

Reframing Collections, Rethinking Responsibility: Reflections from a Collaboration with the Ipswich Museum, United Kingdom

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This paper explores how Academic Social Responsibility (ASR) can be practised within the context of anthropological and ethnographic museums, where research involves not only the study of objects but also an ethical engagement with the histories and communities they represent. Drawing on my collaboration with Ipswich Museum (UK), the paper examines how academic research can help to revisit, reinterpret, and ethically reframe the museum's Oceanic

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collections, many of which have yet to receive systematic study.

Rather than positioning museums as passive custodians of the past, the paper approaches them as active partners in an ongoing academic commitment to social responsibility. It reflects on the ways in which curatorial research can foster transparency, accountability, and inclusivity by re-evaluating provenance, addressing historical inaccuracies, and foregrounding the cultural complexity of objects. The case study will pay particular attention to materials from Kanaky/New Caledonia and Fiji, including a Kanak axe bound with European cloth, clubs, tapa, and ceremonial artefacts, alongside a wider range of objects from Ipswich Museum's Oceanic collections.

The discussion situates this work within the decolonial turn in museum and heritage studies. It proposes that ASR entails sustained attention to the

social lives of objects, the responsibilities of researchers towards communities of origin, and the shared commitments that link museums and scholars. Ipswich Museum, in particular, places strong emphasis on connecting research with collections and fostering ethical collaboration. By reflecting on the early stages of this partnership, the paper considers how working with ethnographic collections can embody the principles of academic responsibility in practice.

Introduction:

In recent years, Academic Social Responsibility (ASR) has increasingly been discussed within the humanities in relation to questions of knowledge production, ethical accountability, and the legacies of colonialism. Rather than positioning academic work as neutral or detached, this body of scholarship has drawn attention to the responsibility of research practices to engage with social inequalities, epistemic hierarchies, and the lived

consequences of interpretation (Rycroft 2023: 1-5). Within this perspective, responsibility is not understood as an abstract moral stance, but as something that takes shape through situated, dialogic, and practice-based forms of scholarship, attentive to plurality, inclusion, and the conditions within which knowledge is produced (Pathak 2025: 26).

Within museum and heritage studies, these concerns intersect with what has been widely described as a decolonial turn. This shift has involved a critical re-examination of classificatory systems, representational authority, and the colonial epistemologies embedded in museum practices, moving attention away from objects as static carriers of knowledge and towards the processes, relationships, and temporalities through which meanings are produced, stabilised, or contested. In this context, responsibility is increasingly located in the everyday practices of documentation, description, and care, rather than solely in the final narratives presented

to the public. Building on these discussions, this article approaches ethnographic collections as sites where responsibility is enacted through everyday curatorial and research practices, and where objects with complex trajectories make visible the ethical stakes of working with historically layered and unevenly documented materials.

My research at Ipswich Museum sits at the intersection of my work as an anthropologist of Oceanic material culture and my long-standing attention to the ethical dimensions of cultural representation in museums. Approaching the collections from this standpoint, shaped by years of working with the material and documentary histories of Oceanic objects, meant entering the museum with a specific awareness of how responsibility begins long before interpretation, in the institutional practices that determine how objects are classified, handled, and made legible. My previous research on Kanak collections, and on the European

textiles woven into the process of their crafting, has shown me that responsibility is formed upstream, at the earliest stages of collection management and documentation, through the routines and decisions that classify, store, and render objects intelligible. This perspective shaped the way I approached the Ipswich materials, attentive not only to the documentation but also to the gaps, hesitations, and inherited descriptions that condition how these collections can be understood.

It was within this framework that my collaboration with Dr Aurogeeta Das, Ipswich Museum's Senior Curator for Cultural Policy (and the recently appointed University Lead for Colchester + Ipswich Museums Service), took shape. From our first conversations, it became clear that responsibility is not something museums hold on their own, nor something researchers can enact independently. Instead, it emerges in the space between institutional infrastructures and scholarly intentions. What follows in this article is

therefore not a report of results, but a reflection on how responsible academic practice unfolds in the day-to-day work of examining ethnographic collections. It explores how responsibilities are distributed, how they become visible in the smallest decisions, and how both researchers and institutions participate in shaping the futures of objects whose pasts are often fragmented or unevenly recorded.

How Museums Shape Knowledge:

Museums, particularly those holding anthropological collections, are spaces where academic practices, political claims, and inherited responsibilities converge and collide. Within this landscape, ASR becomes less a framework than a process of articulation and reworking of stories, absences, and the conditions that make knowledge possible. If ASR asks scholars to recognise the social implications of their work, ethnographic

collections entail, and indeed compel, a deeper sense of responsibility, shaped by issues of provenance, colonial histories, under-documentation, and the relationships of belonging that tie them to their communities of origin.

Museums carry an authority sedimented over time, built through scientific classification and institutional memory, an authority that still shapes how publics learn about cultural heritage (Fromm 2016: 92). Yet this position also places museums under an ethical obligation to reconsider how knowledge is produced, classified, and shared. Recent debates in museum and heritage studies have foregrounded a shift from object-centred narratives towards more participatory and inclusive approaches, where interpretation is understood as polyphonic and fluid rather than fixed. This shift reflects a growing recognition that the perspectives held by source communities, visitors, and researchers coexist with curatorial expertise within museums and can

meaningfully and collaboratively reshape how collections are understood.

In my work with Oceanic collections, especially those from Kanaky, I have often seen how apparently technical decisions about cataloguing quietly determine which stories can be told. When I follow an object from the database line to the storage room and back to the label, I can see how much has been simplified, lost, or frozen in the process. This is not unique to Oceania, but anthropological collections make these tensions especially visible, because they condense colonial trajectories, highlight fragmentary documentation, and reveal the expectations of different publics.

Within the broader decolonial turn, museums appear less as neutral containers than as active producers of cultural narratives. The ways objects are catalogued, described, and interpreted influence which histories come to the forefront, and which remain marginal

(Stylianou-Lambert *et al.* 2014: 567). The Oceanic materials I work with are often linked to generic attributions or outdated terminology. Reopening these records, and acknowledging documentary instability, has concrete analytical consequences for both communities of origin and future researchers (Fromm 2016: 92; Russi 2024: 5). Careful documentation, attentive also to intangible dimensions, becomes the baseline condition for any later collaboration, whether with source communities or with academic partners.

These classificatory frictions are precisely where ASR becomes meaningful for me. Attending closely to the museum's records, including accession registers, card catalogues, and object history files, becomes part of the work of responsibility itself. These documentary traces reveal how provenance is constructed, where gaps and silences persist, and how received categories continue to shape interpretation. This attention is particularly significant when future collaboration or

engagement with source communities may depend on what has been preserved, omitted, or lost. Read in this way, the slow and attentive work of revisiting documentation, tracing provenance, and probing unresolved questions can be understood as grounded in process rather than outcome, aligning with broader reflections on responsibility in the humanities as a situated, relational, and temporally extended practice (Blakey and Mitchell 2017: 3).

Much of the current literature on museum ethics draws attention to how documentation and interpretation shape the possibilities available to objects, influencing the narratives they support and the relationships they enable (Stylianou-Lambert *et al.* 2014: 567; Fromm 2016: 92; Russi 2024: 5). In practice, “generic attributions” often appear in museum records as broad labels such as “Pacific”, “Oceania”, or “Melanesia”. In some cases, this reflects limits of available evidence, where the available documentation does not allow for a

more precise localisation; in others, it results from inherited cataloguing conventions, in which large regional taxonomies have functioned as a substitute for specificity. I have repeatedly encountered objects whose material features or forms strongly suggested a more localised origin, yet whose records retained only a sweeping regional category. Such classifications do not merely simplify description; they shape how objects can be retrieved, compared, and contextualised within and across collections.

The problem is not uncertainty itself, but how institutions manage it. In museum catalogues, material labels frequently take on the status of established facts, regardless of how those identifications were produced. This gives classificatory language a disproportionate authority, shaping interpretation while masking its own conditions of possibility. Treating the distinction between confirmed knowledge, informed attribution, and lack of evidence as optional or immaterial obscures the

power relations embedded in documentation practices. Making these distinctions explicit is therefore an ethical necessity, as it resists the stabilisation of interpretive categories that risk turning provisional readings into authoritative narratives.

Attempts to render knowledge fully coherent or universally legible can reproduce forms of epistemic exclusion rather than resolve them, particularly when working with histories shaped by non-translation, value-incongruence, and uneven relations of power (Rycroft 2023: 27–29). From this perspective, uncertainty and partiality are not failures of scholarship, but conditions that must be acknowledged if historical and anthropological work is to remain attentive to positionality, relationality, and the uneven grounds on which knowledge is produced. Rendering uncertainty visible thus becomes an ethical commitment, foregrounding the limits and responsibilities of

interpretation over the authority of definitive or closed claims.

Questions of responsibility become particularly visible at the level of material description. In my previous work on Kanak collections, materials that are historically and politically significant, such as European textiles incorporated into objects, often became difficult to discern once translated into catalogue entries, where they were omitted or absorbed into broad descriptors that neutralised their interpretive significance. Similar issues arise with other materials that appear in museum records with a degree of apparent precision. For example, stone components may be identified as jadeite, nephrite, or serpentine, or wooden elements attributed to specific tree species, without any traceable indication of how these determinations were reached. Such identifications may be inherited from earlier records, collector notes, local knowledge shared at the point of acquisition, or later

curatorial inference, yet the conditions under which they were produced frequently remain undocumented.

Processes of simplification can also carry explicit political implications. In other institutional contexts, I have encountered objects originating from West Papua catalogued solely under national or administrative labels such as “Indonesia” or “Irian Jaya”, a dynamic that echoes more recent debate surrounding the naming of Kanaky/New Caledonia. While these terms may appear neutral within a database, they obscure contested histories and ongoing struggles over sovereignty, and they stabilise a geopolitical framework that is neither uncontested nor historically fixed, without implying intentional misrepresentation. In such cases, cataloguing practices do not simply organise information; they participate in shaping how objects are read and which historical and political narratives are foregrounded or silenced.

This framework also reframes the role museums play in supporting researchers. During my preliminary discussions with Dr Das and the Ipswich Museum staff, I encountered a strong institutional commitment to making collections researchable: preparing access, offering guidance, sharing internal records, and identifying areas where new research is needed. The museum's ongoing work to create resources and tools for researchers, including clearer cataloguing structures and transparent documentation, demonstrates how responsibility is not limited to public-facing interpretation but extends to the conditions that make academic work possible. For me, this support is not a secondary detail but part of the broader system of ASR, where responsibilities are distributed between researchers and institutions.

Methodologically, my work combines close visual and material analysis with provenance review and the slow, ongoing process of revisiting databases and drafting short interpretative texts in conversation with

the curatorial team. Through this approach, I trace how responsibilities move between objects, researchers and institutions, and how even seemingly minor decisions become part of the ethical labour of working with collections.

Inside Ipswich Museum: Curatorial Practice, Support, and Institutional Ethics:

Ipswich Museum offers a particularly revealing context in which to reflect on ASR in practice. Established in the mid nineteenth century as a civic institution intended to inspire and educate the people of Ipswich, the museum was shaped by the collecting rationale of the Victorian period, when specimens and artefacts were gathered from across the world in an effort to build a comprehensive vision of nature and diverse cultures. This history remains visible today, both in the breadth of the natural science collections and in the global scope of

the anthropological materials. The institution has changed considerably since those early decades. Archival accounts describe a museum that was historically under-resourced and constrained by limited space yet already engaged in critical self-reflection about its displays and interpretative choices (Jones 1979).

More recent documentation presents a museum undergoing significant redevelopment and renewal. Alongside the architectural restoration of the historic building, the institution is redefining its identity around accessibility, research, and public engagement (Ipswich Museum 2023a). The official website describes an institution modernising its galleries while preserving its Victorian heritage, expanding exhibition rooms, creating new research and conservation spaces, and improving visitor facilities such as learning areas and public amenities (Ipswich Museum 2023b). These changes form part of a broader effort to open previously unseen areas of the museum and create conditions for displaying

a larger portion of the collections than ever before. This redevelopment reflects a vision that positions Ipswich Museum as a civic institution rooted in local histories but connected to global narratives, where research, participation, and cultural accessibility coexist as central priorities (Ipswich Museum 2023a; 2023b).

My collaboration with Ipswich Museum began within this landscape of transition, and from the outset the institution's commitment to supporting research was made tangible rather than conceptual. During my early conversations with Dr Das, the responsibilities the museum assumes internally became immediately visible. She and her colleagues not only prepared access to the storerooms, arranged object viewings and retrieved items from the collections, but also carved out time in their work schedules to guide me through storage materials, historic files, and areas of the catalogue that required further attention. These actions, small in appearance yet

substantial in practice, shaped the conditions that made this project possible.

This article is based on object-centred research conducted during repeated visits to Ipswich Museum, which began in November 2025 and will continue throughout 2026, alongside a semi-structured interview carried out in November 2025 as part of the preliminary phase of the collaboration. The interview was structured around open-ended questions intended to reflect on curatorial practice, institutional responsibilities, and the ethical dimensions of working with ethnographic collections.

In the interview, Dr Das described enabling research as a curatorial responsibility in its own right: opening the storage facilities, sharing the museum's documentation, explaining gaps, and being transparent about what is known and what remains uncertain. She framed this work as part of a wider institutional

effort, which included plans to create what she called a “research toolbox” for scholars, building upon an idea first conceived and put into practice by her former colleague, Glynn Davis, previously Senior Curator for Collections and Learning at Colchester Museums.

The toolbox is conceived not only as a set of intellectual resources but also as a practical support system for those working with the collections. It will consist of guidance notes with pertinent contacts, contextual histories, cataloguing protocols, and clearer workflow structures designed to help researchers navigate records and understand the museum’s internal documentation. Alongside these elements, there will be a small physical kit to accompany researchers in the analysis. This will include protective gloves, a measuring tape, relevant templates or labels, building layouts, and other basic tools for careful handling and close looking, the kinds of tools that make object-based work possible in practice. For her, bringing together

these conceptual and material components is part of the same responsibility: enabling research not through abstract principles but through tangible forms of care that shape how scholars encounter and understand the collection.

Integrating this interview into the methodology is essential, because it offers a view of responsibility as it is practised inside the museum rather than declared in formal documents. In our conversation, Dr Das was careful to describe the museum's decolonising work not as a programme with fixed steps, but as an ongoing process shaped by limits, uncertainties, and the need for transparency. She emphasised that the museum does not position itself as speaking on behalf of others but rather understands its ethical responsibility as making visible what is known, what remains unclear, and what cannot yet be reconstructed from the available evidence. For her, responsibility begins with honesty: a willingness to recognise the structural gaps inherited from earlier

collecting practices and to resist the temptation to present definitive narratives where the evidence is partial.

What emerged most strongly was her attention to the ethics of interpretation. She reflected on how many objects have long been framed through colonial taxonomies and simplified cultural categories, and on the need to exercise greater care and to devote more time to revisiting existing descriptions rather than reproducing them automatically. In her view, decolonisation is not an outcome but a form of attentiveness that requires questioning assumptions, creating space for the knowledge researchers can bring, and preparing the ground for conversations with communities of origin when circumstances allow. She described this work as “care that happens behind the scenes”, the kind of labour that is rarely evident in exhibitions but fundamentally shapes how the museum understands its own holdings.

A crucial part of this care, she added, is transparency about the interpretive process itself. She emphasised the importance of making visible who has researched what, when, and with what kinds of constraints, so that future researchers and communities can trace how knowledge about an object has been produced. For Ipswich Museum, acknowledging the hands and voices that shape catalogues is not an administrative detail but an ethical practice: a way of recognising that interpretation is cumulative, situated, and always open to revision. In this sense, the position she articulated resonates strongly with the principles of ASR: responsibility appears here not as a single corrective act, but as a shared practice grounded in openness and the acknowledgement of limits. What I encountered in this interview was not a museum asserting authority over the past, but one committed to recognising its gaps, making transparent the processes through which knowledge is produced, and rethinking

inherited frames so that alternative readings and future dialogues can emerge.

My work with the collections from Oceania began with the objects from Kanaky and Fiji, both because of my previous research and because these materials capture not only the cataloguing challenges present across these holdings but also because they indicate the range of object types that will play a significant role in the museum's future permanent displays. The museum's records for these objects are often sparse, uneven, or tied to broad geographical labels such as "Oceania" or "Melanesia", categories that flatten cultural specificity and obscure the distinct histories of each object. As I moved between rooms, accession registers, and digital catalogues, I encountered objects whose provenance was recorded in only a few words, or whose descriptions relied on terminology inherited from colonial taxonomies. This is not unusual in

anthropological collections, but encountering these gaps first-hand made their implications especially visible.

The objects themselves carry complex itineraries. The Kanak axe bound with European cloth (IPSMG:R.1936.118.6) is a telling example: absent from the database category of New Caledonia and recorded only in its earliest accession entry, it combines European cloth with other, less documented materials whose functions and histories have not yet been studied. These elements point to additional layers of use, modification, or repair that would merit future technical and contextual investigation. Similarly, several clubs from Fiji are described generically, their local terminologies omitted or absorbed into broader typologies. These gaps do not diminish the value of the objects, but they shape the possibilities available for research, interpretation, and future collaboration with communities of origin.

Working with these materials requires a form of responsibility that is both technical and ethical. On the one hand, there is the practical work of reviewing the catalogue, revisiting terminology, identifying inconsistencies, and tracing what can be reconstructed from ‘history files’. On the other hand, there is the responsibility of recognising where evidence is insufficient, where uncertainty must remain visible, and where new research can meaningfully contribute to the museum’s understanding of its own holdings. The work is slow, but this slowness is part of the ethical commitment: an approach that prioritises accuracy, attentiveness, and care over the production of quick interpretative answers. In this sense, analytical responsibility lies not only in interpretation, but in the cumulative effects of small documentary decisions, which shape how objects will be encountered and understood over time. Such forms of responsibility unfold over time and through repeated encounters with

objects and records, where meaning is not revealed all at once but emerges through sustained, embodied engagement with materials and their histories (Blakey and Mitchell 2017: 7-8).

In an ideal scenario, transparency about the motivations, limits, and positionality of contemporary record-keepers would be incorporated into museum records themselves. Making visible how and why information has been produced helps ensure that ambiguities inherited from past record-keeping practices are not inadvertently reproduced, but remain open to future questioning and reworking, as discussed further below.

Understanding Responsibility as a Shared, Ongoing Practice:

Working with ethnographic collections makes ASR unavoidably concrete. The kind of objects I examined at

Ipswich Museum rarely come with stable narratives; instead, they sit within layered histories shaped by incomplete documentation, uneven provenance, and interpretive choices inherited from earlier curatorial systems. In this context, responsibility takes shape as a principled practice: one that is enhanced through the handling of objects, reading catalogues, and acknowledging what cannot as yet be known.

The interview with Dr Das made this especially visible. What became clear is that responsibility in this context is not only about how objects are interpreted, but also about how research itself is structured. She outlined three forms of responsibility that the museum must assume when working with external researchers: establishing shared expectations and aligning research aims with institutional priorities; providing access not only to objects but to the broader documentary ecosystem that gives them meaning, including history files, card catalogues, and accession registers; and

finally, situating each object within its wider collecting networks, recognising that no part of the collection exists in isolation.

These points rarely appear in published guidelines, yet they significantly shape how knowledge is produced and circulated. In describing these responsibilities, she also drew attention to the unevenness of the museum's archival records, shaped by generations of curators, donors, and collecting practices. For her, transparency is not simply about publishing provenance data but about making visible the processes, limits, and decisions through which interpretation takes shape.

A particularly compelling element of our discussion concerned authorship. She stressed that interpretation is never neutral, and that museums have a responsibility to document the standpoints, contexts, and constraints within and through which knowledge about an

object is produced. Tracing these interpretive lineages, she suggested, is what enables future researchers and communities to understand how certain narratives came to dominate while others remained unspoken.

At the same time, she highlighted the practical constraints that complicate this work. Every research visit requires staff supervision, specialist knowledge, and time, resources that are increasingly stretched. Rather than framing this as a limitation, she sees it as part of the museum's wider decolonising work: recognising structural constraints, negotiating them openly, and still striving to create an environment where research can contribute to more balanced and accountable interpretations. This connection between practical realities and ethical commitments is where her account overlaps most strongly with the principles of ASR, which identify responsibility not as a single gesture but as a shared, ongoing negotiation between institutions, researchers, communities and the collections themselves.

This perspective reframes ASR as a shared field of commitment. Hearing Dr Das articulate the museum's position made me more attentive to the ways in which my own work participates in this circulation of responsibilities. For me, it means recognising that the work I do on terminology, provenance, and object histories is not separate from the museum's responsibilities but intertwined with theirs. For the museum, it means supporting researchers not only through access but through honesty about limitations and through practices that keep interpretation open to revision and dialogue, rather than hardened into fixed narratives. Seen from this angle, responsibility towards communities of origin, as well as diaspora and descendant communities, does not begin only at the moment when collaboration becomes possible, but much earlier, in the preparatory work that must precede any engagement. Facilitating access to resources, ensuring

their availability, and creating structurally conducive conditions is necessarily a part of this task.

Future Work, Limits, and Continuing Care:

While the previous sections have examined how responsibility operates within present curatorial and research practices, this final section shifts attention to the temporal conditions that precede and shape future forms of collaboration. The early stages of my collaboration with Ipswich Museum have shown how ASR becomes visible not through broad institutional statements but through the careful practices that shape everyday research. Working with collections from Oceania is highlighting how much responsibility lies in the smallest decisions over time: revisiting terminology, acknowledging uncertainty, tracing provenance through fragmentary records, and recognising the limits built into earlier curatorial systems. These tasks may appear

technical, yet they structure how objects will be understood in the future and what forms of dialogue may eventually become possible with communities of origin.

The conversations with Dr Das emphasised that museums hold their own responsibilities in this process: to make their records accessible, to be transparent about gaps, to support researchers with context and guidance, and to articulate clearly the conditions under which knowledge has been produced. These gestures, modest in appearance, contribute to the creation of a research environment attentive to the cumulative and situated nature of interpretation.

At the same time, this project remains at an early stage. The possibilities for future research, reinterpretation, and eventual community engagement depend not only on academic commitment but also on institutional resources, staffing, and time. Acknowledging these limits is part of the ethical

landscape in which ASR operates. In the absence of direct dialogue with communities of origin, objects are often interpreted through documentary frameworks inherited from earlier collecting contexts, in which classificatory priorities and descriptive conventions reflect historical power relations rather than contemporary cultural meanings. This can restrict the kinds of meanings objects are able to carry, reducing culturally specific materials, practices, and relationships to generalised descriptors that fail to reflect their social and cultural significance.

For this reason, responsible work cannot consist in postponement or inaction, but in sustained efforts to refine, verify, and expand existing knowledge. This includes cross-checking records, consulting specialists across disciplines, and questioning inherited classifications, so that objects are not prematurely exposed to the public through simplified or misleading narratives. Premature claims to decolonisation or

engagement, when not grounded in careful documentary work, risk reproducing new distortions rather than unsettling inherited ones. Fragile or opaque documentation can silently constrain even well-intentioned collaborative projects, narrow the terms of dialogue and shifting the burden of interpretation onto researchers or communities rather than recognising these limitations as institutional and historical. From this perspective, care does not lie in producing closure or definitive answers, but in resisting premature simplification and keeping interpretative questions open over time. Treating uncertainty as something to be held responsibly, rather than resolved too quickly, preserves the possibility for future reinterpretation and for forms of engagement that are not shaped by distorted or incomplete foundations.

Seen in this way, ASR does not coincide with moments of public engagement or collaboration alone, but with the often-invisible work of preparing ethical,

documentary, and institutional ground on which future encounters with collections and communities may eventually take place on less distorted terms. What this collaboration has revealed is that responsible work with anthropological collections begins long before definitive outcomes can be reached and consists in creating conditions for thinking together rather than delivering resolved solutions.

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