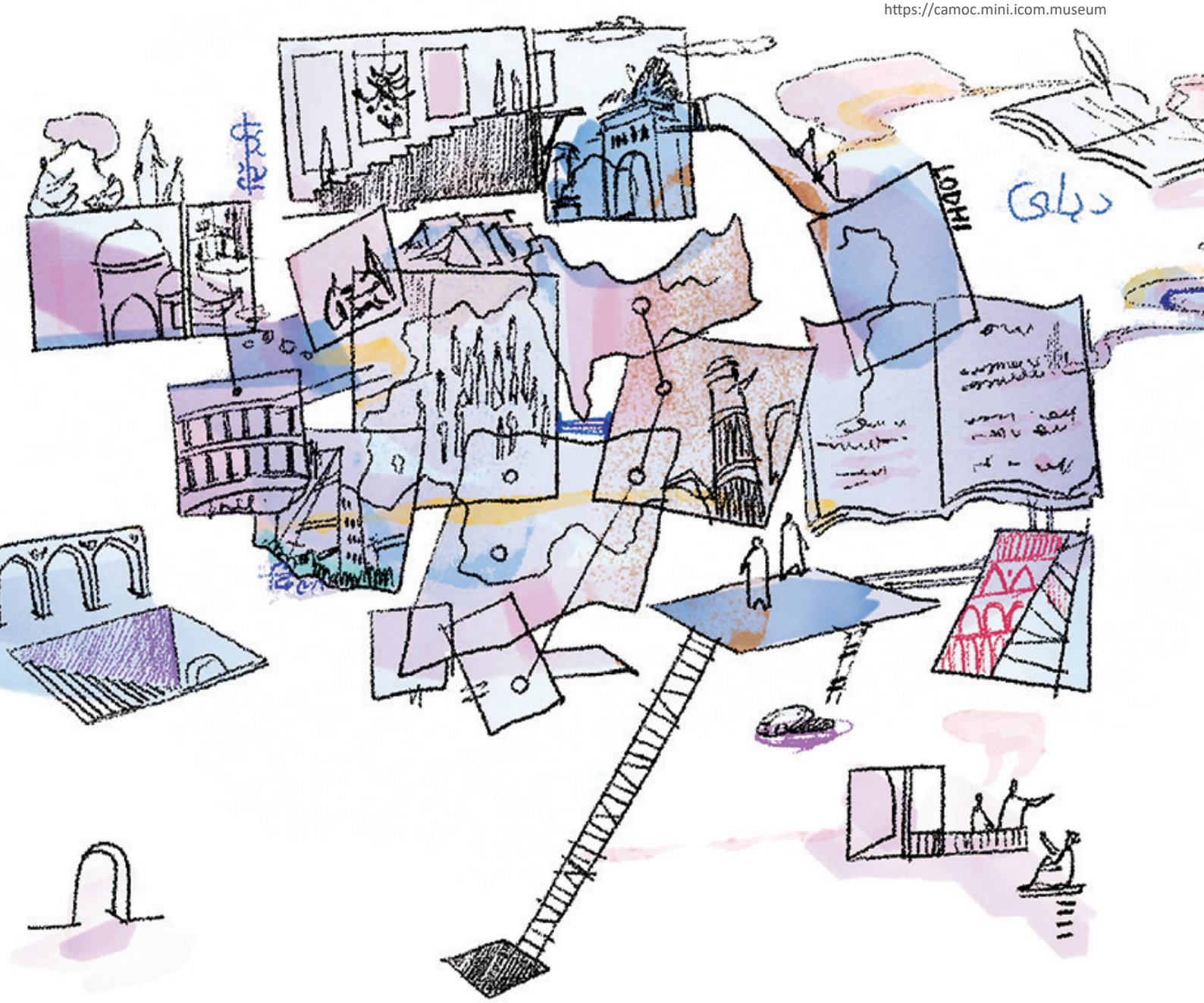
ICOM international council of museums

FALL-WINTER 2025
ISSN 2520-2472

# CAMOC MUSEUMS OF CITIES REVIEW

https://camoc.mini.icom.museum




## Unsettling the City: Decolonial Approaches to Urban Memory and Museums

decolonising museums of cities + the potential and the reality + challenges and lessons learned + re-thinking colonial buildings and monuments + legacies for Indigenous and enslaved people + disability justice + control of historical narratives

# CAMOC Review

# Special Theme Issue on Decolonization

## Unsettling the City: Decolonial Approaches to Urban Memory and Museums

**Andréa Delaplace, Catherine C. Cole, and Elka Weinstein, Co-editors**

CAMOC is about the city and its people—their history, their present and their future. It is a forum for those who work in museums about cities, but also for anyone involved and interested in urban life: historians, urban planners, architects, citizens, all of whom can exchange knowledge and ideas across national frontiers.



Published by ICOM CAMOC Museums of Cities 2025. 

CAMOC MUSEUMS OF CITIES REVIEW

# CONTENTS

FALL-WINTER 2025


# Editors' Note

Andrea Delaplace, Catherine C. Cole, and Elka Weinstein, Co-editors

The subject of decolonising museums has been discussed, particularly in settler countries, for decades and has gained increased attention globally over the past decade. Yet, some types of museums have paid more attention to this theme than have others – national museums, university museums, ethnology, anthropology, migration, and natural history museums, for example. But what about city museums? How did colonisation impact the development of cities, and how is the growing interest in decolonisation impacting museums of place, in and of cities?

Colonialism has benefitted city museums as the wealth and power resulting from the exploitation of others was concentrated in cities. Many museum founders and early benefactors played a role in colonisation, whether as explorers, traders, scientists, colonial administrators, or missionaries, or as industrialists whose wealth was accumulated at the expense of others. Cities are facing their colonial legacies not just in museums but also in public art and naming, some of which has implications for museums.

The concept of decolonisation means different things in different parts of the world, depending on the colonial experience. While some may think that decolonisation is all about repatriation, or relates only to Indigenous collections, exhibitions and programmes, it impacts other communities as well—descendants of slavery, diaspora communities, differently-abled, and gender and sexually diverse people among them. Colonialism is not confined to the past, the legacy of colonialism remains traumatic for many peoples today, and neocolonialism and expansionism are threatening. We will never be able to undo the harm done by colonialism, but museums can become more equitable institutions – for the benefit of:

- Communities of origin through recognition of rights and healing,
- Museum visitors through greater public trust, and
- Museums themselves through greater accuracy, more appropriate care, and more meaningful interpretation.

As co-editors, we have each brought our own perspectives and experience to this task. Andrea comes from a mixed family (Brazilian and French background) and did a postdoctoral fellowship at the UQAM and Laval University in Québec dedicated to decolonial practices in museums in Brazil and Québec, Canada. She currently lives and works in Paris, France and is a member of the CAMOC 2026-28 board. Catherine works as a consultant and speaker on related issues. She is a member of ICOM's Working Group on Decolonisation. A former CAMOC board member, from 2014-2020 she was also Secretary-General of the ICOM-affiliated and Commonwealth-accredited Commonwealth Association of Museums, which focuses on the legacy of British colonialism. Elka has worked in museums in Canada and has taught museology in Canada, Latin America (Ecuador and Bolivia) and Spain. She is currently a Museum Advisor and is the former President of ICOM Canada.

We have gathered perspectives from different parts of the world, and examples of different types of decolonisation. While it's impossible to be truly comprehensive in one issue, we hope that the articles and reviews offered will provoke a broader understanding of the subject as it relates to cities.

The 2022-2028 ICOM Strategic Plan also identified the need to address decolonisation and ICOM established the Working Group on Decolonisation, a report from Chair Hanna Pennock begins this issue. The Working Group recommended establishing a Standing Committee to keep this issue front and centre for ICOM.

**Feature Articles**

Prachi Joshi offers a poetic, conceptual article which encourages readers to fantasise about the potential for city museums in India: "To whomsoever it may belong: Speculative Narratives for City Museums in India as a Way to Rethink Decolonial Museological Processes."

In "Decolonising City Museums in Nigeria: Towards an inclusive museum practice," Louisa Nnenna Onuoha compares two museums in the city of Lagos, the National Museum Lagos and the JK Randle Museum. She discusses the potential for federal and state government-run museums to also serve as city museums.

The Bristol Museum is a model for decolonisation. Lisa Graves's contribution, "Recent developments on decolonial work in Bristol City museums", openly discusses some of the challenges the museum has faced in its efforts to decolonise as well as lessons to learn from and be inspired by.

Suy Lan Hopmann poses the questions: "Can the colonial archive be challenged? Crypts, graves, funerary monuments in the Nikolaikirche in Berlin" How can contemporary museum curators and community members re-think their colonial buildings?

In "*Traces of Slavery in Kampen*: Decolonisation at a Medium-Sized City Museum in the Netherlands" Nynke van der Wal discusses the exhibition *Traces of Slavery,* and how the museum adds new layers to familiar stories to broaden visitors' perspectives. The exhibition raised awareness of the history of slavery in the city.

"Exhibition *Fugitives!"* by Aly Ndiaye, alias Webster, explores an exhibition he developed in Quebec City which humanises 15 enslaved people in Quebec in the second half of the 18th century. He notes that most Canadians are unaware of the history of slavery in Canada, but there are estimates of over 4,000 slaves in Quebec, two-thirds of whom were Indigenous, not of African descent.

Kahutoi Te Kanawa discusses a new textile at Tāmaki Paenga Hira, Auckland Museum in "Te Aho Mutunga Kore; The Eternal Threads of Knowledge" and its importance to Maori and to Pacific Islanders, many of whom have relocated to Auckland because – in part or full – of climate change in their islands.

An interview with Paolo Araiza Bolaños by Elka Weinstein focuses on her groundbreaking work with community museums in the urban zone of Iztapalapa, Mexico City

"*The Taking Care Project* @ Museum of Vancouver: A Curatorial Conversation" by co-curators Viviane Gosselin, Raven John, and Carmen Papalia offers an inside perspective on exhibition development through discussion of planning towards an upcoming exhibition focused on disability justice in the city, an illustration of how exhibition development may be decolonised through collaboration.

**Decolonising the City Museum: Memory, Power, and Plural Voices**

City museums around the world are undergoing profound transformations as they confront the legacies of colonialism embedded in their collections, narratives, and institutional structures. This special issue of the *CAMOC Review* explores how urban museums are engaging with the complex work of decolonisation – rethinking their roles, shifting interpretive frameworks, and opening space for historically marginalised voices. The battle over control of historical narratives is intensifying, even targeting works of art. We believe it is essential to integrate this development into our reflections on the future of city museums: how can they preserve their critical autonomy in a context of growing political interference?

Together, these articles illuminate the tensions, possibilities, and responsibilities faced by city museums today, as they strive to become spaces of justice, dialogue, and plurality. We hope this issue offers critical insights and inspires further reflection and action – wishing you an engaging and thought-provoking read.

# ICOM's Working Group on Decolonisation, 2022-2025

by Hanna Pennock

In 2023, in response to the 2022-2028 Strategic Plan, ICOM established a Working Group on Decolonisation[1] with a mandate to advise the Executive Board about how ICOM, as an international voice of museum professionals, can address decolonisation and seek equity and inclusion in museums around the world – including city museums. The Working Group is ICOM's important first step towards becoming a 'global forum' to explore the key issues and identify 'best practices' in the decolonisation of museums and ensure exemplary institutional practice (although the concept of best practices is considered by some to be colonial – 'best' to whom?).

While various ICOM Bodies, including CAMOC, have addressed decolonisation – some for years – whether through the ICOM Code of Ethics or NatHist Code of Ethics, discussions around the new museum definition, thematic conferences and publications, there has not been any consideration of ICOM itself as a colonial organisation nor coordinated effort to provide guidelines or tools. The Working Group's report to the Executive Board includes a brief history of ICOM with a decolonisation lens as well as an extensive list of related activities by ICOM Bodies. ICOM has acknowledged the role that museums have played in colonisation and, through the Working Group, is proactively addressing decolonisation, cultural rights and democracy, including how best to support museums as they engage with communities. But this is just a first step; there is much more work to be done.

The Working Group is comprised of a chair, 11 members (from Barbados, Benin, Canada, Germany, India, Netherlands, Nigeria, Pakistan, Scotland, Spain, Taiwan), and ex-officio members including the president of ICOM and four Executive Board members, as well as members of the ICOM Secretariat. The Working Group functions primarily online through monthly meetings and an active WhatsApp discussion group. It has met twice in person, in Utrecht, the Netherlands in June 2024 and in Berlin, Germany in June 2025, and most members attended the ICOM Triennial General Conference in Dubai. Over this period, members learnt from one another, from guest speakers at our meetings, and participation in several related conferences online or in person in different parts of the world.

In just over two years, the Working Group has gathered input from surveys of ICOM National and International Committees, Regional Alliances, and Affiliated Organisations, in-person and online meetings with Advisory Council members, and six online meetings with ICOM members and Indigenous people (many of whom were not ICOM members). The two meetings with Indigenous people were important and reinforced the need to meet separately with other groups affected by the legacy of colonialism but there wasn't time to do so during the current mandate. The Working Group provided input into the LEAC guidelines and drafts of the ICOM Code of Ethics and invited its Chair to attend the meetings with Indigenous people. While the Working Group did not conduct a formal literature review, members recognise that the field is changing rapidly now and that it would be impossible to be comprehensive. The Working Group functioned almost entirely in English, which further limited the sources accessed. The WhatsApp discussion group created an extensive list of resources.

The Working Group is aware that many ICOM Bodies have been working on decolonisation, some for years or even decades, as have museums and communities of origin around the world. A small sample of case studies is included in the report to illustrate points raised, but these examples only touch the surface. ICOM can play a role in advocating the importance of decolonising museums,

[1] ADM_WG-Decolonisation_Mandate_2023-2025_EN.pdf.

ICOM's Working Group on Decolonisation, 2022-2025


*Left to Right: Rachelle Kalee, ICOM Secretariat; Camila Opazo, ICOM Spain; Natalie McGuire, ICOM Barbados; Carly Degbelo, ICOM Benin; Asma Ibrahim, ICOM Pakistan; Abeer Eladany, ICOM UK; Ishola Chinedu Ozueigbo, ICOM Nigeria; Prachi Joshi, ICOM India; Suy Lan Hopmann, ICOM Germany; Terry Simioti Nyambe, Zambia, ICOM Vice-President; Isabel Beirigo, ICOM Netherlands; Phaedra Fang, ICOM NATHIST; Hanna Pennock, ICOM Netherlands, Chair; Catherine C. Cole, ICOM Canada.* Credit: Agency for International Museum Cooperation, Berlin

especially in parts of the world where this is being questioned but ICOM also needs to recognise its limitations as a global forum, that its membership is primarily European, and that many nations, particularly countries and peoples impacted by the legacies of colonialism, are not ICOM members.

The Working Group has developed eight recommendations about how ICOM can decolonise itself as an organisation and how ICOM can provide leadership and guidance to museums globally on decolonisation. ICOM Canada submitted a Resolution, drafted by the Working Group, for discussion at the General Assembly in Dubai" to "which was approved at the General Assembly in Dubai. The Resolution recommends that ICOM establish a Standing Committee on Decolonisation with a mandate including to advise on policy development; provide guidance and support to Standing Committees and Working Groups, National and International Committees, Regional Alliances and Affiliated Organisations; and promote cross-regional dialogue and knowledge exchange on decolonisation issues in museums.

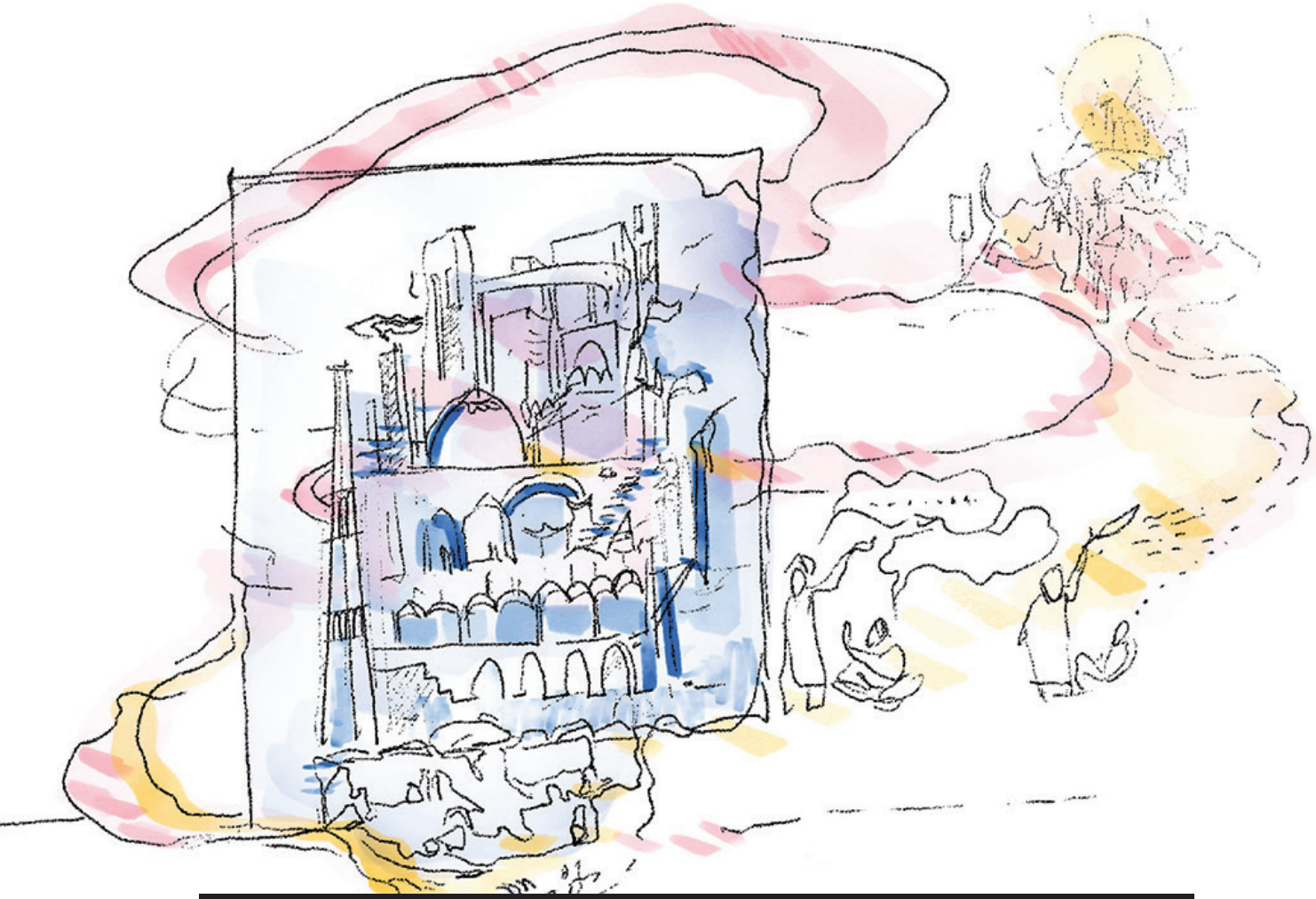
The Resolution recommends that the Standing Committee be co-chaired by an Indigenous person and someone from a former colonial power, and that its composition be professionally diverse and balanced geographically between individuals from former colonies, including Indigenous people, and former colonial powers, as well as people from other marginalised communities impacted by colonialism. The Resolution also recommends that the ICOM Executive Board ensure that the 2025 Report of the Working Group be published in all official ICOM languages, and that the Executive Board review the recommendations in the Working Group's report on how ICOM can provide leadership in the global museum community on decolonisation and agree to an Action Plan, a draft of which is in the report. Finally, it recommends that, in its first term, the Standing Committee work closely with the Working Group on Statutes and Internal Rules to revise these documents to reflect current practice and address systemic barriers to participation to ensure a more equitable organisation. The report itself includes additional recommendations for consideration by the Executive Board.

*The Working Group meeting in Berlin, Germany, June 2025* Credit: Phaedra Fang

ICOM recognises that decolonisation means different things in different parts of the world. It also means different things to some types of museums than others. Cities are re-examining their relationship with their 'founding fathers', many of whom in colonising nations profited from colonisation (as did the countries). European cities are researching their history with a new lens, acknowledging that much of their wealth, including monuments and museum collections, came from profits made with slavery and colonial trade. In the case of former colonies, profits came from (and often still do come from) the natural resources and original peoples of the land on which cities were built. The impacts of migration are keenly felt in cities – including the development of diaspora communities and the migration of Indigenous people both within countries, and between countries, often because of the climate crisis, as well as activism for gender diversity rights and disability justice, and other legacies of colonialism.

CAMOC's focus is city museums, whereas the Working Group is looking at all types of museums through a decolonisation lens. In addition to the recommendations, we have included a number of case studies in our report to the Executive Board. This CAMOC issue provides an opportunity to delve into good examples of city museums addressing this theme more specifically.

**Hanna Pennock** is the Chair of ICOM's Working Group on Decolonisation and Senior Advisor at the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, specialising in colonial collections and decolonisation. An art historian, she worked as a senior curator, exhibition coordinator, and inspector, and served as a member of the Executive Council and Acting Director General of ICOM.



*The imagination of speculative narratives.* Credit: Prachi Joshi

Who belongs, Who says, Who gets left behind?

# Speculative Narratives for City Museums in India as a Way to Rethink Decolonial Museological Processes

by Prachi Joshi

Museums across the Western world are in a process of transformation – of 'decolonising themselves'. As the scope and understanding of 'decolonisation' continues to evolve and expand each day, the process becomes complex, time-consuming and also contestable.

In a post-colonial context like India's, this process is still nascent. In this scenario, finding ways to decolonise requires a deeper recognition of the problematics of inherited colonial models and their persistence.

City museums in India, however, offer a compelling entry point into this conversation. India does not lack such museums, yet constrained by outdated practices, they are often underfunded, unpopular, and neglected.

Most significantly, they fail to imagine themselves as keepers of stories of the city, as living witnesses to the past, present, future, and mythical. Instead, they relegate themselves to static time and a unilateral popular/political narrative.

This hiatus presents an opportunity to reimagine city museums as tools for both critiquing colonial legacies and constructing contextually relevant alternatives to the institutional museum models. This article proposes speculative narratives as a tool to rethink city museums while raising critical questions on alienation, ownership, authorship, interpretation, absent narratives, and most of all, belonging. With the layered complexities cities bring, these museums can become a wondrous space for their discourse.

Only when we dream of relevant alternatives, will we be able to design museums that resonate with India's diverse identities, lived experiences, and cultural particularities – those which belong here, rather than to a European past.

Cities contain the stories of people but they have chequered pasts – narratives written, rewritten, and overwritten. Borders and boundaries have been drawn, contested, and redrawn repeatedly. The 'ownership' of cities, too, remains fluid and contentious.

It thus seems paradoxical to place cities and museums together in the same frame. Cities are living, ever-evolving organisms shaped by time and flux, while museums often freeze time, reducing their subjects to static representations.

In this sense, city museums appear to exist as contradictions within the storytelling world. As a reference point for this exercise, I will present a case for the Museum of the City of Delhi.

**City Museums in India**

India's urban landscape is far too diverse to fit under a single typology of city museum. There are city *palace* museums – like those in Jaipur, Udaipur, Vadodara, Mysore, and Thrissur to name a few – that immortalise the royal patrons of erstwhile kingdoms. These museums seldom explore the evolution of their cities beyond their regal pasts. Independently run trust museums, such as the Palanpur City Museum, focus on the past of smaller urban centres.

Two striking examples of 'city museums which could have been' are Ahmedabad's Sanskar Kendra, designed by Le Corbusier, and Chandigarh's Architectural Museum, dedicated to him.

Built as India's first planned city post-independence, Chandigarh's museum primarily serves as a tribute to the architect and his vision, with little attention paid to the land's pre-existing narratives, the lives of its current inhabitants, or the Chandigarh of today. Although Sanskar Kendra fared better in terms of storytelling, it remains better known as Corbusier's work rather than as an institution reflective of Ahmedabad's layered identity. For a city recognised as India's first UNESCO World Heritage City in 2017 on the basis of its rich diversity, this lack of plurality is particularly stark. In both cases, while the museum buildings are celebrated for their climate – and geography – responsive designs, the institutions themselves reduce their cities to singular narratives.

In cities like Kolkata, Varanasi, and Lucknow – colloquially titled the City of Joy, the City of Light, and the Nawabi City respectively – we have privately owned 'museum' ventures. Designed as experience centres, they entertain and attract audiences by catering to popular perceptions. Yet, in doing so, they reinforce narrow, one-dimensional portrayals of these cities, neglecting their inherent contradictions, complexities, and the lives of their people. They are questionable as 'museums', but then again, this concept is in itself a debatable decolonial rhetoric.

India's city museums often follow a predictable pattern: a chronological account of the past that, if extended, ends with a vague nod to the present or future. This linearity, while pragmatic given funding, space, and logistical constraints, often reduces cities to romanticised or simplified narratives, erasing their contested and multidimensional histories. Cities, with their vibrant, textured fabrics and overlapping realities, cannot be distilled into singular stories.

These museums are also struggling. They remain neglected as reflected in their squeezed funding and are outdated in their approach. Unlike state museums, which encompass regional histories and

attract at least some audiences, city museums are largely invisible and fail to position themselves as essential spaces for public engagement.

**The case for alternatives**

Decolonising museums in India is still an emerging discourse. Indian institutions have yet to fully reckon with the colonial structures embedded in their practices, which remain rigid and exclusionary. Moreover, any decolonising effort must contend with India's unique social and cultural complexities, including caste, class, religious diversities, and entrenched hierarchies. These realities complicate the process but make addressing them all the more vital.

City museums and speculative narratives offer an experimental, fertile ground here. They hold the power to challenge and dissolve even the boundaries of who gets to participate as visitor, receptor, chronicler, or curator – because isn't everyone writing the story of the city? Many museums fail to self-reflect, remaining shaped by colonial museological frameworks that limit their potential as potent, dynamic, living centres of storytelling and defining their accountability as responsible public spaces.

While decolonisation is often a top-down approach, speculative narratives provide a multi-perspective mechanism way forward to imagine contextually fitting museums for India.

Speculation is usually shunned by museums, while facts are revered, but as a diagnostic tool of inquiry, it can be used to discuss possibilities of truth and ways of being—helping us to see, to problematise, and, as a corollary, to contextualise. However, raising provocations and being speculative should not remain hostage to search for answers and resolutions.

**To Howsoever It May Belong**

*Imagining a City Museum of Delhi*

We meet at the drawing board, you and I, to build a museum for Delhi.

Where do we begin? The entryway.
Given a choice, where would you enter the museum? Through its grand gates, its crumbling walls, or the shared memories of *Dilli*[1]?

It is important to establish a beginning, is it not? It helps one transition from the city into the telling of the city's narrative. But where does the museum begin?

*Two Truths, to truths*

A museum begins when you cross into its space, into its boundaries. This one, though, could begin with *your* image of the city. Or at least, that's how a museum for Delhi would begin – *in one way* – through the imaginations of Sufi saints and poets who made it their muse. In their renditions lives a city, perhaps long lost, perhaps not yet arrived.

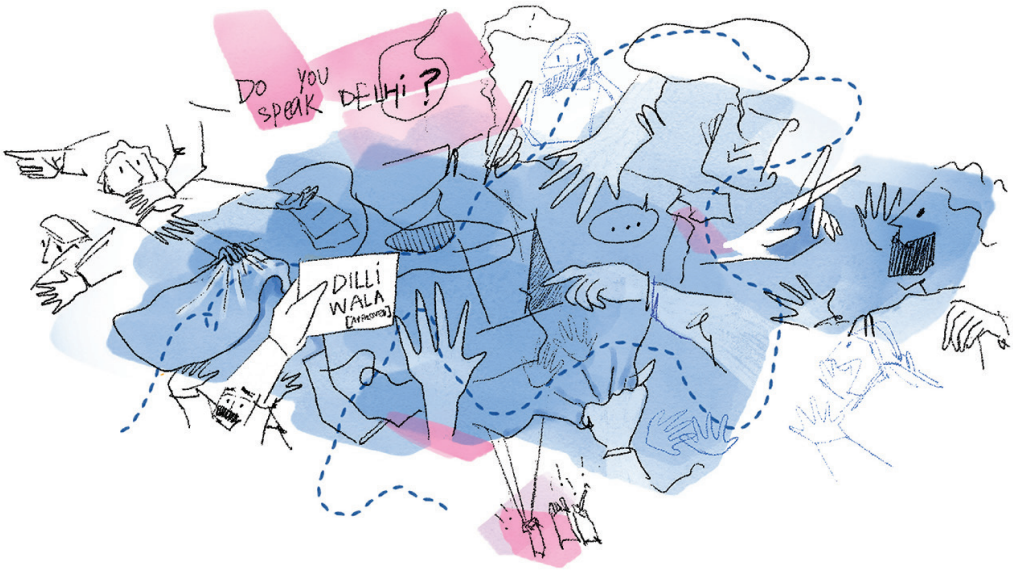
But dreams and reality have never reconciled. If the museum becomes an interpreter, how true can it be in narrating a city that is still in the making? And whose truth does it tell?

Imagination is thus tricky. It is ambiguous. Museums claim to deal with facts. And facts demand legitimacy. So it's back to the drawing board.

Let us tell Delhi's story chronologically – a linear, historical path of settlement after settlement, kingdom after kingdom- walking through the seven cities of its past.

Delhi is congested and space here is a luxury. This museum must be vertical, rising layer by layer from the foundations of the past through the Rajputs, the Khiljis, The Tughlaqs, The Sayyids, the

[1]Dilli is the Hindi and colloquial name and pronunciation of Delhi.




*Who belongs, Who says, Who gets left behind?.* Credit: Prachi Joshi

Lodhis to the Mughal emperors and then the British who decided to blanket all these pasts into the 'old' order for Delhi to become 'New', until we finally arrive into the Delhi of Independent India, and of today.

Yet, even as we build upward through each new derivation of this powerful political city, we realise we have left something behind - Indraprastha, the city of divine design inscribed in the sacred text of the Mahabharata. For the believers, its foundations lie beneath the city's stones. Others place it in a parallel mythological realm.

Physically, all the in-betweens of recorded history can be accommodated into mezzanines and stairwells, but do myths remain buried, or with their higher spiritual power, float above everything else? In India, the boundaries between history and mythology are often blurred, especially in the spatiality of the land, so where do we house a city that is both real and imagined?

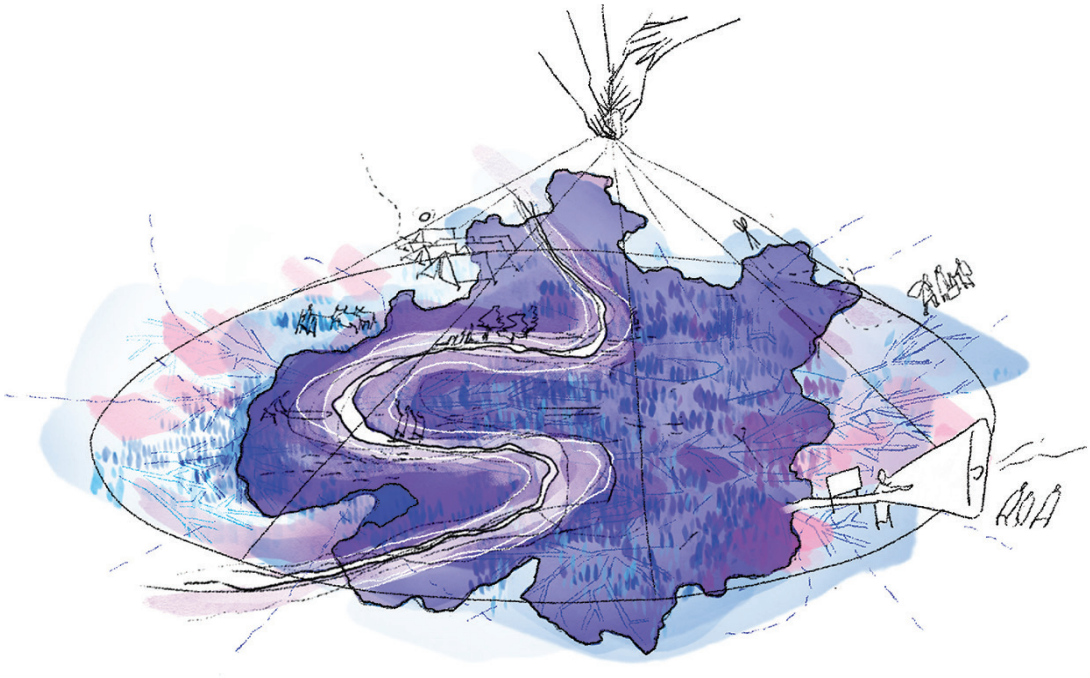
Is mythology in the past? Or is the past the start of the city of Delhi itself?
We must go back to the discussion table to find the voices to establish the truth.
After all, truth is the foundational stone for a museum.
*Though, the question of whose truth will always linger…*

*From Sources to Provenance*
We go to the residents to whom the city belongs.

However, just as in its past as a seat of power, Delhi continues to be the heart of India's politics and governance – it is embedded in the very being of this city. If an apolitical, neutral truth is the marker of a museum, which politician's truth is the truth of Delhi? We've also inherited a governance system from the same ones who colonised this land – how should we filter the biases in the telling of the narrative?

We turn to other residents – those *native* to the land. However, in a city made of and built by refugees and migrants, it is difficult to even establish *nativity* and original inhabitants.

After the Partition of India and Pakistan, when millions were forced and coerced from their homes, Delhi became a fresh start. For those from Bangladesh seeking refuge during the War of Liberation, Delhi offered a home. At the time of Dalai Lama's exile from Tibet, Delhi became a shelter for displaced Tibetans. To date, Delhi is the draw for migrant labour from neighbouring



*The weight of the stories of Delhi = weight of the museum?.* Credit: Prachi Joshi

states. The city is malleable and has always been made within the flux of people – settlers, migrants, immigrants, tourists – creating multiple social categories and identities. To all of them, Delhi has offered shelter.

And yet it wavers from being a refuge to millions to become an inferno for its own; from rebellions, riots and pogroms to communal violence and political agendas that erased, forced out or displaced countless lives –1857, 1957, 1984, 2020 – just a few markers of violence and resilience.

*Is pain chronological, or is it shared across memory, collapsing events into one enduring echo?*

*Who belongs?*

The originals have tried to establish their turf with the right paperwork and connections to prove they are *'dilliwalas'*.[2] The tourist is told they are welcome but temporary. The migrants are told they do not belong. Their voices have never been legitimised on paper or in social structures, and still, they are the hands which make, build and work the city each day. There are still 'others' who are told they have overstayed their welcome and must return home- the Urdu they speak is now not welcome in the same city in which it was born.

To wander through the story of Delhi is to walk hand in hand with its heroism, its glory and its sheen as much as its pain, scars, and bloodshed. Delhi has been a battleground as much as it has been a balm.

*Who is the guardian of the silence of all those the city never recognised as its own? Would the halls of our museum not end up being echo chambers?*

Among the displaced and silenced, is also the foremost resident of the city, Yamuna. The river remembers when she was worshipped, when she was a lifeline, when she was poisoned. Gods have played on the rich banks which are now hard to find in the city, and yet its mysticism has not diminished even though its waters have.

[2] *Dilliwala* is a term used to describe someone from Delhi.


*To whomsoever it may belong.* Credit: Prachi Joshi

*We cannot venture further here- this floor is as uneven as the city museum's narratives, and the foundations of this museum are slipping away with the sandbanks– the consequences of forgetting its non-human narrative.*

But to whom do we return- the politicians who safeguard the agendas of the city? From the see-*ers*, to the seen, to those who make seen; to the invisible to those made invisible, and the shunned. Does Delhi belong to all of them? Each story has weight, and not all are equal.

**The Site of a Museum**

We've come to an impasse.
This spatiality has become unsettling, and our museum is struggling to claim its place.
Perhaps we need to find a resolution there first, but to whom does the museum owe?
Is the museum a scribe or is it the storyteller? Does the museum enact the city, or merely mimic it?
Would it have the courage to not just acknowledge itself as a witness to the past but as an actor/agent in and of it?

*How do we juxtapose multiple opposing truths?*
And who are we – you and I, the ones making this museum?
Who are we to legitimise who belongs, and whose story is told?
Are we the keepers of the story, or the enactors of it?
Are we the marginalised, the silenced, the heroes or the rulers?
Visitor, storyteller, witness, builder?
Our structure has stalled momentarily, or perhaps indefinitely.
This does visually match Delhi's current skyline, so perhaps nothing will be out of place.
The city museum for Delhi will perhaps perpetually be in development.

**To Whomsoever It May Belong**

A truly decolonised city museum may always remain an unresolved project, but an institution responsible for safeguarding public memory in India must resist the temptation of closure – to define, to claim ownership over history. Instead, it must remain open-ended, unresolved – a site of inquiry rather than instruction.

*Who has the right to the city? Who gets to narrate its past? What memories are preserved, and which ones are left to fade, in a story that every inhabitant shapes?*

In embracing the multiplicity of existence here, city museums in India could begin to emerge as new museum models in their own standing, transcending their colonial past, confronting and claiming their position, and finally becoming a space of belonging – for all its inhabitants, past, present, and future.

*the city museum,*
*To whomsoever it may belong.*
*To howsoever it may belong.*
*To wheresoever it may belong*
*soever may it belong.*

**References**

DRONAH. (2021). *Challenges faced in Heritage Management in India and Policy Imperatives*. https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-03/Challenges%20Faced%20in%20Heritage%20management%20in%20india%20%26%20policy%20imperatives.pdf

Geva, R. (2022). *Delhi reborn : partition and nation building in India's capital*. Stanford University Press.

Hemanth Kadambi. (2024, July 14). *Discourse: Decolonising Museums*. Dawn.com. https://www.dawn.com/news/1845703

ICOM International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM). (2021). *The Decolonisation of Museology: Museums, Mixing, and Myths of Origin ICOFOM Study Series, VOL. 49, Issue 2 — 2021*. International Council of Museums (ICOM). https://icofom.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2022/05/2021_ISS_49_2.pdf

Insaf, H. (2019, October 3). *In Flux: The Making of Indian Museums and their audiences*. Untextbooklife. https://medium.com/habibainsaf/in-flux-the-making-of-indian-museums-and-their-audiences-a2da0c2960f

L'internationale. (2015). *Decolonising Museums*. Internationaleonline.org. https://internationaleonline.org/publications/decolonising-museums/

Liddle, S. (2023). *14 Historic Walks of Delhi*. Speaking Tiger Books.

Menon, R. (2004). *Menon, R. (2004). The Mahabharata a Modern Rendering: Vol I & II*. Rupa Publications India Pvt Ltd.

Museums of India. (n.d.-a). *City Museum*. Museumsofindia.org. https://www.museumsofindia.org/museum/12275/city-museum

Museums of India. (n.d.-b). *Sanskar Kendra City Museum: Karnavati Atit ni Jhanki*. Beta.museumsofindia.org. https://www.museumsofindia.org/museum/11759/sanskar-kendra-city-museum-karnavati-atit-ni-jhanki

NYUAD Institute. (2022). The Impossible Decolonization of the Western Museum. In *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEPpp5IuZOA

Roychowdhury, A. (2016, December 8). *Six major challenges facing Indian museums, says museologist Vinod Daniel*. The Indian Express. https://indianexpress.com/article/research/six-major-challenges-facing-indian-museums-says-museologist-vinod-daniel-4417103/

Sauvage, A. (2010). To be or not to be colonial: Museums facing their exhibitions. *Revista Culturales*, *6*(12), pp. 97–116 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262507105_To_be_or_not_to_be_colonial_Museums_facing_their_exhibitions

Singh Rathore, R. (2022, December 24). *Embracing "Refugee-istan": A Look at Delhi's Refugee History and Why It Must Continue*. Economic and Political Weekly. https://www.epw.in/engage/article/embracing-%E2%80%98refugee-istan%E2%80%99-look-delhis-refugee

Singh, K. (2017, June). *A Public Failure? Museums and Audiences in India*. https://www.goethe.de/resources/files/pdf146/a-public-failure_museums-and-audiences-in-india_kavita-singh1.pdf

Thomas, P. (2016). Museum as metaphor. In *Media and Utopia* (pp. 133–148). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315091303-7

Wali, A., & Collins, R. K. (2023). Decolonizing Museums: Toward a Paradigm Shift. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *52*(1). https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-052721-040652

Prachi Joshi is a mischief-maker, a museum tinkerer and a freelance narrative & interpretation designer based in India. Museums have shaped her practice as she explore modes of interaction and critical discourse to challenge identity politics sustained through colonial systems and institutions of power (knowledge, space, and medium), to find alternatives and to ask and re-ask – where do we draw the line?


*National Museum Lagos*. Credit: Nkechi Adedeji

The museum is a city museum not only because it holds one of the largest collections of the NCMM, but because it serves a diverse public and is located in the art hub of Nigeria, if not West Africa, situated in the former capital of Nigeria, Lagos.

# Decolonising City Museums in Nigeria: Towards an Inclusive Museum Practice

by Louisa Onuoha

The concept of decolonisation means different things to different people. Defining decolonisation is not straightforward. The process has been described in a variety of ways by scholars, stakeholders and professionals in different fields of practice. More recently, the term has made its way into interdisciplinary fields such that we have scholars and professionals in the humanities, medicine, linguistics, law, economics, etc., writing and propounding theories about decolonisation. If we brought together different people and tried to find out what decolonisation means to them, we would probably have different responses, and different meanings would surely come up as there is no uniform definition. This shows the fluidity of the concept. Even though decolonisation has different meanings for different people, its focus is primarily to recognise Indigenous rights, knowledge systems and practices, and incorporate them into various aspects of society, such as governance, education, and healthcare. By doing so, decolonisation seeks to address historical injustices and promote more inclusive and equitable practices. Practicing decoloniality is a complex issue, and there is no single solution that fits all (Ariese and Wróblewska 2021).

To complete the introductory part of this article, here are a few definitions of decolonisation as presented by scholars: Niigaan Sinclair, an Anishinaabe Native Studies professor at the University of Manitoba takes a critical look at how Indigenous people in Canada have been affected by colonisation and says that at its core, decolonisation is about reacting to the oppression they have faced. Sinclair says decolonisation as being about, “rethinking the sort of relationships that exist on

these lands.'[1] According to Emmaline Soken Huberty, a writer and activist based in Portland, Oregon, decolonisation is used in two ways: It is used in referencing a country's independence process or as a social, cultural, and psychological process. She says that colonialism still affects the colonised adversely as Indigenous people remain marginalised and discriminated against. Decolonisation, she projects, is "the process of deconstructing or dismantling colonial ideologies and challenging the superiority of western thought and approaches."[2] Pushpa Lyer, Chair of the Department of Conflict Resolution Studies at Nova Southeastern University in Florida, believes that decolonisation is about re-centring First Nations peoples whose erasure was the number one project of colonisation.[3] She advises, though, that this could be wrong as some proponents of decolonisation may be confusing the promotion of diversity with decolonising. She suggests, therefore, that appropriate words be used to describe the efforts people make and not label every step of initiating change in their institutions as decolonisation.

Based on these definitions (which, of course, are not exhaustive), I would like to address decolonisation in the context of Nigerian museums' collections and collecting, presentation, and communication particularly in the National Museum Lagos and the JK Randle Museum, also in Lagos. Both are city museums run by the federal and state governments respectively. Both museums showcase Nigeria's rich cultural heritage, with exhibitions ranging from traditional artefacts to contemporary art. The National Museum Lagos focuses on Nigerian history dwelling mostly on ethnographic evidence and archaeological excavations, while the JK Randle Museum emphasises Lagos' history and Yoruba culture using artefacts, audio and visual displays. These institutions play a vital role in preserving and promoting Nigeria's diverse cultural legacy. They serve as important cultural hubs, attracting both local and international visitors. The purpose of this article is not necessarily to critique either museum's decolonisation strategy, or the lack thereof, but rather to find out whether both museums have a dedicated decolonisation program. The article aims to assess whether these museums have implemented specific initiatives to address colonial legacies within their collections. By examining their approaches, we can better understand how Nigerian museums are engaging with the broader discourse on decolonisation and cultural representation. Further, the study explores the extent to which these initiatives align with global decolonisation efforts and contribute to reshaping the narrative around Nigerian heritage. This analysis will shed light on the museums' roles in fostering cultural reclamation and promoting inclusive perspectives.

**The Problem with Colonial Museums**

It is well known that the concept of a 'museum' as we know it today was not a practice of African countries before colonialism. Traditional objects were never kept in houses, locked up, and rarely displayed as we do today in Nigeria and other African countries. In traditional African societies, cultural objects were often used in communal rituals and celebrations, allowing them to maintain their functional and spiritual significance. They were mostly kept in family or community shrines and palaces tended to by those who had been chosen to look after them. They were passed on from generation to generation this way (Nwaubani 2024). In contrast, modern museums tend to isolate these artifacts behind glass, stripping them of their original context and meaning. This shift from active cultural engagement to passive observation highlights the profound differences between traditional practices and contemporary museum approaches. This, perhaps, would be one of the major problems of colonial museums as this practice encourages the perpetuation of a single-sided narrative that glorifies colonialism and ignores the perspectives and experiences of colonised people.

City museums often present a Eurocentric perspective, sidelining the histories and achievements of colonised peoples. By glorifying colonial exploits, they obscure the violence and exploitation inherent in colonisation, perpetuating a one-sided narrative that diminishes the rich cultural heritage of Indigenous communities. This approach not only distorts history but also alienates communities whose histories are misrepresented or completely erased. City museums have a responsibility

[1]https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/panel-debate-decolonization-meaning-1.4609263
[2]https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/decolonization-101-meaning-facts-and-examples/
[3]https://www.peacejusticestudies.org/chronicle/do-not-colonize-decolonization/


*Entrance to the JK Randle Museum.* Credit: Louisa Onuoha

to present a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of history, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected. While city museums in the West must prioritise ethical practices by engaging with source communities, returning stolen artifacts, and presenting a more inclusive narrative, those in Africa should, as a matter of urgency, begin to rewrite the distorted histories written by the empire. One way of achieving this is by decolonising museum practices and policies put in place by colonialism and neocolonialism. This shift is essential to fostering respect, understanding, and reconciliation, ensuring that cultural heritage is preserved and shared in a way that honours its origins and significance. City museums have a wide reach and, therefore, must promote inclusivity, social justice and accessibility in their practice.

**Decolonising City Museums in Nigeria**

I would like to start by asking a few general (important) questions regarding decolonisation. The answers to these questions (which I will try to give) may ultimately lead to some satisfaction regarding how the issue of decolonisation in city museums can be addressed. For example, are city museums in Nigeria aware that they may still be carrying their past colonial presence? If they are, do they want to shed the dominant colonial burden by infusing decolonial practices into their work? How can museums effectively collaborate with communities of origin? And how can museums create narratives that honour the true origins and significance of cultural heritage? Answering these questions is crucial to meaningful decolonisation efforts within museums in Nigeria.

Most national museums in Nigeria are in the capital cities of the states which they occupy. This does not, however, qualify them to be described as city museums. They could be state-owned or under the umbrella of the federal government. The National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) is the federal agency in charge of over fifty national museums in Nigeria. There is at least one federal museum in every state in Nigeria. In each of these states, there could be a state museum as well that is solely run by the state. One of the largest museums in Nigeria, with large collections and staff, is the National Museum Lagos which was established in 1957 from the collection of Kenneth Murray, an archaeologist who gathered a vast collection of objects from


*A screen displaying the Yoruba pantheon of gods and the story of creation.* Credit: Louisa Onuoha

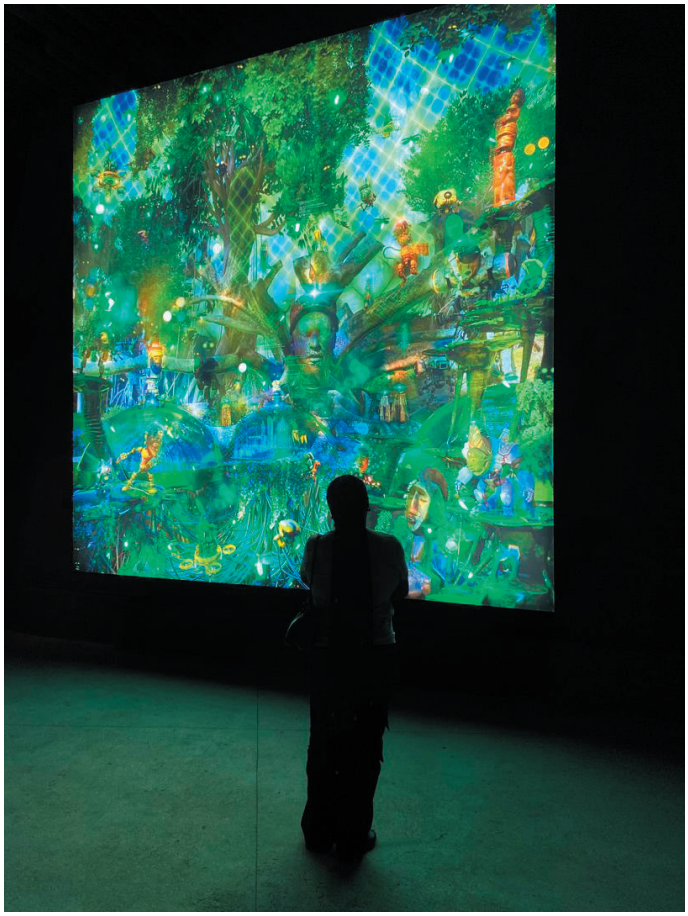
around the country. These collections boast about the rich culture of the country, primarily for education purposes, and form largely what is housed in National Museum Lagos. The museum is a city museum not only because it holds one of the largest collections of the NCMM, but because it serves a diverse public and is located in the art hub of Nigeria, if not West Africa, situated in the former capital of Nigeria, Lagos. Recent practices in the museum tell us that the museum is aware that they are still encouraging the dominant colonial narrative and is now looking for ways to decolonise its very existence. One effort in this direction is the recently opened exhibition *Beyond the Classical: Unveiling the Unsung* where the museum and the Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique au Nigeria (IFRA) collaborated to show parts of the collection normally in storage that had either not been exhibited before, or not for a long time. It featured objects that were not the usual classical items such as Benin Bronzes, Nok Terracota, Igbo Ukwu, etc. These classical objects are often the focus of the museum, along with narratives and styles of representation reminiscent of colonial times. A positive step towards decolonisation in the museum involved featuring works of the great female potter Ladi Kwali, alongside others that probably hadn't been seen before. It also encouraged gender balance, another feature of inclusiveness. The exhibition was held in Lagos, which is the cultural hub of Nigeria and the largest city in Nigeria.

*Beyond The Classical: Unveiling The Unsung*

Colonial narratives often overshadow the rich and diverse histories of local cultures, presenting a skewed version of the past that emphasises the perspectives of the colonisers. This can lead to a misunderstanding of cultural heritage, perpetuating stereotypes and diminishing the value of Indigenous contributions. As a result, visitors may leave with a limited understanding of the region's true history and cultural diversity, underscoring the urgent need for museums to decolonise their narratives and embrace a more balanced and respectful approach.

Language is a major barrier to decolonisation efforts in museums. A museum that creates an exhibition without utilising the language of the people whose culture and heritage is being conveyed, has automatically alienated the exhibition from those very people. Inclusivity is a strong aspect to be considered during decolonisation. Exclusion of Indigenous language in museum programming undermines the museum's ability to connect with local communities. To address this, museums

should incorporate Indigenous languages into their programs, ensuring greater accuracy, inclusivity and accessibility. This approach not only respects cultural heritage but also fosters a deeper connection between the museum and the people whose history it represents. The JK Randle Museum understands this and since opening its doors to the public in 2024, not only does it celebrate Yoruba history, art, language and influence, it does so with respect for the local community for which it was created. Signage and object labels are written both in English and Yoruba. The resulting effect is an increase in public interest. The JK Randle Museum, in celebrating Yoruba culture and history, serves as a platform for community and creative expression for the people and city of Lagos.



*An immersive screen showing a glimpse into the future of the Yoruba world view.* Credit: Louisa Onuoha

Involving marginalised communities in decision-making processes can be very helpful in decolonisation. When museums collaborate with local communities, they can accurately reflect the stories and perspectives of these groups. The purpose of this approach is not only to promote inclusivity, but also to restore trust and strengthen relationships between museums and their audiences. Inclusive narratives in museums are crucial for representing the diverse experiences and histories of all communities, ensuring that every voice is heard and respected. Culture can be better understood by incorporating multiple perspectives that challenge dominant colonial narratives thereby dismantling the lingering effects of colonialism in cultural institutions. Besides enriching the visitor's experience, this method also fosters a sense of belonging and shared history among diverse audiences. This method has not been applied to any degree in exhibitions at the National Museums. However, there has been some collaboration with local communities in other museum educational activities such as outreach programmes where museum educators engage host communities on what they would like to learn before embarking on such programs. Communities of origin must be respected as authorities on their own cultures and material heritage.

Oftentimes, museum curators and educators on the continent try to make choices of what to exhibit depending solely on their professional knowledge. However, volunteers and other members of the community can be equally valuable in this process. They often have a unique perspective and can provide invaluable insight into the local context. Simon (2016: 99) refers to this as 'Community First Programme Design' and defines it as creating projects that speak to the people you wish to engage. In this model, programmes are not designed first before seeking out audiences for them. Instead, communities are first identified, and programmes are co-created with community representatives. This way, exhibition projects become tailored and relevant to the assets, needs and values of various communities involved. If Nigerian museums move towards a dialogue-and-engagement model to present their objects and educational programs, they may become more decolonised in their day-to-day running.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to submit a broad definition of decolonisation which reflects Indigenous Peoples ultimately achieving sovereignty, the right and ability to practice self-determination in all areas of life, through cultural, psychological and economic freedoms. Decolonisation involves actively deconstructing and challenging colonialism and its systems that do not account for the lives of Indigenous Peoples.

It is important to note that there are several challenges involved in implementing decolonisation in museums. For instance, a significant obstacle to the development of comprehensive programmes is the lack of funding and skilled personnel fluent in Indigenous languages. It may also be difficult to integrate these languages into existing exhibitions and educational materials due to institutional resistance to change.

Institutional bureaucracies in cultural institutions may stem from their supposed political neutrality which could be found within government institutions in Nigeria. Most city museums are government-funded and are therefore tied to the apron strings of their funders. This does not encourage decolonisation.

Cultural heritage preservation, addressing historical narratives, and ensuring inclusivity are some of the challenges involved in decolonisation of city museums in Nigeria. It is critical to engage communities, to re-evaluate colonial legacies, and create spaces that reflect diversity. Repatriation, restitution and centring Indigenous voices, though not an end, are all tied to decolonisation

City museums must actively engage with local communities, incorporate Indigenous knowledge, and adopt inclusive curatorial practices. By doing so, they can serve as platforms for dialogue, reconciliation, and the celebration of Nigeria's rich cultural diversity.

Finally, decolonising city museums in Nigeria and assuming a wholly African character, will further promote cultural pride and help to understand the nation's complex history. By reclaiming narratives and showcasing Indigenous contributions, these museums can serve as vital tools for education, reconciliation, and the celebration of Nigeria's rich heritage.

**References**

Ariese, C E and Wrowblewska, M (2022). *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums. A Guide with Global Examples.* Amsterdam University Press.

Eze-Uzoamaka (2001). *Museums, Archaeologists and Indigenous People: Archaeologists and the Public in Nigeria.* British Archaeological Reports International Series 904. Oxford, UK: Archaeopress.

Jasser, M., Suárez, C.C., Grimaldo-Rodríguez, C. (2024). "Decolonization." In: Warf, B. (eds) *The Encyclopedia of Human Geography*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25900-5_192-1.

Nwaubani, A.T. (2017). Contributor to BBC's Letters from Africa Series. www.bbc.com

Okpoko Ikechukwu. A. (1997). *West African Journal of Archaeology* Vol 27, Issue 2, pp. 118-131.

Simon, Nina (2016). *The Art of Relevance.* Santa Cruz, California: Museum 2.0.

Thurston, Isabella. 8/2/2022 The Indigenous Foundation https://www.theindigenousfoundation.org/articles/decolonization-in-everyday-life

**Louisa Onuoha (PhD)** is Assistant Director, Museum Educational Services and Training, National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria. She combines research and museum practice in her role as a museum educator/curator. Her interests include intangible heritage preservation, decolonisation and the transatlantic slave trade. She is a fellow of the Smithsonian Institution, Columbia University and Oxford University.


*Sold Down the River by Tony Forbes* © Bristol Culture and Creative Industries (C&CI)

Since 2007 our Fine Art curators have been trying to diversify the collection to include more works from historically excluded or ethnically marginalised groups.

# Recent Developments on Decolonial Work in Bristol City Museums

by Lisa Graves

Bristol Culture and Creative Industries (C&CI) is a local authority run organisation that consists of three museum sites, two historic houses and one Roman villa. It includes Bristol Archives (where our British Empire and Commonwealth Collection is based) and a regional museum development team. In addition, it is also responsible for the city's Film Office, Festivals and Events and Arts Development Team. With such a wide-ranging remit it is difficult for C&CI to have a one-size fits all approach to decolonial work so I will focus on the museum teams where I am based.

To begin I should try and define that word 'decolonisation' – it's difficult, changeable and many are moving away from its sometimes performative use. I look on it to mean engaging wider histories of Empire and enslavement, being more representative and inclusive of stories of people, and communities of colour, challenging the founding ideas of European museums and their overtly racist narratives, and decentring (where possible!) Eurocentric ideas. I'll look at some of our work over the last couple of decades, the turning point of 2020, work I've been involved in, and where we are at now.

**Activism and Bristol**

Bristol is proud of its history of protest and nonconformity, but there is also ongoing race-based inequality in the city. As ever, led by communities of colour demanding change and recognition, we in the Museums Service have for a long time engaged with local activist work, with greater and lesser degrees of success, to move our narratives forward. In 1996 Bristol's harbourside based 'Festival of the Sea', celebrated John Cabot's voyage to North America but made no mention of Bristol's traffic in enslaved Africans. A painting we commissioned by Tony Forbes, *Sold Down the River* (1999), summed up feelings in the Black community about such historical erasure and absence, and inequality.

In the wake of these external events there had previously been small displays and discussions in our museums focusing on these narratives, but in 1999, in response to the backlash to the omissions of the 'Festival of the Sea', we opened a temporary exhibition called *A Respectable Trade?* It was created with our largest community consultation project and was extremely well-received across the city. Sue Giles, the curator of the exhibition, wrote an article in 2001 looking at this work[1]. The exhibition eventually evolved to become a permanent space in our newly opened MShed museum in 2011.

**Representation and Engagement**

Activist pressures, internal moves for change and a UK museum sector shift towards decolonial work as a priority meant that a growing number of staff were, by 2016, knocking on the door of senior management asking to address the need for change more fully. During this time staff across the service worked on projects that could be seen to be addressing the legacy of colonialism in more of an overt way than previously. Our events programme has supported Black History and Black interest topics with a wide range of offers, and there have been small-scale gallery interventions, but in 2017-2019 there were two temporary exhibitions at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. One, *Empire through the Lens*, drawing on material from our British Empire and Commonwealth collection (BECC), inviting people to select and interpret an image or film through a decolonial lens, and the other, one I curated focusing more on more positive narratives across the African continent, *Fabric Africa: Stories told through textiles*. Though difficult subjects such as Maasai cultural appropriation and the Herero genocide were not sidestepped.

Since 2007 our Fine Art curators have been trying to diversify the collection to include more works from historically excluded or ethnically marginalised groups. In 2019 we collected *Minesis: African Soldier* by John Akomfrah and Yinka Shonibare's *End of Empire,* as well as a rare example of a 1827 portrait of an unrecorded Black sitter by Henry Hoppner. In 2016, members of our Participation team co-produced, with Bristol Somali Forum, *Somalis in Bristol: Where are we from and who are we now?* highlighting the different voices in the local Somali community. A Black History Steering Group, made up of staff and representatives of members of the Black creative scene, was set up in 2017. It initially looked to create digital content on Black stories, commissioned from local Black historians and other community members, but in later years broadened out into becoming a sounding board for content across the service relating to Black history.

In 2019, we undertook a partnership project with a local university looking to create practical opportunities for its students. 'Uncomfortable Truths' aimed to engage a group of young people of colour from a range of academic and creative backgrounds to create a series of podcasts. These reflected difficult narratives around material on display in the galleries. From a Sumatran rhino to a mummified Egyptian woman, new perspectives were able to be heard via QR codes next to the cases and on-line.

**Repatriation**

In order to try and insert change into the main galleries at the Museum and Art Gallery at a lower resource cost, in 2018 I added just a few more objects to one case in our *Curiosity* gallery. The

[1]Giles, S. (2001). The Great Circuit: Making the Connection between Bristol's Slaving History and the African-Caribbean Community. *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, *13*, 15–21. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40793663

gallery was designed as a very temporary, experimental way of unpacking multivocality around World Cultures and Archaeology collections but has now been up for almost 15 years. The case that originally just held a single Benin bronze head was supplemented with objects designed to present colonial stories such as, conversion, resistance, oppression, and legacy, but obviously in a very small, probably very easy to overlook space.

Despite us being aware of the decades old repatriation claims from Nigeria for the Benin Bronzes, it wasn't until after a member of the 'Uncomfortable Truths' cohort contacted the Benin Royal Palace that we received our first direct repatriation claim. During filming for a local current affairs programme, the student showed a video request from a royal prince to our then C&CI Director, on camera. I was then directed to identify, through back curatorial channels, where other museums were at in their thinking on returns of this material, and what if any approaches they had had in recent times. Again, external pressure focused minds and resources.

As a museum service we already had quite a good track record in repatriations. We returned ancestral remains to Australia and New Zealand in 2006 and 2007 and to California in 2019, and I was in the process of negotiating the return to Canada of a hunter's caribou hide, but it's hard now to remember that in 2019 the repatriation claim for the Benin Bronzes had not yet hit mainstream consciousness and was still something that was proving hard to navigate behind the scenes. Then June 2020 happened: The toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol city centre during a Black Lives Matter (BLM) march protesting the murder of George Floyd in the US. Suddenly, and partly to do with being in the midst of a global pandemic, a new urgency to the decolonisation debate ramped up.

**Difficulties of Decolonisation**

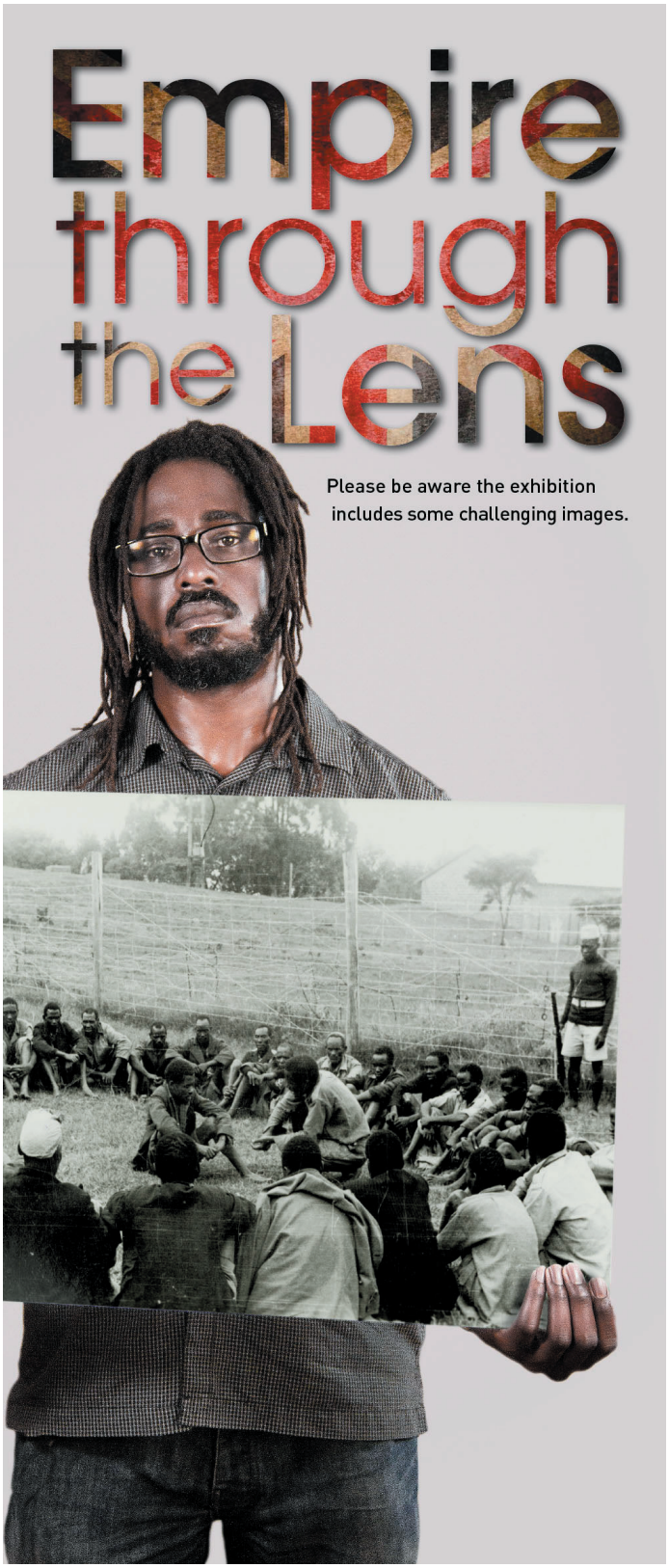
Just before this ground-shifting event, in November 2019, we had had our first cross-team staff workshop delivered by Bristol-based Black South West Network. It was supposed to help us work out what decolonisation could look like for us – with a series of presentations, provocations and break out groups, focusing on labelling in our permanent galleries. Progress then stalled as the pandemic hit early the following year. However, as for many people, this meant an opportunity arose to be able to deliver three more sessions remotely across the summer of 2020 -- meaning all staff, including Front of House could attend, as the majority of us were stuck at home. These sessions had wins and losses in terms of progressing our service focus. They showed fault lines between teams, and the variability across the staff on their previous experience in, and knowledge of, this area. There was a difference in willingness to engage in the style of delivery of the workshops and ultimately a lack of coherent way to progress. Being part of the City Council also bound us to have to follow its lead on things such as statements of support for BLM, which added to some frustrations.

Despite this our internal Decolonisation Working Group was set up in the Autumn of 2020 and web pages created to try and consolidate our work and position. Repatriation and collections information was delivered, blogs from members of the Working Group on aspects of related projects and FAQ's. One area that quickly became a priority was a sub-group focusing on terminology and language. Initially it was focused on issues directly related to decolonisation and race in our gallery labelling but has since broadened to encompass all outdated, inaccurate and offensive wording. This is an example of one of the first new text panels we created, addressing the need to speak about the money behind the museum building. It was a good/bad example of tortuous design by committee (so many rewrites!), and again shone a light on the need for a coherent voice and direction in what we want (and need) to communicate to, and with, our audiences.

**The Colston Statue and its Legacies**

Audiences, publics, and communities were at the heart of the temporary display based around the toppled Colston statue that we opened in June 2021, and closed in January 2022. Its title, *The Colston Statue: what next?*, was a very genuine question as to what, in particular, Bristol people wanted to see done with it. We partnered with the History Commission, a group that had been set up in September 2020 by the City Mayor, and as Project Manager for the display

I found the tension between museum staff beliefs and wider Council and political sensitivities was sometimes difficult to navigate. There was however an overwhelming response to the on-line survey, as well as verbal visitor comments and paper surveys and workshops with community groups. The majority were happy it had come down and wanted to see the statue retained by a museum. The History Commission authored a report on the findings based on the survey data and offered recommendations for next steps.




Poster for *Empire through the Lens exhibition* © Bristol Culture and Creative Industries (C&CI)

Following the massive amount of media and public interest in the fate of the statue, a supporter of the museum service donated a generous amount of money for us to commission an artwork commemorating the event. Local artist, Jazz Thompson, was selected and her mural *A Movement not a Moment* went on display in our Front Hall in June 2021, and is still there today partly due its popularity with the public. There have been negative comments from those on the right of the so-called 'culture wars' and it's at such times that a solid institutional commitment to decolonial work, plus coherent communication, is most needed.

However, just at the moment when our decolonisation journeys were gathering pace, economic realities of recent years hit our service. In January 2022, huge budget cuts were announced in Bristol City Council and an extremely difficult restructure of our museums and archives, that went on for almost two years, began. Everything paused or stopped, though some projects that were already underway continued. 'More Uncomfortable Truths', a follow up to the original project, came to its conclusion in June 2022. As a member of

staff and a participant in the project, there were many plus points to working with a group of young people of colour from the University of Bristol, to create a display discussing decolonial issues. However, it also uncovered certain fault lines within our readiness to act upon our decolonial principles. A painting that was discussed and was initially taken down at the request of the group was rehung a few days later. Internal processes, staff values and political influence had been challenged, and we were left with a difficult relationship with the participants and the project not delivering on its aims and objectives.

One of the other casualties of this period of disruption was our relationship with local Black communities. So when we were instructed, by the then City Mayor, to put on permanent display the statue of Colston we took the opportunity to try and rebuild some trust. Despite the tight schedule we were given to get the display ready we brought together an Advisory Group who, through working with external facilitators, supported, endorsed and contributed to its feel and content. Opening in early 2024 the statue now sits in a display in MShed about protest against racial injustice. Building on this we have engaged a group of 'Rebel Curators' drawn from people of African heritage in Bristol to create an intervention in our current display on the *Transatlantic Slave Trade* to encapsulate their feelings about its deficiencies and move it towards and African-centric exploration of the *Transatlantic Trafficking of Enslaved Africans* – another stepping stone in a broader and deeper look at legacies of enslavement and Black History across our service.

**Now and Next**

Other decolonial focused work such as 'Extinction Silences', a project linking the climate emergency and the impact of colonialism through artist interventions in the Natural History galleries, is still ongoing. A Decolonising Arts Institute project 20/20, giving us an artist in residence, Jessica Ashman, to create work based upon investigations into our colonial collections, has just completed. The repatriation of the Benin head is still in the pipeline but has been difficult to navigate through again lack of resources and political nervousness. More encouragingly, by working with national projects on African restitution and other global initiatives such as GRASAC in Canada, Digital Pasifik in New Zealand and AIATSIS in Australia, we are moving forward in those areas. Our next repatriation was a collection of weapons and ceremonial objects taken from the Larrakia people and returned to Australia in September 2025.[2]

So, finally, now the dust has settled on the restructure, and there is a new senior leadership team and director in place, we are starting to work out our priorities based on significantly reduced staff capacity and disappearing budgets. We need to move away from a project based approach to decolonial work and move towards embedding strands across everything we do. Our Decolonisation Working Group restarted in September, refocusing on language and labelling and re-establishing different groups of Critical Friends and varying methods of co-production. Further training in anti-racism and understanding how that plays out in our work in public and private spaces has begun which will hopefully result in a service that can better reflect Bristol's diversity in all aspects of our work. As a City museum service we have been the focus of praise from other cities across the UK and the world, and criticism from those closer to home for stumbles and missteps, but with transparency and honesty, to however we want to describe this work. I hope we can keep challenging ourselves to do better.

**Lisa Graves,** Senior Curator, World Cultures worked with World Cultures collections in Newcastle, Birmingham and Manchester before coming to Bristol Museum and Art Gallery 18 years ago. She worked on regional ethnographic surveys, repatriations, exhibitions and decolonial projects and was a long standing member of the Museum Ethnographers Group committee.

[2]https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/sep/01/bristol-returns-cultural-artefacts-larrakia-australia

*The grave of Carl Constantin von Schnitter with new information panels.* Credit: Suy Lan Hopmann

As an archive – and a colonial one at that – the Museum Nikolaikirche in Berlin offers a unique opportunity to explore the links between history, power and violence.

# Can the Colonial Archive be Challenged? Crypts, Graves, Funerary Monuments in the Nikolaikirche in Berlin

by Suy Lan Hopmann

**The Value in Dispute of Public Commemorations**

The question I bring with me today is: How do we deal with the public commemoration of people whose life's work is considered problematic or even unacceptable by parts of society?

The starting point is the public debates about monuments, street names and other forms of public tribute that have intensified in recent years. In particular, the global Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, triggered by the murder of George Floyd in the United States, have given a new dynamic to the discussion of how to deal with charged symbols and places of remembrance. As a curator, I have repeatedly been involved in such debates, be it at the Museum am Rothenbaum in Hamburg[1] or currently at the Museum Nikolaikirche in Berlin. As a facilitator for the decolonisation of

[1] e.g. https://markk-hamburg.de/veranstaltungen/der-riss-zwischen-den-loewenfuessen/, last access: 29 December 2024.

Hamburg, I was particularly involved in the question of what to do with the world's largest Bismarck monument in the St. Pauli district of Hamburg[2].

In my various roles, I have observed that institutional responses are often erratic and uncoordinated - and often only when there is public criticism. However, the measures that are then taken rarely result in lasting - or permanent - changes to the property.

**Colonial Personal Tributes in the Museum Nikolaikirche in Berlin**

I would like to illustrate my thoughts with a current example. The Nikolaikirche is located in the historical centre of Berlin and marks the beginning of the city's history with its construction around 1230. Today it is one of the eight sites of the Berlin City Museum Foundation. The symbolic and public value of the Nikolaikirche is reflected in its integration into central narratives of the city's history. Prominent examples of this are the Berlin Jubilee celebrations in 1937 and 1987. The Nikolaikirche was also the venue for the first meeting of the Berlin City Council in 1809 and, two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, for the new Berlin House of Representatives in 1991.

The Nikolaikirche is the oldest church in the city and was not only a central place of religious and social life. For centuries it was also the burial place of the city's elite. This function makes the church an archive of the material and non-material remains of Berlin's upper class. Over the centuries, numerous tombs have been laid out here, illustrating the life and work of prominent personalities. The emphasis on power, wealth and social status in the design of the more than 200 crypts, tombs and gravestones is particularly striking.

The biographies of those honoured in the Nikolaikirche illustrate the social, political and cultural dynamics of their time and also reflect Berlin's colonial entanglements. However, these aspects have only been partially researched. One example is the grave of Carl Constantin von Schnitter (1657-1721), whose work as an engineer and fortress commander in the Brandenburg-Prussian colony of Groß Friedrichsburg not only points to the connections between Berlin's history and the European slave trade, but also illustrates that the Nikolaikirche archive can also be seen as a colonial archive.

But how should such archives be dealt with today and in the future? What approaches can be taken to critically question large-scale tributes to people like Carl Constantin von Schnitter in publicly accessible spaces? Is it possible to question, change or reinterpret monuments through alternative narratives?

**Carl Constantin von Schnitter and the Colonial Engagement of the Nikolaikirche**

Between 1683 and 1685, Carl Constantin von Schnitter was an important figure in the Brandenburg-African Company (BAC) as a civil engineer and provisional commander. This company traded mainly in enslaved Africans. It is estimated that at least 22,750 people were abducted by the BAC or its successor organisation, the Brandenburg-African-American Company (BAAC), and sold mostly in the Caribbean. The company's main base was at Groß Friedrichsburg in present-day Ghana, where employees, locals and enslaved people built the stone fort. Other fortified bases were later built at Akwidaa, Takoradi, and Taccrama.[3]

This part of Carl Constantin von Schnitter's life was barely mentioned in the Museum Nikolaikirche until 2022. Despite the prominent location and the size of the grave inscription, the information board only mentioned his name and the date of his death. The audio guide mentions his activities as a fortress commander on the west coast of Africa, but there is no further information about the importance of Groß Friedrichburg for the Brandenburg slave trade. The material tribute to

[2]https://www.hamburg.de/politik-und-verwaltung/behoerden/behoerde-fuer-kultur-und-medien/themen/koloniales-erbe/entwicklung-hamburger-bismarck-denkmal-110434, last accessed 29 December 2024.

[3]From the internal research dossier 'Carl Constantin von Schnitter and Berlin's colonial networks in the 17th and early 18th centuries' by Annika Bärwald. It was produced as part of a research project commissioned by the Stadtmuseum Berlin in cooperation with *Dekoloniale Memory Culture in the City*.

his person in the Nikolaikirche thus stood in stark contrast to the lack of contextualisation of Carl Constantin von Schnitter's historical involvement.

**Public Criticism**

This lack of contextualisation was publicly criticised in May 2021 by civil society groups, in particular Berlin Postkolonial. For example, Berlin's Tagesspiegel wrote: "The Berlin Postcolonial Association demands a different approach to this history. This is not yet school material," says Kopp. There is an online knowledge quiz for pupils that asks what Carl Constantin von Schnitter did for a living. Possible answers: Commander, musician, comedian. For Kopp, this is a typical example of "white ignorance of the suffering and injustice caused during the colonial era".[4]

**Chronology of the Reinterpretation I: Additional Information Plaques (2022)**

Like most institutions, the Stadtmuseum Berlin was caught off guard by public criticism. It lacked appropriate structures, resources and a solid idea of how to deal with the situation systematically. After all, Carl Constantin von Schnitter's grave was only one of many in the church. As a result, the museum's response was typical for many institutions confronted with the troubled history of their buildings, busts and monuments. An additional plaque was erected to provide the missing information.

However, the text for the additional plaque was not written by the staff of the city museum alone, but as part of the joint project *Dekoloniale Memory Culture in the City*[5], in order to involve external experts and civil society actors. The *Dekoloniale Memory Culture in the City* project was launched in 2020 by a number of non-profit actors, including Berlin Postkolonial e.V., Berliner Entwicklungspolitischer Ratschlag (BER) e.V., Each One Teach One (EOTO) e.V., Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland (ISD) e.V. and the Berlin Senate Department for Culture and Europe. The Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin is a partner in the project. The overall aim of the work is to facilitate the long-awaited change of perspective in the culture of remembrance of German colonial history: The focus should be on the victims and opponents of colonial racism and exploitation – and no longer on the colonial actors.

Since 2022, the plaque in front of Carl Constantin von Schnitter's grave has complemented the existing information material. It took more than a year to draw attention to the fact that his life was colonially intertwined, and thus to clarify the problematic nature of the grave. However, the measure is far from 'visually just'. The sign can do virtually nothing to counter the size and visual power of the tomb. Nevertheless, the debate about controversial tributes usually ends with the installation of an additional sign.

**Chronology of the Reinterpretation II: Scientific Research (2024)**

But not in this case. The reason for this is that the city museum had committed itself to several years of cooperation in the joint project *Dekoloniale*. This illustrates the need for long-term cooperation with experts and civil society actors who can contribute alternative perspectives on sites of memory culture.

The collaboration planned to open a joint exhibition in November 2024. And so, in 2023, two years after the public criticism and one year after the installation of the new information plaque, a more comprehensive examination of Schnitter's role and the colonial context of his work began. At the beginning of 2024, several academic research commissions were awarded. The aim of these commissions was, firstly, to comprehensively document the historical significance of the fortress of Groß Friedrichsburg and the role of Carl Constantin von Schnitter.[6] Secondly, an initial inventory was

[4]https://leute.tagesspiegel.de/mitte/intro/2021/05/26/172706/, last access: 29 December 2024. The article talks about Christian Kopp, historian, curator and activist, as well as board member of Berlin Postkolonial. He also represents the association as head of the 'History[s]' and '[Re]Presentations' sections in the joint project *Dekoloniale Memory Culture in the City*.

[5]https://www.dekoloniale.de/en, last access: 29 December 2024.

[6]Annika Bärwald. "Carl Constantin von Schnitter und koloniale Netzwerke Berlins im 17. und frühen 18. Jahrhundert"; unpublished research dossier, Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin and *Dekoloniale* 2024.


View of the exhibition *Dekoloniale – What remains?* in the Museum Nikolaikirche. Credit: Rosa Merk, © Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin

to be made of all the people mentioned by name in the Museum Nikolaikirche and their possible colonial connections.[7]

**Missing Perspectives and Stories of Resistance: The Life of Jan Kwaw**

In terms of the change of perspective, it was of central importance to deal with the missing perspectives and stories of resistance and to do basic research on biographies that have so far been little known. The biography of Jan Kwaw (c. 1670-unknown), a contemporary of Carl Constantin von Schnitter, played a special role in this and was therefore given its own research assignment.[8]

Jan Kwaw was an influential Ahanta trader and army leader who acted as a powerful African trading partner in the colonial trade between Brandenburg-Prussia and the West African interior in present-day Ghana. By supplying maize to the Brandenburg-Prussian fortress of Groß Friedrichsburg, Kwaw became wealthy and extended his political influence as far as Kumasi.

In the late 19th century, Kwaw was portrayed by colonialists as a loyal supporter of Brandenburg-Prussia. In reality, it appears that the colonial power was dependent on him and his political and military influence. Kwaw prevented Dutch and British attacks on Groß Friedrichsburg on several occasions. By the early 18th century, his influence may have been so great that he was able to force the colony's last governor, Nicolas de Bois, to return to Europe in 1716, and thus to take

[7]Anne Haeming. "Koloniale Bezüge der Familien und Einzelpersonen mit Grabstätten | Würdigungen in der Nikolaikirche"; unpublished research dossier, Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin and *Dekoloniale* 2024.
[8]Andrea Weindl. "Antikoloniale Netzwerke und Ambivalenzen: Leben und Rezeption von Kɔne Kpole alias Jan Conny"; unpublished research dossier, Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin and *Dekoloniale* 2024.

control of the fortress himself. When Prussia later sold the colony to the Netherlands, Kwaw refused to recognise the deal. It was not until 1724 that the Dutch succeeded in taking Groß Friedrichsburg. What happened to him later is unknown. However, it is believed that the Junkanoo (John Canoe) festival in the Caribbean goes back to his name and story, and – in contrast to his characterization as a loyal follower of Prussia at the beginning of the 20th century – has an anti-colonial interpretation.

Jan Kwaw's life and reception thus offer multi-layered alternative perspectives on colonial power structures. His role as an influential actor who significantly shaped relations between African communities and European colonial powers illustrates the importance of resistant narratives. Kwaw's story also shows how African actors used diplomatic and military strategies to defend their own interests and counter colonial expansionism.

Despite their importance, biographies such as Jan Kwaw's have received little attention in the German culture of remembrance. Their inclusion in museum presentations offers the opportunity to critically question existing narratives and to understand history more comprehensively.

**Chronology of the Handling III: Cooperative Exhibition *Dekoloniale – What Remains?!* (2024)**
The decentralised cooperative exhibition *Dekoloniale – What remains?* was opened as a further outcome of the examination of the colonial archive of the Museum Nikolaikirche.[9] The exhibition highlights Berlin's colonial entanglements at three exemplary locations in the district of Mitte – and at the same time offers resistant perspectives. In addition to the museum as a burial site for colonial actors, the exhibition focuses on the "(post-)colonial area monument" in the African Quarter and the "Asian-Pacific Streets"[10] in the Wedding district, as well as the historical site of the Berlin Africa Conference of 1884/85 at Wilhelmstraße 92.

In the Museum Nikolaikirche, for example, eight life stories will be presented on the themes of power, trade, enslavement and resistance. Four of the people presented – including Carl Constantin von Schnitter – are directly linked to the Nikolaikirche and the Stadtmuseum as colonial actors, while they are juxtaposed with four black resistance figures, Anton Wilhelm Amo, Nana Yaa Asantewaa, Jan Kwaw, and Queen Mary Thomas, who are role models elsewhere in the world but have not (yet) been honoured in Berlin.

The public exhibition thus takes a further step in dealing with the controversial recognition of individuals. It makes the knowledge produced so far publicly accessible and invites the public to take a critical look at colonial history and to reflect on future ways of dealing with colonial legacies. In addition to dealing with tributes in public spaces, this also includes museum collections. Many objects from the colonial era also convey colonial racist attitudes. In contrast, there is little evidence of alternative perspectives or resistance. For this reason, the exhibition at the Nikolaikirche Museum includes very few objects. However, the issues surrounding this decision are made transparent and can be discussed by visitors and experts alike.

**The Conclusion: What Remains?**
As an archive – and a colonial one at that – the Museum Nikolaikirche in Berlin offers a unique opportunity to explore the links between history, power and violence. The grave of Carl Constantin von Schnitter is just one of many examples that illustrate the entanglement of Berlin's history with colonial networks. The critical examination of the graves and monuments in the Nikolaikirche illustrates the fundamental challenges of dealing with colonial archives. It requires in-depth research into the biographies and networks represented in the archives. It also raises the question of how these findings can be presented in a way that stimulates public debate and incorporates the perspectives of those affected by colonial violence.

[9]https://www.stadtmuseum.de/en/exhibition/dekoloniale-what-remains, last access 11 January 2025.
[10]Ibid.


*What is the stadtmuseum of the future? Are we decolonizing Berlin?* Credit: Rosa Merk, © Stiftung Stadtmuseum Nikolaikirche

The contextualisation of graves such as that of Carl Constantin von Schnitter shows how museum practice can encourage the examination of colonial structures and create long-term perspectives. It is crucial that the process aims to actively negotiate the future of these tributes, rather than stopping at the generation and presentation of knowledge.

In this context, however, one should not forget the increasing polarisation in the debate on how to deal with controversial commemorations in public space. The intensity of the discussions on memorials or tributes shows that fundamentally different understandings of the culture of remembrance are now coming into conflict. History is multi-perspective and transnational; memory is always negotiated in the context of current issues and future expectations. This dynamic requires active and ongoing reflection on the function and meaning of places of remembrance.

Can museums become a radically democratic space for this reflection and negotiation, challenging their own and other controversial archives? My fear is that there is still a very, very long way to go.

**Suy Lan Hopmann** is a curator at the Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin. She works on colonialism and coloniality, racism and migration, gender and queer issues. She is a board member of ICOM Germany, a member of ICOM's international Working Group Decolonisation and a trustee of filia. die frauenstiftung.

What do diversity, inclusion, and equality mean for the organization? What is the institution's position and identity? And where do we ultimately want to go?

*Stedelijk Museum Kampen*. Credit: Eric de Vries

# Traces of Slavery in Kampen Decolonisation and a Medium-Sized City Museum in the Netherlands

by Nynke van der Wal

**Introduction**

From July 1 to September 17, 2023, the exhibition *Traces of slavery in Kampen* was on display at the Stedelijk Museum Kampen. For the first time, a museum in Kampen addressed this topic. For decades, it was believed that the history of slavery in the Netherlands mainly belonged to the Dutch provinces of Holland and Zeeland. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness that traces of slavery are present throughout the entire country, leading to more research and publications on the subject. The Keti Koti Remembrance Year from July 1, 2023 – July 1, 2024, celebrated that slavery was abolished 150 years ago in the former Dutch colonies and also played a role in this awareness.

This was also true for Kampen, a municipality in the province of Overijssel, with over 56,000 residents and Kampen as its main city, a historic Hanseatic town on the IJssel River. The museum organised an exhibition on this subject with the aim of raising awareness among the city's residents and visitors. It also sought to show how the history of slavery continues to impact the present, particularly through institutional racism.

**Dientje**

The exhibition *Traces of slavery in Kampen* was developed in close collaboration with the Overijssel Academy, a research institute that studies and publishes on the history of Overijssel. Its research publication *Overijssel & slavery* was the primary source for the exhibition's content.[1] Dr. Aspha Bijnaar, a sociologist and director of 'Museums See Colour', was invited as a guest curator.[2] She worked with museum curator Yvonne Oordijk to create the exhibition.

One of the topics in the exhibition was the story of Dientje. When the Kamper couple Frederik Carel Marius and Anna Francisca Louisa de Swart returned from the colonies in South America at the beginning of the 19th century, they brought a servant with them. An archival document from 1821 refers to "the black girl, formerly named Dientje, now called Everdina Marius, whom they brought as a slave from Demerara in the year 1816.[3] Unfortunately, we know very little about this young woman, which is sadly representative of the experiences of enslaved individuals in Dutch history.

The museum invited Surinamese-Dutch artist Iris Kensmil, known for portraits depicting the strength of Black people from a feminist perspective, to give Dientje a face.[4] The work *What is my name? They call me Dientje* was unveiled by the artist and the mayor of Kampen and acquired by the museum. The podcast *And they called me… Dientje*, developed simultaneously by Jeanine Cronie, won several prizes, among them the Dutch Podcast Award in the Youth category.[5]

**Dutch Context**

Demerara, likely Dientje's birthplace, was one of the Dutch colonies in 'The West'. It was part of Dutch Guyana, alongside regions like Berbice and Suriname. The Dutch West India Company (WIC) played a crucial role in the 17th and 18th-century Transatlantic Triangular trade, in which ships from Western Europe carried goods (such as weapons and textiles) to West Africa in exchange for gold and enslaved people. These individuals were then transported under inhumane conditions to North America or the Caribbean, where they were sold as plantation laborers. Ships then returned to Western Europe with luxury goods such as sugar, coffee, cotton, and tobacco – products from the plantations.

In 'The East', the renowned VOC (Dutch East India Company) held almost a monopoly on the spice trade in the Indonesian archipelago from the 17th century. VOC-controlled colonies included much of modern-day Indonesia, as well as regions in South Africa and Sri Lanka. Exploitation and subjugation of the local population occurred on a large scale.

**Kampen**

Traces of slavery in the provincial city of Kampen can also be seen as part of the legacy of the wealthy families who held shares in plantations in the Transatlantic region, such as the brothers Phinie Salomon and Lion Stibbe, owners of a liquor distillery in Kampen.[6] They, like many other plantation owners (a total of 5,300), received compensation when slavery was abolished in 1863.

[1]M.van der Linde et.al. (red.), *Overijssel & slavernij*, Zwolle 2023.
[2]Musea Bekennen Kleur https://museabekennenkleur.nl/
[3]Stadsarchief Kampen, 00124 Notarieel Archief Kampen, inv.nr. I-569, akte nr. 1030, 15-12-1818.
[4]Artist website: https://iriskensmil.nl/
[5]Dutch Podcastawards 2025 https://podcastawards.nl/nominatie/en-ze-noemden-me-dientje/
[6]See note 1, page 76.


*Traces of slavery in Kampen* exhibition. Credit: Freddy Schinkel

The compensation amount was set at 300 guilders per enslaved person in Suriname and 200 guilders in the Caribbean.

The well-known Kamper mayor Stephen Hendrik de la Sablonière (1825-1888) was the grandson of the namesake governor and plantation owner in Berbice, part of Dutch Guyana, who moved to 'The West' in 1768 with his wife and children. His wife Beate Louise Schultz sent long letters to their relatives back in Kampen and moved back after her husband's death in 1774.[7]

These are just a few examples, but they show that Kampen, too, was connected to plantations in the West during the 18th and 19th centuries. The city's involvement in slavery also extended to the East. For instance, we know the history of Cees de Vogel, who, after working as a Master of Coin in Surabaya, settled in Kampen as a pensioner around 1839. His account books have been preserved, revealing that he paid maintenance money monthly for his enslaved people in the former Dutch East Indies. The museum held an exhibition about this in 2023: *From Surabaya to Kampen: Account Books of a World Traveler.*

Kampen's relationship with the former Dutch East Indies goes beyond this. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Kampen was a true garrison town. The Instruction Battalion, based in the Van

[7]Marco Krijnsen, 'Van Kampen naar de Barrebiesjes' in: M.van der Linde et.al. (red.), *Overijssel & slavernij*, Zwolle 2023, pages 62–67.

Heutsz Barracks, trained boys for the Dutch and colonial armies. The Barracks were named after Lieutenant General and Colonial Administrator Jo van Heutsz (1851-1924), a former student and one of the most controversial military figures. Between 1877 and 1924, officers were trained at the Head Course in Kampen. Part of the Head Course was an Ethnographic Museum, with a collection of Indonesian ethnographic objects. The collection was moved to the Military Academy in Breda when the military training stopped in Kampen. And what about the large-scale cigar industry for which Kampen became known at the end of the 19th century? Around 1870, three out of every four industrial workers were employed in cigar production. The Dutch East India Company became one of the largest tobacco exporters of the 19th and 20th centuries. Slavery was officially abolished in Dutch East India in 1860, nevertheless contract labourers (coolies) were exploited as modern-day slaves and could be subjected to corporal punishment.[8]

**Museums See Colour**

Since the establishment of the collaboration and platform 'Museums See Colour' in March 2020, 45 museums and heritage institutions have participated in the program in three cohorts. Under the inspired leadership of Aspha Bijnaar, participants are encouraged in seven reflection sessions and four action planning sessions to find answers to the questions: What do diversity, inclusion, and equality mean for the organisation? What is the institution's position and identity? And where do we ultimately want to go? The goal is to ensure that diversity, inclusivity, and equality are embedded in the DNA of museums and heritage institutions.

Additionally, all Dutch museums must endorse several codes, including the *Governance Code for Culture*, aimed at oversight and transparency, and the *Code for Diversity & Inclusion*.[9] The goal is to make the cultural sector more inclusive in all parts (program, audience, staff, and partners) and develop an action plan. In five steps, diversity and inclusion can be made concrete:[10]

1. You know where you stand on diversity and inclusion;
2. You integrate diversity and inclusion in your vision;
3. You generate support within your organisation for compliance with the code
4. You draw up an action plan aimed at continuous improvement
5. You monitor and evaluate compliance with the code and hold yourself accountable for it

**Role of a Museum in Society**

Dutch and Belgian museums have endorsed the ICOM definition (2022) and jointly launched its official translation in October 2023.

> A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible, and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally, and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing.[11]

The new ICOM museum definition clarifies what a museum is and how it relates to its environment. The new statement allows more space for the societal role of a museum. This was already present but not formalised, making it easier to link themes like decolonisation and sustainability directly to the museum definition.

[8]E. van Velden, "Overijsselse tabak uit alle windstreken", in: M.van der Linde et.al. (red.), *Overijssel & slavernij*, Zwolle 2023, pages 102-107.
[9]Diversity & Inclusion Code.
[10]link naar specifieke website.
[11]Website: Museum Definition - ICOM Nederland.


*From Surabaya to Kampen: Account Books of a World Traveler* exhibition. Credit: G.J. van Rooij

For a city museum like the Stedelijk Museum Kampen, this is a meaningful development. We see and experience that we play an increasingly significant role in society. Our motto is: “museum in the city, city in the museum”. This means the community must be reflected in the museum. And this applies to everyone in this community. We believe art contributes to a better society, stimulating understanding, connecting people, and offering new perspectives. Creating space for reflection and dialogue ánd connecting contemporary stories with the past is how we do this. By offering art that is both surprising and accessible we want everyone to connect with it and gain new insights, regardless of background or experience.

For us as museum professionals, this also means a shift in attitude: we must be aware of what is happening in various parts of society. We need to look at our collection from different perspectives, which is why we regularly invite people from outside, as we did with *Traces of slavery in Kampen*. And community outreach is something we increasingly invest in: through associations, schools, and social organisations.

We believe that art and culture play an important role in bringing social issues in the past and present day closer to the museum visitor. During the *Secret Garden* exhibition, which focused on caring for your environment, the museum organised a side program with the 8th Work Foundation, which works to reduce inequality of opportunity among Kampen’s residents. During this exhibition, we also started a monthly free visitation day, so Stedelijk Museum Kampen can be accessible to everyone. During the *Drifting: Refugees in Kampen 1914 - 2024* exhibition, portraits were created not only of Belgian refugees in Kampen in 1914 but also of Kampen residents today with refugee


*Lune Diagne*, Credit: Hans Hollestelle

backgrounds. The museum hosted an afternoon with artistic and musical talent from the AZC (asylum seekers' centre) of a nearby municipality.

We believe that experiencing art gives you the chance to discover yourself and the world around you with a fresh perspective. Stedelijk Museum Kampen is on the brink of a major renovation, during which the permanent exhibition will be fully changed for the first time in 16 years. In the choices we make now, you can also see the development the museum has gone through. From a more closed institution to an open space where the familiar stories from Kampen's history are still told, and where there is also room for lesser-known stories and other viewpoints. Where, for example, the wealth of the De la Sablonière family is discussed alongside the plantations they owned in 'The West'; where not only the grandeur of the cigar industry is discussed, but also the poverty of the Kamper cigar rollers and the '*coolies*' who worked as modern-day slaves on plantations in the Dutch East Indies. By adding new layers to the familiar stories, old objects reveal more about the here and now.

This is how we hope to continue broadening visitors' perspectives in the new museum.

**Nynke van der Wal** obtained a master's degree in Art History from the University of Groningen (NL). She worked in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, for nearly a decade. Most of the period as the head of the Documentation Centre. Since April 2020 she has been working as the director of Stedelijk Museum Kampen.


Project is a way to challenge the main Eurocentric narrative about the history of Quebec. In decolonising storytelling (who tells the story and who is portrayed), it enables us, as a society, to understand the plurality of our identities

*MNBAQ* Credit: Aly Ndiaye

# Fugitives!

by Webster

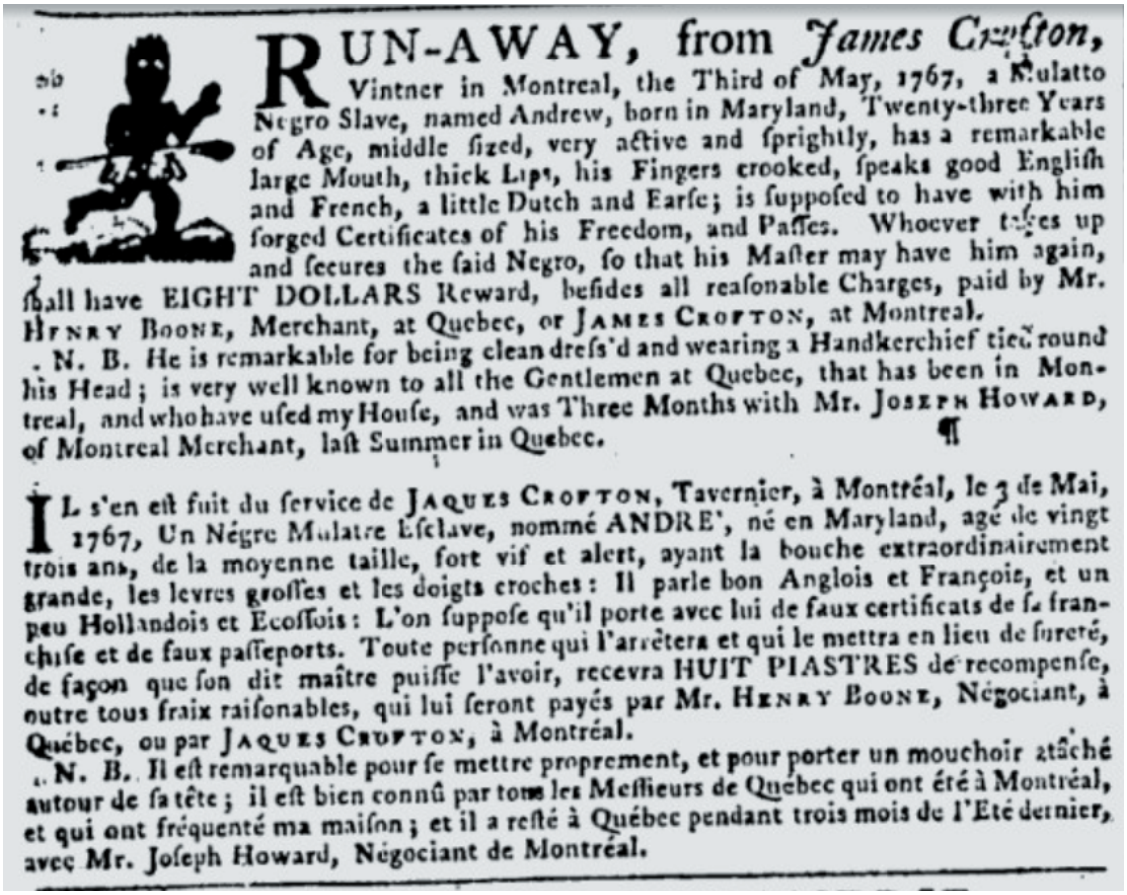
Slavery and the presence of people of African descent in Quebec are little-known subjects among the public, and even today they are generally absent from the dominant historical narrative. In fact, slavery lasted for almost 200 years, from the arrival of Olivier Le Jeune in Quebec City in 1629 until the abolition of slavery in the British Empire came into effect on 1 August 1834.[1]

Thousands of Indigenous people, Africans and people of African descent were reduced to chattel in New France and under the English regime, but they seem to have left only a faint trace in our collective memory. Because of their distance from the usual transatlantic slave trade networks, the colonists of New France had to develop another source of supply of enslaved people, by connecting to the diplomatic and commercial networks of the First Nations of the Americas.[2]

Historian Marcel Trudel has listed 4,185 enslaved persons in Quebec, two thirds of whom, or 2,683 people, were Indigenous. Whatever their nation of origin, many of them were referred to

[1]The boy christened Olivier Le Jeune was the first African to live permanently in Canada and the first person to be enslaved in New France. The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which came into force on 1 August 1834, put an end to slavery in a large part of the British Empire. This was the official date of abolition in Canada, although the practice began to decline in Quebec in the early 19th century.

[2]Marcel Trudel, Deux siècles d'esclavage au Québec, New edition, Les cahiers du Québec Collection histoire 139 (Montreal: Hurtubise HMH, 2004), p. 90. Historian Brett Rushforth estimates that 'more than 10,000 slaves lived in Canada in the 18th century", Paulin Ismard, ed, Les mondes de l'esclavage: une histoire comparée, L'univers historique (Paris: Seuil, 2021). p. 180.



RUN-AWAY, from *James Crofton*,

Vintner in Montreal, the Third of May, 1767, a Mulatto Negro Slave, named Andrew, born in Maryland, Twenty-three Years of Age, middle ſized, very active and ſprightly, has a remarkable large Mouth, thick Lips, his Fingers crooked, ſpeaks good Engliſh and French, a little Dutch and Earſe; is ſuppoſed to have with him forged Certificates of his Freedom, and Paſſes. Whoever takes up and ſecures the ſaid Negro, ſo that his Maſter may have him again, ſhall have EIGHT DOLLARS Reward, beſides all reaſonable Charges, paid by Mr. HENRY BOONE, Merchant, at Quebec, or JAMES CROFTON, at Montreal.

N. B. He is remarkable for being clean dreſs'd and wearing a Handkerchief tied round his Head; is very well known to all the Gentlemen at Quebec, that has been in Montreal, and who have uſed my Houſe, and was Three Months with Mr. JOSEPH HOWARD, of Montreal Merchant, laſt Summer in Quebec.

IL s'en eſt fuit du ſervice de JAQUES CROFTON, Tavernier, à Montréal, le 3 de Mai, 1767, Un Négre Mulatre Eſclave, nommé ANDRE', né en Maryland, agé de vingt trois ans, de la moyenne taille, fort vif et alert, ayant la bouche extraordinairement grande, les levres groſſes et les doigts croches: Il parle bon Anglois et François, et un peu Hollandois et Ecoſſois: L'on ſuppoſe qu'il porte avec lui de faux certificats de ſa franchiſe et de faux paſſeports. Toute perſonne qui l'arrêtera et qui le mettra en lieu de ſureté, de façon que ſon dit maître puiſſe l'avoir, recevra HUIT PIASTRES de recompenſe, outre tous fraix raiſonables, qui lui ſeront payés par Mr. HENRY BOONE, Négociant, à Québec, ou par JAQUES CROFTON, à Montréal.

N. B. Il eſt remarquable pour ſe mettre proprement, et pour porter un mouchoir attaché autour de ſa tête; il eſt bien connû par tous les Meſſieurs de Québec qui ont été à Montréal, et qui ont fréquenté ma maiſon; et il a reſté à Québec pendant trois mois de l'Eté dernier, avec Mr. Joſeph Howard, Négociant de Montréal.

*Andrew* Credit: Gazette de Québec, May 21 1767

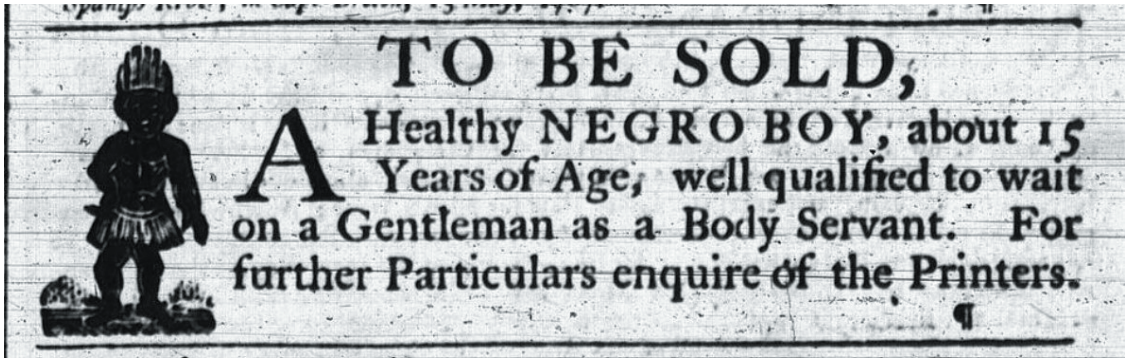
generically as Panis,[3] a term that contributed to their acculturation and enabled enslavers to secure their property. The supply of enslaved Indigenous people was based on conflicts and diplomatic exchanges. Nations against which war had been declared could, once peace had been restored, demand the return of their captives from New France, which would embarrass the colonial government that had approved their sale.[4] Referring to the enslaved Indigenous people as Panis served to blur their origin, ensure the 'ownership' of the enslavers and make it easier for them to uproot their identity.

The supply system for enslaved Africans and people of African descent, the other third listed by Trudel (1,443 people), was different: as the slave ships did not travel to the St Lawrence valley, these people came mainly from the Caribbean and New England.[5] Their presence was initially modest under the French regime but increased with the arrival of the Loyalists after the American War of Independence (New France having passed into British hands at the time).

The small number of enslaved persons in Quebec contributed to historians' denial of the practice. Over time, this denial turned into omission. Even today, many people are unaware that this practice took place in the province and in the rest of the country, not as an anomaly, but as an established and accepted institution. The fact that so few people were enslaved in Quebec inevitably had an impact on resistance strategies. For example, unlike many places in the Americas, armed rebellion was not an option. Apart from day-to-day resistance, the main act of revolt against slavery in Quebec was therefore self-emancipation or, in other words, running away.

**The Quebec and Montreal Gazettes**

It was with the British Conquest that the first newspapers were founded in the new Province of Quebec, notably the *Quebec Gazette* by William Brown and Thomas Gilmore (1764), and the *Montreal Gazette* by Fleury Mesplet (1778).




*To be sold* Credit: Gazette de Québec, June 18, 1767

These two newspapers became effective promotional organs for the sale of goods such as real estate, animals, furniture, imported products, and enslaved persons. They were also used to advertise when they ran away.

The special feature of these wanted advertisements was the very precise way in which the enslavers detailed the men and women who chose freedom, describing in minute detail their clothing, physiognomic features and certain intellectual traits.

In the absence of paintings, engravings or photographs illustrating the people who were enslaved in Quebec, these wanted advertisements are the most detailed documents available about them.[6]

**The *Fugitives!* Exhibition**

Based on these detailed descriptions, the *Fugitives!* exhibition presents 15 Indigenous, Africans, and persons of African descent enslaved in Quebec in the second half of the 18th century: five women, nine men and one child.

For example, when Joe's wanted notice was posted in the *Quebec Gazette* on 24 December 1778, he was described as "born in Africa, about twenty-one years of age, about five feet and a half high, full round fac'd, a little marked with the small-pox, [...] he had on when he went away an old green fur cap, a dark ratteen Coat and double-breasted jacket of the same, with yellow gilt buttons to each, a pair of black Manchester velvet breeches, grey worsted stockings and a pair of Indian Macassins."[7]

The publication of this wanted notice corresponds to Joe's fifth attempt to escape. Bought 10 years earlier by William Brown, the founder of the *Quebec Gazette*, Joe oversaw printing the paper. He ran away a dozen times and was imprisoned at least six times.[8]

Notice of Andrew's escape was published on 14 May 1767. Enslaved to the tavernkeeper Jacques Crofton, he had fled nearly two weeks earlier. Described as a 'mulatto', he was of "middle sized, very active and sprightly, has a remarkable large Mouth, thick Lips, his Fingers crooked." He was "remarkable for being clean dress'd and wearing a Handkerchief tied round his Head". One

[6]At least two paintings exist depicting enslaved persons in Quebec: *A view of the Jesuit college and church* by Richard Short (1760) and *Portrait of a Haitian woman* by François Malepart de Beaucourt (1786), both in the collection of the McCord Stewart Museum. The enslaved person illustrated in Richard Short's work is only a small detail in the lower right-hand corner and his status can only be inferred. The person illustrated in *Portrait of a Haitian woman* is possibly Marie-Thérèse Zémire, a young woman held in slavery by Benoîte Gaëtan, the wife of the French-Canadian painter François Malepart de Beaucourt while they were living in Saint-Domingue in 1786. The couple brought Marie-Thérèse Zémire with them when they settled in Montreal a few years later. Thus, the only portrait that could be associated with a person enslaved in Quebec was painted outside the territory, at a time when the subject was not yet enslaved there. Nelson, Charmaine A, "Portrait of a Black Slave." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada. Article published March 03, 2014; Last modified March 04, 2015; Mackey, *Ibid.* p. 466n13.

[7]*Gazette de Québec*, 24 décembre 1778. The "green fur cap" does not refer to the colour green, but to the condition of the beaver fur before it is processed.

[8]Marcel Trudel, *Dictionnaire des esclaves et de leurs propriétaires au Canada français*, Cahiers du Québec. Histoire (Ville LaSalle: Hurtubise HMH, 1990), pp. 171-72.

*Joe* Credit: Em

*Nemo and Cash* Credit: Valmo

astonishing feature was that he spoke “good English and French, a little Dutch and Earse”. However, he was not the only polyglot among the enslaved: Ismaël could “[...] speak and read English tolerably well and understands a little Dutch and French” and Bett spoke “[...] the English, French and German languages well”. Another remarkable fact in the wanted notice concerning Andrew is that “[it] is supposed to have with him forged Certificates of his Freedom, and Passes”. He is said to have had false documents made (or to have made them himself) to facilitate his escape.[9]

Nemo and Cash’s notices appeared on 4 November 1778. The name Nemo, which means ‘nobody’ in Latin, is representative of the slave-owning practice of naming or renaming enslaved persons. In Quebec, enslavers regularly took their inspiration from biblical names (Mary, Joseph, John, Peter, etc.) or, sometimes, from a repertoire linked to Greco-Roman history and mythology: Caesar, Pompey, Nero, Scipio, Cato, Phoebe, Neptune or Jupiter, for example.[10]

A remarkable detail in this wanted notice shows that Cash “carried with her a considerable quantity of Linen and other valuable Effects not her own; and as she has also taken with her a large bundle of wearing apparel belonging to herself [...] it is likely she may change her dress”. This strategy of escaping and changing appearance was often used by women, as in the case of Marie Jeanneviève and Lydia. However, this strategy was not limited to women: Jacob, described as a Panis, also escaped with several items of clothing. As well as changing their appearance, the fugitives could have sold or exchanged these clothes to ensure their subsistence during their escape.

As far as the origin of the fugitives is concerned, Joe and Jack are the only two whose place of origin is clearly mentioned as Africa; it is also stated that Jack spoke “no other tongue but English,

[9] *Gazette de Québec*, 14 mai 1767.
[10] Trudel, *Deux siècles d’esclavage*, pp. 196-97.

and that upon the Guinea accent". Ismaël was a native of Claverac, New York, and further research tells us that Lydia and Robin were from New Jersey and that Lowcane may have come from Saint-Domingue (possibly the town of Léogâne).[11] The fact that Marie Jeanneviève and Jacob were described as Panis does not mean that they came from the Pawnee nation; as we saw earlier, they could have belonged to another nation or been born into servitude without any knowledge of their ethnic or cultural background.

**To Counter Invisibilisation**

I instigated the *Fugitives!* Exhibition to develop an educational tool accessible to the general public by illustrating, through a few images, the historical presence of Afro-Quebecers and Afro-Canadians and the resistance to slavery in North America.

By building a conceptual bridge between academic research and the general public, this project contributes to the democratisation of knowledge. It counters the historical invisibilisation of people of African descent in Quebec and shows how deeply rooted they are in the territory.

The exhibition *Fugitives!* was first presented at the Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec (MNBAQ) in Quebec City in 2019, and has since been shown regularly in museums, exhibition halls and schools across the province.

In 2020, the MNBAQ received the Award of Excellence from the Canadian Museums Association for presenting Fugitives! and, the following year, the exhibition was a finalist for the Prix Droits et Libertés awarded by the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse. A book is in preparation with Bayard publishing for 2026.

The Fugitives! project is a way to challenge the main Eurocentric narrative about the history of Quebec. In decolonising storytelling (who tells the story and who is portrayed), it enables us, as a society, to understand the plurality of our identities. Historically, Quebec has removed itself from the narrative about the transatlantic slave trade and struggles to recognise the enslavement of Indigenous people. By telling stories of resistance, we can reconnect Quebec to its colonial past and to centre the narrative around those who were forgotten.

Since museums are one of the main interpreters and conveyers of history, it is important to decolonise the stories told inside their walls. However, work also must be done outside, and many sites that witnessed those histories are still unknown to the general public. Hence the *Qc History X* guided tour that I've put together to reveal the layers that were buried underneath centuries of invisibilisation. By visiting these sites, we can visualise the concreteness of those narratives and realise that it is not something that happened elsewhere in faraway places, but right here under our feet.

Hopefully, this twofold approach (museums and historical locations) will contribute to create the necessary fulcrum to raise awareness and change the mainstream narrative about Quebec's history.

**Aly Ndiaye, aka Webster,** is a veteran of the Quebec hip-hop scene. In addition to his musical career, he has been passionate for nearly two decades about the history of slavery and the Afrodescendant/African presence in Quebec and Canada since the days of New France. He has implemented several projects to make this little-known history accessible to the general public: the exhibition Fugitives! (2019), the children's books Le Grain de Sable (2019) and Charlotte et la fin de l'esclavage au Québec (2025) and the *Qc History X* guided tours. Webster is currently Quebec's representative to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.

[11] *Gazette de Québec*, 24 décembre 1778, 30 juillet 1778, 11 mars 1784.; Mackey, *Op. cit.,* p. 57.

To operate ethically, museums must partner with Indigenous peoples so they can control their representation, seek redress for historical injustices, and have their voices privileged within museum narratives about the cultural treasures they hold.

*Solomon Aelan Kastom Arts and Weavers. Grass skirt workshop with weaver Marylace Wetara, using indigenous Varua (tree bark - Choiseul Province) at Wesley Community Centre.* Credit: Florie Dausabea. June 2024

# Te Aho Mutunga Kore: The Eternal Threads of Knowledge

by Kahutoi Te Kanawa

Te Aho Mutunga Kore was established at Tāmaki Paenga Hira, Auckland Museum as the Māori and Pacific Textile Centre.[1] The name of this centre derives from the *Te Aho Mutunga Kore* exhibition, which travelled throughout Aotearoa New Zealand in 2004. Commencing at Pataka Museum Porirua, Wellington, then onto Rotorua Bath House Museum and the Auckland Museum, before leaving for the USA, and the Yerba Buena Center in San Francisco in 2005.[2] Te Aho Mutunga Kore translates to 'the eternal thread.' This acknowledges the thread that carries the knowledge and skills through the generations. The exhibition showcased Māori textile fibre arts and the imbued knowledge, techniques, and skills held in Māori taonga (treasures).

[1]The centre was set up for a two-year pilot or proof-of-concept phase funded by Manatū Taonga Ministry of Culture and Heritage in late 2022. See https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/discover/kaupapa/te-aho-mutunga-kore

[2]Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum, hereafter the museum or Auckland Museum.


*Te Aho Mutunga Kore community opening of the Britomart Pavilion Exhibition including community members, Museum and Britomart staff.* Credit: Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira. February 2024

The exhibition was co-curated by Tina Wirihana, Kowhai Grace and Kahutoi Te Kanawa. Together, they worked with Toi Māori staff under the guidance of Te Roopu Raranga Whatu ō Aotearoa and in association with New Zealand Tourism. The opening at the first international venue brought together renowned national Māori performers and a Kapa Haka group from the Te Puia Institute of Māori Arts, Crafts and Tourism, Rotorua. This ten-day event engaged over 22,000 people.

While this was an excellent vehicle to introduce our weaving art practice to an international audience and as a showcase for our skills, craftsmanship and uniqueness, it felt as though we were on display ourselves, to promote tourism to Aotearoa New Zealand, when in fact we were there to display the best of our art practice and showcase our living culture. Despite this, it enabled other Indigenous peoples to engage with artists and knowledge holders, building relationships that remain important today.

Forty-seven years ago, the 1978 UNESCO Regional Seminar on the Role of Museums in Preserving Indigenous Cultures, held in Adelaide, Australia, marked a pivotal shift in the relationship between museums in Oceania and Indigenous peoples. The seminar advocated for Indigenous representation in museum collections, management, and boards of trustees, challenging the colonial practice of viewing Indigenous objects as mere cultural artefacts or primitive artworks (Stanton, 2011). The museum approach often undermined Indigenous spiritual beliefs, supported missionary efforts, and today necessitates a decolonisation of museums through collaboration with Indigenous communities.

Today, it is a given that to operate ethically, museums must partner with Indigenous peoples so they can control their representation, seek redress for historical injustices, and have their voices privileged within museum narratives about the cultural treasures they hold. Such partnership approaches seek to avoid privileging Western epistemologies, recognising Indigenous communities as the true experts in their cultural heritage (Shannon, 2015). Partnerships between Indigenous Peoples and museums can inform culturally accurate and respectful museum exhibitions that may lead to the return or loan of valued items to Indigenous families, tribes, and communities (Vonk, 2013).

*Te Aho Mutunga Kore Tongan Language Week Community Drop-in*. Credit: Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira. August 2024

Te Aho Mutunga Kore aims to collaborate with communities to challenge systemic colonial museum practices, guided by Māori and Pacific values. These are cultural *uara* (values) that endure despite settler-colonial culture that sought to erase and marginalise Māori. Auckland Museum holds over 13,000 Māori taonga and Pacific artefacts. These collections are imbued with the connection between Māori and Pacific nations, through methods of process, construction and patterns. Although natural fibrous materials found in Aotearoa are totally distinct from the Pacific Island fibres, Māori adapted the skills they brought from the Pacific Islands to the available plants growing in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Harakeke, commonly known as New Zealand flax, due to the fibrous content of the leafy plant being perceived as similar to European flax, is a unique, strong and durable plant. The botanical names, *Phormium tenax* or *Phormium cookianum*, mountain flax, are called *whaririki*. Other plant materials from the forest and sand dunes were used for weaving, lashing, netting and clothing. Pacific Island materials include palm leaves, pandanus, and coconut fibre (sennit), which have different names local to each Pacific language and nation.

**Taonga Māori and Pacific Measina Collections[3]**

Taonga Māori and Pacific *measina* have *whakapapa* (genealogy) and *mauri* (life force) and "hold the mana, wisdom and *whakapapa* embodied in their history, design, techniques and mauri" (Cram, 2024, p. 8). And yet access to taonga and measina by the communities that cherish them has often been difficult. There are many reasons for this, objects have been disassociated from their knowledge holders, communities are unfamiliar with the museum's collections, and communities' access is restricted due to the museum's limited ability to service the need for access within the museum (Ibid, p. 9).

These access difficulties are at odds with the museum's Māori and Pacific strategic documents, which set out the museum's position as *kaitiaki* (guardians) of these collections. As described

[3]Taonga is often translated as 'treasures', a Pacific equivalent would be the Samoan word *measina* which is used here although each language will use a different local term.

*Deborah Phillips and Deborah Goomes from Miheke Moriori community closely studying the Rameka Te Amai at Puke Ariki*. Credit: Jasmine Tuiā. May 2024

in the plan for Te Aho Mutunga Kore, He Korahi Māori[4] and Teu Le Vā[5] set the kaupapa (agenda) for our work and we are guided by our Taumata-ā-Iwi and Pacific Advisory Group. The kaupapa is to maximise and sustain access to and care of the museum's collections, and the knowledge associated with them. This will serve the people that whakapapa to the collections and provide the communities with the agency and resources to engage in this space (Auckland Museum, 2023, p. 7).

Part of the museum's implementation of their 2017-2022 Strategic Plan was the development of initiatives to build and strengthen trust relationships with Māori and Pacific communities within Auckland Tāmaki Makaurau. Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland has a population of 1.65 million, more than 180,000 Māori live in Auckland and nearly 1 in 6 Aucklanders identify as Pacific. This community is growing and the Museum is uniquely placed to serve these communities. From 2016-2019 the museum undertook the Pacific Collection Access Project (PCAP) which opened access to the museum's Pacific collection by their communities. The objectives were to:

- improve knowledge and understanding of the museum's Pacific collection,
- improve the safety of the Pacific collection, and
- increase public access and engagement, especially for Pacific source communities, with 'the museum and its Pacific collection.

PCAP resulted in 58 cultural knowledge holders from 13 Pacific nations, mainly based in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, sharing their knowledge of c.6000 *measina*. PCAP facilitated Pacific Peoples'

[4]He Korahi Māori outlines Auckland Museum's (2016) strategy to become bicultural, as mandated by the Auckland War Museum Act 1996. Initiated by the Taumata-ā-Iwi, it emphasises *mana whenua*, *manaakitanga*, and *kaitiakitanga* principles. Key goals include addressing past grievances, improving access to taonga, and enhancing cultural responsiveness and staff capability. It aims to strengthen co-development with Iwi and hapū, build bicultural skills, and generate new knowledge through mātauranga and te Reo Māori. The museum's 2023/24 draft plan reaffirms this commitment.

[5]Teu le Vā, Nurture the Relationship – The Pacific Dimension at Auckland War Memorial Museum (Auckland Museum, 2013) outlines the museum's future partnership with Pasifika communities, aiming to "give life to the objects" (Tuna Fielakepa). Guided by the principle Teu le Vā, meaning to "nurture the relationship," it emphasizes respect, mutual trust, and reciprocity. The Pacific Collections Access Project (2016-19) exemplified this, enhancing access to the Museum's Pacific collection and connecting communities with their heritage. Despite its success, the project highlighted the need for sustainable, community-responsive engagement, leading to the Te Aho Mutunga Kore initiative.

**Table 1.** Overview of those engaged with Te Aho Mutunga Kore

| | Rōpū | Region | Selected Outcomes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rōpū 1 | Kiribati Arts and Weavers Community | Warkworth to South Auckland | Use historical tiputa for teaching community members to make them; learn from the woven pandanus collections to make similar works. |
| Rōpū 2 | Solomon Aelan Kastom Arts and Weavers | Auckland | Explore techniques through observation, discussion, and making workshops with the Solomon Islands fibre collections; create a selection of the following: *kuza* (string bags), grass skirts, baskets, mats, placemats, and textiles. |
| Rōpū 3 | Te Roopu Whatu Kākahu | Whitianga and Coromandel | Record and share the terminology of Māori weaving practices and techniques; study natural embellishments (feathers, dyes, etc.) and explore techniques in making *kākahu* (cloaks). |
| Rōpū 4 | He Kete Iti | Te Tai Tokerau Northland to Auckland | Research and create *kete iti* (small bags). |
| Rōpū 5 | Kahukura Collective | Te Tai Tokerau Northland, Whangamatā, Kaitaia, Auckland | Collectively make a cloak representing Ngāpuhi design, drawing on the museum collection. |
| Rōpū 6 | Te Aho a Rahiri | Te Tai Tokerau Northland | Research collections to look at taonga and techniques to develop skills in weaving kākahu. Weaving Tukutuku (lattice-work panels) for *wharehou* (new meeting house) at Rewiti; mentorship of emerging practitioners. |
| Rōpū 7 | Moriori Weavers | Rēkohu \| Chatham Islands | Visit the collections held by seven institutions across the country to investigate ancient and Eastern Pacific weaving techniques, e.g. mats, skirts, rain cloaks, tools, and material with fibre attached; view material carrying Moriori designs and incorporate Moriori design into new works. |
| Rōpū 8 | Mana Whenua: Mana Wahine: Mana Whariki | Rotorua | Host a *Wānanga kōrero* (open forum) on the lasting values of *whāriki* (floor covering); create woven *tauira* (samples); explore the *tikanga* (protocols) with Iwi, hapū and whānau for the appropriate care of whāriki. |
| Rōpū 9 | Ngā Whiri a Raukatauri | Wellington | Explore the range of woven, natural, and material processes for the construction and practices of *taongo puoro* (musical instruments) and *karetao* (puppets); create recordings, podcasts, online exhibitions, and a publication. |
| Rōpū 10 | He Aho Tuwhiri Ki Te Ao Marama | Wellington | Establish a connection between Lapita designs and tāniko (finger weaving).; replicate these designs using two-way tāniko weaving. |

reconnection to collections, and the sharing of knowledge by participants benefited the museum's records.

In the foreword to Auckland Museum's Five-Year Strategic Plan, 2017-2022, the museum is described as "Auckland's place of gathering, welcome and orientation, where we share knowledge of our taonga and explore the many stories of Tāmaki" (Auckland Museum, 2017, p. 5). This role is guided by the Taumata-a-Iwi (Māori Committee), formed in 1996 under the Museum's Act. The museum outlined a vision: "He oranga tangata ka ao – Enriching lives: Inspiring discoveries," and a mission, "Tui tui hono tangata, whenua me te moana – Connecting through sharing stories of people, lands and seas" (Auckland Museum, 2017, pp. 8-9).

**Te Aho Mutunga Kore**

Te Aho Mutunga Kore, sits within Auckland Museum to provide "sustained engagement with textile and fibre collections to strengthen the ties (aho) between the community, their material culture

and heritage to develop a safe pathway for knowledge transmission (taonga tuku iho)" (Cram, 2024, p. 11). In this way, the Centre aims to foster engagement, (re)connection, learning and revitalised making practices. A culturally grounded approach is taken, fostering community collaboration and reciprocal relationships, rather than the traditional museum-centric model.

The Centre focuses on the voices and creative practices of Māori and Pacific Peoples and intergenerational knowledge exchange. The museum has been partnering with communities to achieve this, ensuring that collections are more accessible and beneficial to descendant communities. This approach advocates for a new model of museums as active participants in decolonising practices and pedagogy.

Outcomes from access-based projects are community-led through the use of a Māori methodology, *tui tui tuia*. "Tui tui tuia brings together and binds the skills, knowledge and practice of all participants and nurtures knowledge for future generations" (Ibid).

The Centre has three co-directors: Kahutoi Te Kanawa, Curator, Pou Arahi; Fuli Pereira, Curator, Pacific and Chantal Knowles, Head of Human History and three staff during the pilot phase: Hikitia Harawira, Kaiarahi Project Manager; Jasmine Tuiā, Community Navigator; and Justine Treadwell, Associate Project Manager. Co-director Te Kanawa developed the *uara* to underpin the relationships between the museum and communities, between participants and staff, and to the place, land and taonga. These are (Ibid):

- *Whakapono* – truthful relationships and trust in each other
- *Tiaki* and *manaakitanga* – the continued care and reciprocity of knowledge and skills that uplifts the Mauri of taonga, people and place
- *Kotahitanga* – working together as one and having dual roles to support the *kaupapa*

Te Roopu Whatu Kākahu weavers, Deborah Phillips and Bess Kingi viewing kākahu (cloaks). Credit: Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira. September 2023

- *Hōhonutanga* – deep profound connections for all those involved acknowledging the *whakapapa* to taonga and each other
- *Āhurutanga* – respectful relationships that care about the safety of taonga, people and space

These *uara* have been shared through staff *wānanga* (learning and discussion forum) to understand the *kaupapa* of Te Aho Mutunga Kore and how the museum can transform its relationships within and beyond its walls.

The Centre has a dedicated room with comfortable seating, desk space and tables. The space allows time for conversations and deep engagement with taonga. By supplementing visits to storage areas, communities can request selections of objects to be viewed close-up, in detail, in this dedicated space.

Te Aho Mutunga Kore has provided community groups with the resources to remove barriers to access to the museum's collection. Each *rōpū* (group) has undertaken a project and been allocated financial support to be used at their discretion. For example, each rōpū has been provided with the financial support for travel to the museum, materials for making and venue hire to gather and make together. In addition, the museum requires no specified outcomes, but has been open to support any activities in the museum that a rōpū may wish to propose.

In conclusion, this initiative represents a profound commitment to honouring and uplifting the voices and knowledge of Māori and Pacific peoples. By fostering deeper relationships with knowledge holders and practitioners, we not only enrich our understanding but also respect and embed alternative narratives into the very fabric of our institution. Through the establishment of an endowment fund, we offer a heartfelt invitation to those who wish to support this vital work, ensuring that the wisdom and traditions of these communities continue to thrive and resonate for generations to come. This endeavour is not merely about preservation; it is about celebrating the living legacies of Māori and Pacific cultures, acknowledging their contributions and working collaboratively towards a more inclusive future.

**References**

Auckland Museum. (2013). *Nurture the Relationship: Teu Le Vā: The Pacific dimension at Auckland War Memorial Museum.* (p. 24). Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum. https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/getmedia/1f0cb555-8206-4cb3-adce-3e8cd838f026/auckland-museum-teu-le-va-the-pacific-dimension-2016.pdf

Auckland Museum. (2016). *He Korahi Māori: Straegic Pathways* (p. 12). Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum. https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/getmedia/016605a4-9609-4b1c-8849-352a12dcd7a6/auckland-museum-he-korahi-maori-strategic-pathways-2016.pdf

Auckland Museum. (2023). *Annual Plan FY 2023/24* (p. 31) [Annual Plan]. Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum. https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/getmedia/9dfb5192-0835-4b64-bcc1-2b6432b9cf09/Auckland-Museum-Annual-Plan-2023-24.pdf

Cram, F., & Te Irirakau, T. (2024). *Evaluation of Te Aho Mutunga Kore, Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum*. Katoa Ltd.

Shannon, J. (2014). Projectishare.com: Sharing our past, collecting for the future. In R. Silverman (Ed.), *Museum as Process* (0 ed., pp. 85–107). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315766935-11

Stanton, J. E. (2011). Ethnographic museums and collections: From the past into the future. In D. Griffin & L. Paoissien (Eds.), *Understanding Museums: Australian Museums and Museology*. National Museum of Australia. nma.gov.au/research/understanding-museums/JStanton_2011.html ISBN 978-1-876944-92-6

Vonk, L. (2013). *Indigenous peoples and ethnographic museums: A changing relationship* (p. 14). Nordiskt centrum for kulturarvspedagogik: NCK. https://nckultur.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Report-Indigenous-communities-and-museums-L-Vonk.pdf

**Dr. Kahutoi Te Kanawa,** Ngāti Maniapoto, Tainui (including Ngāti Rārua), Ngāti Tūwharetoa, is a Māori teacher, curator, weaver and textile artist. She has worked as a senior lecturer at the University of Otago and was a member of the Taumata Māreikura (expert weavers' group) Tāmaki Paenga Hira. In 2020 she was appointed Associate Curator, Māori at the Auckland Museum and in 2021 promoted to the role of Curator Pou Ārahi. As Curator Pou Ārahi, Kahutoi is charged with caring for, providing access to and researching the Māori collections.

These cultural landscapes, as established by UNESCO, include hills such as Cerro Rojo and monuments such as pyramids and churches that give them their compound names, such as San Lorenzo Tezonco, and that together create these cultural landscapes.

*Mural vestíbulo Museo Comunitario Pueblo Santiago Acahualtepec 2023. Credit: Paola Araiza Bolaños 2024*

# Interview with Paolo Araiza Bolaños about her Groundbreaking Work with Community Museums

by Elka Weinstein

**Introduction**

Paola Araiza Bolaños is a native of Mexico City and a museologist. She has been collaborating with the inhabitants of Iztapalapa for the past two years on a groundbreaking project in which the co-curation of the area will support local pride and the preservation of the zone's artefacts and intangible cultural history.

Iztapalapa is the most populous borough of Mexico City and one of the most densely populated urban areas in the country, with over 2 million inhabitants. More than 90% of its territory is urbanized. Eight of the barrios are at the historic centre of the city of Iztapalapa: La Asunción, San Ignacio, Santa Bárbara, San Lucas, San Pablo, San Miguel, San Pedro, and San José. The zone includes Cerro de la Estrella, a hilly national park topped by the Pirámide del Fuego Nuevo. This Aztec ceremonial site hosts the end of the Easter Passion play, in which participants drag crosses through the streets. The Fuego Nuevo (New Fire) Museum houses pre-Hispanic artefacts. The area also hosts the Central de Abasto, a vast wholesale produce market which includes the Bodega del Arte cultural centre.

**Paola, can you please tell us how you came to this work and what you are hoping will result from your efforts in collaborating with the local inhabitants of Iztapalapa?**

I have had the opportunity to speak about the experience of setting up community museums in the City of Iztapalapa in various forums, which has allowed me to address different aspects of museology, sociology and cultural heritage, including:

1) Actions that assess the role of the cultural manager in community projects,
2) Within the framework of museum work, evaluating and presenting the design of these spaces through the lens of social museology, participatory community co-curation and educational museography, and how promoting heritage identity based on community knowledge and memory achieves the dignification of marginalized societies.

I have taken on a facilitating role in helping to create community museums for Indigenous Peoples who have been absorbed by the growing urbanisation of Mexico City. In the context of previous museological thought, the work revisits the points made in the Santiago Declaration[1] which establishes the actions that museology should consider for museum practice in both rural and urban areas.

I also comment on how the exhibition discourse is not only focused on showing the customs and traditions of the communities in Iztapalapa, but also gives them the character of cultural landscapes, as well as seeking to revalue the natural environment so that it is not further damaged and transformed, by identifying the existing heritage and the actions taken by its inhabitants to protect it.

**Can you please give us some context for the work that you have been doing in Iztapalapa?**

1. Iztapalapa is a fundamental region in the formation of what was once the Valley of Mexico Basin (pre-Hispanic era). It was the centre of Mexica culture and is where the New Fire ceremony, which forms part of the Nahuatl worldview, is held.
2. It was a *chinampa* area, which led to the formation of indigenous villages and neighborhoods that still make up this geographical area today, which, over time became the outskirts of Mexico City.[2]
3. With rural migration to the city, there has been an invasion of the communal lands of these Indigenous peoples, leading to overpopulation and the creation of large city belts, which in turn have created marginalised areas.
4. In this struggle for survival, the population has sought to protect their customs, practices, and traditions. Their margins were transformed into garbage dumps, car dismantling yards, penitentiaries, and prisons, which turned Iztapapala into one of the most populous boroughs in the country's capital, with much poverty, crime, and violence.
5. The community's museums arose from requests made by the communities themselves.

Currently, there are a total of eight museums:

1) Teotongo Community Museum
2) Fuego Nuevo Museum
3) Museum of Culture and Passion of Iztapalapa
4) Cabeza de Juárez

From 2023 to 2024, the following community museums will be added:

5. Santiago Acahualtepec People's Museum,
6. Ocho Barrios Museum,
7. San Lorenzo Tezonco Museum,
8. Santa Martha Acatitla Museum

1The Declaration of the Santiago Round Table (1972) was a pivotal document that called for museums to adapt to contemporary societal needs and promoted the concept of the social museum. Convened by UNESCO and ICOM this declaration was a milestone in Latin American museology, emphasizing the museum's role in community development, social integration, and lifelong learning rather than just artefact preservation.

2Chinampas are a pre-Columbian Aztec agricultural technique creating artificial islands for farming on shallow lake beds in the Valley of Mexico


*Museo Comunitario Ocho Barrios*. Credit: Paola Araiza Bolaños 2023

I am helping to conceive and shape these museums, working in tandem with the local community. All these museums are created in an urban context, proposed by the communities that inhabit Iztapalapa. Their different authorities support the projects and have developed the museums over the years, making this part of the city the one with the highest number of museums created, not by a cultural institution, but by a public administration that responds to the needs of protecting and disseminating the heritage identity of the society that comprises it.

**What is the intention of the local inhabitants of Iztapalapa with the creation of these museums? What is most important for them to preserve, and why?**
There are a total of eight museums across the municipality, built over the course of three decades. The first to be established was the San Miguel Teotongo Community Museum, which opened its doors in 1994 following the discovery of a pre-Hispanic burial, and which houses a collection of archaeological pieces donated by local residents.

A few years later, in 1998, the Fuego Nuevo Museum was inaugurated on the Cerro de la Estrella, whose summit contains an archaeological site under the custody of the INAH. The Huizachtepetl is considered by the people of Iztapalapa to be a sacred centre, as it is the place where the New Fire Ceremony is carried out—a ritual held every 52 years that marks the renewal of the world. In 2024, the museum underwent a new museographic renovation which, in addition to incorporating multimedia experiences, seeks to ensure that new generations learn about and value the significance of this ceremony, which is fundamental to the Nahua worldview.

In 1976, the Cabeza de Juárez monument was built, and in 2000 it was adapted to house documents, thereby acquiring the status of a museum. The monument features murals that were originally commissioned from David Alfaro Siqueiros, who passed away in 1974. The project was later continued by painter Luis Arenal, an important figure of the Salón de la Plástica Mexicana. This space holds heritage value in its own right, and due to its location, it has become a landmark for the city's inhabitants.

The *Museo de las Culturas y Pasión por Iztapalapa* was built in 2012 in the Ocho Barrios zone, the historic centre of the municipality. Its exhibition discourse brings visitors closer to what was once the Basin of the Valley of Mexico, a chinampa region that disappeared after the drying of the lakes of Texcoco and Chalco. As a museum dedicated to the culture of Iztapalapa, it highlights several of its traditions, such as Carnival and the Passion of Christ. Today, the Holy Week celebration held in

Iztapalapa is attended by thousands of devotees and witnessed by large crowds filling the avenues along the procession route.

Between July 2023 and September 2024, a project was carried out to create community museums dedicated to the *pueblos originarios*[3] of Iztapalapa, with the firm purpose of preserving their history while also building platforms to strengthen their cultural identity and pride in their traditions. This initiative was launched by the Executive Directorate of Culture of the Iztapalapa Municipality, which invited me to lead the project as coordinator of the museums and exhibitions area.

The four community museums created for the *pueblos originarios*—Santiago Acahualtepec, San Lorenzo Tezonco, Santa Martha Acatitla, and Ocho Barrios—were all conceived through the triad of **Social Museology + Participatory Community Co-curatorship + Didactic Museography.**

**You spoke about Cultural Landscapes and their importance for the local inhabitants in Iztapalapa. Can you expand on this aspect a little bit and tell us why you think this is important?**
We spoke about those spaces, let us then delve into the community itself to understand that it is not about maps and demarcations, but rather to understand those spaces, those neighborhoods, where people live in communities, and in those communities, there are traditions, customs, and practices, and that is what makes them heritage territories. These cultural landscapes, as established by UNESCO, include hills such as Cerro Rojo and monuments such as pyramids and churches that give them their compound names, such as San Lorenzo Tezonco, and that together create these cultural landscapes. But it is the community again that tells you about them, gives you the value to understand that safeguarding that heritage itself is so important. Thus, we understand that this biodiversity, another of the heritage elements that the 2030 agenda seeks to make us understand to protect them and achieve sustainable development. That is why talking about these riches that existed in the past and that were like the lagoons that are now dry is to make them present in the dialogue and discourse for new generations to defend what persists, even though the territory has been modified. Understanding their territory from the perspective of fauna and flora, the traditions that gave rise to fishing and home cooking, the gastronomy that is still present, is happening in these discourses. And why not play with it and create playful spaces that allow us to delve into, learn recipes, learn about those ingredients that are taken from nature and converted into these delicious dishes that continue to be served? In other words, we must touch this intangible heritage, we must make it felt, we must visualize it, and playfulness allows us to do that.

Over the years, I have come to believe this, and that is why these museums were also conceived, to provide spaces that allow new generations to participate and play with these elements, but not only to understand them as museums that are just going to have an activity or a program. The local people themselves build these spaces, they themselves engage in dialogue and create them. That was the space that was built in the museum of the town of Santiago Acahualtepec, where the community held countless workshops to talk about what this flora and fauna has been and this cultural landscape, and to be able to capture it in a mural. Activities were organised to make stencils so that muralists could work on it. They were able to develop it, and the mural remained there. But what does museology and museography do? What does the curatorship we are talking about do? It generates these tools that can enrich a dynamic for others, for visitors, for users, for those who are not in this territory, so that they want to create it.

**You spoke earlier about museology and museography in what you called "Dynamic Museology." What did you mean by that and how does it help to do the work that you are currently undertaking with the folks in Iztapalapa?**
Dynamic museology expands the role that museums play in their context, becoming a fundamental tool when seeking heritage rescue from the territory and its community. By emphasising the dialogue between the museum and its audience, dynamic museology can redefine how exhibitions are conceived and experienced, making the visitor not just an observer, but also a protagonist in the re-signification of the heritage identity presented through the curatorial discourse.

[3]Founding peoples.


*Museo Comunitario San Miguel Teotongo.* Credit: Paola Araiza Bolaños 2023

For this reason, the inclusion of didactic museography is vital, as it focuses on the active participation of the community and meaningful learning. In this sense, didactic museography is not only conceived as the spatial design that organises the exhibition sections, but also as an educational tool that promotes understanding, critical analysis, and reflection on the objects and stories they represent.

In this context of participatory actions, co-curatorship becomes essential, as it involves the community, experts, and other key actors in the process of shaping the topics and conceptualising what is intended to be conveyed. This practice transforms traditional curatorship, where the curator is seen as the sole authority on content, into a more inclusive and collaborative process. Co-curatorship, as a tool for participation, not only enriches the curatorial discourse, but also fosters a sense of belonging and ownership of the museum space by those involved, thereby consolidating the triad of social museology, didactic museography, and communal participatory co-curatorship.

So, museology and museography, what does this curatorship we are talking about do? It generates tools that can enrich a dynamic for others, for visitors, for users, for those who are not in this territory, so that they want to get to know it, so that they can reinterpret it and value it. There were many exercises, such as a memory in which research was done on the flora and fauna of the Santa Catarina mountain range and with an archive from CONABIO, they made these memory cards that were placed on the sides of the mural so that we could discover together this heritage, this biodiversity, which was accredited by CONABIO to be used.

This is the partnership I am talking about, that we must combine with this other material that we use. We already did it for what we call the guardians of history, the guardians of heritage, which is an invitation that makes us the owners as an exercise in safeguarding, that is, there is an evaluation and appreciation of our own heritage and in this way we can safeguard and protect it. And so, we generate this dynamic, which can also be played with, to discover all these elements of flora, fauna, monuments, and sites, and then together create a story and make a little theatre. In short, playfulness and games have long allowed for a form of learning that carries with it the possibility of emotion and memories and meaningful experience, and with that we provide elements of

identification and appreciation, but for the community of the territory it goes further, for the community that container cannot remain just a container, as the new museology says, we have to talk about territory and live that container, live the space, so in the museum's planters they decided to plant what is their activity, the harvest, they are farmers, there is still that rural aspect rural in the urban area, and there they are planting *cempasuchil*, now used for the nights when we are celebrating the Day of the Dead.


*Museo Comunitario Ocho Barrio Nucleo Ángeles Azules.* Credit: Paola Araiza Bolaños 2023

In other words, the container does not have to start out as just an exhibition space. The territory is a space that speaks to us. The new museology *in situ* has to create spaces for the preservation of that living heritage of that comprehensive museum, so that we can delve into the community itself and we understand that this community has countless traditions, those that are lived on a daily basis, those that are on the calendar, where every day you hear fireworks, you see pilgrims passing by, or you enter into the festivities of the carnivals and their patron saint festivals. So why not also bring them to the museum and learn about these parades, who these characters are that participate, who that band is, who the *Chinelos* are.[4] These traditions can also be experienced from within, so customs and traditions must also be represented by the community itself.

The exercise that is always carried out in these examples that I am telling you about is not only the objects brought by the community, those that have already been discussed, revalued, and understood as heritage, but they are placed there as the community wanted to recreate those spaces. The community painted murals and created the portals and did not make the scenery using the support and tools of museography but rather created these using the support and tools of the community's own discourse.

And so, we created these exhibitions, which serve to redefine and raise awareness of the spaces themselves. Reassessment will be fundamental; that is the role of museography. But the discourse, the network of meaning and appreciation, comes from what the community itself creates, which

[4]Chinelos are a kind of traditional costumed dancer which is popular in the Mexican state of Morelos, parts of the state of Mexico and the Federal District of Mexico. The tradition arose from the blending of indigenous and Catholic traditions, most notably Carnival, with its permission to be masked and to mock. Chinelos mock Europeans and European mannerisms from the colonial period up to the end of the 19th century.

also has elements of creativity already present in its own traditions. It is important to know what we know and what we identify with. That is why these murals were created within these spaces, where they themselves sometimes pose, participate, and are painted or indicated by the muralists and others who were part of this rich interdisciplinary work for representation. In this way, they also create these sets, these reproductions, these images that we see there.

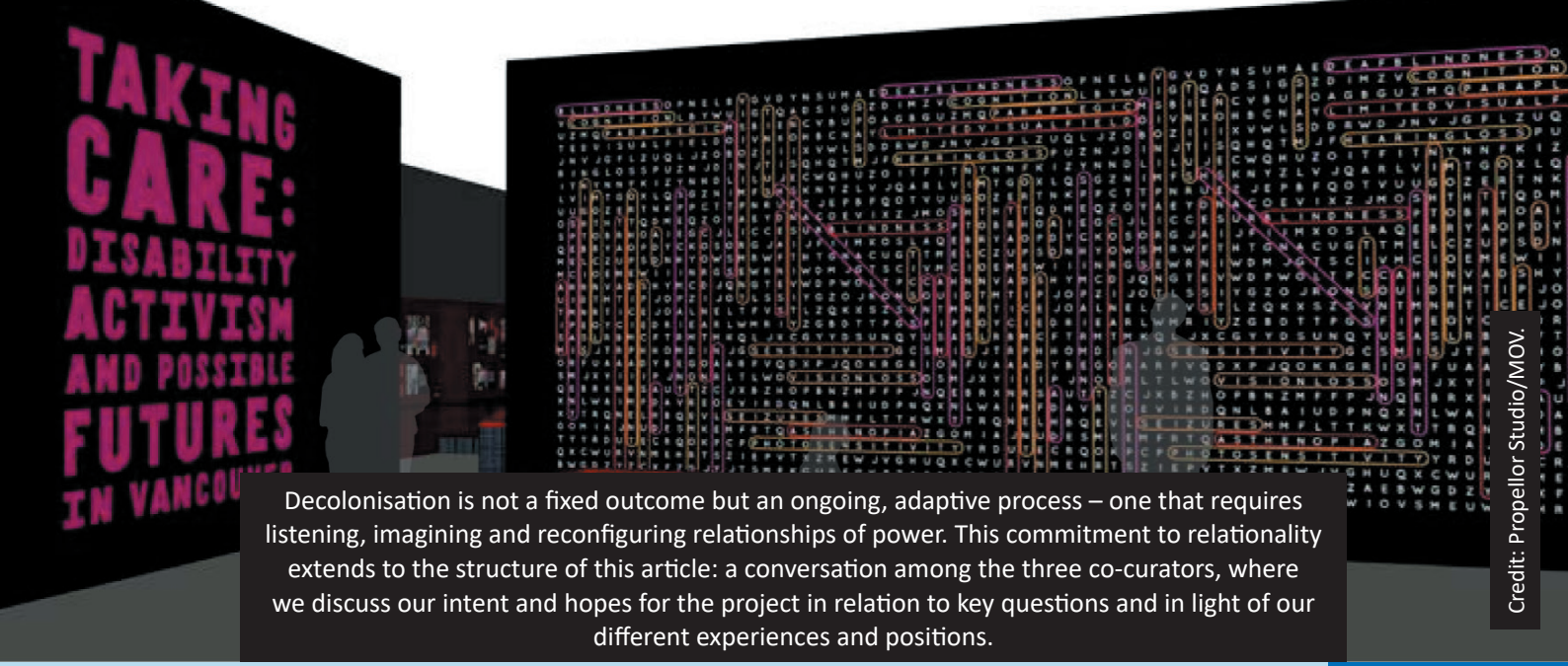
But what gives me the most joy is not only that they planned each space, but that today, on the first anniversary of the Santiago Acahualtepec Museum, they are once again using the space as a living space, and these meanings, these interpretations that we see on the monitor, that we see in the murals, that we see in the X-rays, that we see in the photographs, are being reinterpreted in a living museum.

We have to understand that this step, this transformation of the demarcation, these hills that at one point were ravaged for *tezontle*[5], and then became large rubbish dumps for the rubble that came out in the earthquakes, seeing their flora and fauna disappear, wanting to recover that identity and that geography, are manifested in their social struggles, and they have to be seen and heard. We must understand those spaces from where they are located, to make room not only for their knowledge, but also their expressions, their feelings, their own view of what they establish as the history that has shaped them. That is why the struggles are about dignity. We cannot continue to understand the museum only as a space for conservation and dissemination. The social museum, the truly comprehensive museum, the museum that is conceived from a sociocultural perspective must talk about these concepts.

We must understand these spaces from which they are situated, making room for us. That is why the call to action was made at MONDIACULT 2022 in Mexico, in which I had the great opportunity to be participating. One of the points of the declaration said: "We reiterate the individual and collective responsibility on behalf of future generations to ensure the conservation, safeguarding, and promotion of all cultural sectors, including both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as an ethical imperative improving equity, geographical balance, and representativeness of heritage in all regions." I had the opportunity to participate as a member of ICOM Mexico and as a correspondent for that organization and as the coordinator of the education committee for my country. Another exercise that I was able to participate in was reflecting on the ICOM definition, understanding that it was not about finding the best definition, but rather about seeing how we can bring this definition into new spaces being created in the 21st century."A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.", it is this definition that I believe gives contemporary meaning to museum activities. Open to the public, accessible, and inclusive, museums promote diversity and sustainability with the participation of communities. Museums offer varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and the exchange of knowledge.

I am very grateful to those who gave me the opportunity to be part of this project to create the museums of Santiago Acahualtepec, San Lorenzo Tezonco, Ocho Barrios and Santa Martha Acatitla, because they gave me the great opportunity to understand the real role of the cultural manager who is interested in sociocultural action and to understand the role of the museologist in this participatory curatorship. I am enormously grateful to the team that accompanied us throughout this work because it was an interdisciplinary team that was fully committed to doing this work.

[5]Tezontle is a porous, oxidized volcanic scoria, typically reddish, originating from Mexico and used for construction, gardening, and hydroponics due to its lightness and durability. Named from a Nahuatl word for “stone hair” or “hair stone,” it is considered Mexico’s most representative building stone, used since the pre-Hispanic era in monumental sites like Teotihuacan and Tenochtitlan.




Credit: Propellor Studio/MOV.

Decolonisation is not a fixed outcome but an ongoing, adaptive process – one that requires listening, imagining and reconfiguring relationships of power. This commitment to relationality extends to the structure of this article: a conversation among the three co-curators, where we discuss our intent and hopes for the project in relation to key questions and in light of our different experiences and positions.

# Curatorial Convo – The Taking Care Project @ Museum of Vancouver

by Viviane Gosselin, Raven John, and Carmen Papalia

Museums are increasingly called to engage in decolonial work– rethinking how they structure knowledge, relationships, and accessibility. *Taking Care: Disability Activism and Possible Futures in Vancouver*[1] embraces this challenge by centring disability justice as both a critique of systemic ableism and a framework for reimagining more inclusive futures. This Museum of Vancouver (MOV) exhibition project is currently in its design and prototyping phase, experimenting with accessible and participatory formats to ensure that disabled voices and experiences shape both its content and structure. It explores disability activism in Vancouver from the 1970s onward, highlighting how disabled artists, designers and activists have driven cultural and systemic change. A key section invites visitors to engage with speculative visions of the city through a disability justice lens, countering the tendency to confine disability to historical or medical narratives.

From its curatorial approach to its design process, *Taking Care* prioritises collective knowledge-making. The curatorial team – Carmen Papalia, Raven John and Viviane Gosselin – works closely with an advisory group of disabled artists and activists to co-create the exhibition's themes, content, and design strategies, ensuring multiple perspectives on accessibility are integrated throughout.

Decolonisation is not a fixed outcome but an ongoing, adaptive process – one that requires listening, imagining and reconfiguring relationships of power. This commitment to relationality extends to the structure of this article: a conversation among the three co-curators, where we discuss our intent and hopes for the project in relation to key questions and in light of our different experiences and positions.

**What and who are we doing this for? What does it mean to do decolonial work when curating an exhibition on disability activism?**

**Carmen:** This is the Museum of Vancouver's first exhibition on disability. The big question is: How do you tell that story? Do you focus on notable disabled figures in the city who've gained visibility in dominant culture, or do you centre disability culture itself? We're doing the latter, highlighting how

[1]The curatorial team recognises that language around disability is complex and evolving. Terms like 'disability activism' and 'disability movement' were chosen in consultation with disabled advisors and reflect widely used terminology in disability justice and disability studies. We acknowledge that no single term resonates with everyone.

disabled communities have survived under ableism, found ways around barriers, and built their own networks of support where none existed – whether in the medical system or society at large.

That's why it's crucial to have people from the diverse, intersectional disability community at the table, shaping the stories we tell. Who do we honour? What ideas and ways of being from a disability culture can we share with a wider audience? This isn't about reinforcing an ableist, dominant narrative; it's about telling these stories from within disability culture itself.

As co-curator, I knew it was essential to work with Raven, who brings perspectives neither Viviane nor I could. That kind of collaboration is key, not just to this exhibition but to the broader work of decolonising and dismantling Eurocentric and ableist museum practices.

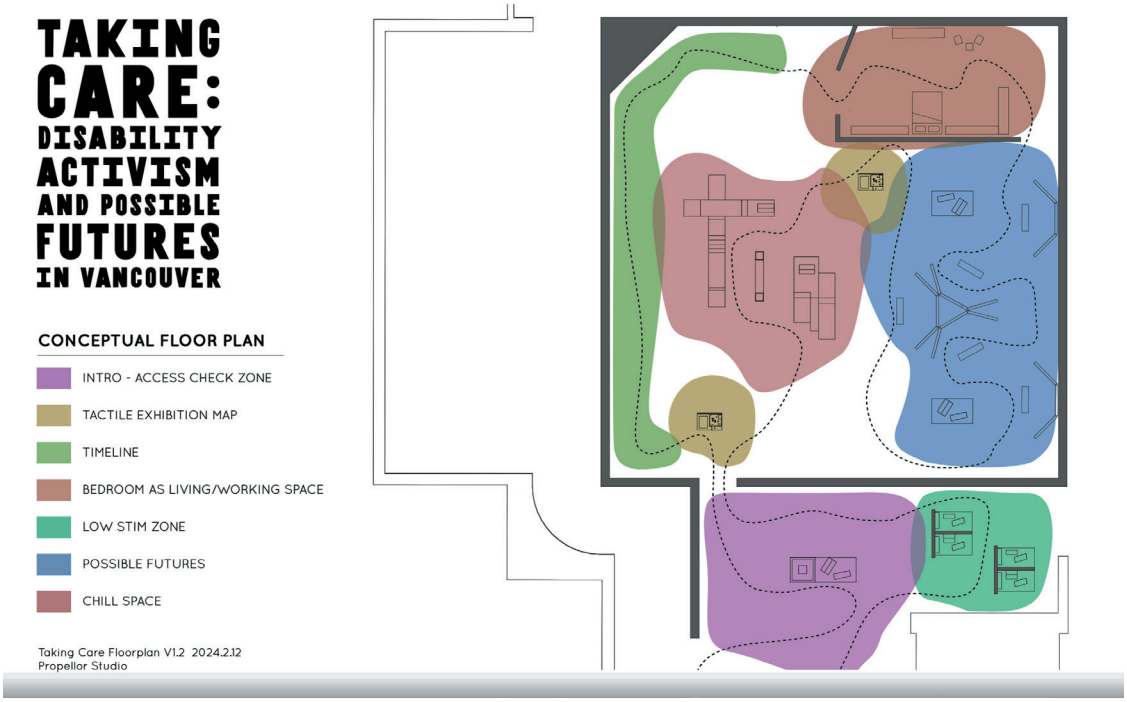
**Raven:** I am Stó:lō and Coast Salish. I am a two-spirit matriarch within my community and a caretaker of some ceremonies, and witness to many beautiful ones within and outside of my community. Our relationship with institutions is often that of a huge power imbalance, especially within museological and art spaces where disability and disability culture is viewed from the outside and then treated with clinical and sterile means. Whereas we can, being within the community itself, caring for it, have a closer and more careful look at the history of disability here in Vancouver, but also looking to the future of how disability, care and culture can shape the world and has already shaped the world. Having an Indigenous voice within this curatorial team means that we have with us the means to consider all the ways in which we can take better care and examine all those practices that are harmful within museological and curatorial practices. And it's great. I love working with you guys!

**Carmen:** I'm a non-visual artist with a degenerative blood condition and chronic pain, so I don't often see my experiences reflected in museums. I know Raven feels the same way. Through this project, I not only get to platform and highlight, but also make visible different histories, identities and experiences that I don't often see reflected at me. And yeah, I also have a say in how those stories are told. It wouldn't be a true representation of disability in Vancouver if we didn't approach it from an Indigenous perspective, especially since a lot of the ways we care for each other stem from Indigenous worldviews and values. On the other hand, disabled people have also been controlled, institutionalised, incarcerated, held in medical facilities, and subjected to eugenics. We're not the only population this has happened to. Indigenous peoples have had their resources, land and traditions dispossessed. These histories are already linked and I think we can learn a lot by considering them together.

**Viviane:** For me, this project is about revisiting the city through a disability lens – highlighting and validating that history, as well as the values, knowledge and skill sets that disability communities bring to the table. Right now, we're in the planning stage – digging into these little nuggets of history and imagining futures. And here's the thing: if we truly embraced the values already embedded in the disability communities – interdependence, mutual aid, solidarity, to name a few -- our lives could be so much better. It flips the usual dynamic: this isn't about the museum lecturing or teaching about mainstream values. It's about the museum *listening* and *learning from* marginalised communities. That's the position I find myself in—taking it all in and asking, how do we internalise this? How do we make these teachings part of how we move forward?

This is an ambitious project because it's so multifaceted, and there's a lot at stake. We're working with a limited budget, and I feel the pressure of getting it right. I'm very aware of my position and privilege in this curatorial trio — as museum staff, and non-disabled White settler. I don't want to disappoint you two, the communities involved, or the advisors supporting this work. I have to say that the project advisors have been so generous in reminding me that being challenged is part of the process and that something meaningful will come out of it.

**What about the impact this exhibition can have? What should come out of this process?**
**Carmen:** The key to making this show impactful and carrying its lessons forward is the idea that the museum relies on people's stories and cultures to exist. There should be a two-way exchange between participants and the institution, rather than just an extraction. Relationships should be




*Conceptual floor plan for the Taking Care exhibition featuring a labelled map with distinct colour-coded zones. The exhibition layout includes various furniture arrangements and pathways, indicated by dashed lines connecting different sections. The design emphasises accessibility, engagement and sensory-friendly areas*. Credit: Propellor Studio/MOV

reciprocal. I think it's important for people like us to keep working with museums, integrated at all levels of management. When I consider joining a project, I ask if there's a supportive, safe context for the work. In this case, there's enough of that based on our long-standing relationship and the community's trust. This feels like a long-term effort to move away from rigid accessibility rules to more community-responsive practices.

**Raven:** Same. I usually only work with people who are familiar with my work and how I engage with community. Larger institutions often approach Indigenous artists and communities aware of the power imbalance, knowing they're one of the few who can platform your work. But they also expect you to silence the painful parts of your stories or only share what fits their narrative, using Indigenous culture for propaganda or to check a diversity box. The people who approach me with an understanding of my work know I won't hide what needs to be said. I only work with those who don't expect me to leave my identity at the door and only want me for the labour. Our work is about who we are, where we are, and how we come together. Understanding the perspectives of both the disability and Indigenous communities has been crucial to this project.

**What sort of messages are important to convey in the exhibition?**
**Raven**: I think this project is a way for the broader community to catch up. There's so much that makes us vulnerable when we have a disability – things that non-disabled people don't understand or have any context for. Honestly, the broader community is far behind in understanding what the disabled community deals with every day – and how much they actually benefit from the work and innovations of disabled folks. So, to me, this exhibition is a chance to highlight what we bring to the table.

For so long, society has viewed disability through an ableist lens, and while the language is slowly evolving, there's still a long way to go. It wasn't that long ago that people casually used the R-word and other slurs when talking about the disabled community – and, unfortunately, some still do. People need to catch up, and we're willing to slow down for them – just like we expect them to slow down for us.

**Carmen:** I don't want to say that this whole exhibition is about educating an uninformed non-disabled public. I think part of it is to create a space where we and others in our community can feel seen and also have a space to share their stories and really be in a place where they can really get some affirmation, a sense of validation or just joy out of being the insider.

We often use insider language in our community to mask or adjust for the dominant culture. I think part of the project is about dispelling myths; like the myth of overcoming disability, or the myth that the medical system is all-powerful and always effective. For me, one goal is for people who aren't informed to walk away questioning whether the medical system could be harmful. I want them to think about the systems they participate in, support and uphold. A lot of people who've had to rely on the medical system – like me, having spent a lot of time in the hospital since childhood – carry medical trauma. It's not a straight path to healing for everyone. Many people live in the gray area, and a lot of people fall through the cracks of a safety net that we're lucky to have, but it's full of holes. And it's important to recognise how dominant culture is often what's blocking us from making real, systemic changes that could improve the quality of our lives.

**Raven:** And we need to talk about the pervasiveness of 'disability'. There are artists and writers who say it better than me, but everyone will be disabled. If you're lucky, you get to be disabled before you die, literally. I really hope everyone gets to live a long, wonderful life and with that, disability is just part of the deal as you age. It's going to happen, whether it's arthritis, blindness, or something else.

**Carmen:** Especially with the way we're treating the environment. I mean, we're creating more of us, and more people are going to end up on our side. They'll have to learn from us just to figure out how to navigate and survive under these conditions.

**Viviane:** We could also see this exhibition as an invitation to give everyone permission to be vulnerable. We're sharing stories of people who, simply by being unwell, sick, or disabled, have had to navigate the world in a state of vulnerability because they had no choice. Yet, so much of what we define as 'normal' is about hiding, about trying to appear a certain way. One message I hope we can convey well in the show is that this idea of normalcy is ultimately destructive to everyone.

**How do the interpretive plan and design solutions in the gallery space help communicate ideas about the values of self-representation, mutual aid, solidarity, resourcefulness, and access?**
**Carmen:** I really love the Bedroom Zone. It feels like you're stepping right into someone's life. In this case, it's a mixed disability, queer couple who are deeply involved in disability culture and activism. They're active in their community but also spend a lot of time at home, resting, recovering, working, and organising. They take part in activism both from their home and out on the streets. This space lets us tell their story through objects – the accessibility features, mobility devices, photos, the room's setup, and even what is tucked away in the drawers.

I like this way of learning about disability, like showing what an active life with a disability can look like. It's often oversimplified in the media. This idea came from a description I wrote, inspired by people I know, and imagined into this installation piece. Now, it's being refined with input from our advisors and the design team.

**Raven:** I think it's a beautiful way to give non-disabled people a glimpse into our lives. So much media and messaging have isolated us from the larger community. We live full, vibrant lives filled with art and connections. There's still this stigma; people whisper about going to therapy or the doctor, as if disability is something contagious. Creating welcoming, softer spaces like the home office bedroom in the gallery helps break down that barrier.

**Carmen:** I'm really excited about the speculative futures explored through a series of large two-page comics. They let us imagine the worlds we want while challenging assumptions – like why visual culture is so dominant. What if things worked differently? How would we build support networks after another pandemic? The disability community can share valuable lessons with a wider culture that is not ready for looming social and climate crises.

**Viviane:** There's this giant timeline of disability activism in Vancouver – I'm talking 22 meters long! We wanted it to be big, bold, and exuberant because disability history has been silenced, forgotten, or dismissed as unimportant in this city. By giving it this kind of physical presence, it speaks to the importance of the work done by disability activists.

*Digital rendering of a 22-metre-long timeline displayed along dark red walls with images, text panels, and interactive elements.* Credit: Propellor Studio/MOV

As we identify key events and developments, we know we will inevitably miss important moments. To address this, we're designing a timeline that allows visitors to add their own entries. That participatory piece is essential to the project. I'm also very excited because, in the process of building this timeline, MOV is acquiring material culture documenting disability activism in the city, which has been vastly underrepresented in our permanent collection.

**Raven:** I really love the Chill Space. A lot of museums and galleries are treated as drive-throughs instead of inviting visitors to sit with the work and digest it. So, we have built in a lot of spaces where you can sit with the work either in the gallery space or ahead of it so that you can kind of have this quiet space of reflection as part of the work.

**Are there any other design elements you'd like to share that stand out in the exhibition?**
**Carmen:** MOV often builds 'release valves' into exhibitions – ways for visitors to participate and contribute their own perspectives. The ones we've set up for this show feel especially strong. One of them appears right at the start: a word search, like the kind you'd find in an activity book, but filled largely with words disabled people use to describe themselves. Instead of medical or diagnostic terms, these are self-chosen identifiers – words like *spoony, psychiatric survivor,* or *queer crip* – language that carries personal meaning. Visitors are met with this prompt: *The word 'disabled' isn't for everyone. What's your word? Can you find it here? If not, add it to our growing lexicon of disability identifiers.*

For disabled visitors, this activity offers a moment of recognition; an opportunity to 'find themselves' in the exhibition and contribute to an evolving lexicon. For non-disabled visitors, it's a way to grasp the diversity of disabilities and get a glimpse into the language used within these communities.

**Viviane:** One thing that kept coming up in our brainstorming sessions was how to make the exhibition *feel* like disability art and activism. What really stuck with me was the idea of design hacks – how disabled people are constantly adapting objects and systems to fit their needs. They ARE professional hackers, by necessity! Disability activism has that same DIY energy: Scrappy, adaptive, and built from whatever's on hand. It's about making do with what's available. That mindset really shaped the exhibition design. The team at Propeller Studio, for example, suggested using zip ties and milk crates to build seating, tables, and display cases. That choice instantly captured the spirit of the project; being intentional about materials, colours, and typefaces, and avoiding anything overly polished as a way to align content and form.

**Final thoughts on creating support and changing culture one exhibition at the time.**
**Viviane:** Now more than ever, as our democratic institutions come under attack, non-disabled communities need to step up, get organised, and take action for social and climate justice. This

*Testing a prototype bench made from milk crates. Left to right: Ruby Violette (student intern), Nicholas Cyr-Morton (Head of Fabrication), Taking Care Co-Curators Viviane Gosselin, Raven John and Carmen Papalia*

exhibition will highlight powerful stories of community building and advocacy – stories that can inspire everyone to create change in their own communities.

**Raven:** Something I've been thinking about this whole time is how much people can do when they're supported. There's this idea that disabled folks are a burden or need too much care, but the disability community proves time and again – just support us, and we'll show you what we can do. We've done so much with so f*cking little.

It's the same with Indigenous communities. I get recognition for my work, but at the end of the day, I'm just a rez girl from a community full of incredible artists, chefs, illustrators, singers, comedians, who don't always see their own brilliance because they've never been supported. I've had opportunities, school, exhibitions like this one, and that support made all the difference. If more of us had that, imagine the work we'd see.

**Carmen:** It's about support on your own terms. Can people meet you where you're at – your access needs, your rhythm, your time? That's huge for me too, since my conditions fluctuate. I completely agree – we need to be involved and resourced to create real, lasting change.

Something I hadn't considered much before but find exciting is how this show might influence how the institution collects disability-related objects and stories. Moving away from the 'super-crip' narrative – the singular, exceptional disabled person – and instead centring the disability movement as a whole. How disability history is told matters. How many institutions do that well, or at all? Knowing we've helped shape that at MOV is pretty exciting.

*Taking Care: Disability Activism and Possible Futures in Vancouver is scheduled to open in July 2026.*

**References**

Ladau, Emily. *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally*. First edition. Emeryville, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2021.

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *The Future Is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes, and Mourning Songs*. Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2022.

Wong, Alice. *Year of the Tiger: An Activist's Life*. New York: Random House, 2022.

**Viviane Gosselin** is the Director of Collections and Exhibitions and Curator of Contemporary Culture at the Museum of Vancouver. She is committed to curatorial practices that bring together a vibrant mix of voices, to deepen conversations on pressing contemporary urban issues.

**Raven John** is a Two-Spirit Coast Salish/Stó:lo visual artist, activist, cultural consultant, photographer and sculptor. She graduated from Emily Carr University of Art and Design with a major in visual art and a minor in social practice and community engagement.

**Carmen Papalia** is a nonvisual social practice artist whose performances, public interventions and curatorial projects explain aspects of Disability culture such as interdependence, de-medicalisation and creative accessibility.

# Exhibition Reviews

***Costume Balls: Dressing Up History, 1870-1927*. A temporary exhibition at the McCord Steward Museum (Montreal, Canada): An Approach to Decolonisation through a Historical Collection**

by Christine Conciatori

The McCord Stewart Museum defines itself as Montreal's social history museum. As a teaching and research museum, the McCord Stewart has a rich collection of over 2.5 million items of material culture, fashion and textiles, Indigenous cultural belongings, photographs and archives.


*Introduction to the exhibition.* Credit: Christine Conciatori

The exhibition, *Costume Balls: Dressing Up History, 1870-1927*[1], presents a selection of the costume collection as well as Indigenous cultural belongings. Under the seemingly lighthearted theme of dressing up for a fantastical event providing an escape from everyday life, the exhibition confronts the visitor with the colonial views existing in society at that time. It also makes us reflect on the long lasting impacts of these views, impacts we are still struggling with today.

The exhibition is divided into three main sections. The first one, *But What Are We to Wear*, sets the theme of costume ball and carnivals in Canadian society at the time. These grand events served to reinforce the notion of imperialism and colonialism in Canadian society, as well as to promote the myths related to the creation of Canada as a nation and its place within the British Empire.

At first glance, visitors are swept away by the magnificence of the costumes and the excitement that balls and carnivals created. *But What Are We to Wear?* is thus the first question the very select upper class participants in these events were asking themselves. These events allowed them to take on the personality of a historical figure, a character from a play or a book. The idea was not to conceal one's identity behind a mask, which was not allowed, but to present a better version of oneself.

The costumes presented in this section show the cultural and historical references that inspired people to choose these outfits. As well, drawing on the rich collection of archival documents and photographs, we can see the variety of costumes, but also the taboos of what not to wear. For example, blackface was not often permitted. The reason behind this interdiction was not the dehumanisation of people of colour, but the fear that people wearing that disguise might feel as though they were allowed to misbehave.

While no exhibition can be exhaustive on the topic presented, a brief mention of imperialism, cultural appropriation and romanticised ideas in the representation of people from the Levant, China and other regions of the world, as portrayed in the pictures on view, would have been a good addition. We see the pictures but there is no mention or context for the visitors to understand that these representations were done by Westerners without any consultation or true knowledge of these cultures. This is somewhat of a missed opportunity.

The second section of the exhibition, *Come to the Ball*, invites us to a *mise en scène,*

[1]The exhibition was open from November 14, 2024 to August 17, 2025.

reminding us of a ballroom. In this room, a selection of costumes worn by the English and French Canadian upper class are beautifully presented. The affluence of the participants wearing rich dresses and clothing, some of them representing central figures of various periods of colonialism is evident. The idea of personifying the 'heros' of Canadian history, or even some from the British Empire, or from France, is cementing the national myth of how the history of Canada began, by Europeans settlers who 'discovered' and 'explored' this land, a land that was already occupied and known by Indigenous Peoples.

*Mise en scene.* Credit: Christine Conciatori

In the last section of the exhibition, *Dressing Up Colonial Violence*, we see a variety of original Indigenous cultural belongings and some crafted clothing that is meant to be Indigenous, worn by the participants to these balls to impersonate 'Indians'. While there are references to colonialism in the previous sections of the exhibition, this last one delves into the violence of colonialism, as well as the appropriation of Indigenous culture by colonisers. Historical themed balls and carnivals celebrated the dominant culture and its vision of the past. They glorified the British Empire. These portrayals of Indigenous Peoples created a misconception of a lesser 'Other', uncivilised and unruly. These representations were caricatures and they contributed to stereotypes attributed to Indigenous Peoples in Canada. The stereotypes not only impacted views of Indigenous Peoples, they also influenced the narrative and helped to justify the idea that colonisers could dispossess them of their lands and remove them from political life.

It is worth noting that throughout the exhibition, the narrative and the design are supported by a soundtrack. In the first two sections of the exhibition, music is playing, bringing the visitor into the atmosphere of the ball. In contrast, in this last section, the music stops.

As a topic that would usually be seen as festive and joyous, *Costume Balls* is an exhibition that doesn't shy away from the difficult topic of Indigenous representations through the coloniser's eye. While *Costume Balls* is a beautiful exhibition, it is also a learning experience and a good example of how to decolonise a collection. The exhibition provides a sense of awe through the excellent scenography and the rich collection. The colonialism message is subtly woven throughout, except for the last zone where it is clearly the main message. The exhibition never lectures, and it does not tell the visitor how they should feel or think. It succeeds in engaging visitors and taking them on a journey. From the first impression of the magnificence of these balls and their importance in the Canadian society of the late 19$^{th}$ - early 20$^{th}$ centuries, visitors are then faced with the role these events played in the reinforcement of the national myth, and finally, they realise the underlying violence of the representations of Indigenous Peoples. For visitors not familiar with the history of colonialism in Canada, a suggestion would be to visit the McCord Stewart Museum's permanent exhibition, *Indigenous Voices of Today: Knowledge, Trauma, Resilience*, before *Costume Balls* to better understand the impacts of colonialism on Indigenous people and the violence of these representations.

**Reclaiming Time, Spirit, and Technique: A Conservator's Reflection on Thonton Kabeya's Introspection II**

by Mabafokeng Hoeane

This review offers a personal and professional reflection on *Introspection II*, an exhibition held at the Unisa Art Gallery in Pretoria, South Africa. As a continuation of Thonton Kabeya's earlier exhibition, *Introspection I* (2023) at the Wits Art Museum (WAM) in Johannesburg, *Introspection II* presents a deeply spiritual and material exploration of the artist's ten-year journey living and working in South Africa. The exhibition invites critical engagement with themes of memory, identity, and belonging, while foregrounding African-centred artistic and conservation practices.

Let me begin with the words of African philosopher and traditional healer Credo Mutwa:

*You must understand who you really are.*
*You must understand how great you are.*
*You must understand how great you once were.*

These words frame Kabeya's offering: an artist's effort to locate the self spiritually, historically, and culturally. Through *Introspection II*, Kabeya has manifested all three of these imperatives. His work demonstrates a deep understanding of the current conditions African creators face, especially the urgent need to innovate from within African knowledge systems.

Kabeya's use of the Spiral technique, a method he links to ancestral cosmology, serves as a powerful metaphor for African existence. According to him, African spirituality teaches that the foundations of life are the spiral, the egg, and the void. This worldview challenges linear Western models of time and artistic progression, instead foregrounding a cyclical, patient, and purpose-driven practice. For those of us in the field of conservation, Kabeya's approach is a reminder that heritage preservation must account not only for the physical life of objects, but for their metaphysical dimensions as well.

As UNISA and similar institutions on the continent grapple with Africanisation, *Introspection II* stands as an example of what decolonised curation can look like – from the artist to the curator, to myself as conservator. We engaged African methodologies and resisted the temptation to package African works through Eurocentric frames. The exhibition provided a platform to discuss overlooked African techniques in conservation – methods often dismissed or deemed ' non-scientific ' in mainstream museological discourse.

This review also reflects on the structural challenges facing African creatives. During the exhibition walkthrough, my partner (an engineer) asked Kabeya how he managed to complete such a large and intricate body of work. Kabeya responded that he worked on multiple pieces simultaneously over a period of ten years. This revelation underscores the pressure many African artists face to produce

*Bathing of the Soul,* 2016. Thonton Kabeya's first work employing the spiral technique. Walnut powder and newspaper ink on sculpting canvas, life-size. Courtesy of the artist

*Introspection II* marks the first solo exhibition at the Unisa Art Gallery led entirely by a Black artist, curator, and conservator. Pictured above: Thonton Kabeya (artist), Tshegofatso Seoka (curator), and Mabafokeng Hoeane (conservator) during the *Creating, Curating, and Conserving Thonton Kabeya* seminar, Pretoria, 2025. Credit: Lesego Plank, Unisa Art Gallery

under constrained timelines – expectations rooted in colonial productivity models. Kabeya's process resists this, valuing time, spiritual alignment, and meaning making.

Interestingly, some visitors perceived Kabeya's use of canvas as 'recycled'. But what they were witnessing was not disposal; it was ritual. Repetition, patience, and re-activation of materials are part of a sacred process – one that connects the artist to the ancestors and to purpose. Such artistic processes mirror traditional African craft techniques, where every gesture is intentional and spiritually guided.

From a conservation perspective, this exhibition has reshaped my approach to contemporary African art. Too often, our work is reactive – restoring pieces after they've been separated from their original context, purpose, or community. *Introspection II* is proactive. It asks us to conserve meaning as much as material, to engage the artist's voice, and to prioritise living traditions over frozen artefacts.

Most powerfully, this exhibition reminded me of the role of art in healing. As a Black South African, I have often been told we are disconnected from continental African identity. Kabeya's work refutes that narrative. It invites collaboration, solidarity, and cultural re-membering. I am also grateful to Seoka, whose curatorial vision ensured the exhibition space was accessible—welcoming to all, not only the typical gallery-goer. For many in my community, this was a transformative introduction to art as a serious discipline, not merely a visual or decorative experience.

In closing, *Introspection II* is more than an exhibition. It is a spiritual and political intervention, a pedagogical offering, and a statement on what African-led museum and conservation practice can be. I am honoured to have been part of this process. *Camagu!!!.*

**Mabafokeng Hoeane** is a curator and conservator in African Cultural Heritage, at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Her research and professional practice centre on African spiritual, sacred, and ceremonial material culture, with a focus on contemporary African art and decolonial approaches to preservation. She is pursuing a PhD in Visual Culture Studies at the University of Pretoria.

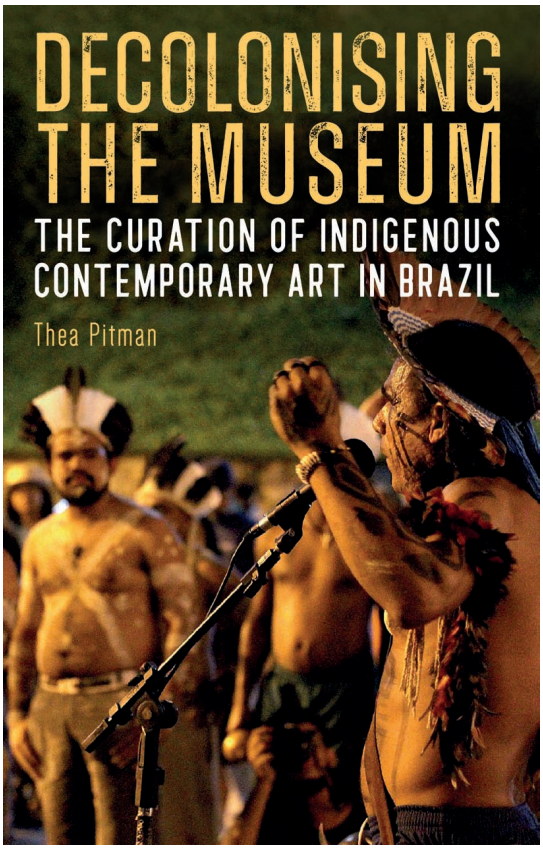
# Book Reviews

**Decolonising the Museum: The Curation of Indigenous Contemporary Art in Brazil by Thea Pitman**

by Elka Weinstein

*Decolonising the Museum* is an academic monograph published by TAMESIS Studies in Popular and Digital Cultures in 2021. It discusses an exhibition of Indigenous contemporary art – electronic art, specifically – in Brazil, based on work that Dr. Thea Pitman undertook in 2018. Despite its being an academic work, its main topic – interactive electronic artworks created with direct input from Indigenous groups across northeastern Brazil (Bahia) – makes it more exciting than might be imagined at first glance. Pitman's involvement in the project, as an observer and anthropologist, and as a participant in the events around the exhibition, make her less of a bystander, and more of a contributor and accomplice in the event.

I am by no means an expert in contemporary or Indigenous art, nor an expert in digital or media studies. I am a former anthropologist/archaeologist who studies and works with museums. I worked in South America, and although I have never been to Brazil, I am familiar with both Latin American and North American Indigenous art and am fascinated by electronic and video art, specifically interactive digital media.




*Cover of "Decolonising the Museum".* Credit: Thea Pitman

**City Museums and Urban Indigenous Peoples**

Indigenous art shown in contemporary art galleries and city museums in Brazil has undergone a resurgence over the past 10 or so years. The Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia (Museum of Modern Art of Bahia) in Salvador, Brazil challenges colonial perspectives by Indigenous worldviews.

In terms of simple demographics, according to the 2022 census more than half (57%) of Brazil's Indigenous population lives in cities. From 2010 to 2022, the Indigenous population in urban areas grew by 181.6%. The changes in the urban Indigenous population are not only due to demographic movement between urban and rural areas, but also to a more accurate count of Indigenous persons in urban areas.[1] Urban populations of Indigenous peoples are generally considered difficult to count, due to many factors including that many urban Indigenous people tend not to participate in the census due to poverty and its associated lack of a fixed address, mobility between communities and historical distrust of government and colonial policies.

**The *Arte Eletrônica Indígena* Exhibition**

Pitman's monograph is a detailed case study of an exhibition from August 2018, which is both particularly illustrative and has been largely overlooked by the Brazilian art establishment:

[1]https://agenciadenoticias.ibge.gov.br/en/agencia-news/2184-news-agency/news/42288-censo-2022-mais-da-metade-da-populacao-indigena-vive-nas-cidades-2

the *AEI: Arte Eletrônica Indígena* (AEI: Indigenous Electronic Art) exhibition that was held at the Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia (MAM or Museum of Modern Art of Bahia) in Salvador.

*Arte Eletrônica Indígena* was mounted in collaboration with an NGO called Thydêwá, a small Bahia-based organisation founded in 2002 by a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the Brazilian Northeast who "...sought to work in 'alchemical' collaboration, running 'programmes, projects, actions and campaigns to raise awareness of discrimination against indigenous people and promote a culture of peace'". (Pitman 2021: 67) The project was premised on collaboration and co-creation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants as a way of improving intercultural relations between Indigenous people and Brazilian society.

> The Indigenous communities involved were the Kariri-Xocó and the Karapotó Plak-ô in Alagoas, the Xokó in Sergipe, the Pankararu in Pernambuco, and the Tupinambá de Olivença, the Camacam Imboré, the Pataxó Hãhãhãe, the Pataxó de Barra Velha and the Pataxó de Comexatiba in Bahia. These are all small communities (c.150–9,000 members), spread out over an area the size of Western Europe and located in a part of Brazil – the Northeast – that has seen the most extensive colonisation over the last five centuries including sustained efforts to decimate, dilute and deny Indigenous populations. So efficacious was this process that local governments felt confident in declaring the Indigenous communities of the Northeast officially extinct in the late nineteenth century. It is thus the case that all the Indigenous communities that participated in the Arte Eletrônica Indígena project are ones that have re-emerged and reasserted their Indigenous identities and their right to lands over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and they all endure an ongoing battle for acceptance by a mainstream society that generally considers them to be 'falsos índios' [fake Indians]. (Pitman 2021: 69)

MAM is a colonial art gallery, which had previously paid lip service to Afro-Brazilian art, but which had never exhibited Indigenous Brazilian art before this exhibition. When the art gallery was asked if it was acceptable for the exhibit to also be considered a festival of Indigenous art, staff responded by saying that the museum did not 'do festivals'.

The space for the exhibition was the museum's 18th century chapel, dedicated to Our Lady of Conception on a former industrial estate which includes a Manor House, the chapel and various buildings and machinery used for sugar cane processing – a very colonial site indeed.

The exhibition itself included ten different artworks, not all of which were specifically digital art, but which were works that required electricity to work and were based on electronic, though not necessarily digital, technologies. Nonetheless, the overall impression given by the press releases and other ephemera is of a thematically coherent exhibition of often quite low-tech, improvised and provisional electronic art, with a strong interactive and experiential element." (Pitman 2021: 71). The exhibition also included traditionally made 'crafts' such as featherwork and woven crowns and necklaces, pottery, and gourd maracas, and smaller carved pieces made of wood, some of which were for sale for the duration of the exhibition.

The disconnect between MAM's stated goal of collaboration with the Indigenous participant artists, and the actual catalogue of the exhibition is highlighted in Pitman's analysis. However, in Chapter 4 her "Ethnographic reading of Indigenous curatorial agency" demonstrates how the audiovisual elements of the installations were combined with spontaneous demonstrations of singing, chanting and dancing (*torés*) throughout the exhibition by the Indigenous groups involved. Pitman was also able to document one of these spontaneous interactions by creating a video of the opening of the exhibition entitled, "Occupy MAM! (available to watch on Youtube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wd8X93r5EH8).

Pitman's conclusion is that the Indigenous participants in the exhibition engaged in a 'retomada' or retaking of the gallery space, "challenging both the design of the project and the function of the museum space to better

respond to their social, political and economic needs. In so doing, they positioned themselves at the cutting edge of decolonial Indigenous curatorial practice" (Pitman 2021: 104). The Indigenous Brazilian idea of '*bem viver*' or living well is referred to here by Pitman as, "the essence of Indigenous 'survivance' in Brazil – the retaking of space and the joyous celebration of their culture." (Pitman 2021: 128)

Recent exhibitions of Indigenous contemporary art in Brazilian city museums and international art galleries in 2023 and 2024 have become part of a larger movement by Indigenous people from the countries that encompass the Amazonian region. Indigenous Brazilians are fighting for their rights over traditional lands, using art to make their point clear: we are the traditional keepers of the land, the Amazon depends on us.

**Elka Weinstein** came to this book with a penchant for iconoclasm in museums and a firm belief that it is necessary, timely and right to include Indigenous peoples' own views in museum exhibitions.

**Relearning How to Inhabit the Earth: Ailton Krenak and Decolonial thinking**

by Andréa Delaplace

***Ancestral Future* (Polity Press, 2024); *Life Is Not Useful* (Polity Press, 2023); and *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World* (House of Anansi Press Ltd, Canada, November 2020)**

For centuries, the Indigenous peoples of Brazil have bravely faced threats that could lead to their total annihilation. Faced with extremely adverse conditions they have reinvented their daily lives and their communities. As the Covid-19 pandemic forced the world to reconsider its way of life, Ailton Krenak's thinking has emerged with even more impactful lucidity and relevance. I had the occasion to discover Krenak's books in 2021, when I was preparing my post-doctoral project for the Centre de recherche Cultures - Arts - Société (CELAT) at the UQAM and Université Laval in Québec.

My project, dedicated to decolonial perspectives in museums both in Brazil and Canada, explored how indigenous curators, artists and thinkers are taking part in creating exhibitions and new discourses on museum collections that have been displayed from the point of view of a non-Indigenous gaze and voice. Ailton Krenak is an Indigenous curator[1] and activist of the Krenak people. He is also a writer, philosopher, journalist and environmentalist who became widely known after his protest at the Brazilian Constituent Assembly on September 4, 1987, when he painted his face with black *jenipapo* dye before delivering a speech against the violation of Indigenous peoples rights. He participated in the drafting of the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 (known as the "Citizen Constitution") as an important representative of Indigenous peoples.


*Three books by Ailton Krenak.* Credit: Andréa Delaplace

Krenak is the author of *Ideas to Postpone the End of The World* (2020), *Life is not useful* (2023), and *Ancestral Future* (2024), among other books, essays and interviews. His ideas on predatory human activity against the planet, non-anthropocentric humanity, the institution of dreaming as a way of being closer to our ancestors, and the relevance of orality as a way to reconnect with community and the planet were developed through his books and have been very influential to environmentalism and modern thought in Brazilian contemporary society. His influence served as grounds for his induction as the first Indigenous member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters in 2024.

[1] I had the occasion to visit an exhibition *Hiromi Nagakura até a Amazônia com Ailton Krenak* curated by Ailton Krenak in January 2024 when I visited the Instituto Tomie Ohtake in Brazil. For more info please check the website: https://www.institutotomieohtake.org.br/exposicoes/mis-ceara-hiromi-nagakura-ate-a-amazonia-com-ailton-krenak/

He recently presented his ideas and work at the College of France in Paris in a conference called *Habiter la Terre à l'Anthropocène* (April 2025).[2]

At this conference he said that cities are a human way of living that is structural (as all big cities resemble each their structure and functions) but that this is not necessarily the best way for humans to live as a collective. Krenak, in fact, invites us to rethink our way of life and the concept of the city itself.

Ailton Krenak offered a critical reflection on the homogenization of urban life under global modernity. He observed that, despite their cultural and geographic diversity, major cities around the world have come to resemble one another in both structure and function. This convergence – manifested in the replication of urban grids, commercial zones, infrastructures, and temporal rhythms – reveals not only a shared architectural logic but also a deeper alignment with an anthropocentric worldview grounded in productivity, consumption, and control.

Krenak, however, does not accept this model as either inevitable or desirable. On the contrary, he argues that the dominant urban paradigm – rooted in colonial, industrial, and capitalist histories – has imposed a form of life that distances human communities from the ecological and spiritual dimensions of existence. Cities, in their current form, are often structured to separate humans from the land they inhabit, reinforcing a disconnection from nature and from ancestral modes of being.

Against this backdrop, Krenak invites a radical rethinking of the city: not merely as a physical or administrative unit, but as a cultural and ontological construction. He challenges the presumed universality of the modern urban model and opens the possibility for alternative urbanisms that are plural, situated, and ecologically embedded. Such a reconceptualization requires acknowledging other ways of inhabiting space – ways that privilege relationality over control, community over individuality, and continuity with ancestral knowledge over rupture.

Rather than viewing the city as the culmination of human progress, Krenak positions it as a site that must be reimagined through a decolonial and post-anthropocentric lens. This involves not only rethinking urban planning and design but also questioning the epistemologies and ontologies that undergird the city itself. In this sense, his intervention resonates with broader calls for ecological justice and epistemic plurality, inviting us to imagine futures where urban life is no longer detached from the Earth, but in dialogue with it.

As we understand Krenak, through his narratives of impressive strength and beauty, his writing questions the idea of a 'return to normality' following the pandemic. In what consists of a 'normalcy' in which humanity divorces itself from nature, devastates the planet and creates a gigantic gap of inequality between peoples and societies, Krenak questions everything about this normalcy. After the terrible experience the world went through during the pandemic and everything that has happened since, we will need to work to bring about profound and significant changes in the way we live.

As Krenak says: "Many people have put projects and activities on hold. People think that all they have to do is change the calendar. Those who are simply postponing commitments, as if everything would go back to normal, are living in the past [...]. We have to stop being conceited. We don't know if we'll be alive tomorrow. We have to stop selling tomorrow."

If there is a future to imagine, it is ancestral, for it is already present in the here and now and in what exists around us, in the rivers, mountains, and trees that are our relatives. Krenak proposes a perspective that challenges and confronts the assumptions that sustain Western mentality.

The idea of the future sometimes frightens us with apocalyptic scenarios. At other times, it is offered as an opportunity for redemption, as if it were possible to magically resolve all the problems of the present in the future. In any case, illusions distance us from what

[2]To watch Krenak's speech at the College de France, please use the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0r75TSGxQBo&list=LL

is all around us. In this collection of texts, Ailton Krenak provokes us with the radicality of his insurgent thought, which displaces common sense and invokes wonder. Krenak says: "Rivers, those beings that have always inhabited the worlds in different forms, are what suggest to me that, if there is a future to think about, that future is ancestral, because it was already here."

He also reminds us that we must awaken from the comatose senselessness we have been immersed in since the beginning of the modern colonial project, where order, progress, development, consumerism, and capitalism have taken over our entire existence, leaving us only very partially alive, and, in fact, nearly dead. To awaken from the coma of modernity is, for Krenak, to awaken to the possibility of becoming attuned to "the cosmic sense of life." He points out that the COVID-19 pandemic affected all so-called 'human' lives and that the time is ripe for us all to reflect on and undo the exclusivity and distinction that have characterized the concept of humanity in Western modernity.

Indigenous peoples have faced the end of the world before. Now, humankind is on a collective march towards the abyss. Global pandemics, extreme weather, and massive wildfires define this era many now call the Anthropocene.

He demonstrates that our current environmental crisis is rooted in society's flawed concept of 'humanity': the idea that human beings are superior to other forms of nature and are justified in exploiting it as we please.

To halt environmental disaster, Krenak argues that we must reject the homogenising effect of this perspective and embrace a new form of 'dreaming' that allows us to regain our place within nature. In *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, he shows us the way. An ancestral vision that challenges and confronts the assumptions that sustain Western mentality.

**Andréa Cristina Delaplace** is an art historian and anthropologist. She holds a PhD in Art History from Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. She is a board member of ICOM-CAMOC (International Committee for the Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities).

## *A Programme of Absolute Disorder*: Decolonising the Museum by Françoise Vergès

by Nguye Flora Mutere

### Complicit Museum

Vergès' interrogation of enduring colonial worldviews, institutions, and impact provides evidence of cases of structural racism implicating the museum as an instrument of colonial racist capitalist regimes. This enduring colonial system and logic, where the museum forms a representation that naturalises oppression and racial, class, and gender exploitation. She empathises with her reader, saying that to confront and act on this malaise, "it's not easy, it triggers a fear, even the folks who would benefit hate the idea of complete rupture". Vergès prompts the reader to engage in a keen introspection by posing the question: *What institutions do we want to create? How to repair centuries of destruction and dispossession? How can one resist catastrophic ideology, which posits that the only hope lies in technology?*


*Nguye Flore Mutere reading the title book*. Credit: Muhaji Nasutcha

Invisibilised bodies in the museum are an outstanding theme throughout this text. Recalling the remonstration that "As important as their goals may be, social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches that decentre settler perspectives have objectives that may be incommensurable with decolonisation."[1] Vergès contends that marginalised workers – including security guards, cleaners, cashiers, cultural mediators, and construction workers – can only access museums as invisible labourers due to structural race, class, and gender inequalities. They remain unacknowledged and are excluded from roles as exhibition creators. She seeks institutional redress from empty rhetoric, emphasising that "Decolonisation is not a posture; no institution can be decolonial unless society is decolonised, and the museum does not exist outside the social world that created it." Vergès categorically states that the Western museum is complicit in the accumulation of objects through looting, theft, pillage, and bloodshed. Throughout the book, she remains relentless but masterful in fulfilling her role as a decolonial feminist activist, employing convincing, structured prose and argument that gives a historical conceptualisation of the museum complex and concepts, and exposing the internal social struggles working to subdue, pacify or neutralise liberation struggles.

Vergès systematically breaks down the retrogressive categories that offer 'abstract universalist discourse' in addressing tacit resistance to ideology and approaches that follow a refusal to obtain a 'complete level of humanity'. She draws up a unique spectrum that ranges from the 'better than nothings' — those that acclimatise to surface improvements, clinging to what has been achieved, accepts the bare minimum; to the, 'it'll do-for-now-we-need-to-build-up-our-forces' — forgetting advances, the results of bitter struggles, thus nothing is lastingly enshrined in a system that aspires to undermine social victories; completing with the 'why not?' — why not have the same things as the bourgeois class, why shouldn't the Global South aspire to the Global North, must we relinquish everything Europe created? Therefore, one is hard pressed to escape classification here. There are no fence-sitters or grey areas to flee to, specifically as postcolonial scholars, artists, creators, and makers. Vergès progresses to build up a convincing case that change is necessary, to imagine a transcendent cultural, political and social order. She empowers and equips the practitioner with the ideology to resist the weakening of traces of the colonised other. This text is radical in mobilising, catalysing and strengthening the reader with an imperative to free ourselves from Western ideals.

Vergès details and catalogues a scholarly cultural programme she spearheaded, notably the *Maison des Civilisation set de l'Unité Réunionnaise* (MCUR) project. Here, candid and vulnerable, she depicts the failing and controversy surrounding the MCUR project, which sought to preserve and interpret the world from the Réunionese point of view, set apart from the gaze and framework of French historiography. Then amidst two examples of state negligence and indifference towards definition of Réunionese culture came refusal from state services and here is where a consciousness and awareness converge to Vergès point, this project was viewed as an opposition to the state in 'elaborating the autonomy of the site where the project was to be located' at the behest of the community acknowledging their presence in the land. These real-world lessons and analyses serve to illustrate and educate us in forging refusal as a tactic and in creating imaginaries that become the museum without objects. She relates that it starts from the narrative, the intangible, not the physical fetishised object and document.

**Decolonial Tactics**

Vergès invokes Ruth Wilson Gilmore's "life in rehearsal" discourse, summoning it to define and attend to 'emancipatory utopias', a term to frame fictive speculation as a methodology to carve out spaces of freedom. These are alternate archive possibilities through actions involving imagining for exhibition creation outside of Western thinking. Reminding us that without the work of imagining developed in struggle, namely the Haitian

[1]Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 1(1), 1–40. https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630

Revolution, Maroon communities[2], the Paris Commune, the Algerian Revolution, struggles for Vietnamese independence, feminist, Indigenous, queer, trans, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist movements, Les Soulèvements de la terre, or La Cuillère collectives in the Antilles, Mawon, in Réunion, La Box - would not have formed, emancipating the oppressed. Without the work and space of imagination – of making visible and seeing the possibility, no liberation from slavery, colonialism, and imperialism will occur. Without this construction of practices that engage imagination to ask and think around extraction, imperialism and colonialism, we cannot move beyond that world that brings oppression and devastation to the planet.

She assures us that "disorder is not chaos." Instead, decolonial tactics seek to stimulate our imaginations. They aim to develop institutions that address the question posed by decolonisation as a programme of absolute disorder. These tactics are anti-racist. They devise an ethic of memory and narrative using images and words that inscribe realities in historical narratives. They represent a Black practice of refusal to obey white rules – what Tina Campt[3] calls fugitivity. They require constant attention to work and positions.

She argues that decolonial representation must work to reveal the intrinsic violence of racial capitalism. This includes all that racial capitalism entails: degradation, the exhaustion of bodies and minds, social and premature death, techno-totalitarianism, and an unbreathable and uninhabitable world. However, this revelation must happen without giving way to catastrophism, humiliation and degradation. In no uncertain terms, Vergès inscribes a programme to achieve a balance, the decolonial museum, by proposing a counter museum that engages radical, transformative categorical measures to confront racist imperial patriarchal capitalist logic.

**Formulating the Post-Museum**

Technological determinism, patronage and funding, repatriation, political artistic protest and activism are the multi-dimensional conversations that are required reading for city museums contained in the text. This is a highly stimulating and relevant read that examines and humanises museum operations, collections, and visitors' experience. Cultural institutions of the city are not powerless to contribute, shape, and influence a comprehensive understanding that museums are not neutral. To be informed and attuned about encounters and daily struggles for the freedom of their constituents. It is impossible to decolonise the museum, Vergès states throughout the text, instead, she invites us to pivot, imagining the post-museum, steering museum institutions and programmes to be aware of "the origins of its collections, the property rights that perpetuate the legitimacy of expropriation, and the structural inequalities between major universal and small museums, between the North and South." To actively combat fabricating violent asymmetries and inequalities that perpetuate erasure, non-being, and silences within their programming and the transmission of knowledge and understanding.

https://www.nguyesportfolio.com/

**Nguye Flora Mutere** is a Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) laureate and Next Gen Social Sciences and Research Proposal Fellow. She is undertaking practice-based research that aims to instil storytelling around the forging of identity and belonging to the urban space.

[2]A Maroon is a Black person or a descendant of such a person of the West Indies and Guyana in the 17th and 18th centuries who escaped slavery. Descendants of Maroons can be found today in Jamaica and Cuba, as well as other places in the continents. See Edwards, C. (2021, June 14). Françoise Vergés. *The Studio Visit*. https://thestudiovisit.com/artists-directory/francoise-verges/

[3]Campt is a black feminist theorist of visual culture and contemporary art. See Tina M. Campt Princeton University – Department of Art and Archaeology (n.d.). Retrieved May 10, 2025, https://artandarchaeology.princeton.edu/people/tina-m-campt