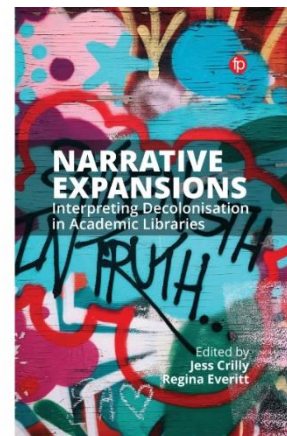


## Cambridge University Libraries Decolonisation Working Group

Update 4 (July 2023)

Welcome to the latest update for library and archive staff across Cambridge about the recent and ongoing activities of the Decolonisation Working Group (DWG). For those who are hearing of the DWG for the first time, we are a group of Cambridge librarians, students, academics, and more, who are aiming to help encourage and embed decolonisation in library work. You can find out more by looking at [our webpages on the CUL website](#).



This update:

- introduces preliminary work about offensive material in iDiscover, with an invitation to contribute thoughts and examples
- has reminders about our new decolonisation reading list (which includes 'Narrative expansions', shown here, to which our Decolonising through Critical Librarianship colleagues contributed a chapter) and the 2022/23 Decolonisation Fund for Teaching Collections
- provides a summary of various other projects the DWG has been involved in over 2022/23

### Offensive material in iDiscover

The DWG has been consulted before now about how to handle offensive material in terms of older, archival material. More recently, we have been approached about a new area – material in the iDiscover catalogue, focusing in the first instance on print books. While the issues being raised go beyond the scope of the DWG, our group is well placed to start and push the conversation.

We know that our libraries contain offensive material and that offence can sometimes even mean harm. Readers are increasingly helped to be aware of this when it comes to older material and special collections (when even the library/archive metadata might be offensive), through catalogue warnings and through library training. But we are increasingly hearing about the issues of potentially harmful material in *modern* collections, and readers are not necessarily anywhere near as well advised or trained in terms of these.

Why might we collect offensive material? Sometimes we know things are problematic when we acquire them (through purchase, donation, transfer, or – for some libraries – Legal Deposit). That acquisition might represent a deliberate step, maybe on the basis of a reader recommendation or in order to have examples of a certain type of material in the library, or it might be a bit more passive in terms of being given something that we do not reject. Sometimes we don't know that an item is problematic, and we may not realise there is an issue even during cataloguing and classification work. That might be because it would take proper reading of the book to recognise issues, or it might simply be that the issue is one that we ourselves aren't affected by and are not aware could be a problem for others. It's also important to acknowledge that there can be a lack of consensus between individuals about whether a specific subject is a concern.

Even when we do know that something is problematic, how do we deal with that in the catalogue and on the shelf? It isn't standard to indicate through a catalogue record or classmark that a book might be "bad", except in very extreme circumstances (eg material with very explicit or distressing imagery in the UL would go in the Arc class). We know from non-staff members of the CUL Decolonisation Working Group that students and other readers can assume intentions on the part of library staff that are not necessarily the case: that a book acquired us means a book *approved* by us; that a book not flagged in its catalogue record or classmark as offensive is therefore not going to be offensive; and that our library catalogue puts forward as its top hits books (sorted by "relevance" – a term that sounds positive) that are objectively "good".

In our initial conversations, the DWG has discussed the possibility of some kind of standard warning in the catalogue and also the huge importance of information literacy training. We have taken our initial thoughts to the CUL Collections Strategy Group, as a first step in making sure that our conversation is open and broad.

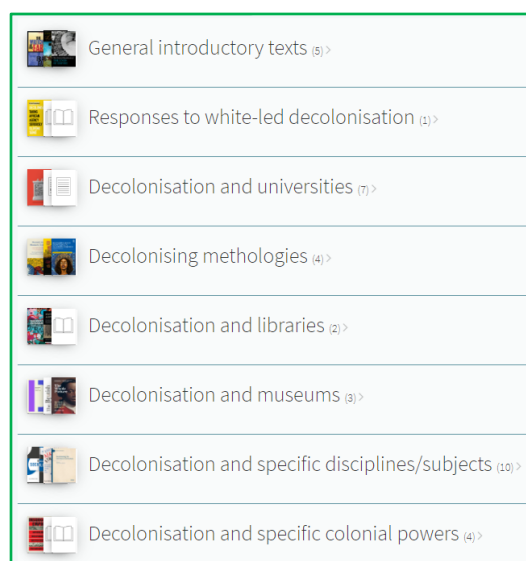
**Please get involved!** We would like to hear from colleagues across Cambridge about:

- any books you have had flagged to you as problematic (for any reason, not just in connection with decolonisation issues), so that we can compile a list of examples on the Cambridge Librarians intranet and think the problem through in more detail on the basis of that list
- anything you are already doing in your library to address this or similar issues
- please write to [decolonisation@lib.cam.ac.uk](mailto:decolonisation@lib.cam.ac.uk)

If you'd like to read more about troubling material in the UL (and why we sometimes still buy it), do have a look at the [latest newsletter from Collections and Academic Liaison](#).

### **Decolonisation reading list**

After several discussions and a good debate about what kind of form such a reading list should take, our group launched the Decolonisation Reading List ([public version](#) and [Raven version](#)) in **February**. The DWG decided eventually that the list should be short and introductory rather than trying to be exhaustive. The list currently stands at 38 titles, spread over the 8 sections shown in the screenshot here.



### **Decolonisation Fund for Teaching Collections**

Per Mel's email of 16 June, do remember to send in requests for the 22/23 fund. The fund is chiefly for **faculty and departmental libraries**, for books relating to decolonisation that aren't on reading lists and you'd struggle to afford/get hold of otherwise.

- The deadline for print requests has now passed
- Please email details to [ebooks@lib.cam.ac.uk](mailto:ebooks@lib.cam.ac.uk) if you're interested in an ebook **by 14 July**

Do note that **College libraries** can also ask us to buy decolonisation-related ebooks, also by 14/7.

### **Other things**

You might remember from the 2022 update that the DWG had been supervising/advising a fantastic project supported by the **University Diversity Fund** and put forward by a PhD student to launch an online journal of narrative experience called Scholourship. This launched last year – have a look! <https://www.schol/ourship.com/>

We said a sad goodbye to Francis Neary, our long-standing **Darwin Correspondence Unit** rep, whose role with the Libraries ended in late 2022 with the completion of the larger Darwin project. Francis and his colleagues had particularly worked with the DWG about the introduction of a content warning box that appears with each online letter and which links to a commentary about Darwin, race, and gender.

In January, the DWG met the UL's Irène Fabry-Tehranchi, who has been working on a **Cambridge decolonisation UK Web Archive collection** which gathers together online material relating to decolonisation in Cambridge, both in the University and in the city. This includes the webpages of decolonisation-related groups and sites that record relevant exhibitions, events and projects, blog

posts, as well as some news articles and social media. Irène would welcome suggestions of additional pages and websites for the collection. Do get in touch with her (if229) if you have ideas or questions. The current list can be seen at the following link for reference:

[https://universityofcambridgecloud-my.sharepoint.com/:x/g/personal/if229\\_cam\\_ac\\_uk/EfA44nYZQiFCoonoAlq16\\_sBg6QG\\_MGcnUcYkzD0tyYtZA?e=pjo7B1](https://universityofcambridgecloud-my.sharepoint.com/:x/g/personal/if229_cam_ac_uk/EfA44nYZQiFCoonoAlq16_sBg6QG_MGcnUcYkzD0tyYtZA?e=pjo7B1) You can read more about the [UK Web Archive in general here](#).

The DWG was delighted to hear about various purchases made in early 2023 with UKRI funds that really **diversify the e-resources** that Cambridge libraries offer, particularly for research, and to be consulted about the name of a new subject in the e-resources A-Z for these and similar databases, which we suggested could be called [Amplifying Voices](#). You can see the Electronic Collection Management's [introductory post](#) about the new purchases on their blog as well as [separate posts](#) about the various e-resources.

In **early 2023**, [a lengthy interview](#) with Mel, the DWG convenor, about the group came out in the journal *Serials Review*.

In **June**, the formal sponsorship of the DWG and its activities was passed to Alastair Flett, Deputy University Librarian. We look forward to working with him.

As usual, we're keen to use the opportunity of this update to promote the work of our colleagues in the **Decolonising through Critical Librarianship** group. Do sign up to their mailing list and for blog post alerts if you haven't already. There are lots of thoughtful and inspiring posts, some by the group and some guest posts, that have appeared on their blog, including a [write-up of their December 2022 Brown Bag Lunch](#) about archives and libraries following up on the Legacies of Enslavement report, three blog posts about the University's Black Advisory Hub's Black Awarding Gaps & Decolonisation Forum, and guest posts from College libraries. The blog is the place to find out about Cambridge practices – so do remember to get in touch with the DtCL if you've got a project you'd like to write up and share with others.

Do you have **questions about decolonisation**? No question is too simple – we're all learning together! Or might you have **ideas about new projects**? Do contact your DWG rep\* with any questions or thoughts you may have, or of course you can always contact Mel at [decolonisation@lib.cam.ac.uk](mailto:decolonisation@lib.cam.ac.uk).

\*our main webpage has a [list of DWG members](#) towards the end of the page