologies and discovery approaches

- to bypass outdated and inappropriate language;
- to surface under-described and undiscoverable collections;
- to respect access protocols of culturally sensitive heritage.
- We will improve discovery of marginalised experiences in the collection through the creation of guides, finding aids, blogs, social media, as well as increased, targeted, and fuller cataloguing.

Policy & Principles

We will:

- establish ethical principles for cataloguing and metadata
- ensure that staff tasked to work on sensitive material receive adequate knowledge, training, and emotional support.
- provide regular and mandatory training to all staff on best practice.

Priorities

Objectives Item No	Objectives Description	IMPACT	PRIORITY	Potential Primary & Secondary Lead(s)
CM 1.1	Establish a comprehensive glossary of problematic and inclusive terminology as a reference for the cataloguing of culturally sensitive material	HIGH	HIGH	TBC
CM 1.2	Establish a multifaceted approach to auditing the collections for racist descriptions, through resourced projects and business-as-usual work in cataloguing and curation teams	HIGH	HIGH	TBC
CM 1.3	Establish a flexible schema for treating problematic terminology that considers terms in context, while not inhibiting the accurate identification of items	HIGH	HIGH	TBC
CM 1.4	Ensure that staff tasked to work on sensitive material receive adequate knowledge, training and emotional support and provide regular and mandatory training to all staff around anti-racist cataloguing practice	HIGH	HIGH	TBC
CM 2.0	Devote greater resources to existing cataloguing through the creation of new projects and posts to allow more time for collection items to be described fully and for cataloguers to promote material via collection guides, blogs and social media to avoid future under- description	HIGH	MEDIUM	TBC
CM 3.1	Create a more accessible and transparent metadata feedback process to encourage users to report harmful material	MEDIUM	LOW	TBC
CM 3.2	Develop processes to enable continuous collaboration with stakeholder communities, while respecting our partners' time and labour, and providing compensation where appropriate	HIGH	MEDIUM	TBC
CM 4.0	Implement a system of advisories by which users are made aware of the existence of terms or images in the Library's website, content and catalogue records that may cause offence or distress	HIGH	HIGH	TBC
CM 5.0	Develop more flexible subject terminologies and discovery approaches, through which outdated and inappropriate terms can be addressed or bypassed	HIGH	MEDIUM	TBC
CM 6.0	Develop the means to search the collections by language, especially for lesser-known languages, and to search in original (non-Roman) scripts	MEDIUM	LOW	TBC
CM 7.0	Work with indigenous communities and experts to establish appropriate access and description protocols for material of relevance to Indigenous cultural heritage	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	TBC
CM 8.0	Establish ethical principles for cataloguing and metadata from which to update and maintain policies and processes	HIGH	HIGH	TBC
CM 9.0	Provide greater resource to cataloguing and metadata teams through the creation of new projects and posts and greater resource to Technology to support our infrastructure	HIGH	HIGH	TBC
CM 10.0	Communicate the centrality of cataloguing and metadata to the production of knowledge and to the presentation of cultural heritage for our diverse communities	HIGH	HIGH	TBC

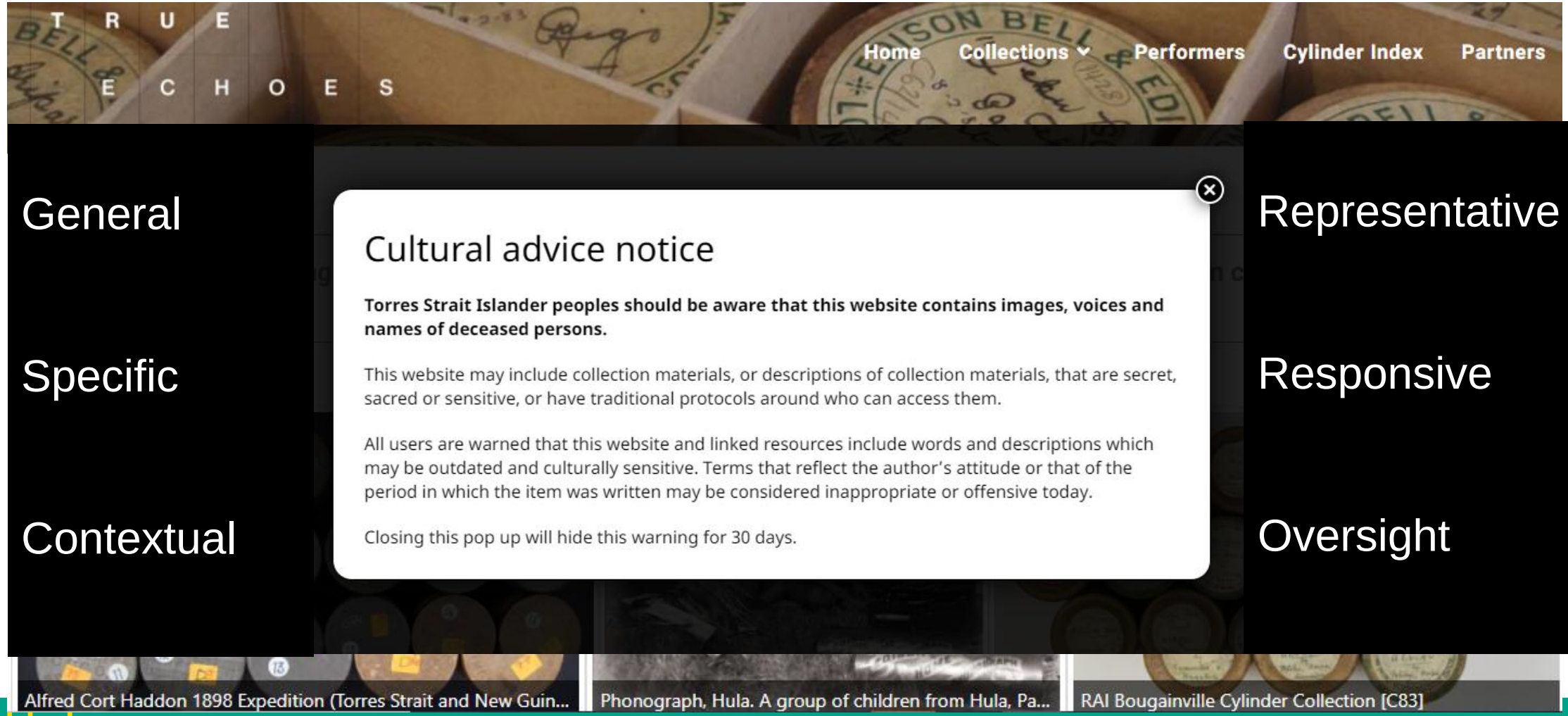
CM1.1 Establish a comprehensive glossary of problematic and inclusive terminology as a reference for the cataloguing of culturally sensitive material

Potentially offensive term/phrase	Historical context	Preferred term/phrase	Tag	Related Library of Congress Subject Heading
'concubine'/'concubines' 'slave concubine' / 'slave concubines' 'enslaved concubine' / 'enslaved concubines' **'slave mistress'** / 'slave mistresses' 'enslaved mistress' / 'enslaved mistresses' 'mistress' / 'mistresses'	Terms used to disguise histories of sexual violence against enslaved women	**Sexual violence, sexual assault, rape, coercion under slavery**	Race, Black history, slavery, USA, Latin America, Caribbean, intersectionality, gender, women's history, Early modern, Modern, 17th century, 18th century, 19th century, 20th century, British Empire, English	Women slaves
'colored' / 'coloreds' 'coloured'/ 'coloureds' 'colored people'	The term 'colored' was historically used in the USA for African American people. It is now deemed offensive although continues to be used in some official titles such as 'The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People'.	**African American** or **South African person of mixed Black and white heritage** or **person of colour**, as appropriate.	Race, Black history, USA, British Empire, 20th century, South Africa, UK, 21st century, modern, mixed race history, English	African Americans Racism – United States Colored people –

Carissa Chew – *Inclusive terminology: guide & glossary for the cultural heritage sector*. May, 2021

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CM.4 Implement a system of advisories by which users are made aware of the existence of terms or images in the Library's website, content and catalogue records that may cause offence or distress



General

Specific

Contextual

Representative

Responsive

Oversight

CM.8 Establish ethical principles for cataloguing and metadata from which to update and maintain policies and processes

Align British Library Values with international codes of ethics

- *IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and other Information Workers.* 2012
- *Cataloguing code of ethics.* Cataloguing Ethics Steering Committee. Jan. 2021
- *Archives & Records Association Code of Ethics.* 2020

1. Put users at the heart of everything we do

- We catalogue resources in our collections with the end-user in mind to facilitate access and promote discovery.
- We recognise that interoperability and consistent application of standards help our users find and access materials. However, all standards contain biases; we will approach them critically and advocate to make cataloguing more inclusive.

Next steps

British Library Board reviewed the recommendations in November

- Senior Managers will draw up plans on how to implement proposed recommendations with potential timescale and associated cost resources
- Actions to be incorporated into:
- British Library Race Equality Action Plan
- Collection Metadata Implementation Plan 2022-3
- Collection Metadata Strategy 2023-2027



Thank you

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