# Authenticity, Risk, and Co-Production:
## Immersive Digital Media in Decolonial Heritage Practice

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Between 2022 and 2024, English Heritage partnered with university and community colleagues to explore the use of immersive digital technology alongside promenade theatrical performance. Working alongside a youth panel from the International Slavery Museum of National Museums Liverpool, we developed mixed-reality (MR) promenade performances at Marble Hill as a partnership between English Heritage, Brunel University London and Essex University. The aim was to interpret challenging narratives around enslavement and colonialism in the National Heritage Collection. The project was also linked to a broader partnership involving Farmingdale State College SUNY and Historic Deerfield.

This article focuses particularly on the role of the youth panel and the risks and benefits of community co-production in digital heritage practice. Asking communities to help steer a project is sometimes considered a risk to authenticity, institutional expertise or research innovation. This article offers a new risk framework in which authenticity is a key to risk mitigation, helping to align the aims of communities with heritage practitioners and researchers. This approach draws on heritage and community practitioners and researchers interested in community participation, including Sherry Arnstein (1969), Gerard Corsane (2004), and Tehmina Goskar (2022). Through authenticity, co-production can be based on partnership that recognizes rather than obscures the autonomy and uniqueness of individuals, groups and organizations and that offers constructive and equitable models for collaboration and partnership between heritage institutions and communities.

### *Mixed Reality and Decolonization at Marble Hill*

Marble Hill is a grand eighteenth-century villa in southwest London (Figure 1). It was built in the 1720s in the Palladian neo-classical style for Henrietta Howard, the mistress of future King George II (Bryant 2011, 1). The house was in the latest fashionable style, and it offered Henrietta a retreat

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from life at court. Marble Hill became an idyll by the Thames where she entertained the great intellectuals of her era, including Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift. Henrietta overcame a difficult childhood and abusive first marriage, and her house is a rare example of a house built for and by a woman in Georgian England.

Figure 1. Marble Hill

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Marble Hill is looked after by English Heritage, the charity that cares for the National Heritage Collection. This collection comprises more than 420 historic sites in England owned by the government of the United Kingdom, as well as the collections associated with them. English Heritage has a responsibility to hold the trust of the public. At the time of the project at Marble Hill, the English Heritage motto was helping visitors to "Step into England's Story." The historical information offered by English Heritage is of great interest to the public and to commentators (for instance, Addley 2023). All English Heritage materials must be accurate and must be scrupulous in distinguishing between what we *know* and when we are *speculating*.

English Heritage is committed to telling the fullest possible story of the sites and collections it looks after. The immersive digital-media performance project at Marble Hill offered the opportunity to explore aspects of the site's story that are familiar to specialists but usually not prominent for visitors. These included the site's entanglement with global histories of empire, enslavement, and exploitation (Brown 2010; 2013) as well as Henrietta's experiences of gendered violence (Bryant 2011, 31). One of the project's aims was to challenge traditional narratives of eighteenth-cen-

tury material culture by decentering conventional narratives in favor of ones that include the transatlantic slave trade and attempt to highlight the silenced experiences and cultures of enslaved people and other forced workers in Jamaica and British Honduras.

*Risk and Decolonization*

Decolonization is an approach to heritage that recognizes the links between the heritage sector and colonialism and that aims to recenter heritage from the perspective of those who were exploited by colonialism and imperialism. Decolonization is not an outcome that museums and heritage organizations can seek to achieve. Rather, it is an "ongoing process that involves restitution and rehumanisation" (Brulon Soares and Witcomb 2022, iv). According to the Museums Association's decolonization toolkit, decolonization "challenges legacies of oppression and calls for an honest and accurate reappraisal of colonial history" (Museums Association 2022, 4). A further essential element of heritage decolonization is that it be about organizations' interactions with and between the communities they serve, particularly "through the sharing of knowledge and by encouraging mutual understanding" (Brulon Soares and Witcomb 2022, iv). At Marble Hill, decolonization has meant exploring the stories hiding in plain sight that connect the site to other parts of the world through British imperialism and sharing them with visitors in ways that promote respect and understanding.

An essential part of Marble Hill's story is the commodities with strong links to the property such as mahogany (Figure 2), sugar, and shells. Like all commodities, these were transported across global "commodity chains" connecting "successive processes of manufacturing that result in a final product" (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994). As we explored the story of commodities at the site through a decolonial lens, we also came to understand the relevance of – and so to sense the presence of – invisible intangible histories and heritages linked to those long-distance commodity networks, such as Anansi folklore from west Africa. This perspective offers an alternative route for understanding the site, not focused on the genteel society of early eighteenth-century London, but focused instead on the culture and lives of the people upon whose forced or enslaved labor that London society was built (Gikandi 2014; Dresser and Hann 2013).

Figure 2. Mahogany at Marble Hill

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Heritage organizations may perceive some degree of risk attached to marginalized histories, whether they choose to share them or choose *not* to share them. Unfamiliar histories, even (or especially) when well evidenced, may be contested by some established visitors, volunteers, staff, and members of the wider public (Kidd 2014; Moody and Small 2019). Conversely, failing to share those histories undermines a heritage organization's mission to communicate the past and will rightly be contested by others among those same groups. Individuals who feel a personal connection to the history being shared may experience retraumatization and may have strong and divergent views about what stories should be told and in what way. Organizations may also fear they will become caught up in divisive politicized discussions or so-called culture wars (Farrell-Banks 2023), even when the story being told (for example, of the human misery caused by transatlantic slavery) is incontrovertible and beyond dispute in mainstream media.

A further area of perceived risk is that the nature of the evidence for hidden and marginalized histories often differs from that available for more familiar histories. Some degree of uncertainty about the stories being uncovered may be inevitable. Just as risky for a heritage organization, however, is excessive caution leading to a failure in its basic duty to tell the whole story of the heritage it interprets. At Marble Hill, it was incumbent on us to tell as full a story as possible of the house and its global connections and to do so in honest, authentic ways which could connect with a wide variety of audiences. Elements discussing the global connections of the house and the links to transatlantic slavery were brought out as part of a long-planned project to improve the presentation and interpretation of the site, which concluded in 2022.

*Affectual Dramaturgy and Immersive Performance at Marble Hill*

Marble Hill was also selected as the setting and context for a mixed-reality immersive live-performance project to draw out the global connections of the house and its links to enslaved people and to imperialism. To the surprise of some visitors, who expected MR to be used to provide a simulacrum of the past, the piece did not set out to recreate a moment in Marble Hill's history. Rather, the house and its history provided the context and fabric for a fictional work that drew out these connections.

The live performance was developed by playwright and researcher Holly Maples of University of Essex, collaborating with immersive design expert Mariza Dima of Brunel University, who have been working in immersive heritage performance for a number of years (Dima and Maples 2021). The team's creative computing specialist was Damon Daylamani-Zad, also of Brunel University (Doukianou, Daylamani-Zad, and Paraskevopoulos 2020). The project was supported by the youth panel from the International Slavery Museum, who were paid consultants. The immersive live performance explored the use of digital technology alongside promenade theater to interpret challenging narratives around enslavement and colonial power. The immersive performances were designed to reveal hidden and uncomfortable histories through imaginative multimedia storytelling and interactive design.

Dima and Maples have developed an "affectual dramaturgy," through which "immersive experience creates an embodied and sensorial relationship to the function of storytelling in the heritage site… a lived, and embodied, experience which relies on affect as a physical, sensorial, and imaginative act for the participant" (Dima and Maples 2021, 30).

Live-performance MR for heritage decolonization can give users agency in the storytelling and allow each participant to play a role.

The live-performance MR digital decolonization project at Marble Hill aimed to take participants on a journey of discovery into these commodity chains between the property and British imperialism, gradually layering virtual multimedia references to the lives and experiences of enslaved people and forced laborers. MR headsets enabled an embodied engagement with heritage through multisensory interactions with digital audiovisual material, broadening the possibilities of digital storytelling. The fusion of live immersive performance and MR glasses presented a powerful storytelling and educational tool.

*Partnership and Empowerment*

The heritage sector in the United Kingdom and elsewhere has in recent years increasingly recognized the importance of marginalized and minoritized communities being involved in telling their own stories, especially sensitive and hidden stories (For Arts' Sake, Bouchard 2022). The self-advocacy maxim, *nothing about us without us*, sets out a minimum aspiration for community participation to help ensure that projects are relevant and ethical. Taken from the Latin tag *nihil de nobis sine nobis,* which was used in the politics of self-determination in Central Europe (Kornat 2007, 76), the phrase was subsequently popularized by disability studies (Charlton 1998). In recent years, the phrase has developed broad applicability (World Health Organization 2021), and is now found in the arts and culture sectors (Apoh and Osuagwu 2022; People's History Museum 2022).

For institutions to support that principle of "nothing about us without us" in a meaningful way, community participation must represent an empowered partnership. Co-curation and co-production can be understood as processes through which museum professionals work in partnership with communities, sharing in decision making. In the well-known ladder of citizen participation developed by Sherry Arnstein, only the final three rungs allow the participants to exercise what Arnstein calls "citizen power (Arnstein 1969, 217). For Arnstein, the boundary between what she calls "placation" and genuine empowerment is whether citizen participants can "negotiate and engage in trade-offs with traditional powerholders." Museum co-curation and co-production projects can – and should, but do not always – operate at this level of meaningful power for participants.

where "participation shifts from idea or value to actual practice" (Pierroux et al. 2020, 28).

Since at least 2010, the model of the "participatory museum' as expressed by Nina Simon (2010) has enjoyed broad support within the museum sector. Aspects of this approach can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, but as a widely recognized concept, it is much more recent (Pierroux et al. 2020, 27). Nevertheless, for museums and heritage institutions, sharing meaningful curatorial power with project participants can still be an alarming prospect (Moolhuijsen 2015). Loss of control may be understood to bring with it some reputational and relationship risk for an institution's links to visitors, staff, and the wider public. A museum curator in 2013 resigned over a community curation project, saying "the power of art and the sanctity of the public trust had been compromised" (Gamerman 2014).

A more empowering version of co-curation requires the curator to give up some power and to work in partnership with participants within a structure in which both the museum and the community co-curators have a voice, so that both negotiate over the creation of outputs. The result should be a project that speaks not with the institution's voice but with the community's voice or, more accurately, a hybrid voice that incorporates elements of each perspective.

In Arnstein's terms, communities are placed in a position to *negotiate and engage in trade-offs*. This allows the museums to act as a space within which multiple voices can be heard, or what Gerard Corsane calls "polyvocality" (Corsane 2004, 9). When successful, co-curation engages curators and community participants in a joint journey of discovery, with no fixed destination and with barriers removed. While objects themselves may (or may not) remain in cases, through co-curation, the culture, heritage and ideas that objects embody are no longer locked away by themselves as if they were treasures prone to being stolen. Instead these ideas are opened up to be explored by the public. While this may entail risks, it also provides substantial benefits for organizations and institutions that can only be realized through bold sharing of power.

The individuality and diversity of participants are part of what makes co-curation and co-production feel dynamic and exciting for visitors. Nevertheless, some common themes emerge from co-production practice (Table 1).

Table 1. Top-down and bottom-up models

| **Top-down model: cultural/ heritage institutions have power** | **Bottom-up model: communities / visitors have power** |
|---|---|
| **The institution:** | **Communities and visitors:** |
| - determines what you should be interested in. | - want stories that have personal relevance. |
| - tells you what you need to know. | - decide what they want to learn about. |
| - believes the visitor's role is as passive consumer. | - can contribute their lived experience, family history, creative and affective responses, and so forth. |
| - 'owns' the history, art and experience. | - feel a sense of ownership of their cultural experiences and stories. |

Projects may run into difficulties where unpaid participants are used to advance the priorities of the institution rather than their own priorities. For participation to operate successfully, there must be a "deal" (Goskar 2022): A fair exchange between institution and participants, in which volunteering to support the institution is balanced by training, professional development, personal satisfaction, or, indeed, remuneration. Exploitation of participants can be a particular issue for decolonization projects and other work with minoritized groups. In any project in which the subject matter may be traumatizing or retraumatizing for participants, particular care must be taken to ensure that participants fully understand all aspects of the project and their participation in it, including the scope and content of the project, the activities they will be asked to do, the benefits to them, and the benefits to the institution.

A particular tension can arise within the bottom-up model in participant research projects, when there may be ambiguity about the dual role of the participant-researcher as a *contributor* of information, often about their own experiences, memories, and perceptions, and as a *recipient* of information from the institution. Co-produced research projects require significant professional research support – sometimes, even more so than a traditional project. The professional researcher(s) will have to respond dynamically to requests for information to support the particular interests and focuses of the community researchers.

*Youth Partnership at Marble Hill*

At Marble Hill, to amplify the voices of members of the many communities whose stories we sought to interweave, we engaged a youth panel of about ten young people aged 18 to 24 from the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool. For a project like this one, with the explicit aim of creating an emotional response, we were particularly mindful of the risk of alienating our audience or of working without incorporating their perspectives. The ISM Youth Panel was an ideal partner because of their lived experience and their familiarity with contributing to projects that considered histories of enslaved people and of empire and colonialism. As members of a youth panel, they also represented the young audience that we hoped would be engaged by the digital technology.

This was organised through Shout Out Loud, the English Heritage youth engagement program. Shout Out Loud established an approach to youth co-curation in which central principles include clarity about the role of the youth participants and a clear distinction between the institutional voice and the youth co-curation voice (Table 2).

Table 2. Youth co-curation and youth consultants

| **Youth co-curation: Young people and the institution partner to curate a project jointly of interest to both.** | **Youth consultants: Young people support an institution to pursue its objectives.** |
|---|---|
| **Empowerment**: The institution shares knowledge with young people so they are empowered to question and challenge experts. | **Empowerment**: The institution shares knowledge with young people so they are empowered to question and challenge experts. |
| **Role of participants:** Young people have a unique role based on their lived experience and perspective. Don't treat young people like professional historians – or free labor. | **Role of participants**: Young people have a unique role based on their lived experience and perspective. Contributing as a consultant is a *paid opportunity.* |
| **Voice:** Ensure distinction between the institutional voice and the youth/institution hybrid co-curation voice. | **Voice:** Ensure distinction between the institutional voice and the youth consultant voice. |
| **Decision making:** Decisions are based on consensus. | **Decision making**: Clear parameters for advice and challenge. |

Our partnership with the ISM Youth Panel ran for a year from November 2022 until October 2023. This was a partnership in Arnstein's sense: Participants were able to negotiate and engage in trade-offs with the organizational partners. The project had two components: The first was a capacity-building process, allowing them to develop their understanding of the site, of histories of empire, and of methodologies for exhibiting hidden histories in heritage settings. This process included visits to other heritage sites with colonial connections and sessions with experts from English Heritage and from other organizations and independent scholars, with the intent of developing their capacity to act as "critical friends" to the project. These sessions increased the young people's understanding of the issues, and access to external experts helped to empower young people to consider ideas from outside English Heritage and to bring a fresh eye to our work. The program was also responsive. The project organizers suggested session topics and ideas to the youth panel, but the young people quickly identified areas in which they wanted more training and/or expert contact. The final program was developed in partnership.

The second element of our partnership with the ISM Youth Panel was bringing the young people in as critical friends and consultants collaborating with the project team developing the immersive digital experience. The young people were involved almost throughout the project, and they helped to determine the themes of the theatrical performance and advised the project team on appropriate ways to engage with the most sensitive and challenging aspects of the colonial histories we were exploring. The young people determined in particular the tone in which those aspects were addressed, and a key contribution was to suggest that the end of the theater piece be a call to action that would empower visitors to share the knowledge they had gained about the layers of history that may be hiding in plain sight at heritage sites and that the play revealed in increasing detail as it progressed.

The ISM Youth Panel participants were particularly excited by the potential of the digital technology. They appreciated the potential of the technology to overlay multiple elements and multiple stories together, allowing multiple historical voices to be perceived at the same time. The young people were particularly struck by which historical stories are amplified and which are obscured in the design of Marble Hill. They noted the obvious neo-classical allusions on the building, starting with the Palladian neo-classical façade with pediment and sculpture above classicizing columns (see Figure 1). This neo-classical theme is continued inside the house in many features, including plaster roundels of figures from

classical mythology, although eighteenth-century Britain had only indirect links to the Greek and Roman past. On the other hand, the house has powerful links to British imperialism, including mahogany likely grown in British colonies in Central America and harvested by enslaved workers from West Africa and forced indigenous laborers, yet the heritage linking the house to Central American forest trees and to the West African heritage of the enslaved people who harvested those trees was much harder to perceive. The young people were inspired by the potential "polyvocality" (Corsane 2004, 9) of digital media, allowing all those stories to speak, not only metaphorically but also literally.

The basis of the partnership was mutual respect and equality, through which we were able to reach a fair exchange or a "deal," in Goskar's phrase. The ISM Youth Panel members were interested in developing their individual expertise in both emerging digital media and in heritage decolonization, and the program was carefully developed in partnership with the ISM Youth Panel to represent a fair exchange of their time for their contribution to the project. In addition to the training and project experience they gained, each member of the Youth Panel was given a consultation fee. This reflected the irreplaceable contribution of their lived experience and perspectives, as well as that in their role as critical friends, they were meeting the needs of the project.

*A Risk Model for Co-Production in a Digital Media Project*

Working with our partners, we were able to identify shared values (Table 3) that united the project partners and that we thought could underpin the work we did together.

Table 3. Shared values among partners in a new media digital-heritage creative project

| **Shared values** |
|---|
| Authenticity (historical, organizational) |
| Collaboration and consensus |
| Audience engagement and growth |
| Distinct community and institutional voices |
| Genuine commitment to decolonizing |
| Interest in innovative approaches to interpretation |

From this we were able to identify a risk framework that all of us could support (Table 4).

Table 4. Risks and mitigations in a participatory new media digital-heritage creative project

| **Risk** | **Mitigation** |
|---|---|
| Compromising historical authenticity | - Authenticity through accuracy: sharing the limits of our knowledge<br>- Clarity with the project team and project participants about the different roles and expectations on the project, including the young people as consultants and professional researchers as a historical resource<br>- Clarity with the public about what is fact, what is speculation, and what is creative invention |
| Distress and/or conflict working on sensitive topics with (young) people | - Authenticity through transparency: being open about the challenges<br>- Acknowledging that the project team does not have all the answers<br>- Recognizing the sensitivity of these issues for all involved in the project, especially those who related most strongly to the project themes |
| Compromising relationships with established visitors and volunteers; reputational damage | - Authenticity through clarity: sharing the purpose of the project<br>- Clear distinction between the institutional voice and the non-institutional / community / hybrid voice |
| Navigating new technology; misalignment with established visitor relationships; missing the boat on new technology | - Authenticity through bravery: clarity about project objectives and the role of the technology<br>- Trusting that holding onto our values would allow us to adapt to the new technology while remaining authentically ourselves |

At the center of the risk framework we developed was the idea of authenticity. The digital technology was not an end in itself but rather a means for us to tell stories in a way that was both historically authentic and organ-

izationally authentic, in the sense of true to our values as an organization. Similarly, in our work with young people, we were able to navigate sensitive issues that arose through being authentic and honest about the challenges in the project and acknowledging that we did not have all the answers. By being open with visitors about the nature of the project, they were willing to see the work as an experiment and came with us on the adventure.

As a digital project, there was a greater institutional appetite for risk, because the project offered an opportunity to develop technological familiarity and was not judged by the standards of "business as usual." Some degree of risk was considered inevitable. There was also clear delineation between the institutional voice (expressed through the site's presentation and standard interpretation media) and the community co-curation voice expressed through the MR performance. The audience for digital media often skews younger, more open to innovation, and less enthusiastic about traditional heritage presentation, so work with that audience was seen as positive, with fewer preconceptions about how to reach them.

The performances of the immersive work, *Sancho's Journey*, ran to fully booked audiences in September and October 2023, with very little controversy from visitors, staff, and volunteers. All audience members for the MR performances signed a research participation form that explained the project to them, helping to increase audience understanding. Nevertheless, some were surprised and frustrated by the use of creative invention in the MR work to create a fictional piece. For some, their strong expectation was that MR new media should be used for documentary reconstruction, not for fiction, which was a valuable new insight for us into perceptions of the medium. Focusing on our value of authenticity, we were able to revise and expand our information to visitors to be even clearer about what they were seeing, which resolved that concern. The authenticity risk framework, therefore, allowed us both to mitigate the risks inherent in the project and to address the issues that arose.

*Conclusion*

At Marble Hill, immersive digital technology was a powerful tool for creating an affective dramatic experience that helped audiences to see the site and its history in new ways. *Sancho's Journey* helped audiences to connect to and empathize with perspectives that were unfamiliar and sometimes challenging. The youth panel, far from representing a risk to the project or to the organizations involved, was a vital source of consultation and guidance. By focusing on authenticity, broadly understood, we were able

to see how bringing in young people as partners was a way to manage the risks of working with sensitive material and new technology. The success of the project suggests that the risk framework was appropriate to the project and may have broader applicability.

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