



## D2.2 Community Interactions: Scenarios and Results

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<b>Author(s)</b>	Isabel Beirigo (NISV), Monique Groot (NISV)
<b>Contributors</b>	Marco Rendina (EFHA), Marta Franceschini (EFHA), Kerstin Herlt (DFF), Sofie Taes (KUL)
<b>Reviewers</b>	Marie-Véronique Leroi (MC), Thierry Bultingaire (MC)
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## 1 Introduction

This document is a report of the co-creation activities conducted as part of the DE-BIAS. It serves as a resource for other cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) seeking to undertake similar knowledge creation activities. It outlines the initial scenarios, strategies, and key outcomes derived from the conducted co-creation workshops. By sharing our experiences and findings, we aim to support and inspire CHIs in their efforts to engage with local communities and enhance the representativity and relevance of their cultural heritage collections.

The document represents a collaborative effort undertaken by DE-BIAS project partners engaged in co-creation workshops, including DFF - Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum, EFHA - European Fashion Heritage Association, KU LEUVEN - Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, and NISV - Netherlands Institute for Sound & Vision. Later in this document, each partner's experiences and contributions will be detailed, encompassing specific local community engagements, methodologies employed, national contexts, as well as both positive and negative outcomes.

The authors extend an open invitation to all individuals and institutions invested in fostering diversity and inclusivity within the cultural heritage sector to examine this document and consider implementing the positive experiences shared herein. It's essential to note that while the experiences recounted here are valuable, they are not the sole approach to community interaction and engagement. Nevertheless, we believe that our insights can offer guidance to institutions embarking on similar endeavours, particularly those seeking to collaborate with underrepresented groups.

## 2 DE-BIAS: Outlines and Outcomes

The DE-BIAS project, co-funded under the Digital Europe Programme of the European Union, spans two years. The project aims to develop an AI-powered tool that can detect and flag problematic language in the metadata of cultural heritage collections throughout Europe. By providing historical context to such language, we hope to contribute to a more accurate and inclusive representation of cultural heritage.

The DE-BIAS project kicked off in January 2023 and is scheduled to run until December 2024. Initially, our focus was on bringing together local communities to participate in co-creation sessions, where they engaged with cultural heritage collections relevant to their own backgrounds. These sessions provided an open space for community members to share their perspectives and opinions on the representation of their cultural and historical context within the collections. Moving forward, our project partners are working on capacity building activities to share our process and methodology with other cultural heritage institutions. This phase aims to facilitate understanding, discussion, and adaptation of our experiences to suit the specific contexts of different CHIs. Subsequently, we will introduce the AI-powered tool and provide training to professionals, while evaluating its usability and adaptability across different European settings.

The DE-BIAS project brings together a diverse consortium of 11 partners from across Europe. Led by DFF - Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum, our consortium includes organisations from Germany, the Netherlands, Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Belgium, and France.

The project has a dual focus when it comes to its target audience. Firstly, we aim to contribute to the broader conversation surrounding the decolonisation of museums and archives by addressing bias in collection metadata. Secondly, we seek to foster stronger relationships between cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) and socially underrepresented groups. Through experimentation and testing of methodologies for engaging with local communities, we are working towards a more collaborative approach. Ultimately, our goal is to bridge the gap between CHIs and the communities they serve, promoting a more polyvocal representation in cultural heritage collections.

### 3 Community interactions

Throughout the DE-BIAS project, we've been navigating complex concepts such as community, identity, and belonging. While we aim not to delve extensively into these topics, we've established working definitions to guide our project's scope. It's important to clarify that when we refer to "community," we are specifically addressing local communities linked to either colonial history, or those defined by ethno-religious identities, or yet those centred around gender identity. These definitions provide a framework for our project activities and help us navigate our objectives effectively.

Based on this framework, we focused on three community backgrounds: migration and colonial past, gender and identity, and ethno-religious identity. Although focusing on only three groups of underrepresented communities may be a limitation for the project, this choice enabled us to better carry out the necessary work within the two-year timeframe while strengthening existing relationships with specific social groups. Our core principle, '*nothing about us without us*,' guided our actions, emphasising the importance of community involvement. By inviting local representatives from these specific cultural backgrounds and closely collaborating with them, we aimed to understand their needs while also managing expectations within the constraints of our own institutions.

Four out of the eleven partners were tasked with engaging these community groups. DFF addressed ethno-religious issues, concentrating on antisemitic language patterns in historical collections. EFHA targeted gender and identity, collaborating with LGBTQIA+ activists in the UK and Italy. KU Leuven and NISV focused on Migration and Colonial past. KU Leuven engaged with Congolese groups due to Belgium's historical ties, while NISV collaborated with Surinamese communities.

### 4 Methodology<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning, the DE-BIAS project consortium has faced the need to intensely discuss various approaches to engage with local communities and develop co-creation work. Given the

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<sup>1</sup> You can find in this section a very short description of the methodology that has been developed along the project. It is based on the collaborative research: *A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT METHODOLOGY: resources, reflections, recommendations*, written by C. da Milano, M.F. Guida and P. Migone, ECCOM and S. Taes, R. Pireddu, KU Leuven, July 2024.  
[https://pro.europeana.eu/files/Europeana\\_Professional/Projects/debias/a\\_community\\_engagement\\_methodology\\_resources\\_reflections\\_recommendations\\_v3\\_july\\_2024.pdf](https://pro.europeana.eu/files/Europeana_Professional/Projects/debias/a_community_engagement_methodology_resources_reflections_recommendations_v3_july_2024.pdf)

group's limited experience with community work and the diversity of our backgrounds, we have shared challenges and lessons learned with the goal of building up a method of working with local communities. We aimed to create a replicable methodology that could be improved based on our ongoing experiences. Thus, through research, reference literature, and support from our partner ECCOM, DE-BIAS explored different approaches for working with communities.

As explained above, the project focuses on three community backgrounds. The selection of these backgrounds and their distribution among the four consortium partners were based on pre-existing relationships with these communities or the partners' interest in establishing a long-term collaboration with these social groups.

For the piloting actions with partners and their community groups, no fixed preliminary plans were imposed. Instead, we chose to shape the activities through continuous dialogue with community stakeholders, ensuring that both the outcomes and the process would be a result of collaboration. Therefore, meetings with a dedicated community engagement team, negotiations with community experts and allies, and conversations with the external advisory board led to the development of a methodology. This methodology provided frameworks and guidelines for co-design, as well as direction and indicators for interaction. The base for the development of the co-creation sessions, described in the next section, was a close work and consultation with the community allies. The knowledge and insights these community representatives brought to the project were essential to the enhancement of the work with the local communities.

The next key component of the DE-BIAS methodology was the effort to transform cultural spaces into “safe” places, in which the space for dialogue shifts from the need to avoid confrontation into a place where to practise it safely, giving voice to all points of view. The co-creation sessions were space for debating and discussing bias issues. It was, as well, the opportunity to anchor values such as inclusion, dialogue, interdisciplinarity and respect aimed at re-reading the values traditionally associated with heritage and the role of cultural heritage institutions and the community it serves.

In the next section, we will describe the co-creation sessions, the discussions and results each partner achieved, and the perspectives the community contributed to the project.

## 5 Co-creation Workshop: Working Together With Local Communities Representatives - Scenarios and Results

As mentioned before, the DE-BIAS project engaged with three distinct community backgrounds: (i) Ethno-religious identity, (ii) Gender and identity, and (iii) Migration and colonial past. Each of these community backgrounds presented a multitude of possibilities for engagement, therefore each partner needed to discern and refine the avenues for collaboration within their designated community background. By narrowing down the scope of each community background, the project sought to deepen its engagement and foster meaningful interactions with the involved communities. This approach not only enhanced the potential for impactful outcomes within the project but also reinforced the importance and representativeness of the local communities involved, contributing to a more inclusive and participatory approach beneficial for all involved parties.

From the beginning, we tried to anticipate potential risks associated with engaging local communities and proactively developed mitigation strategies to address any unforeseen challenges.

A primary and significant challenge we faced was the varying levels of experience among project partners in engaging with local communities. We encountered a diverse group with differing opinions and the need to grasp important concepts central to our work. Additionally, we had to transition from being knowledge holders to learners, open to listening, understanding, and collaborating with external groups who owned a deeper practical understanding of their respective historical and social contexts. To facilitate dialogue, we established a monthly meeting space aimed at collectively building common ground. During these sessions, we shared our initial experiences in working with the local community, engaging in attentive listening and critical discussions to develop a shared approach to working together, despite our differences, to address doubts and find solutions.

Another significant challenge was identified in engaging with our respective community collaborations. We recognised that while there may be a perceived unity within the different groups and the way they identify themselves, the reality is far more nuanced. We needed to take into account the diversity (and intersectionality) among individuals sharing a similar background. It means that, even though ethno-religious or gender identity groups could be perceived as one homogenous group, in reality the individuals belonging to the same groups would hold different perspectives, interests and opinions. Similarly, the category of migration and colonial past posed its own set of challenges. The diversity within this category was evident, with distinctions between groups of labour migrants and descendants of enslaved people, and in some cases, participants with both aspects in their family history, each with their own unique historical experiences and perspectives. This diversity necessitated careful consideration and sensitivity in our approach to engaging with each community, as we navigated the complexities of conflicting interests and diverse viewpoints within and across these groups.

To mitigate the risk of mixing diverse groups and fostering potential conflicts, our initial approach involved identifying and reaching out to individuals within specific social groups who were involved in the community discussion and possessed a nuanced understanding of their respective communities. Mobilising their personal and professional networks, these community representatives played a pivotal role in facilitating dialogue and collaboration among community members and the cultural institutions from the project.

While engaging with local communities from the start of the project may not have been initially our strongest skill, one thing became clear from the beginning: we needed to avoid the process of exploitation, where we extracted knowledge and experiences from the local community without giving anything in return. Expressing gratitude for the time and knowledge of community members was not enough. Just as we were compensated for our work, we also wanted to compensate our community partners for their contributions. Therefore, each project partner contributed to compensating every member of the community who participated in any of the co-creation sessions.

In the following pages, we will outline and analyse each collaboration crafted and executed by the project partners. We will introduce the chosen community groups we engaged with, followed by an explanation of the methodology employed to facilitate co-creation sessions with these local communities. Lastly, we will delve into the outcomes of these co-creation sessions, reflecting on the lessons learned and challenges we have faced.

## 5.1 DFF - Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum

Under the overarching theme of “ethnicity and ethno-religious identity,” DFF has been actively collaborating with the Jewish research community. Since the 1980s, DFF has consistently made significant contributions to the accessibility of Jewish cinema, Jewish film history, and the stories of Jewish filmmakers to the general public, through exhibitions and the initiation and support of academic projects. Much of this work stems from the efforts of film historian and former DFF curator Ronny Loewy. Among his most notable initiatives is the [Cinematography of the Holocaust](#) database, a unique resource that documents the visual history and impact of the Holocaust. Additionally, DFF houses and preserves several important collections from Jewish filmmakers, including those of German film producer Artur Brauner and director Victor Vicas.

Building on these rich resources, DFF collaborates with Jewish cultural heritage institutions and academics on exhibitions, film programming, and research projects. One of these collaborations led to engaging Lea Wohl von Haselberg, a researcher at the Film University Potsdam-Babelsberg, as a member of the DE-BIAS advisory board and as the DFF’s community representative. Specializing in Jewish film history and audiovisual memory, Lea is also a member of the programming committee for the Jewish Film Festival Berlin-Brandenburg. She co-designed DFF’s first workshop with the Jewish research community.

### **Workshop 1: Contentious vocabulary and anti-Semitic language patterns in (historical) collection descriptions**

The first workshop was held during the conference “[Vernetzte Bilder: Digitale Zugänge zum audiovisuellen Erbe des Holocaust](#)” on December 11-12, 2023, at DFF. We presented the conceptual framework and overall objectives of the DE-BIAS project to the conference participants, who were primarily Jewish audiovisual heritage and media professionals. This allowed us to concentrate on practical community work during the workshop. Following a brief overview of the workshop’s goals, participants were divided into three teams.

#### *Group 1: Anti-Semitic language*

Here’s a revised version with improved flow:

Group 1 was tasked with searching for self-selected anti-Semitic terms on the Europeana platform and in the German Digital Library (ddb), followed by a discussion of their findings. They evaluated how problematic the results were and considered how these issues should be addressed.

Next, the group read excerpts from Ronen Steinke's text "Antisemitismus in der Sprache"<sup>2</sup> and searched for the Yiddish terms mentioned in the text on the Europeana platform and the German Digital Library. They then debated whether these words were problematic and if their Yiddish origins should be highlighted.

During their research, Group 1 identified and discussed several problematic terms on both platforms. All of these terms were subsequently added to the DE-BIAS vocabulary<sup>3</sup>. A particularly heated debate arose around Yiddish terms such as "mauscheln," "Mischpoke," and "schachern." Some participants viewed these terms as discriminatory when used in the German language, while others saw them as enriching the language. The group did not reach a consensus.

In the end, we decided to include these Yiddish terms in the DE-BIAS vocabulary, along with descriptions that reflect the contentious nature of the discussion. We also agreed to revisit these terms in the next workshop, scheduled for July 11, 2024, with a different group of participants.

### Group 2 The influence on Nazi Terminology on language

Group 2 was tasked with searching for Nazi-influenced terms on the Europeana platform and in the DDB, followed by a discussion of their findings. They were asked to assess the problematic nature of these terms and determine how they should be addressed. In the next step, the group read excerpts from the text "Verbrannte Wörter - Wo wir noch reden wie die Nazis – und wo nicht."<sup>4</sup>

There was unanimous agreement that terms like "Rassenhygiene," "Arier," and "entartet" found in the descriptive metadata should be flagged and contextualized. However, the group also encountered several German terms that, while associated with the ideologically loaded rhetoric of the National Socialists, are still in common use today. One such term was "Mädel" ("girl/lass").

The group could not reach a consensus on whether "Mädel" should be flagged. Some argued that few people remember its association with the Nazis through the "Bund Deutscher Mädel" (The League of German Girls)<sup>5</sup>. However, the group found numerous instances on the Europeana platform where the term is used in the same way it was during the National Socialist era.

There is no final decision yet, whether to add this term to the DE-BIAS vocabulary, as doing so might result in a high number of false positives.

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<sup>2</sup> Ronen Steinke, "Antisemitismus in der Sprache: Warum es auf die Wortwahl ankommt" (Duden, 2022). According to Steinke terms are neutral in Yiddish language, but have a derogatory connotation when used in German.

<sup>3</sup> mauscheln", "Mischpoke", "Jundensau", "Brunnenvergifter", "Judenschule", "Börsenjude", "Pressjude", "Halbjude", "entartet", "schachern".

<sup>4</sup> Matthias Heine, "Verbrannte Wörter - Wo wir noch reden wie die Nazis – und wo nicht" (Duden 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Bund Deutscher Mädel (The League of German Girls) abbreviated as BDM was the girls' wing of the Nazi Party youth movement.



### Group 3 Raising the visibility of Jewish filmmakers on Filmportal.de<sup>6</sup>

Group 3 was tasked with identifying gaps and omissions in our database concerning Jewish filmmakers and determining how to address these issues. They explored the language used in biographies to describe the fate of Jewish filmmakers under the Nazi regime. The group questioned whether the tone was appropriate and how to handle cases where the persecution or murder of Jewish filmmakers was either unnamed or merely hinted at through dates of death. They also considered whether our editorial guidelines should shift from "neutrality" to "empathy."

The group discussed these questions and provided concrete examples, resulting in a list of about 20 individuals whose biographies need updates. This could involve finding additional information or revising the language used in their biographies.

The group identified two main categories:

- A significant number of names lacked biographies and potentially had incomplete filmographies.
- For those with biographies, especially well-known figures, issues like euphemisms or omissions regarding their Jewish heritage or fate were prevalent.

Examples of problematic issues include:

- Describing someone as having "died" in a concentration camp rather than using the term "murdered."
- Failing to mention a person's Jewish origins until late in the biography, often making references to their or their children's persecution by the Nazis seem abrupt.
- Using language that implies filmmakers chose to leave Germany or Austria, or glossing over time spent elsewhere (e.g., "After some time in England, he returned to Germany").
- Reviewing the use of terms like "Machtübernahme" or "Machtergreifung" (Power Grab) by the Nazis.
- Making a conscious effort to humanize Jewish filmmakers who were killed by the Nazis.

A controversial discussion emerged about whether it was presumptuous to focus on these filmmakers' Jewish identity. Many Jewish individuals may not have considered their "Jewishness" significant until the Nazis came to power and forced them to make it visible by wearing the yellow star. As a compromise, the group agreed to revise historical biographies while leaving the biographies of living filmmakers unchanged.

To further increase the visibility of Jewish filmmakers, DFF is writing a blog post highlighting their contributions to the audiovisual field. This post will be published on Europeana Pro and DFF's official website.

Finally, all three groups presented their findings and discussions to the entire group.

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<sup>6</sup> Filmportal is a platform managed by DFF which provides in-depth information on German film production from its beginnings to the present. It currently comprises 150,000 film works and 260,000 persons.  
<https://www.filmportal.de/>

## **Workshop 2 on anti-Semitic language and stereotypes**

The second workshop, held on August 12, was organised in collaboration with the Anne Frank Educational Centre. This Centre uses Anne Frank's biography and diary to promote tolerance and raise awareness about the impact of Nazism, anti-Semitism, discrimination, and racism. It also focuses on human rights education, fostering dialogue between individuals from diverse backgrounds, social statuses, and lifestyles. The Centre offers seminars, training programs, and projects on these and related topics.

The Anne Frank Educational Centre team helped DFF reach out to our main target group, which includes representatives from the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt, Holocaust research centres, Judaica archives and libraries, Jewish student associations, and memorial sites. We assembled nine participants representing these institutions.

The primary goal of the four-hour workshop was to gather feedback on the terms labelled as "anti-Semitic" or associated with Nazi ideology in the DE-BIAS vocabulary. We sought input on the contentious issue descriptions, proposed definitions, and suggestions for alternative terms.

As with the first co-creation workshop, we did not restrict participation to members of the Jewish community. We also welcomed allies and professionals working with Jewish heritage collections, memorial sites, or those with a general interest in combating anti-Semitic stereotypes.

### 1 Setting the scene

The workshop began with the following questions:

- Where do I encounter anti-Semitism?
- Where do I encounter anti-Semitic language in everyday life?
- What impact does it have on me?
- How do I react, and what are the consequences?

The question "What impact does it have on me?" sparked a debate between Jewish and non-Jewish participants. It became clear that Jews experience the effects of anti-Semitism differently from non-Jews. One participant argued that public discourse often forces Jews into a victim role, which she strongly rejects. She emphasized that instead of creating a divide between those directly affected by anti-Semitism and those who are not, there should be greater solidarity, as anti-Semitism poses a threat to society as a whole. The approach of including both Jewish and non-Jewish individuals in the workshop was positively received.

### 2 Discussing the DE-BIAS vocabulary on Anti-semitic terms

Participants worked in pairs to

- a) Understand how collection items are displayed on Europeana platform and discuss items that present stereotypical images or contain problematic descriptions related to Jews and

Judaism. In preparation for the workshop, the DFF team curated a gallery of some pre-selected items: <https://www.europeana.eu/de/galleries/16452>

- b) Reflect and discuss the different elements (controversial label, controversial issue, proposed description, proposed alternatives) in the German vocabulary, which so far contains 25 terms with potentially anti-Semitic connotations or loaded with Nazi ideology.
- c) The teams were invited to share the results with all participants.

## Main results

**Contextualization is crucial:** Some terms in the vocabulary, such as 'mauscheln' and 'mischpoke', which are originally Yiddish terms, are not inherently anti-Semitic or problematic, but can be in certain contexts, as seen in the examples published by Europeana. While these words enrich the German language, non-Jewish speakers should be aware of the context when using them.

**Completeness of contextual information:** For certain terms, like "Halbjüdin"/"Halbjude," the current information focuses solely on their classification under the Nuremberg racist laws, without considering Jewish religious law or other definitions of Jewish identity or nationality.

**Historical and etymological accuracy:** Terms like "Judenschule" ("Synagoge") and "Judenfriedhof" (historically referred to as 'Jewish cemetery') must be presented with precise historical and etymological context to ensure that the proposed alternatives are correct.

**Articulate clearly:** If a term is explicitly anti-Semitic, this should be clearly stated in the suggestion description.

**Neutrality vs. Positioning:** Some participants felt the descriptions were morally charged and overly tied to ethical principles, while others believed they were too passively formulated and needed a stronger call to action.

## Overall results

From the two workshops carried out we got valuable feedback on the DE-BIAS vocabulary and the general approach of the project. While the first workshop served to collect terms for the vocabulary that are potentially anti-Semitic or loaded with Nazi ideology, the second workshop was about having a conversation about these terms, how they are contextualised, suggestions for use and proposed alternatives. One important insight we got from these workshops refers to its composition: The fact that we also invited non-Jewish professionals from the cultural heritage, education and research sector was appreciated by Jewish community members. For them, distinguishing between Jews and non-Jews was viewed sceptically: Either you are Jewish or you are not, and what matters is how you see yourself. A distinction would also perpetuate the (historical) exclusion of Jews. The question about Jewish identity also had an impact on our work about raising the visibility of Jewish filmmakers in filmportal.de. Do we have the right to pin them down to their Jewish identity? We agreed on revising historical biographies, not the biographies of filmmakers still alive, but we need to be aware that this is a compromise which requires ongoing reflection and careful consideration. As regards the DE-BIAS vocabulary itself, contextualization has been considered the most important element to help people understand why terms that have

been historically used in a neutral manner are negatively connotated in German language since the Nazi period and the Shoah, in particular composita with “Juden-” / Jews (“Judenschule”, “Judenhaus”, “Judenfriedhof”). A clear distinction was made between terms that are clearly derogatory and those that might have a negative connotation depending on who is using the terms and for what intention. Overall, the participants appreciated the project’s approach and how we create the vocabulary, and they suggested to organise more workshops of this kind to reach out to CHIs.

## 5.2 EFHA - European Fashion Heritage Association

### Understanding the community and reaching out to experts

As the topic EFHA was assigned was related to gender and sexuality bias in cultural heritage, we reached out to the expanded LGBTQIA+ community. Since the community is not located in a precise area but instead is spread out around the world, we decided to work in two different countries—therefore in two different languages—to understand how words and descriptions (and, therefore, biases in these contexts) can be considered site-specific historical artefacts. To reach a diverse set of community members, we involved Dani Martiri from Queering Rome, a project that aims to unveil pathways and retell hidden stories of the city of Rome for an international audience. EFHA organised four community events, three onsite and one online, across the UK and Italy.

#### Workshop in London with Queering Rome and the V&A

The first event was held on 15 June 2024 at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and involved seven people working as collection managers and curators in different departments, all part of the LGBTQ working group of the museum. One of the main points of discussion was the ‘invisibility’ of records connected to LGBTQIA+ identities, especially related to the double meaning of most words associated with them. The session was rather hands-on, and we worked directly on the Europeana website, conducting searches on specific words that emerged from the workshop. Some main issues and possible solutions that emerged include:

- **Multilinguality:** For example, the word ‘queer’ had a negative connotation in the UK and was then appropriated, while it entered the Italian vocabulary relatively recently, only with a positive/empowering meaning. How do we deal with this?
- **Historical accuracy:** The meaning of some words has changed over time, as has their use (e.g., transsexual, transgender). The definitions we provide should take this into account.
- **-Derogatory terms:** These are only present in the archive when appropriated by the community itself. According to the group, we should still flag them and explain the context.

#### Workshop in London with Queering Rome and Queer Britain

The second community event, organised in collaboration with Queer Britain, brought together 18 participants, including curators and archivists, LGBTQIA+ tour guides from renowned institutions such as the TATE and the V&A, PhD students, and Diversity & Inclusion managers from major newspapers. The discussions were animated and passionate, emphasising the urgent need to rethink research methodologies in museum collections and the presentation of artefacts to a diverse global audience. A central focus of the event was the persistent invisibility and

underrepresentation of LGBTQIA+ stories in museum collections. Participants unanimously agreed that storytelling is a powerful tool to bring these hidden narratives to the forefront. The event also highlighted the intrinsic connection between language and politics, underscoring that language is not only a tool of communication but also a historically specific construct that should be neither masked nor neglected. This specificity is a crucial element of our collective history, and acknowledging it is essential in presenting an accurate and inclusive portrayal of the past. By integrating these insights, the event underscored the importance of inclusive and reflective practices in museum curation and the representation of LGBTQIA+ histories.

#### *Online workshop with Queering Rome and members of the Italian LGBTQIA+ community*

The third community event, held online on 7 March for two hours, brought together 10 members from various institutions and museums in Rome, Florence, and Venice, as well as members of the ICOM Italian working group on gender identity. The session concentrated primarily on the critical issue of not 'sanitising' language to make it less offensive, emphasising that words, even when harsh, are a testament to historical struggles and conflicts. Participants argued that sanitising language erases the realities of past discriminations and the resilience of those who fought against them. Another significant topic was the specificity of each language and the importance of conducting historical research to understand how language has evolved in relation to societal changes. This discussion highlighted how language reflects cultural and historical contexts, necessitating careful consideration when curating and presenting Queer histories. The insights gained from this session were instrumental in enhancing the Italian section of the DeBias vocabulary, as participants provided valuable terms and contextual knowledge. This event underscored the importance of preserving linguistic authenticity and historical accuracy, ensuring that the representation of Queer stories in museum collections remains true to their origins and significance.

#### *Workshop in Rome with Queering Rome and Eccom*

The fourth event was organised in Rome, a collaboration between EFHA, Queering Rome, and ECCOM. The event was a success for both the organising team and the 20 attendees. It fostered a dynamic environment where participants could pitch ideas and engage in open conversations, sharing diverse opinions. The session began with an introduction to the project, highlighting examples of invisibility and inaccuracies in (meta)data, and their implications for art production and the teaching of art history. Attendees were divided into four breakout groups, each comprising five people, to delve deeper into these topics. They examined examples from the Europeana portal, with descriptions prepared by Dani Martiri, and discussed how these could be practically applied in exhibitions. This sparked a lively debate on whether descriptions should faithfully represent history or be more reflective and interpretive, balancing objectivity with subjectivity. The discussions also considered how interpretations should cater to different demographics, and also tackled the necessity of policies to be implemented in order to allow people to tell their own stories at an institutional level. The event marked the first official queer tour of Europeana.eu and will be featured in a three-part blog series during Pride month. Attendees noted the differences between online and in-person experiences, and how language and terminology must adapt to different cultural contexts; this highlighted the importance of expanding perspectives, even when

challenging. The insights gained will be incorporated into capacity-building materials to capture the event's impact.

## **Overall results**

The overall results from the four community events revealed several key insights into the challenges and considerations in dealing with Queer stories in museum collections and presentations. First and foremost, the confirmation emerged that 'absence' is the biggest element when dealing with Queer stories, highlighting the widespread invisibility and underrepresentation in existing collections. Participants across all events stressed the necessity of seeing and providing context for all words, even offensive ones, to ensure historical accuracy and integrity. A clear distinction was made between terms that are outright wrong and those that are simply no longer appropriate, recognising the importance of historical specificity in language. The risk of applying modern identity labels to historical figures was a recurring concern, as this can distort historical understanding and impose contemporary frameworks on the past. Additionally, the community expressed a critical stance towards AI tools, emphasising that they must always be guided by human oversight. This perspective aligns with the goals of the DeBias vocabulary project, which aims to mitigate biases in AI by ensuring human-led contextual understanding and sensitivity in dealing with Queer histories. These events underscored the need for inclusive, reflective, and accurate practices in museum curation and historical representation, guided by a thoughtful balance of technological and human input.

### **5.3 KUL - Katholieke Universiteit Leuven**

#### **KU Leuven and KADOC's work on colonial collections with two Congolese communities**

As the CH sector has identified an issue that occurs in many collections - historical, outdated descriptions that once fitted into common societal narratives, but are no longer considered appropriate - more and more national and cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) are instigating programmes to 'decolonise' their collections.

Given the richness of visual and written content from Belgian missionary communities and the yet untapped potential of missionary photography in exploring Congo's history and representation in the colonial period, the [KADOC](#) Documentation and Research Centre on Religion Culture and Society, embedded within the university, emerges as a significant repository. It in fact houses an extensive collection that portrays the experiences of missionary communities in Africa during the colonial period. Additionally, in recent years, KADOC has conducted various research projects, including the ANGLES project, which has highlighted missionary experiences through the analysis and (re)use of multimedia material.

Aided by the expertise of KADOC, the focus of KU Leuven's community-specific efforts were the visual archives of the Flemish Franciscan missions in the southern region of Belgian Congo and the heritage communities - both in Africa and in Belgium - they represent. Having initiated their missionary activities in various places in Katanga, in the south of Congo, from 1920 onwards, their visual archives contain an extensive collection of images of missionary infrastructures and activities, as well as depictions of the local societies in which they worked and/or they encountered.

## **A double-sided approach: local Congolese communities and the Congolese diaspora**

In the case of KADOC's Flemish Franciscan collection and the communities in which they are rooted, a double two-pronged approach was pursued. On the one hand, we wanted to see both the reception of bias at the end product - the showcasing of collections in the aggregated Europeana portal - as well as at the source - the discussion with the community on the basis of actual source documents that still are in the process of being described. On the other hand, we wanted to integrate both the views of Congolese communities in the DRC, close to the origin of the collections, and hear from a Belgian Congolese community consisting mostly of second and third-generation Belgian nationals of Congolese descent.

### **Field interviews in the DRC in collaboration with the University of Lubumbashi**

In an earlier stage of the project, these photographs were considered and carefully selected in collaboration with Donatien Dibwe (University of Lubumbashi). Subsequently, Dibwe formed and coordinated a team of enquêteurs who in early 2024 conducted a series of interviews, departing from the photographs, in five different locations in the former franciscan missionary region (Kanzenze, Kolwezi, Kamina, Kilwa, Lubumbashi). The extensive reports that resulted from this field work, including the original photographs used during the interviews, were submitted to the participants of the subsequent workshops in Belgium.

### **Workshops with a focus group of the Congolese diaspora in Belgium**

The co-creation and engagement approaches outlined above were implemented in the context of two initiatives organised by KU Leuven with the Belgian Congolese community. As part of the DE-BIAS project over the past year, KU Leuven initiated a partnership with the Congolese Circle, a community composed of and established by Belgians of Congolese descent, primarily from the second and third generations. With a view to diversity and representativity, a mix of different age groups, professional activities, personal profiles and cultural experiences was considered the best approach. In addition, a collaborative relationship, carried on and facilitated by KADOC (KU Leuven Documentation and Research Centre on Religion, Culture and Society) was initiated with the University of Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, specifically with the research team led by the Lubumbashi based historian Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu.

#### *Workshop 1: Europeana collections*

During the first workshop, which took place on the 2nd of March 2024 at the Museum *aan de Stroom* (MAS) in Antwerp, we introduced the DE-BIAS project to the community focus group (10 participants). This included a comprehensive overview of the project's conceptual framework and main objectives. The session was divided into three parts, each of them dedicated to different activities: a) the identification and analysis of digital objects resonating with their heritage in the Europeana collection; b) the identification of possible bias and/or misrepresentation in the chosen images; c) review of the terms gathered in the DE-BIAS thesaurus. This process was further supported by the classification of bias found in the collection according to the wheel of bias.

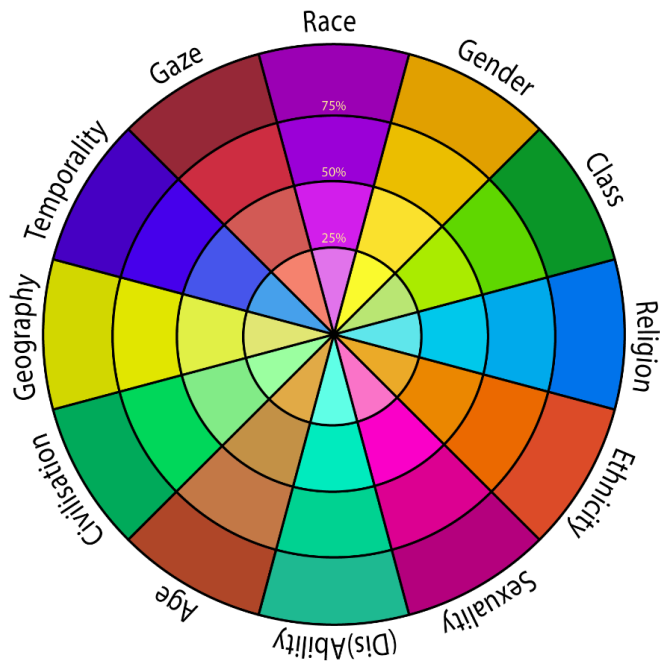


Fig. 1: Draft design of a circular matrix aiming at understanding bias in collections, objects and terms

The wheel of bias was developed as part of the DE-BIAS methodology and is based on the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). It is composed of a set of 12 parameters with varying degrees of intensity, which can assist in identifying and locating the precise nature of biased words. The assumption underlying the wheel of bias is that biases in heritage collections are rarely one-dimensional. Rather, they are the result of the interaction of different cultural, social, and historical realities. Consequently, in order to devise strategies that can assist in the mitigation of these biases, it is of the utmost importance to facilitate the identification of bias in metadata and, at the same time, encourage reflection on the complexity of such biases.

### Workshop 2: KADOC collection

The second workshop, which took place on the 16th of March 2024 at the KU Leuven Campus Carolus in Antwerp, focused on co-creation and participatory approaches applied to a set of historic photo materials sourced from the archives of the Flemish franciscans preserved in KADOC. Donatien Dibwe was present and actively participated in the workshop.

Instead of diving into the aggregated digital collections in the Europeana.eu environment, the emphasis now rested on hitherto undisclosed images sourced from a historical archive, that up to this point had been documented in three ways. Firstly, in many cases, the historical collection deposited at KADOC already contained original descriptions provided by the creators, commentators, and/or custodians of the photo albums, individual pictures, glass plates, and postcards in question, mostly by franciscans themselves, between the 1920s and 1970s. Secondly,



KADOC staff has inventoried and described the collection and its subsections on a general level, thus not on the level of individual images. Thirdly, the results of the interviews conducted in the DRC in an earlier state of the project were collated by the researchers in extensive, information-rich reports that provided narrative and interpretive frameworks to a subset of images in as far as they spurred insights and memories of local citizens.

For a compact subcollection of images, all layers were brought together in PDF documents and shared with the participants. A breakout exercise in teams of up to four community members entailed a dialogue between the participants' own views and impressions combined with existing descriptive layers. In how far did visions collide or complement each other? What did participants expect, but didn't find? Would we be able to offer comprehensive metadata to the digital objects, run short of finding sufficient information, or share unsolved questions with a wider audience by including them in our metadata?

After exploring the images and discussing for two hours, the participants reported back to the other groups and professor Dibwe, who was able to further detail narratives collected by his field team. The emerging views in most cases helped to widen the interpretative scope of the metadata, as the different backgrounds and generations of contributors involved touched upon a wide array of complementary topics. Differing views on specific images weren't brought to a consensus; rather, the group preferred leaving questions open yet not refraining from opening up the collections digitally: wider community participation and polyvocality were considered key ingredients to making the objects as 'talkative' - and therefore representative - as possible.

### **Personal assignment & valorisation of workshop results**

For their personal assignments during the two weeks separating the workshops, the focus group members selected terms from the vocabulary and pictures from a Europeana gallery as a basis for a written reflection. Their contributions were collected afterwards and processed into two blogs published on [Europeana.eu](https://europeana.eu) in the course of June.

Further conversations on the optimal valorisation of community-related activities are ongoing, entailing a.o. the consideration of additional blogs, an interview with the community ally Congolese Circle to be published on Europeana pro, and the planning of follow-up meetings with Congolese Circle to discuss long-term opportunities for collaboration with KU Leuven in matters of colonial heritage.

## **5.4 NISV - Netherlands Institute for Sound & Vision**

The Netherlands Institute for Sound & Vision (NISV) took on the task of collaborating with communities with backgrounds in migration and colonial past. Despite having some prior experience in community engagement, the institute faced challenges in finding community members willing to collaborate with the archive.

As the largest audiovisual archive in the country, NISV houses a diverse collection of Dutch radio and television productions, along with historical materials from the former Dutch colonies. With so many options available in terms of selecting archival materials and engaging with specific social groups, the initial steps involved mapping underrepresented groups connected to the Dutch

colonial past. This was carried out with the help of external specialists who contributed to a careful long list of potential community groups. Recognizing the importance of not solely focusing on migrant groups, we aimed to initiate discussions on the country's colonial history and its implications for cultural heritage institutions. To refine our approach, we internally assessed existing collaborations with identified focus groups to enhance our engagement strategy.

To kickstart the initiative, we reached out to Sharma Soerjoesing-Chin A Foeng, producer and presenter at Omroep West (regional broadcasting organisation in the Netherlands), proposing the concept of co-creation sessions and inviting her to help as facilitator. In her role, Sharma played an important part in establishing connections between NISV and members of the Dutch Surinamese community.

Three co-creation sessions took place between November 2023 and January 2024. These sessions provided opportunities for dialogue and collaboration between NISV and members of the Dutch Surinamese community. All three sessions included members of these community living in the Netherlands, one representative of this community with the role of facilitator, and four professionals from the NISV.

Co-creation sessions	Number of participants	Items from the collection
November 9, 2023 (The Hague)	9 members of the Dutch Surinamese community 3 representants from NISV	video clip: Polygoon Journaal
November 22, 2023 (The Hague)	10 members of the Dutch Surinamese community 4 representants from NISV	video clip 1: Paul de Leeuw video clip 2: Duo Penotti video clip 3: Felderhof
January 9, 2024 (Hilversum)	10 members of the Dutch Surinamese community 4 representants from NISV	video clip 1: Max & Catherine video clip 2: Bauxite mines video clip 3: TiTa Tovenaar

## Scenarios

An important note before we dive into the findings of the co-creation sessions: the group of Surinamese people we have worked with during the co-creation sessions were diverse in professional and educational backgrounds. They were of different gender and ages and belonged to several cultural and social groups within the Surinamese descendance. However, it was only a small representation of the diversity one can find of Dutch-Surinamese people living in the Netherlands. Not to mention, the vast social and cultural differences one could find between other social groups with historical and cultural links to former Dutch colonies. Or even the enormous differences between those living in Suriname in comparison with those living in the diaspora in the Netherlands, or those that had lived in Suriname and those born in the Netherlands. All the discussion and descriptions you will find below need to be considered under the limitations of this small yet diverse group. We are well aware that our findings could have a different turn if another group was consulted.

In any case we believe that opening up space, hearing local community voices and learning from their experiences and specific viewpoint will help our institution to make a small yet important step towards a more polyvocal archive.

### **NISV's Surinamese collection and scenarios**

The first motivation we had to participate in the DE-BIAS project and to contact members of the Surinamese community was that we had the suspicion that our archival metadata contained derogatory and harmful wording. Therefore, we would like to, together with members of this specific community, scrutinise a small sample of our collection to identify these words and add alternatives and context.

However, after the first co-creation session we realised that derogatory and harmful terms were not the biggest problem in our collection metadata. These problems were there, but also present were aspects we haven't thoroughly thought about: (i) one-sidedness of the archival description, (ii) silences in the metadata, (iii) poor representativeness, and (iv) derogatory and harmful content and descriptions.

#### *One-sidedness*

The institutional collection had a big gap of different voices in the collection description. Due to archival practices and the lack of a more diverse representation within the professionals working at NISV, the metadata contained bias in the representation of perspectives, narratives and voices within the materials analysed.

#### *Silences in the metadata*

Likewise the archival collection presented gaps and omissions in the descriptive information in the metadata. These silences were not only a consequence of missing diversity due to the neglect of underrepresented groups or the power imbalance of collecting materials from wealthier and politically relevant social groups, but also because of overlooked aspects of content. Simply put, those responsible for describing the archival material lacked the knowledge of specific cultural and social aspects of diverse social groups.

#### *Poor representativeness*

Embedded in the first two scenarios, the poor representativeness in the NISV's archival collections refers to the lack of diversity in the materials preserved, as well as to the metadata describing them. This one sidedness of the description of the metadata also leads to poorer findability of the collection. Again, this is due to the limited acquisition practices together with the insufficient documentation of underrepresented communities and the highly biased perspectives in the descriptions.

#### *Derogatory and harmful content and descriptions*

We also identified aspects of derogatory and harmful content and descriptions. It means that beyond the existing wording in metadata, also the content (images, texts and voices) in the analysed material contained disrespectful, offensive and damaging representation of individuals or groups.

## **Co-creation sessions methodology**

The three co-creation sessions followed the same methodology with small tweaks to accommodate the discussions and specific needs of the participants. Our community representative, Sharma Soerjoesing-Chin A Foeng, guided the discussions and facilitated interactions between all participants, including the NISV team. The sessions began with presenting a video clip from the NISV archival collection. Sharma then gathered the group's general feelings, capturing the emotions and reactions triggered by the video. Participants were encouraged to discuss and collaboratively write a 'neutral' description of the video clip. During this process, they realised that neutrality was impossible because different ideas and emotions were intertwined. Once they agreed on a description, participants compared their version with the existing archival description. They then analysed and discussed the differences and similarities between both descriptions seeking to critically understand the points in which the archival description was silent, historically wrong and offensive. This exercise brought out new perspectives on why and how current archival metadata can be improved its representativeness.

### *First co-creation session*

On November 9, 2023, we held the first co-creation session. The NISV team provided an overview of the institutional archive, addressing questions on managing the increasing volume and variety of audiovisual content. Following this, we introduced the DE-BIAS project and the dynamic of the co-creation session.

Before this session, participants were asked to conduct research using the NISV catalogue system. They were encouraged to use their own search terms and share their findings during the session. As a result, many of the participants did not find positive outcomes in their search. In response to the problems they have experienced in terms of findability, the NISV team explained the NISV collection policy that is primarily based on the public Dutch radio and television programmes. Therefore, material that is beyond the reach of these major broadcasters may be missing. The conclusion of this round of discussion was that the current catalogue system at NISV needs to be improved and more culturally specific search terms need to be added to the metadata.

### *Second co-creation session*

The second co-creation session happened on November 22, 2023. At the beginning of the session, the description of the video clip 'Polygoon Journaal' presented in the previous session was revisited and discussed. Search terms, the simplicity of the language and their effect on findability were also discussed. After that, the participants watched three video clips and after each screening they discussed problems and absences in the metadata and proposed new descriptions.

### *Third co-creation session*

The third and final co-creation session was held on January 9th, 2024, at the facilities of NISV in Hilversum. Before the session, participants could take a guided tour through the archive. During this co-creation session, the participants watched four video clips. Once again, they analysed the

metadata, discussed their impressions and feelings about the material and suggested new descriptions.

## **Overall results**

When describing the clips, participants introduced many new, relevant search terms such as name of places, company names, specific cultural terms related to traditional clothing, food, rituals and religion. This shows how much was missing from the existing descriptions and demonstrated the value of the co-creation sessions in enriching the metadata. All these new terms helped to make the collection more searchable and accessible to the communities the material relates to. Including these terms in the metadata would enhance not only the findability of the collection but rather bring different nuances to the cultural heritage and improve the representation of underrepresented groups.

The participants also expressed that they prefer an approach that contextualises rather than replaces offensive language. According to them, it is important to keep the original outdated terms but these need to have historical context and have additional references to become less harmful to those researching the collection.

The experience of these co-creation sessions showed the NISV team the importance and relevance of working closely with a community member as a facilitator. This person is the necessary bridge between the knowledge and experiences of both the archive professionals and the community members. Sharma Soerjoesing-Chin A Foeng was indispensable in helping to build understanding between the NISV team and the community representatives, while also strengthening trust and creating a space for open and honest discussions.

Another important lesson learned was that working with underrepresented groups is an open process that requires attention, commitment and dedication. It is not, and cannot be a one-time event. At the same time, being able to compensate for the community members' work, time, and knowledge creates a better and more professional balance between all parties. The structures of power, so long nurtured by cultural institutions and organisations, start to be more levelled when all parties are equally heard and valued.

This experience also showed the NISV team that a transdisciplinary approach is key for a positive result. In a structured institution, different departments are responsible for different stages of designing, improving, and giving access to the collection metadata. When professionals from various departments, with diverse knowledge and experiences, come together to work with local communities, the process has a smoother workflow, facilitating the processing and incorporation of the new findings into the institutional structure.

In conclusion, the co-creation sessions proved invaluable in enriching the metadata of the NISV archive. At the same time, they were a relevant process of understanding and re-evaluating the current approaches the institution uses in the creation and making available the collection and its metadata. Through the co-creation sessions, we have learned how important it is to listen to unheard voices and how valuable it is to dedicate to a long-lasting relationship with different communities if we want to transform the archive into a more polyvocal and open space.

## 6 Conclusions

The co-creation sessions were fundamental in showing us the immense value that underrepresented groups can bring to the work of institutions responsible for cultural heritage collections. The depth of knowledge these groups add when describing collection metadata is substantial. Such depth could not be achieved through the mere intellectual exercise of trying to understand different historical, social and cultural contexts. Lived experience and cultural connection add layers that pure intellect cannot grasp.

Similarly, the opportunity to bring together people with diverse experiences, knowledge, and emotions led to rich discussions that transformed our understanding of certain topics. The lessons learned undoubtedly motivate everyone involved in this project, especially the partners directly engaged in the co-creation sessions, to rethink our responsibilities as institutions safeguarding, representing and sharing cultural heritage.

A simple list of lessons learned does not do justice to the extent of our learning, but it can serve as a starting point for other institutions interested in strengthening their own efforts toward a more participatory, collaborative and inclusive cultural heritage sector.

- Community members are well-prepared and knowledgeable about including search terms that enhance the findability of the collection.
- The overall preference from the community representatives is to contextualise rather than replace offensive terms. However, consulting the represented community is essential for a more inclusive collection metadata.
- Working with community representatives as allies is key to developing trust and deepening the relationship between the institution and the local community.
- Collaborating with underrepresented groups requires attention, commitment, and dedication; it cannot be a one-time event.
- The involvement of different institutional departments helps enhance the (institutional) commitment to working with local communities.
- Different generational, gender, and professional backgrounds among community members help to enhance the critical analysis of sensitive collection metadata.
- Considering the intersectionality of ideas, experiences and cultural background is essential for the representativeness within underrepresented communities.
- Cultural institutions and organisations need to embrace change and open up for collaborative work.

We hope that sharing our experiences will inspire colleagues, sister projects, and future initiatives to strengthen ties with the social groups we represent through cultural heritage. We also wish for new experiences to join ours, contributing to innovative approaches in the cultural heritage sector toward a more inclusive and polyvocal cultural heritage for everyone.

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