# **Black and Indigenous Collectors in the Material and Digital Archive at the Linnean Society of London**

## **Birkbeck, University of London and The Linnean Society of London**

### **Aims and objectives**

### The project investigates a crucial history that has long remained hidden: that of the contribution of Black and Indigenous collectors and naturalists to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century knowledge. The research will focus on the manuscript and material archives held at the Linnean Society and on collections held at related institutions focusing on knowledge about the natural world. The project will involve identifying and tracing collectors and naturalists, mapping knowledge networks, and developing a decolonial approach to recovering and sharing information from this archive.

### The doctoral project will ask after the unseen networks of Black and Indigenous naturalists and collectors who fuelled the enormous boom in global natural knowledge exchange at the apex of the British Atlantic Empire. The naturalists who sent their natural specimens around the world often used local and indigenous collectors who have disappeared from the records. The project will consider the following overarching question: how did Black and Indigenous individuals and networks shape the natural knowledge found in the Linnean Society’s collections and other related collections?

### The final project will be decided by the successful applicant, in conversation with the three supervisors, and will be grounded in the applicant’s interests and expertise.

### **Research questions**

The student will be supported in pursuing their own original enquiries. Research questions may include:

* who were the Black and/or Indigenous naturalists involved in Atlantic ideas about the natural world? What written record of their lives exists?
* what can be recovered of these individuals’ and networks’ training, knowledge, expertise, daily lives, and relationships with European naturalists through analysis of manuscript materials?
* how can we give these individuals a place in history?
* how did colonialism shape ideas about nature?
* what kinds of decolonial approaches can be employed to reconstruct knowledge about Black and/or Indigenous naturalists in the libraries and museums sector?
* what kinds of information should be collected, and how should it be included in digital collections in ways that help recover Black histories?

### **Available training opportunities**

### At Birkbeck, the student will be enrolled within the Department for English, Theatre and Creative Writing. As well as a minimum of three supervisions a term (FT), they will take the taught MPhil programme delivered by the department (weekly sessions for 1 year) and a course in Teaching the Arts in HE. They will also participate in relevant History of Art training workshops and seminars to support the material and museum cultures elements of the project (including at the Centre for Museum Cultures). There will be opportunities to apply to teach and develop other skills necessary for a career either in academia or elsewhere. Students can be trained in and experiment with new media for research and public engagement outputs, e.g. in research-led film-making and other digital technologies, or by using the School’s cinema and art gallery space. As a CHASE-funded student, they will contribute to wider CHASE PGR work on relevant projects and training.

### The student will also be given training the Linnean Society Collections Team, including using the Society’s numerous digital and material resources, and handling rare and unique material. The Archivist and Digital Assets Manager will train the student in the Society’s data management systems so that they are able to assist with embedding new biographical and other data from the project into the Society’s catalogues.

### **Partner resources**

The Linnean Society will provide a stimulating research environment for the candidate, who will be able to use the Society’s resources, including the library, archives and biological specimens, as well as privileged access to our support collections (including secondary publications and staff reference files). The candidate will have a designated desk space in the Society’s beautiful library, and will be integrated into the life of a dynamic Collections team, gaining an in-depth experience of working within a Library and Archives service. They will be able to contribute to the metadata within the archives catalogue and online collections, thereby developing professional archival experience beyond their academic pursuits.

The Collections team is assisted by honorary curators of the biological specimens, who will also share their knowledge of the collections. The student will be able to engage regularly onsite with the Society’s broader network of collections researchers (around 300 a year) and will have the opportunity to interact with the Linnean Society’s network of Fellows (nearly 3,000), many of whom work on similar subjects, making it a useful platform on which to develop and discuss ideas.

The student will also be given specific opportunities to contribute to the Society’s wider research development programme, including public engagement opportunities and events organization towards the latter stages of the PhD. The Society has a rich programme of

events, some of which are developed and led by the Collections team, and to which the student will be able to contribute and participate.

### **Research environment**

Postgraduate research is at the core of the Department of English, Theatre and Creative Writing. The PhD programme is one of the largest in English in the country, with around 100 enrolled students. Depending on the final project plan, the student will benefit from being situated within the Eighteenth-Century Research Group, a multidisciplinary collective with a series of regular events and/or the Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies, which has its own open-access journal and a lively postgraduate research culture led by PGR representatives from departments across the School of Arts. This studentship will also be connected with other work going on across the College on colonial, postcolonial and global cultures. Birkbeck offers its postgraduates extensive research development opportunities, and the student will also work within the CHASE consortium and be able to forge connections with other CHASE institutions.