

Conclusion: Decolonizing Science and Collections



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Overview

Building on our exploration of how the Royal Society institutionalized science (Lesson 1), how maritime networks transported knowledge and collections (Lesson 2), and how African naturalists' contributions were both essential and marginalized (Lesson 3), this conclusion examines how contemporary institutions are working to address these historical patterns through decolonization efforts.

Introduction

In 1860, *The London Review & Weekly Journal* published a tribute to Hans Sloane's contributions to British natural science. It praised Sloane's knowledge and significant contributions to natural history. It also emphasized Sloane's incredible collections of specimens and his donation to national institutions. The author argued that Sloane's collections laid the foundations for British natural history collections and knowledge. The article noted, "The principle

[goal] of Hans Sloane in collecting was to bring together from distant parts of the earth all objects remarkable and interesting and to place them in such way that they might admit of comparison.” The article noted his journey and collecting efforts in Jamaica and suggests much of his collecting work relied on a global network of gentlemanly collaborators. It did not reference how this work was related to British imperialism’s civilizing missions, connections to the transatlantic trade of enslaved people, and the knowledge and labor of enslaved Africans. Given the article’s publication date, this is not surprising. However, recent scholarly work, on which this module relies, is helping to change this Eurocentric narrative.



Engraving of the botanical room of the British Museum, 1858.

Since the late 1990s, some scholars have embraced re-envisioning the history of “Western science,” which this Module presents as problematic because what Europeans called Western science actually incorporated extensive African, Indigenous, and other non-European knowledge—often without acknowledgment. This terminology itself reflects the erasure this Module is trying to uncover, including revealing its connections to imperialism and the slave trade.

These shifts in historical perspectives, often referred to as the imperial turn in history or the decolonization of science, broadened the British and “Western” history of science. The goal is to better recognize the global exchanges and actors who helped advance *global* science. Historians’ and archivists’ work has also turned to decolonizing collections of specimens and knowledge stored in museums and archives.

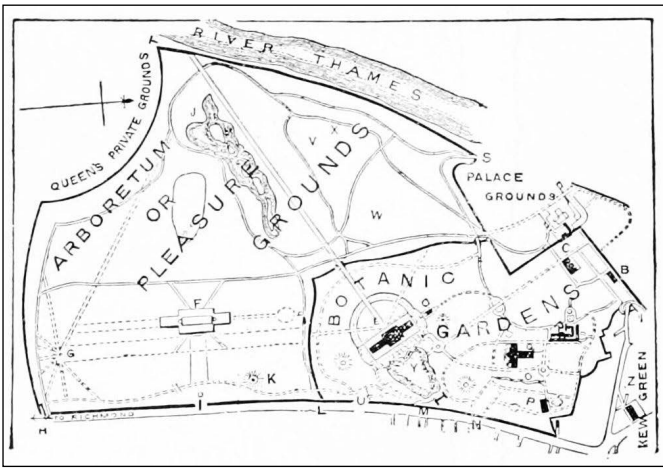


The Coral room of the British Museum shown with visitors, 1847.

These efforts directly address the historical patterns we’ve studied throughout this module: how “gentlemanly” institutions like the Royal Society from Lesson 1 systematically excluded the very voices that made their global networks successful, how the maritime collecting systems from Lesson 2 depended on African expertise while marginalizing those contributors, and how the “reading against the grain” methodology from Lesson 3 helps us recover these hidden histories.

a long-term process that seeks to recognize the integral role of empire in British museums—from their creation to the present day. Decolonization requires a reappraisal of our institutions and their history and an effort to address colonial structures and approaches to all areas of museum work.” In Britain, the British Museum, the Natural History Museum, and Kew Gardens have begun this work. These institutions are revising their missions and goals to tell more inclusive stories, including the colonial origins of specimens, reinterpreting existing displays to include hidden stories of non-white contributors, and

On its 2024 website, the British Museums Association states, “[Decolonization] is



Plan of Kew Gardens, London, 1896.



Contemporary view of the Palm House in Kew Gardens, London.

creating public tours focused on overlooked histories. Their 2024 websites include statements recognizing their historical reliance on global knowledge and the erasure of Black and Indigenous contributors to the history of British and Western science.

The Royal Society's 21st-century description of itself reflects changes through time in British sciences. Their website states, "Our origins lie in a[n] 'invisible college' of naturalists and physicians. Today, we are the UK's national science academy and a Fellowship of 1,600 of the world's most eminent scientists." While the scientific work the Society has contributed to the world is undeniable, recent scholarship has emphasized the Society's connections to British imperialism and the slave trade. The Society's journal, *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, now features scholarship that reveals its connections to imperialism and the slave trade.

Challenging work remains due to the erasure or marginalization of the labor of enslaved and free Africans in the Atlantic World; official accounts, archival descriptions, and earlier scholarship often do not refer to their contributions. We may never recover a detailed history. Despite these challenges, some 21st-century historians and archivists strive to fill in the gaps in the historical record, provide more inclusive research and scholarship, and rethink museum exhibits. Scientists, too, have begun to address structural racism in the history of science and its continuing limitations of equity and inclusion in the sciences.

This ongoing work requires the same critical thinking skills we've practiced throughout this module. Just as we learned to "read against the grain," for example in Lesson 3, to uncover African contributions in European sources, contemporary scholars and institutions must systematically examine their collections and narratives to identify whose voices have been excluded and whose contributions have been minimized.

The Natural History Museum, for example, in 2007 (to help commemorate the abolition of the British slave trade) began to reevaluate their collections and the failure of scientists and cu-



Exterior view of the Natural History Museum, London, 2020.

rators to acknowledge the hidden labor and knowledge of enslaved Africans. The project, “Slavery and the Natural World,” is described on their 2024 website as,

[C]ontribut[ing] a unique angle to the dialogue on the transatlantic slave trade. We were founded within the context of empire, colonization, and exploration. As such, there are many connections between the transatlantic slave trade, our history, and the specimens and objects we look after.

This message reflects a UK Museums Association statement. They note: “Over the past decades, museums have begun to recognize the trauma and suffering caused by the display and representation of objects that were obtained during or made as a result of the British Empire.” Some people in Britain, as well as around the world, are also working to decolonize collections and institutional histories.



A view of a juvenile female Blue Whale skeleton named “Hope” at the Natural History Museum, London, 2024.



Bust of Hans Sloane at the British Museum.

A way forward

These institutions must continue their work, realizing that “decolonizing science” and collections is a long-term and multifaceted project. These institutions and modern scholars emphasize the importance of using inclusive historical understanding to inform contemporary practices. This includes addressing ongoing debates about decolonizing knowledge and striving for more equitable and inclusive institutions.

The work of decolonizing science and collections builds directly on the historical understanding we’ve developed throughout this module. By understanding how the Royal Society’s institutional networks systematically excluded certain voices (Lesson 1), but that



A “Decolonize Science” supporter carries a sign in a March for Science on Earth Day in Melbourne, Australia.

maritime collecting depended on diverse expertise that went unrecognized (Lesson 2), and how we can recover marginalized contributions through careful analysis and methodologies like “reading against the grain,” (Lesson 3), we can better understand and help support contemporary efforts to create more inclusive and accurate narratives.

In her 2019 *Boundless* article, “The Silencing of Black Scientists,” Ghanaian-Canadian novelist Esi Edugyan argues, “Science is meant to be a method,

both color-blind and culture-blind. . . When we look at the history of scientific progress, we usually look at the story of European ingenuity, the European mind. It is a carefully curated story, curated by the prejudices of the current moment. But like any story, it changes in the telling, and it is in the telling that truths are remembered . . .”

Through this module, you’ve developed skills to examine how scientific knowledge has been shaped by diverse voices throughout history. You’ve practiced using advanced methodologies to uncover marginalized contributions and learned to challenge narratives that have excluded important perspectives. These analytical skills will serve you well as you continue your studies in history and engage with the world around you.

Having studied this topic, you’re now better equipped to question incomplete stories and contribute fresh insights into ongoing scholarly conversations. When you visit museums, you’ll notice how collections are presented and can engage meaningfully with staff about different approaches to storytelling. Most importantly, you’ve strengthened your ability to think critically about whose voices are heard in historical accounts—a skill that extends far beyond the history of science to every area of historical inquiry.

Discussion questions

- How do the decolonization efforts described in this reading connect to the historical patterns we studied in Lessons 1-3?
- How has the concept of “decolonizing science” changed our understanding of scientific history, particularly regarding British imperialism and the transatlantic slave trade?
- Many prestigious scientific institutions, as well as a variety of museums, archives and other institutions around the world have begun to acknowledge their historical connections to imperialism and slavery. How might these acknowledgments impact public perception of science and history, and how might this changed perception influence scientific and historical practices going forward?
- What role can the “reading against the grain” methodology play in contemporary institutional reform?

Further Reading

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Image Citations

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British Museum entrance, Bloomsbury, Camden, London, England, United Kingdom, 2006, CC BY-SA 3.0, Gertjan R., https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:British_Museum_entrance.jpg

Page 2:

The British Museum: the Botanical Room, with visitors. Wood engraving, 1858, Wellcome Images, Public Domain, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/fzvep7df/images?id=pkfqv885>
The British Museum: the Coral Room, with visitors. Wood engraving, 1847, Wellcome Images, Public Domain, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/bqdzqwc9/images?id=garsrt6j>

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Page 4:

A view of the whale skeleton hanging in the Natural History Museum, London, with visitors below, photographed by Ray Zhu, September 20, 2024, Public Domain, <https://www.pexels.com/photo/whale-skeleton-exhibit-at-london-s-natural-history-museum-28798484/>
British Museum - Room 1: Sir Hans Sloane, February 15, 2015, CC BY-SA 2.0, Paul Hudson, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:British_Museum_-_Room_1-_Sir_Hans_Sloane_\(16543339595\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:British_Museum_-_Room_1-_Sir_Hans_Sloane_(16543339595).jpg)
A March for Science protester in Melbourne, Australia, CC BY-SA 2.0, Takver, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/science-bears-fingerprints-colonialism-180968709/>