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Confusion and Concern The Troubled Histories of Named Collections Within the British Library

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Abstract

The article discusses the relationship between slavery and cultural history within institutional rare book collections. Beginning with an overview of the media controversy which was caused by the British Library's publication of an internal document that noted Ted Hughes' slave-owning ancestors, it argues that the current approach to these questions which have been developed in museum studies are not sufficient when it comes to thinking about libraries. Taking the two examples of Hans Sloane and John Bellingham-Inglis from the British Library as primary case studies, it explores the institutional framing of their ownership of enslaved people. It then moves to an examination of some of the material impacts of provenance, particularly in Bellingham-Inglis' physical dismantling of his books. By drawing on the twin ideas of 'bookwork' (Whitney Trettien) and 'griefwork' (Jennifer Scuro), the article argues that the future of provenance studies is an affective one. It argues for the benefits of a provenance research which actively considers ethical and political questions to be material forces with impact on our work.

Keywords: Cultural History, Institutional History, Libraries, Provenance, Slavery

1. *Introduction*

On the 21st November 2020, *The Telegraph* ran an article headlined 'British Library adds poet Ted Hughes to slavery dossier for ancestor born 300 years earlier' (Simpson 2020). 'In a bid to become actively anti-racist', it explained, 'the Library is documenting connections – even if tenuous – to slavery and colonialism'. Hughes was included in this document because of his distant ancestor Nicholas Ferrar (1593-1637), a writer, politician, and founder of the Little Gidding religious community, who once served as deputy of the London Virginia Company.

The implication for the *Telegraph*'s reader was that Hughes' connection to slavery was so tenuous that his inclusion in such a 'dossier' could be nothing but risible, especially since there was no direct financial relationship between the two – he had not, for example, inherited Ferrar's estate. To make this point clearer, another article followed the next day, in which a columnist pondered that it was 'hard to see what clarity is offered by [The British Library's] naming of the poet' (Shilling 2020). Within a week, with the story having been picked up by other outlets including *The Times* and *The Daily Mail*, the British Library had publicly apologised to Ted Hughes' widow and quietly removed the offending document from its website.[1]

The document in question was a shared Microsoft Excel spreadsheet which recorded preliminary provenance research compiled by librarians and curators within the British Library, primarily undertaken over the course of the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. Rather than a piece of finished research or institutional policy, the aim had been to identify which of the named provenances behind the Library's collections might merit further investigation as part of the proposed 'Action Plan for Race Equality', announced following the Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020. A (pre-existing) spreadsheet of all named donations in the collections was circulated amongst interested staff and any links to slavery or colonial violence which could be found were noted down. As a result, this was an exploratory and tentative document, one which made no claims of being either comprehensive or advisory, but which simply offered a space to begin getting to grasps with what the Library owned and where it had all come from. Although it was made publicly available, it was presented as work-in-progress reference material and found on a website page dedicated to providing tips on provenance research to users.

The outraged media response to the inclusion of Hughes in the list seemed to arise from a combination of factors. It undoubtedly stemmed in part from the reactionary, right-wing view that questions about colonial legacies have no place in national heritage institutions in the first place: buzzwords such as 'cancel culture' and 'anti-woke press' peppered the articles, as did claims of 'over-zealousness' (Bate quoted in Flood 2020). The conversation also drew on language and ideas arising from wider public debates about the decolonisation of the heritage sector and about the place of named figures in institutional contexts (and the financial endowments or gifts associated with them) more generally. Jokes about the British Museum having stolen their antiquities are common enough online that they now merit an entry on '<knowyourmeme.com>', whilst books including *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (Hicks 2020) and *The Whole Picture: The Colonial Story of the Art in Our Museums & Why We Need to Talk About It* (Procter 2020) have found a popular market beyond academics.[2] The heated controversies over the treatment of slave trader Edward Colston's statue in Bristol, which was torn down and thrown into the canal, and the global campaign 'Rhodes Must Fall', which saw calls for the University of Cape Town and others, including Oriel College Oxford, to remove their statues of 'committed British colonialist' Cecil Rhodes (as he was described in the explanatory plaque erected by the College in 2021), and to rename scholarships and buildings dedicated to him, are further examples of recent campaigns concerned specifically with the cultural legacy of colonial money.[3] Looking elsewhere, the recent renaming of

[1] For other articles on the topic, see Flood 2020; Nikolic 2020; Malvern and Kolirin 2020.

[2] The website <knowyourmeme.com> is a repository and database of memes. The entry for 'British Museum Stealing Things' explains that 'While the topic has been an ongoing controversy for years, memes referencing the U.K. stealing artifacts and putting them on display in museums began appearing online during the late 2010s' (*Know Your Meme*, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/british-museum-stealing-things>, accessed 1 December 2024).

[3] For a reproduction of the Oriel College plaque, see Grierson and Gayle 2021.

university buildings associated with the Sackler name following lawsuits investigating Purdue Pharma's involvement in the US opioid crisis suggest that this is an issue which comes in many guises.[4] Beneath the individual examples lies a more philosophical question. What does it mean to name *something* after *somebody* – and when can we change our minds?

When it comes to the heritage sector in particular, the question of where a library fits into this wider discussion is a confused one. I think this is, at least in part, because of the specific materiality of the book. In museum studies, the question of how we 'ought' to respond to provenance so far has tended to circle around the ethics of the repatriation of looted or otherwise disputed objects to their countries of origin. This often takes the form of a plea to responsibility: Dan Hicks writes that 'where an object has been looted, and a community asks for it back, western museums have a duty actively to make a return, both of the physical object and additionally of other sharing of knowledge, resource, connections and platform' (2020, 239). This prioritisation, it is worth noting, is not always straightforwardly accepted. Neil Asher Silberman has recently argued that 'cultural artifacts at the center of repatriation disputes have become dangerously fetishised' in a process he describes as 'the magical materialism of exclusive possession' (2017, 114). There is, he is clear, room for both sides of the argument: physical possession of the thing itself does still matter, although in many ways it matters less the more advanced that technologies of reproduction become – many museums are now dedicating significant resources to the 3D-mapping and digital reproduction of items in their collection – but by focussing on repatriation alone, we risk indulging in a sort of 'magical thinking that confuses exclusive physical possession with the right to determine significance' (*ibid.*).[5]

This is not a conversation which has been had about collections of rare printed books. Such books usually *cannot* be repatriated. They might be 'from' a country in the sense of having been printed somewhere but they are designed to be portable, to cross boundaries. They are also, with certain provisos in place, repeatable things. A very broad statement, then, might be the fact that – since we are working with books rather than artefacts – what a named provenance means within a library inherently looks different to provenance in a museum. By treating them as if they are the same, we have overlooked the sorts of discipline-specific questions that might be productively asked when it comes to thinking about the study of rare books.

Commentators on the Hughes scandal repeatedly aligned the British Library's comments with a form of literary criticism, asking 'why on earth would you judge the quality of an artist's work on the basis of distant ancestors?' (Bate quoted in Nikolic 2020). The inclusion of the former Poet Laureate seemed to offer journalists an easy way into the 'culture war' provenance debate by way of the assumption that to comment on the person is to comment on their work. But in this situation, this was not the case. The British Library's spreadsheet was related to Hughes' *collections*, which are made up of 'over 465 files, volumes and oversize items' and include 'literary drafts, correspondence, notebooks, professional papers and diaries'.[6] It was never a question of poetical worth that was at stake, but rather what it means to have, and use, a named special collection.

[4] For example, in May 2023 the University of Oxford announced that it would rename its Sackler Library as well as galleries and staff posts at the Ashmolean Museum. In doing so, it followed the lead of other institutions including the British Museum, the Tate Galleries, the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

[5] For more on the relationship between 3D scanning and museum repatriation, see Samaroudi and Echavarria 2019.

[6] *British Library Collection Guide*, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/ted-hughes-collection>, currently unavailable due to ongoing cyberattack.

For all that book history as a discipline has given us the skillset and vocabulary with which to think about the individual book as an object, the ways in which that object has been recorded, catalogued and described so that a researcher can find it remain poorly understood and (for book historians) under-theorised, often invisible, forces. The response to Hughes' items revealed that there are immense institutional, personal, and political pressures shaping the presentation of material, as well as driving the research which gets done and the research which doesn't. It is common to find acknowledgements in scholarship which give thanks to the librarians and archivists who helped facilitate the research, often mentioning them by name as well as by institution. We recognise the labour gratefully but we do not often ask about the decisions that comprise it. By 'we', both here and throughout the article, I refer to the collective work of academics who consider themselves book historians and who work in related disciplines, especially the humanities. Given my interest in the way that the legacy of slavery in particular has materially affected the items which enable such work, it is worth acknowledging here that my 'we' is also a white, Western one. This is not a commentary on anyone in particular but a reflection of the way the field has developed: 'the imperial, white, cis-male, heteronormative, neurotypical bibliographic tradition' (Maruca and Ozment 2022, 232). If we want a 'liberation bibliography' of the sort championed by Derrick R. Spires as 'as a conscious and intentional practice of identifying and repairing the harms of systemic racism, settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and other oppressive structures in and through bibliography and bibliographical study' (2022, 5), this is the 'we' that we must work with and as part of, regardless of our own personal positions within such structures.

The present article, then, is indebted to the work done in library and information science by librarians and special collections researchers across national institutions, university research collections, and local libraries, as these are people who have been thinking about the issues caused by individual provenances for many years. Rather than claiming this work for my own, I seek to ask what book history as a discipline has to offer this ongoing conversation – and what it can learn from it. It seems to me not only that it is important to know where something came from, but that thinking about provenance can also advance discipline-specific discussions about the material book. In beginning to do this, I will provide a brief overview of some of the named collections of the British Library from its founding to more contemporary acquisitions, before proposing a way of reading these named collections theoretically. The British Library has been chosen only as a case study: the questions raised here are not unique to that institution. Nor is the problem of controversial heritages limited to colonial legacies more generally. Instead, I hope that by asking these specific questions, I will reveal the broader stakes lying behind what it means to do provenance research and how we might move forward with it.

2. *Founding Collections*

The British Museum was founded in 1753 following the death of Sir Hans Sloane, whose collections were then sold to the nation for the sum of £20,000. The collections, which had been valued by some at four times that amount, included roughly 45,000 printed books as well as 3,516 manuscripts, 347 albums of drawings and illuminated books, antiquities, geological specimens, insects, and more (see Delbourgo 2017, 260). It is therefore often considered to be the founding collection not only of the British Museum, but also the British Library and in part the Natural History Museum, which was legally established as a separate entity in 1963. The British Library Act, which officially separated the British Library from the British Museum (although the two remained within one building until 1997, when the Library moved to its current location) was passed in 1972.

Although it was his death which precipitated the Museum's creation, Sloane's was not the only named collection when it came to the founding of what was known as the British Museum Library. At the insistence of Arthur Onslow, speaker of the House of Commons, Sloane's library was combined with those of Sir Robert Cotton and Robert Harley (see de Beer 1953, 150). The Cotton library had become Britain's first nationally owned manuscript collection in 1701 and contained important items such as the only known manuscripts of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. However, as William Burgess describes, the collection entered the British Museum in a sorry state, having been poorly managed and, in October 1731, severely damaged in a fire. The sense of failing not only the nation but also Cotton himself was prevalent in responses to the disaster: in what Burgess describes as 'the imaginative power of breaking … a covenant of preservation' (2022, 304), the keeper of the collection, Richard Bentley, viewed the fire as 'the Nemesis of Cotton's ghost to punish the neglect in taking due care of his noble gifts to the public' (Mead quoted *ibid.*).

The Museum's council also felt the ghostly weight of needing to do justice to the men upon whose collections they were building. Their names were written into the very act of institutional creation; the British Museum Act of 1753 was 'for the purchase of the Museum, or Collection of Sir Hans Sloane, and of the Harleian Collection of Manuscripts; and for providing one General Repository for the better Reception and more convenient Use of the said Collections, and of the Cottonian Library, and of the Additions thereto'.[7] In practice, this was easier said than done. The council aimed to keep each collector's items together (as had been specified in Sloane's will), but this proved difficult to reconcile with the practical need of creating separate departments. As a compromise, it was initially decided that the library collections would be ordered by provenance before being sub-ordered by subject and size. Therefore, Sloane's printed books would occupy the rooms labelled A, B, C, E, F and G (as seen on Figure 1); his manuscripts would be in room H; on the floor above, the Harley Manuscripts would be found in rooms E, F, G, and M; the books of Major Arthur Edward, who had bequeathed his library to the Trustees of the Cotton collection, would be found in room L and, finally, Robert Cotton's manuscripts would be placed in room K. Within these rooms the Museum trustees ultimately had the organisational power: the objects were not necessarily to be ordered as they had been in their initial collections. As P.R. Harris puts it, '[on 13 December 1755] it was decided [by the committee] that as the Sloane books were in no special order, they should be arranged in subject order when they were moved … even though this meant altering the catalogue references and the pressmarks on the books' (1998, 3). There was a desire to acknowledge and commemorate the men behind the museum, but this was an impulse at odds with the organisational principles being imposed. Indebted to its various founders and tied to a room layout that prioritised provenance whilst at the same time struggling to implement an overall order, the early structure of the British Museum Library was torn between two fundamentally different demands: private systems of knowledge were being subjugated into a public, institutional system.

[7] *Establishing the British Museum* (26 George 2 c. 22), <https://statutes.org.uk/site/the-statutes/eighteenth-century/1753-26-george-2-c-22-establishing-the-british-museum/>, accessed 1 December 2024.

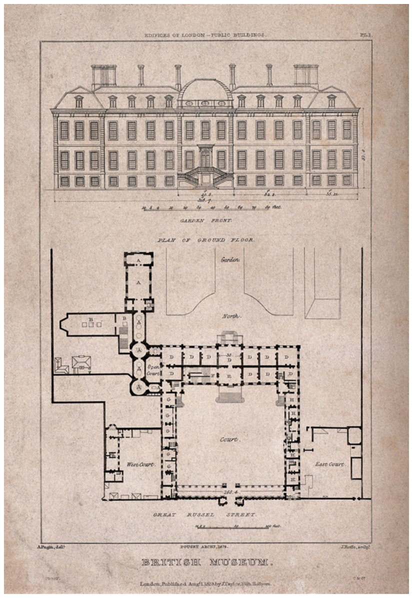

Figure 1 – *The British Museum at Montague House: A Layout Plan, and Elevation of the Garden Façade*, Engraving by J. Roffe after A. Pugin 1823 (Wellcome Collection). License Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 4.0

This organisational structure, of course, has changed drastically over the years. These changes were partly due to the addition of other early large donations such as the King's Library of King George III, bequeathed by George V – which is still largely kept together, visible in the enticing glass tower that greets visitors to the building at St Pancras – and the libraries of John Evelyn (1620-1706) and Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820). As its holdings grew, the Library also faced challenges of rearranging and maintaining its material in order to make it useful. Combined with a need for funding, this resulted in a period of deaccessioning in which several duplicate sales were held. As T.A. Birrell explains,

> In welding together the early collections into a single unit, a considerable body of duplicates had appeared, which were assembled in a separate 'Duplicates Room'. An Act of Parliament was passed enabling the trustees to sell off such duplicates; Samuel Baker of Baker and Leigh (later to be Sothebys) was called in to prepare a catalogue; and a first auction was held in April 1769, to be followed by seven more till July 1832. As the object was to raise money, the tendency was to put the best copy into the sale. (2009, 244)

All these factors mean that even if one is explicitly searching for a named collection it can be hard to trace who once owned the item being looked at. Provenance research has historically tended to focus on this question, using physical traces in the items such as library stamps, printed and manuscript catalogues, sale catalogues, personal and institutional acquisition records, inscriptions, and other annotations in order to reconstruct collections and reidentify owners. As Kari Kraus puts it, these attributes can be understood as 'a form of metadata that is materially coextensive with the book itself' (2019, 163). This type of detailed physical provenance research has led to new understandings about historical book ownership, especially in the field of feminist bibliography: the 'Early Modern Female Book Ownership' project is one such example.[8]

[8] The project can be found at *Early Modern Female Book Ownership*, <https://earlymodernfemalebookownership.wordpress.com>, accessed 1 December 2024.

Institutional metadata, such as shelf marks, occasionally also offer some help in identifying provenance: in the British Library some shelf marks are still named. Evelyn's books can be found under Eve.a.1. - Eve.c.29. and Thomas Grenville's (1755-1846) under G.1. - G.20240. Less intuitively, runs of numbers can also sometimes help to indicate their former owners. For example, books from 1.a.1. - 304.k.23. are part of the King's Library whilst those between 671.a.1. - 688. tend to be from the collections of Clayton M Cracherode (1730-1799). There are, however, some exceptions to these rules, adding another difficulty in undertaking provenance research. Parts of the King's Library were destroyed by a bomb on 23 September 1940. These volumes have slowly been replaced, in some cases with duplicate books from other parts of the Library. It is not clear how many items this applies to: one survey gives the figure as 93 works, or 111 bound parts, another 265. For now, the 'two sets of figures are in essence irreconcilable at this stage' (Edwards 2013, 15). Although these transferred books have been identified with a unique label inside, a researcher going by the shelf marks and location alone would (wrongly) identify them as unique copies once owned by King George III.

Those of Sloane's books which remain in the British Library are dispersed throughout the catalogue. There are some runs of shelf marks around which they cluster, but these tend to be due to the subjects that he was most interested in rather than by any other design. However, the significant amount of material we have in which Sloane detailed his library acquisitions and ordering systems has enabled the digital reconstruction of his library and the creation of a separate catalogue.[9] The British Library guide to provenance webpage explains that

> Many Western printed books acquired at the foundation of the British Museum (and therefore published before 1753) have their origins in the collections of Sir Hans Sloane. Although these are now dispersed across the British Library and indeed other institutions, a quick check of the online database of Sloane Printed Books will confirm if a researcher has already examined your copy and found evidence to support a Sloane provenance.[10]

This information has been fed back into the main catalogue, meaning that a user looking up a book may find – without actively searching for that information – that the copy they are consulting has been identified as part of Sloane's collection. If interested, they can then look to see how such an identification has been made (some of Sloane's books are physically stamped or inscribed, whereas the identification of others requires longer processes of deduction). Sloane's presence in the British Library metadata is undeniable. So, too, is his physical presence: a bust sits within the entrance hall alongside busts of the other founding collectors, Cotton, Banks, and Grenville. His name may be absent from the shelf marks, but it is traceable physically, digitally, and in the legal documentation at the heart of the institution's creation. It has also occupied a prominent space in discussions of colonial heritage. Sloane's collection was funded from money that came in large part from his direct involvement in the slave trade.

The desire to acknowledge this history has led to several public statements and actions from both the British Museum and British Library. A blog post on the latter's website includes the reinterpreted material that makes up the bust's new label, which was changed in 2020. It takes the form of two paragraphs. The first gives biographical information about Sloane:

> Sloane travelled to Jamaica in 1687 as physician to the island's British colonial Governor and worked as a doctor on slave plantations. Using the expertise of enslaved West Africans and English planters, he collected

[9] For more on the Sloane Printed Books Project see Walker 2022 and Wickenden 2020.

[10] *British Library Guide to Provenance Research,* <https://www.bl.uk/help/guide-to-provenance-research-with-printed-books>, currently unavailable due to ongoing cyberattack.

hundreds of plant and animal specimens. When he returned to London, Sloane married Elizabeth Langley Rose, an heiress to sugar plantations in Jamaica. He was a shareholder in the Royal African and South Sea Companies, both of which profited from the slave trade. His medical income, his investments, and the profits from the forced labour on his wife's plantations enabled Sloane to build such a large collection. (Malini 2020)[11]

The second offers a more emotive reflection on such facts:

It is too often said that the transatlantic slave trade is long behind us. An untold number of our ancestors' lives were completely ruined by men like Hans Sloane. Every one of their waking moments filled with violent abuse, torture, unpaid manual labour, rape and treatment as if less than human. That pain and trauma is still with us as we fight to make a world that is truly anti-racist. We cannot allow the glorification of enslavers and their legacies to continue through succeeding generations. We must remember these men for who they truly were, for their crimes as well as their accomplishments. (*Ibid.*)

Only the latter label is accredited – it was written by Reuben Massiah, the Learning Facilitator at the British Library and Chantelle Richardson, Chevening British Library Fellow in 2019-2020 and Librarian at the National Library of Jamaica. The decision to include these details and *not* the name of the person who wrote the first paragraph suggests that the two pieces of writing are not equally weighted: responses to slavery and the desire to contextualise it come from a subjective place of personal or individual impulse, whereas biographical fact is undeniable and objective. At the same time as this 'reinterpretation' was produced, the British Museum similarly changed their framing of Sloane. Rather than adding a label, the Museum's response was to move his bust from its pedestal into a new case within the Enlightenment Gallery with the aim of contextualising his collecting activities in light of his financial background in slavery.

Each of these institution's decisions to recontextualise the busts led to an array of public commentary, both positive and negative. *The Daily Mail* wrote that 'Slavery is not what defines Britain, just as it is not what defined Hans Sloane' (Tingle and Vine 2020); *The Guardian* responded with a column arguing that

no matter how much we are asked to look only at his talents as a physician and his passion for botany and collecting, the fact remains that much of the money Sloane used to purchase the objects that today lie within our national museum came from the murderous exploitation of African men, women and children. (Olusoga 2020)

For better or for worse, it became clear that the question of how to engage with the colonial histories behind institutions had moved from internal debates between GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums) sector practitioners into the wider public consciousness – and that it was a debate which threatened to go round in circles.

In *Cruising the Library*, Melissa Adler argues that 'by reading library classifications against the grain, we find spaces where abstractions of state discourse mask state violence' (2017, 12). That is to say that 'the structures underlying the classification and naming systems in libraries were born out of and reiterate societal norms of a particular era' (22). Adler's work is specifically concerned with the historical presentation and classification of forms of desire – she traces the way in which the automation of cataloguing systems means that 'texts that were cataloged in the early part of the twentieth century retain formerly held attitudes that associated homosexuality

[11] <https://blogs.bl.uk/living-knowledge/2020/08/reopening-and-reinterpretation-our-front-hall-busts.html>, accessed 1 December 2024.

and bisexuality with perversion, but now in anachronistic terms' (29) – but her overall project of re-examining the powers behind public library categorisations also allows us to think about named rare book collections. What is the value of maintaining provenance information in a world in which doing so is considered commensurate with making an ethical judgement? Does using a book inherently necessitate engaging with its provenance? It is perfectly probable – and I would go so far as to say likely – that a researcher who has worked frequently with Western Heritage items from the sixteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries at the British Library has used something owned by Sloane. It is just as possible that they haven't realised it. Is that reader, in any real sense, engaging with the provenance history of that item at all? Is the research that such an encounter produces changed by the likelihood of that book's purchase by Sloane having been funded through the practice of slavery?

What is at stake here, I think, is a question which has been (and remains) an essential component of book history, which is infamously broad as a discipline. When we talk about provenance, we are by default talking about the value of the individual book rather than the text: a named owner is tied to the specific thing, the accessioned object. The fact of ownership forces us to consider the item as a uniquely material one. Otherwise unremarkable items can become valuable and desirable when tied to glamorous owners. In Sloane's case, the chances of a user consulting something from his collection is higher not just because of the vast amount of books he owned, but because of his tendency to collect ephemeral items that did not otherwise survive, meaning that in several cases his is the only copy in existence (see Mandelbrote 2009). This is a direct example of the choices of the collector directly affecting the ways in which we engage with the past and the research that can result.

The other issue at stake when asking whether or how we should ethically consider provenance is the place of emotion in book history scholarship. Where does *affect* belong? It might feel uncomfortable to put it in those terms, because slavery is such an obvious negative; ought we not be able to come up with a more rigorous theoretical argument for considering provenance that relies on facts, not feelings? Saying that we need to think about Sloane's deep legacy within the structure of the British Library because he enslaved people, and slavery was wrong, feels somehow unintellectual. It also feels dangerous: does making this argument not risk inadvertently proving correct those who would rather ignore the whole problem whilst insisting that calls to address slavery are simply representative of 'an intellectual fearfulness' (Tingle and Vine 2020)? But the question of libraries *is* an affective one just as the question of the study of the book is an affective one. In classrooms we (and I am guilty of this) wax lyrical about the features that cannot be reproduced – the smell, feel, sound of an old book – the joy of discovering marginal annotations and doodles, pressed flowers, moments where readers have decided they know better than the author. As readers and researchers we are drawn to books because they allow us to feel. Or, as Deborah Prosser puts it in an article on 'affect and deaccessioning' in university libraries, because 'there is an essential humanism to our relationship to books. They embody the thoughts of others, and the cycle of collections inevitably revolves around the most basic feelings of love and loss' (2020, 519). At the heart of most research is a desire to know, or to think, or to explore – but however it manifests, it is a desire nonetheless.

Could it be the case, then, that we flinch from the question of connecting Sloane's books directly to slavery because we do not want to lose them, or to feel bad about using them? After all, *they* did nothing wrong. Perhaps before moving forward to thinking about how book history can engage with this question theoretically it is necessary to think about what it means to love an institution like a library. Adler uses Jennifer Scuro's concept of 'griefwork' – the idea of a 'necessary labor that cannot be glossed over and gotten over' (2017, xii) – to understand her feelings about working in libraries. 'For me', Adler writes, historical critical classification research is griefwork. It is an ongoing course of mourning the lives of people who have been silenced and denied access in the past, those whose lives were abstracted, cataloged, and classified; and for the continued marginalization of subjects. In a library classification, we are confronted with the knowledge that our profession has a history and a present that needs to be reckoned with … classifications don't just structure knowledge: they structure experience, encounters, and feelings, and they are structured by politics and people in positions of power. (2020, 551)

Expanding on this, I wish to claim that the process of recognising the legacy that slavery has had in contributing to and constructing our national institutions is also one of griefwork. It is unpleasant, and uncomfortable, and it is all the more so because it is to some extent endless: griefwork can never be completed. It is always ongoing.

3. *Material and Theoretical Legacies*

In the rest of this article, I want to think about how some of the techniques and methodological approaches which have been broadly associated with the discipline of 'book history' might enable us to move productively forward in carrying out this griefwork. It is clear that institutions including – but by no means limited to – the British Library are constrained: they may have the desire to address their pasts and to confront their colonial heritage, but they also need to function as working libraries, something that inherently involves maintaining a certain amount of respect for provenance. Public opinion puts added stress on what can realistically be achieved by librarians: as the Hughes example shows, the balance between what is considered acceptable and what will be deemed disrespectful is a difficult one to strike. Finally – as will become immediately clear to anyone who has raised these sorts of problems with a librarian – there are multiple other issues preventing an in-depth reckoning with provenance, issues which are not unique to the heritage sector. These are primarily financial: a lack of staffing, funding and time mean that curators and librarians simply cannot offer the sort of in-depth research into each item and every named former owner that they might like. To complain that there isn't enough information available is to overlook the very real material restrictions at hand. Cataloguing involves utilitarian prediction: what will be most helpful to the greatest number of scholars for me to give my limited time to? And how can I make sure that the user who will most benefit from this item is able to find it?

The consequences of these choices can be seen most clearly in the sorts of catalogue frameworks and internal languages that often initially baffle research students but which they quickly learn to navigate. Navigation, in this sense, involves a sort of learned invisibility: as proficient researchers, we forget to question the quirks of the archive. The more time spent in any given institution, the more you get to know it. Is it too cold, can you take lunch in, is the coffee any good? Do I need a specific type of coin for the locker room? Do they have pencils there or should I bring my own? And then, alongside these questions about what it looks like to physically occupy the space, there are questions about the catalogue: how is the material arranged? What information will the online entry give me? Before I order something is it clear which other items are bound with it or do I need to search separately for that? Does this give me an understanding of what I am physically going to be consulting, or will it be a surprise? We tend to group these sorts of questions together, as things which get asked of a new research location and which can only really be answered through experience.

These questions are all, in their various ways, deeply political. After all, the body in any given space is not a neutral thing. As Lisa Maruca has recently written, teaching book history allows for a reassessment of the ways in which learning is embodied: 'by emphasizing how the physical containers of knowledge are constructed and bringing to the forefront the uses and reactions of the physical body in relation to those, we demonstrate that cognition itself is a somatic, active process' (2023, 90). This is true of researchers as well as students, although we are more accustomed to the process and therefore more likely to overlook it. It is undeniable that the ease of physical access and the clarity with which information is conveyed to the user both have high importance in disability studies, and in this sense, it is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I suggest that the elision of physical factors regarding access (temperature, the available equipment, rest facilities, and the rest) with ones of metadata and cataloguing risks overlooking the latter as areas of potential knowledge that we, as researchers, don't yet know how to think about.

Think about it this way: of course a paragraph on a website which acknowledges a benefactor's uncomfortable or violent legacy feels inadequate. It doesn't help us think about the books themselves any differently. We must do something different if we are to make these colonial histories productive things to work with, to incorporate into our thinking rather than keep at a superficial distance. We must fold them into our work.

The provenance of a book is a material issue. Most obviously, as I have already suggested, the identification of provenance often rests in individual features: inscriptions, ownership annotations, booksellers' marks. Provenance also goes to the heart of what Jason Scott-Warren calls a book's 'material mattering' where 'the book as a whole, in both its content and its physical appearance, signifies' (2019, 6). The value of any sort of ownership claim rests on the idea that *this copy* of the book matters: we might know that someone owned a copy of this, but it is so much more exciting to find the actual thing, to unquestionably connect the object and person. (And there it is: affect again.) The result is that we can think of the named owner as a material influence on the book, and thereby one which is subject to the sort of theoretical interventions that have been made in the discipline over the past several decades. To illustrate this, I will turn my attention to another former bibliophile well represented in the British Library catalogues, this one known less well than Sloane: John Bellingham Inglis (1780-1870).

Bellingham Inglis was a prestigious collector of early printed books, a respected scholar and a keen linguist; he is best known today, if at all, as the first translator into English of Richard de Bury's *Philobiblon*. Compared to Sloane's, his book collection is far more typical of the fate of early modern libraries, as it was sold upon his death rather than being kept together in perpetuity. The title page of the sale catalogue gives some sense of the scope and interests of Bellingham Inglis' books:

> *Catalogue of a singularly curious and valuable selection from the Library of a Gentleman, including three extraordinary specimens of Block Printing; Books printed in the Fifteenth Century; Books printed on vellum; Fine copies of Works from the Presses of Caxton, Machlinia, Wynkyn de Worde, Pynson, Julyan Notary, Verard, &c.; an extensive Collection of Old English Poetry; Romances; Historical and Theological Tracts; early Voyages and Travels; curious Treatises on Witches and Witchcraft; some of the earliest Dictionaries and Vocabularies in the English Language, &c. &c. … Likewise several Manuscripts on vellum, most beautifully illuminated, &c. &c.* (Anonymous 1826, title page)

It is perhaps not a surprise, given the interest or prestige of some of these items, that several of Bellingham Inglis' books have been identified as surviving within public and university libraries today. Christian Algar at the British Library has identified over 260 books, the Bodleian have 13, and UCLA records nineteen bound volumes comprised of Bellingham Inglis' 'transcriptions and translations of various classical and early modern works'.[12]

[12] *Online Archive of California*, <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8rr1wnk/>, accessed 1 December 2024.

The reason that most of these books have been able to be identified at all is that they are materially interesting. Bellingham Inglis had a tendency to embellish his printed books with cut-out images, woodcuts or engravings taken from other works. He also compiled his own: according to the British Library catalogue description, C.194.a.1478 (the 'C' in the BL shelf mark tells us that this is likely to be considered a special collection item with attendant restrictions) is

> A miniature album project of 20 assembled woodcuts with letterpress headings that depict various figures of classical mythology comprising Saturn; Jupiter; Mars; Janus; Sol; Apollo; Neptune; Bacchus; Plutus; Mercury; Vulcan; Genius; Tellus; Minerva; Ceres; Luna; Venus; Juno; Vesta; and Diana. The collated woodcuts appear to have been neatly cut from the large folio pages of the 1554 edition of Johannes Herold's *Heydenweldt*, printed in Basle by Henricum Petri. The cuts have been pasted together, back to back, and bound in an album. (Herold and Bellingham Inglis 1554, n.p.)

In further catalogue information, we learn that

> Each pastedown in the album contains a further printed illustration; each has been neatly cut and pasted to the endpaper. This interaction with the book matches the 'peculiar habit' of the nineteenth-century book collector, linguist and savant, John Bellingham Inglis (1780-1870) who embellished many of his books with woodcuts and engravings, closely cut and pasted to the endpapers.[13]

With its small size (8.5cm) and focus on intricate woodcut images, the created album is enticing. It gives the sense of entering a private conversation, creating a space where one doesn't have to pretend to be interested in the text of the *Heydenweldt* but can simply look at the pictures. The sharing of that desire across time – offering proof that the attraction to images like these in and of themselves is one which was experienced by earlier users of early modern books just as it is today – is also compelling. Simply on an affective level and regardless of the intellectual reason one might have for wishing to consult the item, the experience of viewing it is a charming one – and one in which Bellingham Inglis as a figure feels very much present.

As well as owning and creating embellished books, Bellingham Inglis was also directly responsible for plantations in St Lucia, Trinidad, and Grenada. He is recorded in the database run by University College London's Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery as having been compensated after abolition £276 10s for one estate, £662 3s 8d for another, and £3503 13s 11d for a third; this equates to 13, 21, and 144 enslaved people respectively. He was also (unsuccessfully) involved in a counter claim for a fourth estate upon which 164 people were enslaved.

The jarring contrast between these facts – and, perhaps more importantly, the emotional experiences they raise – demonstrates exactly where the tension of this project lies. If we allow that positive affect can be a productive force in research, then we must also allow for negative feelings; if we think it is important, ethically, to recognise and work through violence committed in the past, then we must also allow for the moments of joy and engagement felt in the archives. Bellingham Inglis' embellished books bring these two things together in close proximity. The very thing that makes them interesting are the material traces of his ownership, which means that we cannot hide from the fact that they were funded with profits extracted from at least 178 enslaved human beings. What are our responsibilities towards this fact as we work with the book? How might we draw on it rather than simply acknowledging it and moving swiftly on?

[13] The above description appeared on the British Library Catalogue that can no longer be accessed due to the cyberattack that took place in 2023.

In her exploration of the work of John Bagford, an 'indiscriminate' collector of printed scraps, Whitney Trettien considers the changing opinions of scholars towards cutting and pasting (2021, 184). Bagford's collection, which included everything from 'portfolios of old bindings and armorial stamps, printer's marks and handwriting from around the world, entire scrapbooks largely devoted to samples of different kinds of paper' (195), was built (much like Bellingham Inglis') on taking apart other items. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Trettien shows, he was subsequently villainised as a biblioclast, a criminal with no sense of the importance of preservation – even as those making such comments used his creations in order to better ground their sense of the past. Part of the anger at Bagford's cutting extended into moral judgements of his character: 'the man who would do this, would do anything' (Pollard 1891, 3). When the book is the most important thing, no one who willingly takes it apart can be considered as having trustworthy intentions.

In the past twenty years or so, however, book historians' work has allowed the processes of cutting and pasting to become understood as simultaneously destructive and creative. In 2015, *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* published a special edition on the 'Renaissance collage', in which Juliet Fleming suggested that collage was 'always central to the production and reproduction of Renaissance culture' (2015, 445), John Considine explored the long history of slips in information management and organisation, and Adam Smyth wrote of the Little Gidding harmonies that

> Knives and scissors function as a kind of material extension of [the] rhetorical mode, lending to the cut-out pieces a force and a sense of lively animation which means that the harmonies are never only themselves: they are books composed of pieces which, as a result of the compositional method that is suggested in the finished form (we see the blade marks, the dried glue, the scribbled corrections), seem only for the moment aligned into the shape of a book. (2015, 598)

These three articles establish fairly conclusively that cutting and pasting were productive modes of engaging with the book: they were often done in service of reading and thinking, and can therefore be read to reveal those actions; they were not as antithetical to the way we read today as we might like to think; they draw attention to the fact of the present when engaging with any book, the fact that it has a past but also a future – one which is not necessarily predictable or within our control. In *Cut/Copy/Paste*, Trettien expands on this in order to explore the way that Bagford's scrapbooks generated 'meaning and narrative through the frictive juxtaposition of material "speciments" ' (2021, 192).

Libraries have also responded to – and helped drive – this disciplinary change, embracing and displaying books which might previously have been kept quietly out of sight. Even in 2015, Fleming described librarians' responses to hybrid manuscript-print items as a combative one, arguing that

> catalogue descriptions of these 'hybrid' books suggest that, in many cases, those who wrote the entries struggled not only with a lack of agreed upon terms to describe what they saw, but also against their own disapproval of the very form — it must, after all, be a rare archivist who can regard a sixteenth-century hybrid book as an embellished manuscript, without regretting the volumes that were sacrificed in its making. (446)

This may have been true at the time (although I would hesitate to say that such archivists, or librarians, were ever as 'rare' as Fleming claims) but is certainly not now. For example, the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas opened an exhibit in August 2023 called 'The Long Lives of Very Old Books' whilst that same Fall 2023 Harvard University's Houghton Library put on an exhibition focussing on bindings and deconstructed books called 'At The Limit of the Book'. There is a clear interest in embellished, hybrid, messy books both on the parts of curators and the public.

We can see, then, the way that responses to cutting and pasting have moved from a type of performative and often ahistorical horror that values the book as a whole item (manifesting in the tendencies of early collectors to bleach away annotations or prioritise copies with no signs of use) to a state in which the book is understood as an inherently porous and almost transient thing. Another way of characterising this movement is as one in which violent actions have been subsumed into a narrative of destructive-productivity – we are beginning to be attentive to the ways in which destruction produces new forms of knowledge. Could this, then, be a helpful metaphor for beginning to understand what it means for intellectual institutions to have been funded with money from slavery? Can we take Trettien's 'frictive juxtaposition' as a way of setting Bellingham Inglis' hybrid books alongside the colonial violence he is responsible for, enabling us to keep both in view without aiming for anything that looks like a reconciliation? Because – let me be clear – I do not think there *is* a clear answer, or at least not one which will enable us to approach these books without unease. Nor do I think there should be. We need instead to look for methodological approaches which embrace and make useful that same unease. We need to become as comfortable working from places of negative emotion as we are from the positive.

'By nudging content out of purview without reducing a text to brute thingness', Trettien writes, 'the word *bookwork* helps us hold in mind the book, any book, as a force field of competing desires and agencies' (2021, 21). However, whilst the cutting and pasting of the Little Gidding concordances offer a sort of 'radical bookwork' that allowed its Christian community to simultaneously 'recognize the cohesive, singular vision of God's word *and* present scripture as polyphonic and variable' (36), and whilst Bagford's scrapbooks were 'experimental engines for generating new historical knowledge' (207), Bellingham Inglis' *Heydenweldt* album is simply curious. It appears to reject anything other than its own brute thingness, prioritising the image over the word and the creator over the author. No explanation is offered in the metadata or other paratext as to why Bellingham Inglis constructed this album, or whether it was even him who manually cut out the woodcuts and glued them back-to-back in the first place. It is adamantly its own thing. We can ask questions but there is no guarantee of any answer.

Returning to Bellingham Inglis' album having pursued some further research into his background and finances, I found myself intrigued by the catalogue note that describes him as a 'book collector, linguist and savant'.[14] Clearly, these descriptions were chosen as the ones which most pertinently reflect back on the items themselves. They suggest that an inherent intellectual value arises from the association between man and book; even when it is not directly related, Bellingham Inglis' linguistic abilities become correlated with his book collecting. But it is the word 'savant' which is most striking in the context of his slave ownership, since it implies an almost unique and exceptional intelligence. Without suggesting that this connotation is necessarily intentional, we might read this somewhat defensively within the wider financial context. If a 'savant' is exceptional in one area, the catalogue seems to imply, they tend to be defective in another, but this is something we should be willing to forgive them for.

The album itself was still charming but the sense of what was lost in these pictures' excisions from their wider text struck me more prominently. I saw unnamed labour in the carefully marbled endpapers and thought about the silent and invisible financial history that had led to

[14] See note 13.

this thing being placed before me. Twenty woodcuts; 178 enslaved human beings. The week before my visit, members of staff at the British Library had been on strike; their labour in keeping the Reading Rooms running, in bringing me this precious book and making sure I had everything I needed in order to properly study it, was another type of silent labour. (This labour, too, is racialised: the British Library's internal BAME group have shown that Black and minority ethnic staff are far more likely to be working in customer-facing roles than in the curatorial or senior management positions.) Bellingham Inglis is by no means absent from the catalogue record, but his slave-ownership, like Sloane's, is; in becoming aware of this, by considering it as a deliberate omission that shaped the way I responded to the book I received, I found myself able to consider the other omissions that might be at play. The absences of the catalogue record came to seem complementary to the other absences we are more practiced at identifying: in this particular case, the text.

4. *Cataloguing Absences*

In their recent special issue of *Criticism*, 'What is Critical Bibliography?', Lisa Maruca and Kate Ozment ask of the field: 'How does the material account for decay, nothingness, and invisibility? Where are the (porous) boundaries between book and body, text and substrate, object and emotion?' (2022, 233). Books are physically full of empty spaces and recent criticism has responded accordingly: for example, Jonathan Sawday (2023) reads gaps and voids in printed forms and on the printed page; Laurie Maguire's work on the blank space of the book considers 'the vestigial and the ghostly, the palimpsest and the trace, … the ways in which the blank self-referentially invokes its own indeterminant existence and activates the reader's restorative critical instincts' (2020, 1); Adam Smyth encourages us to become attentive to the ways in which early printers filled their blank spaces, with errata lists often 'reflecting the available blank space, rather than the actual extent of errors in the text' (2019, 255). But before you can *talk* about absences, you have to be able to *see* them, and some are more visible than others.

The idea of silence in the archives – especially when coming up against names, or their lack – is frequently raised in conversations about decolonisation and conceptualised as a place where abstraction and violence meet. This, again, is something which often comes down to metadata. In their discussion of the process of digitally encoding five of Sloane's catalogues, Alexandra Ortolja-Baird and Julianne Nyhan write about how they became increasingly aware of the absences they were being confronted with – absences that the system of textual tagging being used (in this case TEI [Text Encoding Initiative]) actually reinforced:

> As we engaged in the task of encoding the personal names that are given in the catalogues, we began to wonder about those not included in the catalogues. Those individuals' names may be absent but an echo of their agency, and a trace of their presence is, in some nebulous way, enfolded in the catalogues …. As we worked, we began to conceptualize these nameless individuals as presences who "haunt" the catalogues, in the sense that they participate in a dialectic of trace and absence that is detectable from certain viewpoints only …. But how can one encode the ghosts and the "haunting" of an early modern archival document? Encoders can usually tag an individual only if they are actually "there" in some fixed way in a text …. It was in the process of thinking through how absence, and absent individuals and groups, could be modelled, and encoded in the catalogues, that we were alerted to how positivist encoding schemes like TEI can be. (2022, 853)

This is a conundrum familiar to anyone who has worked at length with archival documents of the early modern period, particularly in an editorial capacity. There is no proving a negative;

how can we even begin to acknowledge enslaved people whose names we do not know (as well as servants, women, children, labourers) in a positive tagging system designed to recognise and record only those who can be identified? Content management systems, including the MARC (Machine-Readable Cataloging) format used by the British Library, are simply not designed for negatives. Cataloguing is, and has always been, a question not only about what to include but also what to leave out. As Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star put it in their influential book *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences*,

> We have a moral and ethical agenda in our querying of these systems. Each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another. This is not inherently a bad thing – indeed it is inescapable. But it is an ethical choice, and as such it is dangerous – not bad, but dangerous. (2000, 5-6)

The work of this article is not to claim that there is a resolution to all the ethical problems of provenance that we are all ignoring. Getting rid of all traces of slave owners in the catalogue (which, I should make clear, is not something that anyone is actively campaigning for) would achieve nothing but the loss of important information. Provenance offers valuable information about books and the histories of their ownership and use and can be an important political tool in its own right for those working on feminist bibliography and Black bibliography. In this sense, I am aligned with the approach followed by most GLAM practitioners. Museums, archives and libraries alike tend to follow the approach of recognition and recontextualization best articulated by Historic England in its statement on 'Contested Heritage': 'we believe the best way to approach statues and sites which have become contested is not to remove them but to provide thoughtful, long-lasting and powerful reinterpretation, which keeps the structure's physical context but can add new layers of meaning'.[15] Addition, not subtraction, is the way forward.

However, as I have demonstrated in this essay, the re-examination of our colonial pasts and the responsibilities we have in such cases also offers a chance for new questions to be asked of book history as a discipline. As scholars, we must be aware of the fact that the catalogue is not neutral. Moreover, we ought to consider the ways in which we are free to ask questions and think through these books in ways that *the staff within the institutions might not be able to do*, due to pressures on time and finances, the material constraints of cataloguing systems, and various other institutional forces. If we learn to interrogate the library catalogue as a political agent, to understand it as something which has been shaped over many years and which is never fully transparent, we can become aware of a whole new constellation of absences. Who paid for this book to be here? Whose ghostly presence shapes our appreciation of it? What questions can I ask that I may never know the answers to? And how can I become comfortable with that state of unknowing?

Asking such things requires us to grapple more fully with the emotions of doing book historical work and to be comfortable working in spaces of negative, rather than positive, capability. We can only carry out the griefwork of understanding how this field is rooted in and has long benefitted from the products of colonial violence when we also allow ourselves to admit that such work is difficult. If it feels like a sort of loss, that's because it is.

[15] 'Contested Heritage' (2018), *Historic England*, <https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/statements/contested-heritage/>, accessed 1 December 2024.

5. *Conclusion*

There is an early poem by Ted Hughes, first published in *Poetry* in August 1957, called 'The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar [*sic*]'. It begins with a brutal account of the public execution of Robert Ferrar (d. 1555) who was burnt at the stake during the Marian prosecutions, and at first appears to revel in the violence, in the way the flames 'shrivel sinew and char bone / of foot, ankle, knee and thigh, and boil / Bowels' (1957, ll. 2-4). As the doomed man begins to speak, however, he captures his audience's attention in a way his preaching never managed. Ferrar's burning is 'An ignorant means to establish ownership / Of his flock!' (ll. 13-14), but nonetheless a successful one: as he dies, the fire 'come from Hell, even / Kindled little heavens in his words' (ll. 25-26). Rather than disowning 'their exemplar / And teacher' (ll. 19-20), the townspeople begin to treat his words like treasure, 'As good gold as any queen's crown' (l. 36).

Despite assumptions by early biographers, Robert Ferrar does not appear to have been an immediate ancestor of Hughes, unlike the Nicholas Ferrar who got him in trouble with the *Telegraph*. However, Hughes was proud of the nominal link, and probably wrote the poem believing that he was in fact writing about a direct relative. This, as well as the fact that Hughes' son with Sylvia Plath was named Nicholas Farrar Hughes – the two spellings are interchangeable – show a man who was not only aware of his family history but actively engaged with it. But Nicholas Ferrar's troubled legacy has implications beyond the poet. His central role in founding the Little Gidding community also makes him an influential figure for early modern historians of the book; as its continuous recurrence in this article demonstrates, Little Gidding has frequently provided a case study for thoughts about cutting and pasting in particular. The Bibles of Little Gidding have been returned to in scholarship again and again. The discipline is inextricably entangled with the history of slave ownership in ways we are only beginning to grapple with.

Bearing in mind the recent claim that 'archival work … is less neutral presentation of the cold hard facts than it is a politically motivated activity and as such should not only be left to the specialists' (Spratt *et al.* 2022, 496), I have shown in this article how the work of librarians and practitioners has begun to reassess the legacies behind the institutions and collections which support research. I have also traced some of the limits facing that work, and suggested that it offers an opportunity to more fully commit to the processes of griefwork. Only by doing so can we understand what it really means for the discipline and begin to look to the future. What might we do with these facts rather than simply trying to make ourselves feel better about them? What happens if we give up on trying to achieve ethical reconciliation and instead embrace *ethical discomfort* as a mode of study going forward?

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