Case Studies
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# The UnMuseum Project: Towards a Living Archive and a Radical Reworking of Heritage Practice

Amanda Egbe
Senior Lecturer, University of West England

Angelique Retief
Policy and Development Manager, Black South West Network

**Keywords**

*Decolonial practice, Governance, Co-production, Heritage, Infrastructure, Community-led*

*Summary: The UnMuseum is a long-term, community-led heritage initiative by Black South West Network that reimagines the museum as a living, contributor-controlled archive, using decolonial governance and co-production to build regional cultural infrastructure across the South West and transform how Black and racially minoritised communities define, curate, and share their heritage.*

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## Introduction

**The UnMuseum is a community-led cultural heritage initiative developed by Black South West Network (BSWN), a racial justice organisation based in Bristol. It emerges in response to longstanding exclusions within mainstream heritage institutions, where Black and racially minoritised communities have often been misrepresented, marginalised, or omitted entirely.**

Rather than proposing a fixed institution, the UnMuseum is conceived as a living archive and a radical reimagining of heritage practice, centring lived experience, cultural expression, and community ownership. It places power in the hands of those whose histories are being told, enabling communities to define, curate, and share their heritage on their own terms.

## Background and Context

The project is led by BSWN in collaboration with regional and academic partners, including UWE Bristol and the University of Bristol's Bristol Digital Futures Institute (BDFI). BSWN is a Bristol-based racial justice charity working across the South West at individual, community, organisational, and institutional levels. Founded in 1995, BSWN leads policy, research, and strategic development work with statutory bodies including Bristol City Council and the West of England Combined Authority. The organisation also leads the South West Race Equity Research Network (SWRERN), funded by UKRI, and holds a 10-year core funding award from the National Lottery Community Fund's Solidarity Fund. The Coach House in St Paul's, Bristol - acquired via Community Asset Transfer on a 125-year peppercorn lease, is home to the UnMuseum and forms the basis of a longer-term vision for a regional Centre for Black Enterprise and Cultural Heritage.

BDFI has played a key role in hosting events, supporting digital and infrastructural thinking, and convening cross-sector dialogue around community archiving and cultural heritage. The development phase drew on a wide group of Black and racially minoritised cultural heritage practitioners, including archivists, librarians, curators, and producers. Key contributors included Dr Tola Dabiri and Cheryl Bowen (Electric Piers), Abira Hussein (NOMAD), Rob Mitchell (Firstborn Creatives), Abi Bulley (Little Bee Community), Louisa Adjoa Parker (The Inclusion Agency), and Amanda Egbe (UWE Bristol). The project also engaged digital and data governance specialists including Dr Andrea Wallace (GLAM-E Lab, Exeter University), and drew on learning from organisations including Black Cultural Archives, Nottingham Black Archives, and Museum Development South West.

The UnMuseum began with early co-design work and workshops exploring decolonised heritage spaces, followed by a two-year development phase (2022–2024) funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The development phase (2022–2024), funded by NLHF, engaged 207 participants across the South West, 106 through face-to-face and online consultation events and 101 through an online survey. Events were held across the five sub-regions, exploring what community-led heritage spaces could look like, what communities wanted to share and how, and what forms of gov-

ernance would honour their ownership of that material. Key findings included strong appetite for immersive, multi-sensory heritage experiences; a clear preference for community-led environments over traditional institutional settings; and the finding that 72% of respondents would share heritage items in digitised form, but only through mechanisms they trusted. These findings directly shaped the architecture of the delivery phase, including the platform design, consent and licensing approach, and curatorial philosophy. The project is now in its delivery phase, running until December 2028, with a grant of over £1.2 million from NLHF.

*UnMuseum Stall*
*© Michael Jenkins*

The funded delivery phase ends in December 2028, but the UnMuseum is not conceived as a project with an end date. The digital archive, once built, is designed to grow, a living collection that communities can continue to contribute to, governed by the Regional Steering Group and stewarded by BSWN as a long-term cultural infrastructure organisation. Practically, this means legacy planning is built into delivery rather than deferred to the end. BSWN is developing agreements with established archives, including Black Cultural Archives and Bristol Archives, to ensure the collection remains safe and accessible if future funding gaps arise. The Coach House in St Paul's, Bristol, held on a 125-year lease, provides a permanent physical home that is not contingent on any single funder. The deeper ambition is

that by December 2028, the UnMuseum will have demonstrated a model, of community-led governance, contributor-controlled licensing, and decolonial archival practice that other organisations can adopt. The sector capacity building programme, reaching 60 Black-led heritage organisations across the region, is part of ensuring that the infrastructure built through this project extends beyond BSWN itself.

The collaboration is ongoing and evolving into a long-term cultural infrastructure, spanning a digital archive and platform, community collecting events across five sub-regions (Bristol, Gloucestershire, Bath, Cornwall and Plymouth) which are anchored by a Black-led organisation: Diverse Artists Network (Bristol), Arts Diverse-City (Gloucester), Fairfield House (Bath), Black Voices Cornwall (Falmouth), and Beyond Face (Plymouth)., an Impetus Commission Fund, a Knowledge Building programme, and plans for a Festival of Black Identity and Belonging in the South West.

*Community gathering & performance*
*© Michael Jenkins*

Amanda Egbe sits across institutional and community contexts, as a Senior Lecturer at UWE Bristol and Chair of the UnMuseum Regional Steering Group, contributing to an embedded, co-produced approach to knowledge exchange that prioritises community leadership and relational practice.

Angelique Retief leads the project management of the UnMuseum at BSWN as Policy and Development Manager. Amanda was initially involved as a digital heritage consultant during the development phase, alongside Abira Hussein, and continues in the role of Regional Steering Group Chair, also creating opportunities through her institutional position at UWE Bristol to connect BSWN with wider funding and research initiatives.

## The Collaborative Process

The UnMuseum operates through a co-production model, with community-led governance at its core. BSWN leads the project, with partners such as Museum Development South West (supporting our Knowledge Building Programme); Dr Andrea Wallace/GLAM-E Lab, Warwick University (IPR and licensing); Little Bee Community (heritage evaluation); and the five anchor organisations above;  and UWE Bristol, supporting through research, facilitation, and resource-sharing roles; The Regional Steering Group, chaired by Amanda Egbe, provides community governance across all delivery.

Amanda Egbe's role operates across institutional and community contexts: as a critical collaborator, facilitator, and conduit between academic and community partners including BDFI. This includes contributing to conceptual development, shaping discussions around decolonial archiving, intellectual property, and historiography, while remaining accountable to community priorities. Her role at UWE Bristol also enables the project to access academic expertise, networks, and institutional resource in ways that directly benefit the community-facing work.

The collaboration is structured through regional consultations and co-design workshops, a Regional Steering Group and network of anchor organisations across the five sub-regions, and ongoing engagement with diverse community groups across Bath, Bristol, Cornwall, Gloucestershire, North Somerset, and Plymouth.

The overarching aim is to reimagine the museum as a living archive, one that centre's lived experience, cultural memory, and everyday practices such as storytelling, food, music, and performance. Outputs are deliberately diverse and extend beyond traditional academic or museum formats, including community consultations and knowledge-sharing events, digit-

isation workshops, frameworks for community archiving, and public-facing activities including participatory events, talks, and the first major community collecting event held at the All Nations Community Centre in Gloucester in June 2026.

Delivery phase outputs include: 10 participatory collecting events (two per sub-region), day-long open-door events where community members bring personal items (photographs, documents, objects, recipes) for digitisation, oral history recording, and preservation advice; a  Knowledge Building Programme co-delivered with Museum Development South West and others targeting 60 Black-led heritage organisations across topics including IPR, archival research, and fundraising; an Impetus Commission Fund awarding up to £7,000 each to 10 community-led commissions responding to locally identified heritage themes; and 13 co-design and testing workshops to develop and launch a publicly accessible digital archive platform.

*Community workshop*
*© Michael Jenkins*

The first major collecting event was held at All Nations Community Centre, Gloucester, in June 2026, attended by approximately 50 people who shared oral histories, personal archives, and family objects, demonstrating the depth of community trust built through sustained relationship over the development phase. The project aims to engage at least 4,500 people in person and 5,000 online across the three-year delivery period, and to digitise and preserve at least 300 heritage items.

Audiences are positioned not as passive recipients but as co-creators, contributing to the shaping of content, direction, and meaning. A key principle of the collaboration is the refusal of extractive knowledge production - knowledge circulates within communities and directly informs project development, rather than being translated solely into academic outputs. The digitisation workshops, for example, will produce significant material around design workflows and user journeys that will be prioritised for community and funder benefit rather than immediate academic publication. The community consultation process has fundamentally shaped the project's direction, particularly around intellectual property, ownership of shared materials, and the platform's architecture, demonstrating how community voice can and should precede institutional decision-making.

The project operates within a decolonial framework informed by the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, Ethics), which are formally embedded in BSWN's Collections Management and Maintenance Policy, the governing document for how all heritage materials in the UnMuseum collection are acquired, held, shared, and licensed. This is not rhetorical commitment: the policy sets out that decisions about significant acquisitions and the inclusion of materials in the collection are taken democratically by the Regional Project Steering Group, with BSWN retaining only a limited veto on legal or resource grounds, not on the relative merits of the heritage itself. Community members retain control over how their materials are represented and shared.

A contributor-controlled licensing model, developed in collaboration with Dr Andrea Wallace at the GLAM-E Lab, Exeter University, ensures communities make active decisions about how their heritage is used beyond the platform. Outputs are deliberately non-academic in their primary orientation: co-design materials, community archiving frameworks, and oral history collections are prioritised for community and funder benefit before any academic dissemination. The digitisation workshops, for example, produce workflows and user journey documentation that feed directly back into platform development and community training.

## Evaluation and Impact

Evaluation of the UnMuseum has been primarily qualitative and process-led, drawing on participant feedback, reflective sessions, and observations from consultation workshops. This approach aligns with the project's emphasis on relational and community-centred practice. The project has recently appointed Little Bee Community as Heritage Evaluation Consultants, who are developing a formal evaluation framework to run across the delivery phase to December 2028.

The collaboration has generated significant cultural and social impact. It has created spaces where communities feel seen, heard, and able to define their own heritage. Participants have expressed a strong preference for community-led environments over traditional institutions, highlighting increased trust, relevance, and engagement. The first major participatory collecting event in Gloucester in June 2026, attended by approximately 50 people, demonstrated the depth of community appetite for this kind of work, with oral histories, personal archives, and family stories shared freely in response to a process built on sustained relationship and trust.

Institutionally, the UnMuseum challenges established models of knowledge production and cultural authority. It demonstrates how community-led governance can reshape heritage.

Challenges

- Building trust takes longer than institutional timelines allow. The most persistent structural tension in the project has been the mismatch between the pace required to build genuine community trust and the timelines set by funders and institutional partners. Authentic co-production cannot be rushed: the depth of engagement seen at the Gloucester collecting event where participants freely shared oral histories, personal archives, and family objects was only possible because of sustained relationship-building that began during the development phase. Replicating that depth across five sub-regions within a fixed project timeline is one of the project's most significant ongoing challenges, and one that the sector as a whole needs to grapple with more honestly in how it structures funded programmes.
- Consent frameworks were not built for scale from the outset. The initial consent framework, developed to cover platform use, did not

anticipate the full range of ways in which heritage materials might be shared including social media, promotional materials, and future exhibitions. This has created an operational challenge: returning to contributors to seek extended consent is both time-consuming and risks re-extracting from communities that the project is committed to protecting. A more robust contributor-controlled licensing framework being developed in collaboration with Dr Andrea Wallace at the GLAM-E Lab, Exeter University, and in consultation with the Regional Steering Group is now being built to address this. The lesson is that consent architecture needs to be designed for the full life of the material, not just its first use.

- Staffing continuity in a small, specialist team is a real risk. Recruiting staff with the right combination of cultural competency, heritage expertise, and community credibility is genuinely difficult - these roles are rare in the sector, and even rarer when the expectation is that post-holders come from or are deeply embedded in Black communities. Mid-project staffing changes create disruption not just operationally but relationally: community trust is built with people, not just organisations, and transitions require careful management to avoid rupturing relationships that have taken years to develop. This is a structural challenge for the sector, not just for the UnMuseum, and speaks to the need for longer-term, more sustainable funding models for community-led organisations.
- Governing a community-led project within institutional structures requires constant navigation. The project operates across multiple institutional contexts, a community charity, a funder with specific reporting requirements, an academic partner with its own timelines and governance, and anchor organisations with varying levels of capacity. Ensuring that community governance, specifically the Regional Project Steering Group, holds meaningful authority rather than functioning as a consultation mechanism requires active, ongoing effort. There is a constant risk that institutional efficiency pressures push decision-making back towards staff and away from community governance structures.

Successes

- The anchor organisation model works. Embedding sub-regional delivery through Black-led anchor organisations: Arts Diverse-City in Gloucester, Fairfield House in Bath, Black Voices Cornwall, Beyond Face in Plymouth, and Diverse Artists Network in Bristol has created genuine local ownership rather than satellite delivery. These organisations bring pre-existing community relationships, cultural credibility, and sub-regional knowledge that no centrally managed

team could replicate. The Gloucester collecting event is the clearest evidence of this: the depth of participation was a direct result of Arts Diverse-City's long-standing presence and trust in that community.

- Decolonial governance is achievable but must be written into structure. The project has demonstrated that community-led governance is not just rhetorical, it can be embedded in formal documents (the Collections Management and Maintenance Policy, the Regional Steering Group Terms of Reference) and in operational practice (Steering Group authority over accession decisions, democratic voting on significant acquisitions). This provides a replicable model for other organisations.

*Community listening and participation*
*© Michael Jenkins*

Lessons learnt for others

- Community trust must precede institutional decision-making: the consultation findings shaped the platform design, governance model, and IP approach before any technical decisions were made. Organisations that build the platform first and consult afterwards will not achieve genuine community ownership.
- Consent and licensing frameworks need to be designed for the full life of heritage materials from day one, in collaboration with communities and specialist legal advisers, not retrofitted once problems emerge.
- Inclusive recruitment processes for specialist roles take longer and cost more than standard recruitment: this needs to be budgeted for honestly, and funders need to understand why.

- Academic-community partnerships require explicit agreements about whose priorities lead, whose timelines govern, and how outputs are disseminated. Without this, the partnership risks defaulting to academic norms that undermine community ownership.
- The sector needs to advocate collectively for longer funding cycles. Three to four year projects are not long enough to build the infrastructure, relationships, and trust that genuine community-led heritage work requires.

## Future Direction and Legacy

The UnMuseum is designed as long-term cultural infrastructure, not a time-limited intervention. The delivery phase establishes the foundations: a publicly accessible digital archive, a network of community collecting practices embedded in five sub-regions, a body of evidence about what de-colonial, community-led heritage looks like in practice, and a regional sector strengthened to lead this work into the future.

*Community archives*
*© Michael Jenkins*

Longer-term ambitions include the development of the Coach House in St Paul's, Bristol, as a regional Centre for Black Enterprise and Cultural Heritage, a permanent home for the UnMuseum and a hub for the wider South

West sector. International connections are also emerging, exploring joint online events and shared approaches to community-led heritage practice.

The academic-community partnership model piloted through the UnMuseum offers a transferable framework for how HEIs can engage with community-led heritage work in ways that are genuinely reciprocal and community-led. BSWN intends to document and share this model as part of the project's legacy, contributing to a wider shift in how heritage institutions understand co-production, decolonial practice, and community ownership.

## Key Takeaways from the Project

**A radical, community-led reimagining of heritage:** The UnMuseum rejects traditional museum models, instead creating a living, contributor-controlled archive where Black and racially minoritised communities define, curate, and govern their own heritage through decolonial principles and lived experience.

**Deep, region-wide collaboration and governance:** Led by Black South West Network with academic and cultural partners, the project is structured through a Regional Steering Group and five Black-led anchor organisations across the South West, ensuring local ownership, trust, and culturally credible delivery.

**Co-production shapes every aspect of design and practice:** Community consultation directly informed platform architecture, licensing, governance, and collecting methods, with audiences positioned as co-creators rather than recipients; knowledge circulates within communities rather than being extracted for academic outputs.

**A long-term cultural infrastructure with national significance:** Backed by over £1.2 million NLHF funding, the project is building a sustainable digital archive, sector-capacity programme, and permanent home at The Coach House, aiming to establish a regional Centre for Black Enterprise and Cultural Heritage and a transferable model for community-led heritage practice.

Structural lessons for the wider heritage sector: The project demonstrates that genuine community governance requires long timelines, robust contributor-controlled licensing, inclusive recruitment, and funding models that prioritise trust-building, offering a replicable framework for decolonial, community-owned heritage work.

Further Information

https://www.theunmuseum.org/
https://www.blacksouthwestnetwork.org/unmuseum
https://people.uwe.ac.uk/Person/AmandaEgbe
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCrkp9BFVNc
https://thecomuseum.org/athens-masterclasses-2025/