

## ON DECOLONIZING THE MUSEUM IN PRACTICE

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### *Honouring Decolonisation Movements*

As much as Colonisation and its resulting ongoing legacy—*Coloniality* (Quijano 1992, 2000, Mignolo 2011)—is an ongoing, harmful process, so has the work of de-colonization been pushed by many peoples, over many centuries. In the case of the Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic and Americas, resistance to colonization has been ongoing for over 500 years and has taken many forms and shapes. It seems fitting, therefore, to start by acknowledging, honouring and accrediting the many decolonization movements led by Indigenous Peoples, by Black Power and civil rights movements, activists, feminist and queer thinkers that have brought us here.

The discipline continues to benefit greatly from scholars who have dedicated their time and energy in writing from and for the disciplines. Their body of work (including their practice, constant advocacy, activism and teaching) spans over half a century. It has been and remains transformational in questioning and reshaping the sector: Vine Deloria, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Amy Lonetree, Stuart Hall, Wayne Modest, Viv Golding, Ruth Phillips, Anthony Shelton, Chip Colwell to name but a few. Personally, I was challenged and inspired by many in my career from indigenous activists to critical thinkers like Gabina Aurora Perez Jimenez, Rosemary Joyce, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Hodan Warsame, Ilias Zian, the participants of #decolonizethemuseum, and members of Museumdetox, Clara Barker, Tinashe Chandauka, Samwel Nangiria, and so many more, some my elders, others much younger than I. They made me question my own positionality and my assumptions, and make me check my privileges and those of the institutions I have worked in.

### *Decolonizing the Museum*

Question number six of the UK Museum Association's 2018 sector-wide consultation to inform a major new research grant programme *Collections 2030* asks: 'What approaches are needed to decolonize collections over the next decade? What would this look like in your museum?' Although globally, questions around decolonization have been discussed in the museum sector since at least the 1970s, to the best of my knowledge this was the first time a question so specifically geared

to the question of decolonizing collections had appeared prominently on a sector-wide consultation in the UK.

For museums stewarding colonial cultural objects, the question should not have come as a surprise. The work of activist movements questioning misrepresentation, power imbalances and erasures spans decades (Deloria 1969; Simpson 1996; Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Indigenous resistance movements have been pressuring for many centuries, starting at the very moment of colonization and through on multiple forms: ‘...from sporadic rebellions to everyday forms of resistance embedded in dances, stories and rituals that are an integral part of indigenous communities’ (Yashar 2005: 14). Resistance was born out of many impetuses: ‘different indigenous writers have explained the movement as one born out of the frustrations of urbanization, out of traditional revivalism, out of the grassroots, or out of the reserves’ (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 112). Resistance to misrepresentation has a key feature in the writings of many prominent indigenous scholars for decades (Deloria 1998; Doxtator 1988; Valaskaskis 1993).

Nonetheless, while the topic of the colonial has featured rather prominently in museums with ethnographic collections over the past decade or so,<sup>1</sup> it has featured much less so in other national museums. The speed at which the topic of decolonization has worked its way up the ladder, therefore, may have come as a surprise to museums that had been challenged less frequently on these issues but seems to have been somewhat surprisingly more easily and more broadly embraced than previously.<sup>2</sup> In the UK, over the course of 2018, the Victoria and Albert Museum (2015), Tate (2018), British Museum (2018) Wellcome Collection (2018) (alongside many others) organised meetings that discussed how issues around empire, the colonial and decolonizing affect their practice.

In the same vein, in April 2018, 120 international museum professionals and community practitioners from across Europe and the UK came to Oxford to attend the Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG) Conference on ‘Decolonizing the Museum in Practice’ at the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM). A selection of what was presented and discussed can be found in this volume. As one of the conference organisers, we wanted to foreground what decolonizing the museum can mean, in practical terms, for ethnographic museums and collections and discuss prominent examples that illustrate possibilities and impossibilities and use the conference to look ahead. The theme seemed timely for a conference, as much important work has been developed in the past years and around ethnographic collections in particular. It seemed exceptionally fitting to organise the conference in Oxford.

### *Entangled Fractions*

As a prelude to the MEG conference, contemporary artist Leo Asemota reflected on his decades-long work *The Ens Project* that includes reflections on the Benin collections in Oxford.<sup>3</sup> Leo talked about the fragmented state of history and how, even when we are integrally part of something, because of our singular perspective, we merely see fragments. Entangled fractions of histories indeed have congregated

in the stores and galleries of European museums, like the PRM, that steward ethnographic and archaeological collections. As part of the curatorial process certain perspectives of those histories are prioritized over others, emphasized or concealed. Each object in our collections has a manifold of stories to tell. From the Dutch context, Simone Zeefuik and Wayne Modest write about the language used by many museums and how it is often an exclusionary one:

‘It is a language that creates or carries categories of us and them, we and they, based on a presumed understanding of who is Dutch and who is not. Such language talks about (and seldom, sadly, with) Black people and other people of colour, making clear not only who is involved in creating such exhibits but also who is expected to view them. Perspectives matter’ (Zeefuik and Modest 2018: 38).

And even though, as Zeefuik and Modest write, ‘practices of exclusion are not always overt or conscious; they are sometimes implicit and embedded in the structures of our everyday language, for example, and they may arise simply because we take our own perspective for granted’ (2018: 35), it seems clear that we all agree that museums need to change with regard to mono-authority, start introducing multiple-perspectives and think more carefully about the voices and stories that find representation. Instead of attributing individual agency and subjectivity only to specific collectors (mostly elite, white, cisgender males) we need to start finding, foregrounding and telling the stories and voices of makers, traders, or those involved in the objects’ design and philosophical thought process. In the process, we need to no longer omit to tell less convenient parts of the story and no longer muffle certain voices that, for example, oppose objects remaining in European museums at all.

As part of the MEG conference, we wanted to ask ourselves what our role is in that process, what is it that we do in practice to enable the rewritings of histories from different standpoints, what is it that we do to enable multiple perspectives, and are we speaking the hard truths of colonisation within our galleries?

Like the Pitt Rivers Museum, most ethnographic museums today are much more conscious of the fact that all ethnographic collecting was and is inherently infused with the imbalance of power relations. Since the start of independence movements, but more intensely since the beginning of the 1990’s, ethnographic museums started to question and probe their colonial roots. In the case of the Pitt Rivers Museum, as the Museum adapted its vision, calibrating it according to paradigm shifts, change happened at many different moments of its 134 years of existence, depending on the vision of the director and senior staff (Van Broekhoven 2018b). It seems almost superfluous to note that the Museum’s current vision, outlined in its current strategic plan in no uncertain terms, differs from the vision that was displayed on a panel at the entrance of the museum at the beginning of the twentieth Century (Van Broekhoven 2018a).

Some of the most commonly held practices of museums; to collect, to preserve, to educate and make representations, have proven all but easy to change. It has

been argued that decolonizing the museum very much seems counter-intuitive for museum staff:

‘Western institutions continue to maintain borders and to privilege particular ways of knowing. Consciously or not, those who staff museums and galleries have been trained and socialised to think and know in those ways, and museums are not set apart from global economic injustice and the reality of racial conflict and prejudice. In Britain, this reality has its roots in empire.’ (Lynch and Alberti 2010: 14).

In *Towards the ‘tangible unknown’: Decolonization and the Indigenous future* Aman Sium, Chandni Desai and Eric Ritskes (2012) emphasise that decolonization cannot take place without contestation and needs to involve more than merely theory: ‘[...] the decolonizing project seeks to reimagine and rearticulate power, change, and knowledge through a multiplicity of epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies’ (Sium et al. 2012: III). It seems blatantly obvious that even though museums have invested (and continue to invest) significantly in developing more inclusive practices, the product of a decolonizing exercise has only just started to find translation into new acquisition practices, label writing (Modest and Lelijveld 2018, Van Broekhoven 2018c), cataloguing, public engagement, marketing, staffing and budgeting patterns or object restitution. Important critiques have foregrounded issues around the neo-colonial aspects of some of our current practices of ‘decolonizing’ (see among others Boast 2011, Onciul 2015, Robins 2017). Those of us who set budgets and structures need to seriously consider how we can ensure that any decolonizing practice includes both the setting of the budget when we consider what is ‘core’ and what is ‘project’ and a review of internal decision-making structures.

### *Turning Tables*

In *Decolonizing Museums*, Amy Lonetree (2012) investigates how museums can be decolonized. She suggests a number of crucial elements are required including challenging stereotypical representations; honouring Indigenous ways of knowing through self-representation; and speaking the hard truths of colonization within exhibition spaces. Similarly, Christina Kreps summarized the decolonization of museum practice as ‘acknowledging the historical, colonial contingencies under which collections were acquired; revealing Eurocentric ideology and biases in the Western museum concept, discourse and practice; [and] acknowledging and including diverse voices and multiple perspectives’ (Kreps 2011: 72). Others, such as Sumaya Kassim, have affirmed in an article of the same name that ‘The museum will not be decolonized’ (Kassim 2017). In her thought-provoking media diversified article and subsequent film, Kassim argues it should be questioned ‘whether large British institutions like BMAG can and should promote ‘decolonial’ thinking, or whether, in fact, they are so embedded in the history and power structures that decoloniality challenges, that they will only end up co-opting

decoloniality’ (Ibid.). She argues that ‘Decolonizing is deeper than just being represented. When projects and institutions proclaim a commitment to ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’ or ‘decoloniality’ we need to attend to these claims with a critical eye. Decoloniality is a complex set of ideas—it requires complex processes, space, money, and time, otherwise it runs the risk of becoming another buzzword, like ‘diversity’”(Ibid.).

The real work of colonization was and is the extraction and exploitation of resources. The flipping of existing power structures so that colonial power could sit at what was considered ‘the centre’—meaning mostly white, able-bodied, cisgender, elite males. Decolonization, therefore, must do the opposite: turn the tables on the power balance, re-humanize, prioritize Indigenous and other knowledges that have been silenced and find ways to establish a new balance, one that starts from a more moral paradigm, that strives to find understanding and empathy and looks for an ethical framework of redress and repair. The work of decolonizing needs to be done and translated into practice, structure and budgeting for it to be effective and—in Museums—has only just started. ‘One of the greatest challenges in looking to understand decolonization in complex ways is bridging the divide of action vs. theory. [...] Transformative praxis can be measured by our ability to show scholarly courage and imagination in taking our ideas off the bookshelf and acting on them’ (Sium et al 2012: VIII).

### *Conclusion*

In other, similar places I have argued that perhaps, ‘despite the presumed unifying nature of the field of ethnographic collections, the specific context, pedigrees, intellectual histories, local heritage frameworks or citizenship practices, colonial pasts and abuses’ the future of ethnographic museums is not singular as it is often posited, but rather multiple and contingent (Van Broekhoven 2014:15). The need for healing and repair, homecomings and recovery within which decolonization and other requests are posed and function across the globe, make it hard to come up with any generalizing claim for a single recipe that does justice to that multiplicity of contexts. Nonetheless, several indigenous scholars, museum practitioners, activist movements and contemporary artists from across the globe give us very concrete and actionable ways to start turning the tables. We must not forget to honour those that—often at great personal expense—have cried out for and forged change and are continuing to spark further dialogue, action and reflection. For, as the voices grow louder, the institution hiding behind blissful ignorance and the obliviousness to how some of what we do causes harm not preservation or education, has become untenable, not just because it is morally right, but also because it is historically more sound, broadens the contemporary relevance of the collections and museums, and economically makes more sense.

We must acknowledge the fact that we might not get it right many times. I genuinely hope none of us are without doubt, without regret, because it is those moments when we feel that we have failed, that we might be most open to change,

to admitting not defeat but imperfection. If we are serious about change, those failures will inevitably present themselves. When that happens, I hope we will remember to be kind to each other, to ourselves, and admit that even when we need to learn, when we might not have acquired the vocabularies yet to express what we intend to say, we might not have the tools to do better and work towards ‘the right thing’; when we could have done better, we can embrace that doubt and that failure and count on the fact that we are allowed to fail and need to be flexible on process but hard on principle.

#### Notes

1. Testament to which are important a number of EU funded projects centred around these topics such as RIME < <https://culturelab.be/archive/rime/>>, README < <https://culturelablog.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/read-me-i-ii-website-cl.pdf> >, SWICH < <http://www.swich-project.eu> >, MELA < <http://www.mela-project.polimi.it> > and RICHES < <http://www.riches-project.eu> >.
2. We might question whether that has been caused by internal rejuvenation processes (a new generation of curators and directors more comfortably schooled in the postcolonial paradigm); public pressure or, alternately, be a reflection of institutional co-optation or tokenism, not real change or struggle.
3. For more information see: [http://www.eotla.com/Leo\\_Asemota\\_\\_\\_EoTLA/work\\_in\\_focus.html](http://www.eotla.com/Leo_Asemota___EoTLA/work_in_focus.html)

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