

Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska

# Practicing Decoloniality in Museums

A Guide with Global Examples



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*A Guide with Global Examples*

*Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska*

Amsterdam University Press



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The legacies of European colonialism are immeasurably deep, far-reaching and ever-mutating, and so decolonial work and resistance must take on different forms, methods and evolve accordingly.

– Sumaya Kassim, *The Museum Will Not Be Decolonised*



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# Introduction

## Abstract

*Practicing decoloniality in the museum* is the myriad of approaches through which the current hooks of colonialism are being untangled from the museum institution. This chapter provides both an introduction to and an overview of the rest of this book, which is based on a conceptual framework of six aims of decolonization. This framework is coupled with practical examples from the field and around the globe. In this chapter we discuss the process of writing this book, the creation of the framework, the selection of examples, and the audience for whom this book is written.

**Keywords:** museums, decolonization, practicing decoloniality, global, practical examples

## What is the problem?

Colonialism was not just a historical policy concerning the domination of other territories and their peoples. It included racial and racist ideologies to 'legitimize' such domination, the suppression of aspects of identity such as language and traditions, and the propaganda of a Western system of knowledge. Nations, organizations, companies, and individual actors were all involved in differing ways in the broad system of colonialism. It is thus a multi-tentacled entity that continues to influence and affect many aspects of the world today. In the words of Elizabeth Edwards, "the colonial is not merely a question of continuity or rupture, of influence or appropriation, but a presence that is all-saturating, overflowing, ever-present, persistent and fundamental to the experience of contemporary life."<sup>1</sup> It is also thoroughly entangled with the institution of the museum. Colonial exploitations of living beings and resources, theories of racial evolution, notions of civilizing and educating lower classes – all of these and more are cemented into

1 Edwards 2018.

the very foundation of the museum institution. Not only is the concept of the modern museum institution a colonial inheritance, but indeed, many collections, some museum buildings, and even older exhibitions are direct remnants from the colonial era. Colonial perspectives can also be read in today's systems of cataloguing and categorizing.

Since the colonial roots of the museum are so deep and wide-spread, decolonization is not just a matter for 'colonial museums' in the narrowest sense. Colonialism is a societal problem, not merely a problem for museums. As a result, whereas overt coloniality may be restricted to a portion of all the world's museums, decolonizing is relevant to all museums, even brand-new institutions. Decolonizing the museum has regularly been synonymized with the restitution of objects. Though important, this is only one small area where the museum needs to be severed from its colonial ties. That is why we choose to speak of practicing *decoloniality*: a process and a mode of thought that goes deeper into untangling the present-day colonial hooks from the museum. Beyond object repatriation, this could entail changed narratives and word usage in exhibitions, different hiring policies, new educational programs, and above all an awareness of colonial inheritances and problems that are openly discussed and highlighted.

In museums, practicing decoloniality has taken many shapes and forms. Examples abound from all around the world. Some early cases of exhibition projects that took a decolonial approach, such as *Magiciens de la Terre* (*Centre de Pompidou*, France, 1989) and Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (beginning with the *Maryland Historical Society*, USA, 1992), are still referenced or used as inspiration today. Theoretical works, such as the development of the ecomuseum concept in the 1970s,<sup>2</sup> or James Clifford's application of the term 'the contact zone' to museum spaces<sup>3</sup> were highly influential alongside the broad field of post-colonial theories. The establishment of institutions dedicated entirely to formerly under-explored communities and themes, like the *National Museum of the American Indian* (USA, 1989), the *International Slavery Museum Liverpool* (UK, 2007), and the *National Museum of African American History & Culture* (USA, 2016) were landmark events that resonated globally. Internationally, movements and organizations including MuseumDetox, MuseumHue, Decolonize the Museum, and #MuseumsAreNotNeutral have gained visibility and from their external positions managed to affect specific changes, including the hiring or firing of museum staff in leadership positions. Museums have seen their spaces

2 de Varine 1978.

3 Clifford 1997.



**Figure 0.1 A decolonial museology word cloud (the list of terms is suggestive rather than exhaustive)**



Image by Erica Lehrer, *Decolonizing Museum Cultures and Collections: Mapping Theory and Practice in East-Central Europe*, keynote address, 21 October 2020

used by external voices for alternative guided tours, such as Alice Procter's *Uncomfortable Art Tours*, the unique tours by MuseumHack, and the unadulterated audio guides created by Audio Tour Hack. The work-in-progress publication *Words Matter*<sup>4</sup> provided a guide for language use. Though written mainly from the perspective of a Dutch ethnographic museum, it has global relevance and has influenced other museums to change the terminologies used in their exhibitions and collections.

As colonialism has left different marks on different communities and their institutions, decoloniality logically requires a unique approach in every case. Some of these decolonial practices have been evaluated, either by museums, by academics,<sup>5</sup> or by (external) critics, to see if they have 'worked.' Again, the criteria for evaluation and success have been highly dependent on the specific setting and context of each case. Therefore, there is no way to evenly compare decolonial practices, nor is it fruitful to speak of 'best' practices – or 'worst' practices, for that matter. Therefore, this book is a collection of practices, but it does not aim to present evaluations of the examples included.

Instead, this book argues that practicing decoloniality, regardless of the scope or any 'results,' is crucially important for museums. The examples collected in this book aim to share practices from different contexts around the world. They are intended to serve as inspiration to anyone wishing to undertake their own decolonial approach. As the examples will show, practicing decoloniality is a complex issue and there is no one single solution that fits all.

4 Modest and Lelijveld 2018.

5 E.g. Fouseki and Smith 2013.

## What is in this book?

There is no shortage of literature, whether academic or practical, that discusses and describes decolonial practices in museums. However, this literature often has a clearly demarcated focus on a specific type of practice. For instance, literature may focus on decolonizing art museums or ethnographic museums, centering firstly on the type of museum institution. Secondly, a common division is by area of the museum's work in which decolonization takes place, for example, exhibitions, educational programs, tours, staff policy, or collections. Finally, literature may home in on one specific kind of practice: artistic, curatorial, educational, scientific. In doing so, the practices tend to be relevant only for particular museum departments.

In this book, we have opted for a different approach. We have designed a conceptual frame with six *aims of decolonization*. This enables us to make a more thematic division in practicing decoloniality. The six aims are: creating visibility, increasing inclusivity, decentering, championing empathy, improving transparency, and embracing vulnerability. Of course, the ultimate aim of all of them is to untangle the present-day colonial hooks from the museum. These six aims are deliberately designed as rather broad conceptual terms that hinge on an active verb and therefore imply a required action. Our conceptual framework is decidedly *not* a typology. There are no strict criteria to determine which practice fits into which category. The benefit of this is that the framework allows for the inclusion of many different types of practices. As such, our book is of use to all types of museums, activities, and scales.

For this book, following the creation of our conceptual framework, we set out to gather examples of decolonial practices that we could include and share. We were not necessarily only interested in identifying 'best' practices. Rather, we set out to find examples that were diverse in terms of scale, target audiences, actors, and locations. It was important for us for the selection of examples in this book to reveal the specificity of local contexts while also charting the global dimensions of the movement towards decoloniality. Thus, some of the examples in the book are well-known, whereas others are perhaps almost unknown. We include them without evaluation to showcase the principle that all decolonial actions can be impactful, important, or inspirational and that depending on budget and scale practicing decoloniality is always possible in one way or another.

Curating the final selection of examples was difficult in two regards. Firstly, in practice, many examples can be related to more than just one aim of decolonization. Indeed, often the examples fit multiple aims. As



colonialism is entangled with the museum institution on different levels, so too do decolonial practices target multiple such tentacles at once by combining more than one aim into a single practice. Thus, in describing the examples in the chapters, we focused our analysis and description mainly on the aim under which we had placed it, but it will be clear to the reader that other aims can also be identified. Secondly, there is such a wealth of examples to choose from that this became a challenge during the creation of this book. We tried to let diversity be our guide, choosing to represent different regions of the world and different museums, even if often the same institution could have been included with multiple projects. Throughout our selection process, we came across so many additional interesting and relevant examples that we chose to include in each chapter some ‘further examples’ with brief descriptions, but without analysis.

As mentioned, the book is divided into six chapters, each of which focuses thematically on one of our *aims of decolonization*. Firstly, we explore how to create visibility, for instance for histories or persons who have been previously marginalized. Secondly, we discuss increasing inclusivity, that is, how to – meaningfully! – include voices, actions, and perspectives of ‘others’ into the museum. Thirdly, we illustrate decentering, which is any act that aims to shift the norm. Fourthly, we describe ways in which museums can champion empathy among staff and visitors alike. Fifthly, we illuminate ways in which museums can improve transparency, for instance of their own contentious histories. Finally, we argue for the benefit of embracing vulnerability, of admitting what the museum and its staff lack, openly seeking out help, and accepting painful experiences. Each chapter begins with an essay in two parts, the first describing the particular challenges of decolonizing according to that one aim, followed up by the second, describing ways in which change can be approached. After the initial discussion, each chapter contains four practical examples from museums around the world.

It is key to recall that not all examples are directly about colonial exhibitions or objects. After all, as we mentioned above, decolonization is denormalization and decolonial practices are more broadly relevant and necessary than just for overtly colonial museums/exhibitions. Additionally, we need to emphasize that this book is not all-encompassing, nor evenly balanced in terms of geographical or cultural representation. We have chosen examples that show a wide range of ways of achieving specific aims, but at the same time we have been biased towards museums and their practices of which we have personal knowledge. Being able to describe these examples from our own perspective has been helpful, but of course also reveals our personal and professional biases.





This book forms part of the research of the Horizon2020 project ECHOES, which focuses on the core dilemma that while the history of empires and colonialism undoubtedly constitutes a shared European past, this past remains strangely silent in official narratives about Europe's 'heritage.' Part of the ECHOES project has narrowed down its research to center on city museums, seeing cities as hubs where activists, artists, and city museums are at the forefront of re-emerging colonial heritages in the present. The interim results of our in-depth research of decolonial practices in two city museums, the *Amsterdam Museum* and the *Museum of Warsaw*, led us to conceptualize and develop this book. Both of us authors have worked as museum practitioners as well as in the academic field of museum studies. This perspective, a mixture of these two worlds, can be seen throughout the book.

### For whom is this book?

This book is not a typical academic monograph on how museums are decolonizing. It is a conceptual framework to help museum staff, scholars, and students think about practicing decoloniality, coupled with practical examples from the field. This book is primarily for museum staff and cultural practitioners, secondarily for museum studies researchers and students, and naturally also for a generally interested audience of museum visitors and museum lovers.

We know that many museums are interested in practicing decoloniality and that staff at all levels and in all departments may be driven – or required – to engaged in decolonial practices. Of course, we also know that there are many museums where decoloniality has not (yet) been placed on the agenda. For those who wish to make a start, or continue practicing decoloniality, it can be daunting to identify the road forward, or find a how-to guide. A lot of literature is deeply academic and either based on single case studies or broadly theoretical. So, this book is for you. It couples brief, accessible essays with a wide selection of practical examples that are ready to serve as inspiration and guidance. You do not need to have any deep, academic knowledge of post-colonial theories to dive into this book, but it will provide entry points into decolonial thinking and suggestions for further readings to those interested. Most importantly, the examples in this book are selected in a way to hopefully always offer something that can be used or reused in your own institution.

For researchers and students in the field of museum studies, this book provides an entry point into the practical work going on within museum



institutions. It is not a typical academic theoretical treatise, nor is it an analysis of decolonial literature. Instead, it delves into the practical dimension of decoloniality within museum settings. The many examples in this book showcase how diverse and different practicing decoloniality can be in reality. For students who have practical assignments as part of their courses, such as designing an audio tour or exhibition intervention, the examples will be particularly helpful. Additionally, the conceptual framework according to which we have divided the book into essays and examples is unique. Consisting of broadly grouped *aims of decolonization*, it is not a typology. Some of the six aims, such as championing empathy and embracing vulnerability, are not commonly spoken of within the field of decolonial practices. By using this conceptual framework, we have also been able to include examples that might otherwise not immediately be identified as ‘decolonial,’ perhaps because they do not concern overtly colonial collections or institutions.

For those readers who are museum visitors and museum lovers, we hope this book provides insight into practicing decoloniality. If you are part of a community surrounding a museum, the book can provide examples for greater involvement. Thus, it can give you more power to be involved in or influence the museums you care about. Having a greater awareness of the colonial entanglements of the museum and the problems of colonialism will change your visiting experiences and your perspective. You will notice new issues, gaps, or missing narratives. But you will also recognize those cases in which museums have made conscious changes. Practicing decoloniality in the museum is often a lengthy process of many small steps, which may go unnoticed to the wider public. But this book will showcase how all of these steps are crucially important to tearing away the colonial entanglements suffocating museum institutions.

To all of our readers, we hope you will be inspired by this book. For one, we believe the essays in each chapter are starting points to think about specific challenges and changes facing museums of the 21st century. The essays should inspire us to rethink the traditional, entrenched ways in which museums work and to discover ways in which that could be changed. What will the museum of the future be like – if there will even be museums in the future?

Additionally, we hope you will feel encouraged by the practical examples in each chapter. Some of them are easier to implement than others. They may work for only a certain type of museum or intended audience. But the hope is that there is something inspiring in here for any kind of museum that can lead to experimentation and alteration. Although the examples are listed under a single aim of decolonization, you will discover that each example may consist

of a mix of different decolonial practices. Ultimately, since every museum institution is different, with vastly different staff and diverse (intended) audiences, you will need to mix your own recipe for practicing decoloniality.

## How to design your own decolonial practice

Figure 0.2 Infographic *How to design your own decolonial practice*

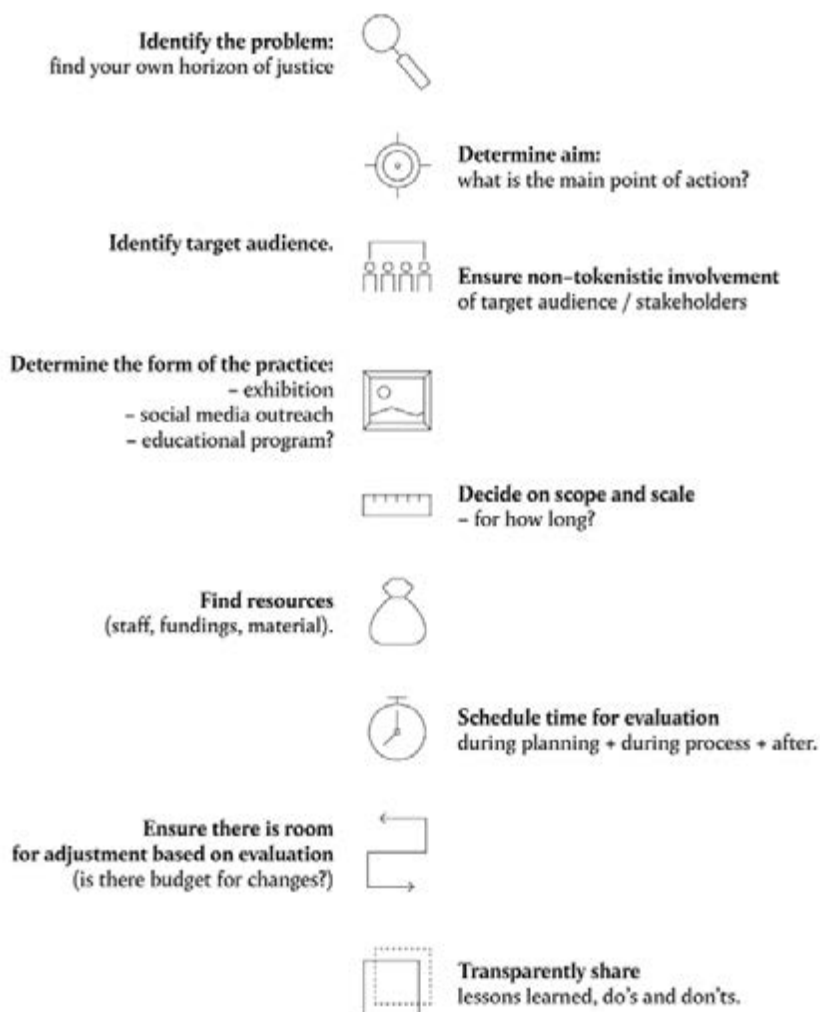


Image by Anna Piwowar, 2021

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