

'Correcting our Collecting': Seminar with Decolonising the Archive

Dr Hannah Ishmael (Department of Digital Humanities), Connie Bell and Dr Etienne Joseph (Decolonising the Archive), Decolonising the Archive volunteers, Professor Pat Noxolo and Dr Rita Gayle (University of Birmingham, Conjectures: Stuart Hall Archive Project), Dancers from African Heritage UK, Sylvia Arthur (founder, Library of Africa and African Diaspora/ Ghana), Mitchell Esajas and Jessica de Abreu (co-founders, Black Archives Amsterdam), Dr Stanley Griffin (co-Editor of Decolonising the Caribbean Record, University of the West Indies)





Trainee Archivists © DTA

PROJECT SUMMARY

The Correcting Our Collecting community archive course was formulated by Dr Etienne Joseph and Connie Bell in 2022. Due to the success of the course and their ambition to further develop it, Dr Hannah Ishmael organised to support a collaboration with Decolonising the Archive (DTA), aimed to bring DTA's established African heritage archiving course to a wider audience. DTA has been running this course for three years, providing participants with an introduction to the tools and skills necessary to create, preserve, and activate archives from an African heritage perspective.

The collaborative event supported by KCL Rapid Response Fund aimed to raise awareness of the course, and related issues amongst a broader regional audience. This was achieved by a one-day seminar held at Birmingham Central Library enabling connections between interested participants, heritage professionals, community leaders, and academics from across the UK, Caribbean, and Africa. The Correcting Our Collective seminar sought to create connections between grassroots practitioners and established professionals in the field. The discussions offered a space for participants to reflect on their own practices and develop new approaches to community-based archiving.

HOW DID THE COLLABORATIVE PROJECT COME ABOUT?

Dr Hannah Ishmael and Decolonising the Archive (DTA) have had a longstanding relationship. While working at the Black Cultural Archives, Hannah had already been discussing potential collaborations with DTA. When she joined King's College London in September 2023, she continued these conversations, focusing on finding funding to support a workshop with DTA.

In early 2023, after identifying the Rapid Response Fund as a suitable opportunity, Hannah successfully secured the funding later in the year, supporting the intended trajectory of the project. By March, the planning phase was underway, with DTA taking the lead in determining the structure, curation and activities, as they had a clear vision for the workshop's content and goals. Hannah's role primarily involved facilitating and supporting the collaboration, ensuring that the project ran smoothly.



Sylvia Arthur, Photo © DTA website

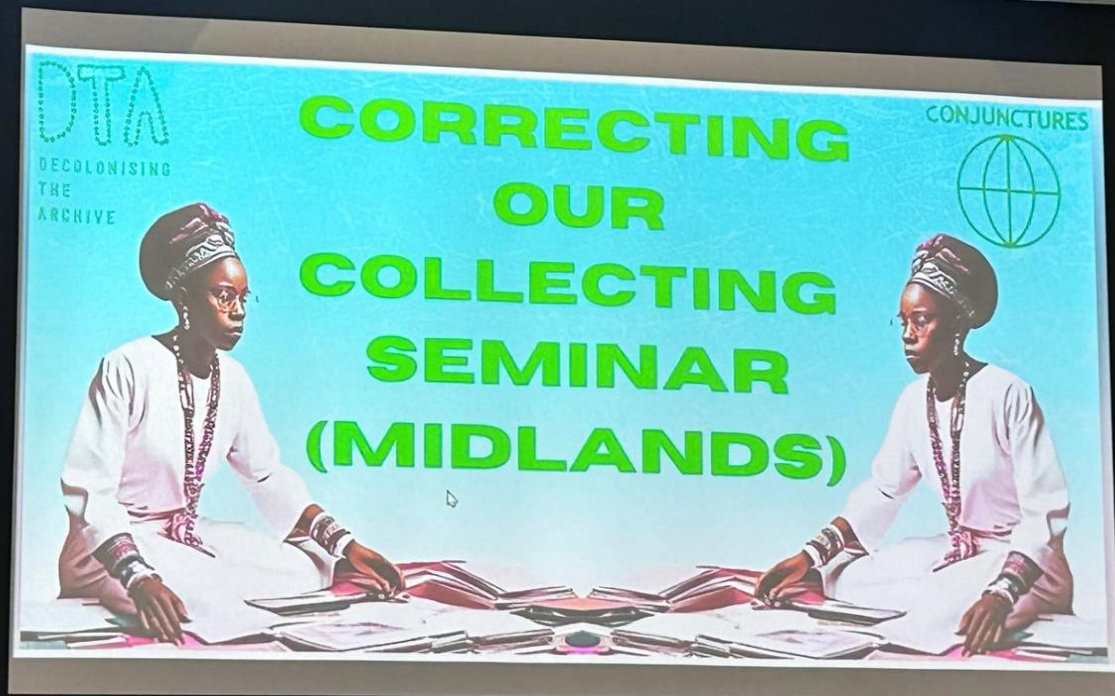
WHAT HAPPENED?

The Stuart Hall Conjectures seminar at Birmingham University was a key project partner. Conjectures is led by Professor Patricia Noxolo and Dr Rita Gayle. Apart from supporting DTA's vision to share the program in Birmingham and to co-facilitate on the day, this collaboration also enriched the seminar by providing a context informed by Hall's cultural analysis.

The day-long seminar brought together community leaders, heritage professionals and academics from the UK, Caribbean, and Africa. The seminar introduced attendees to DTA's ongoing course on African heritage archiving, *Correcting Our Collecting*, which focuses on introducing people of African descent in heritage, narrative and repository skills, encouraging them to apply these techniques within their own communities.

Throughout the seminar, experts like Sylvia Arthur (founder of Library of Africa and African Diaspora in Ghana), Mitchell Esajas and Jessica de Abreu (co-founders of Black Archives Amsterdam), and Dr. Stanley Griffin (University of the West Indies) engaged the audience in discussions about the challenges of preserving African heritage and addressing colonial biases in traditional archival practices. The event allowed for rich exchanges on practical methods of collecting, preserving, and activating archives, with a focus on African heritage.

Despite some logistical challenges, such as securing funding in time from KCL and DTA having to work radically to surpass limitations, the event was a success, drawing 80 attendees. The success of the Birmingham event also highlighted the importance of decentralising cultural conversations away from London, allowing regional communities more access to these important dialogues. The seminar concluded with the idea of continuing this work, with plans to host similar events in other regions to keep broadening the reach of DTA's methodologies.



WHAT WAS THE PROJECT'S IMPACT?

The Correcting Our Collecting project had a significant impact both on the participants and the wider African heritage community. Through the seminar, participants gained practical archiving skills, enabling them to become more active in preserving and representing their own cultural histories. For many attendees, this was the first opportunity to engage with African heritage archiving methodologies. Many were inspired by hearing from community leaders who had undertaken similar work. This was significant because it emphasised that archiving and heritage work is not exclusive to professionals but can be undertaken by anyone with a story to tell, fostering empowerment.

The seminar succeeded in raising awareness about the importance of community-led archiving. This was evidenced by strong attendance, with over 80 participants, and the feedback gathered through post-event surveys. These surveys reflected an overwhelmingly positive response, with participants highlighting the importance of learning from seasoned professionals in the heritage field and making connections with others interested in archiving and cultural preservation.

Another notable impact was the increased visibility of DTA's methodologies, which were shared with a larger audience during the seminar. Their holistic and culturally aware approach to archiving, including the attention to the physical environment of the seminar and cultural touchpoints, was seen as highly effective in creating an inclusive and comfortable atmosphere for learning. This was particularly important as the attendees came from a range of backgrounds, including academics, PhD researchers, members of local community heritage organisations, and interested individuals.

Lastly, the event's partnership with the Conjunctions: Stuart Hall Archive Project added further depth to the conversations, aligning the discussions with archival theory and practice, and laying the groundwork for further events in the Midlands and beyond. The legacy of the Correcting Our Collecting project continues through ongoing collaborations and potential future workshops, with hopes of expanding these conversations and tools to even wider audiences, while continuing to refine approaches to community-led archiving.

HANNAH'S TOP TIPS FOR IMPACT

1. Build relationships with trusted community partners early on. Establishing trust with your collaborators from the outset is crucial for success. My prior relationship with Decolonising the Archive (DTA) proved invaluable, especially when unexpected challenges—such as delays in funding—arose.

2. Decentralise the conversation to reach wider audiences. Taking important cultural conversations to new regions helps to foster greater inclusivity and reach audiences that might not otherwise have the chance to engage. It's essential to think beyond major cities and tap into regional networks for a broader, more impactful reach.

3. Tailor your event environment for inclusivity and comfort. Creating a welcoming and culturally relevant space is essential for engaging diverse participants. Decolonising the Archive's methodology emphasised this, creating an atmosphere carefully to ensure participants feel seen, included, and able to contribute. This attention to detail will improve engagement and foster meaningful dialogue.

FURTHER READING

1. Ishmael, H., Sowinski, E. A., Foster, K., Joseph, E., & Richards, N. E. (2020). *Locating the Black Archive*. In S. Popple, A. Prescott, & D. Mutibwa (Eds.), *Communities, Archives and New Collaborative Practices* (pp. 207–218). Bristol University Press. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/c-communities-archives-and-new-collaborative-practices/locating-the-black-archive/A98E625452D5703BE7E0E68EA3C6FD57>

2. Hall, S. (2001). Constituting an archive. *Third Text*, 15(54), 89–92. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820108576903>

3. Joseph E, Bell C. Everything is everything: Embodiment, affect, and the Black Atlantic archive. *Trans Inst Br Geogr*. 2020; 45: 520–524. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12380>



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