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Dekolonisierung, Kunst, Wissen

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SONDERDRUCK

Dekolonisierung, Kunst, Wissen

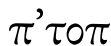
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GAËLLE SHROT

A world »Made in Europe«: German-speaking museums in the decolonising process

ABSTRACT

As the word decolonisation has entered museum practice, it is being declined in many ways. How can we reconcile the various meanings of decolonising with the institution of the museum? This article looks at the meanings that decolonisation has accrued in museums in German-speaking Europe, as well as the possibilities it carries. It first looks at decolonisation in museums as a project to bridge the knowledge gap around colonialism and its consequences. From there, it tries to explore the way colonialism influenced the way we organise and produce knowledge, and what this means for decolonial practices in museums. It then explores decolonisation as a project of power redistribution before looking at it as a project of justice and repair. Finally, it asks whether decolonising museums is even a possible goal.

KEYWORDS

Museums;
Knowledge Production;
Decolonisation;
Epistemic justice;
Collection;
Restitution

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These last two years have seen an irruption in public debate of the word »decolonisation« in connection with public institutions. The word can be found in plays and conferences, on the front page of newspapers, and on October the 12th, 2022, the German Parliament even held a session to discuss the decolonisation of cultural institutions. This shift in the debates brings the negotiations between activists, politicians and institutions to a new terrain: the museums themselves.

Decolonisation can refer to the dismantling of political, economic, cultural, psychological, and epistemic structures that result from colonisation. If we describe colonialism as a series of processes, power relations and technologies that lasted over 500 years across the globe, it becomes clear that decolonisation cannot work as a united, finite process – but must include many approaches, contradictions, and impossibilities. Historically, the term has referred to the projects of colonies' independence from the metropolises, supported by the writing of many political theorists, including Cabral, Césaire and Nkrumah. Adjacent to it, many thinkers commented on psychological decolonisation advocated by Fanon, to cultural – linguistic and artistic, among others – and epistemic decolonisation. This includes the work of postcolonial thinkers, among which Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, the subaltern studies school around Gayatri Spivak and Ranajit Guha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. The term decolonisation now mostly refers to the works of scholars of decolonial theory, originating mostly from South America and gathered around, among others, Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, María Lugones and Walter D'Mignolo, exploring the links between coloniality and modernity. The density and diversity of theory around decolonisation make its condensation in one movement unlikely.

The demands linked to decolonisation have circled around museums for decades, carried by thinkers and activists, and are now gracing official documents. But what does it mean, what can it mean, to decolonise museums in a time when the official recognition of the colonial past of all three countries under review (Ger-

many, Switzerland and Austria) is still faltering? The institution of the museum has been described as a colonial technology that aided in producing a narrative of progress and a racialised, hierarchical vision of the world, a corollary of colonisation and a symbol of modernity. Now even curators of the Humboldt Forum, once once considered a symbol of institutional coloniality, are discussing how to best decolonise it¹. Two moments appear to have accelerated the officialization of this practice in museums: the Black Lives Matter movement and the decision by the German government to support restitutions. Yet no sooner has the word entered institutional vocabulary that it has become co-opted. Sumaya Kassim for instance has said »I too believe the term «decolonising» is being abused by cultural institutions as a consumable product«², the label bringing the legitimacy needed for museums to be recognised. In many cases »decolonial language is often used as a kind of »equity-washing.«³. What are then the limits of this discourse within museums?

Looking at decolonisation in museum discourse in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, this paper will try to see which meanings of decolonisation are relevant to museums. A first aspect is to redress the knowledge gap and spread knowledge about the details and the consequences of colonialism. The second is to look at epistemic structures that were created by colonialism and perpetuate coloniality, as well as to examine the resulting racial power structures. And the third is to work towards a repair of the world. Finally, it will ask if their decolonisation as institutions is even possible.

DECOLONISATION AS KNOWLEDGE ABOUT COLONIALISM

The first relevant implication to decolonisation is the need for a deep historical understanding of what is colonialism. As Françoise Vergès states: »Decolonial representation must work to reveal the intrinsic vio-

1 Dieminger and Ouissa: *In Beziehung setzen*.

2 Kassim: *Museums Are Temples of Whiteness*, 133.

3 Ballo et al.: *The Price*, 34.

lence of racial capitalism in all its implications.«⁴. Colonial projects have shaped the world in many violent ways, destroying lives and destroying worlds, shaping racial and financial inequalities, and the relationship between human and nature. Yet there is ambiguity around the public memory of colonialism in German-speaking Europe – in spite of the decades-long movement by activists, artists and scholars. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch wrote on these absences and silences that »we know many things, but we have either forgotten them, or neglected them, or left them out either due to prudence, or even bad faith or a guilty conscience«⁵. This can be put in parallel with what Charles W. Mills calls global white ignorance, a set of beliefs and deforming frames produced in part by whiteness, that also hides the historical importance of race as a concept⁶. Knowledge thus remains half-hidden in remote corners of academic and activist discourse, easily ignored and always rediscovered.

This historical and memorial haziness requires a concerted effort to undo. Exhibitions on the colonial links of collections and local or national histories of colonialism flourish, first in smaller institutions, then in more established ones – although they tend to stay in temporary spaces, in exhibitions, interventions and events. Following an important exhibition on German colonialism in the German historical museum [Deutsches Historisches Museum] in 2016, many city or local museums have looked at their own collec-

tions, in Hamburg⁷, Freiburg⁸, Berlin⁹ among others. Art museums have also looked at it¹⁰, and all ethnographic museums have had to discuss on the subject in the last few years, be it reflecting on the violent history of their collections or on what they represent¹¹. In Switzerland, the concept of colonialism without colonies¹² has allowed to explore colonial links beyond official state relations and has also slowly made its way into museums, culminating in the exhibition *colonial. Switzerland's global entanglements* in the Swiss national museum in 2024, involving actors from many Swiss museums¹³. In Austria too, exhibitions touch on the subject and a committee has been established at the national level¹⁴. In all three countries, all types of museums have touched on the subject, aided by political support that translates into public funding. In a flurry of activity, restitutions, conversations, conferences and exhibitions are taking place, building on decades of activism, including Black activism¹⁵. Behind the scenes, conferences, training programmes for museums, sets of guidelines and publications appear, a tireless activity to educate professionals, creating a closed circuit of museum knowledge on the topic.

4 »La représentation décoloniale doit travailler à rendre manifeste la violence intrinsèque du capitalisme racial dans tout ce qu'elle comporte« (Vergès: *Programme de Désordre Absolu*, 207), [own translation].

5 »Nous savons beaucoup de choses, mais nous les avons soit oubliées, soit négligées, soit omises par prudence, voire par mauvaise foi ou mauvaise conscience« (Coquery-Vidrovitch: *Enjeux Politiques*, 13), [own translation].

6 Mills: *Global White Ignorance*, 220.

7 <https://www.shmh.de/ausstellungen/grenzenlos-ko-lonialismus-industrie-und-widerstand/> [10.02.2025].

8 <https://alexanderpoetzsch.de/portfolio/freiburg-und-kolonialismus/> [10.02.2025].

9 <https://www.stadtmuseum.de/en/exhibition/dekoloniale-what-remains> [10.02.2025].

10 See for instance: <https://www.kunsthalle-bremen.de/en/view/exhibitions/exb-page/the-blind-spot> [10.02.2025].

11 See for instance: <https://rjm-resist.de/en/exhibition-en/> [10.02.2025] and <https://lindenmuseum.de/difficult-heritage/?lang=en> [10.02.2025].

12 Lüthi, Falk and Purtchert: *Colonialism without Colonies*.

13 <https://www.landesmuseum.ch/colonial> [10.02.2025].

14 <https://www.bmwkms.gv.at/themen/kunst-und-kultur/service-kunst-und-kultur/beiraete-und-gremien/be-ratungsgremium-zu-bestaenden-bundesmuseen-aus-kolo-nialen-kontexten.html> [10.02.2025].

15 Kazeem-Kaminski: *Unearthing*, 80.

This aims to spread what was considered niche knowledge in German-speaking Europe, even as school curricula remain largely unchanged. But it also calls open the question is then who is producing this knowledge, and with what archives, what sources? As educational media, and as such symbolic producers of knowledge and classificatory technology, museums are both well-placed to look into and dismantle existing epistemic structures, but also critically implicated in producing and maintaining these. Which stories can be told through a knowledge system forged from colonial iron?

DECOLONISATION AS EPISTEMIC RE-ENTANGLEMENT

In 2021, during a discussion on the decolonisation of museums, the poet Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, when asked if there was a need for a museum of colonialism, answered: »Aren't all museums museums to colonialism? Aren't all museums museums to slavery? [...] My response would be surely they all are already.«¹⁶. Indeed, they all are: all types of museums (art, ethnographic, history ...) are museums to colonialism, in different ways, as both their disciplinary basis and many of the concepts that underlie them are products of colonialism. Museology, as Bruno Brulon Soares demonstrates, has followed a eurocentrist project based on the coloniality of knowledge, reifying a hierarchisation and compartmentalisation of the world¹⁷. To decolonise then means first try to understand, and then to undo these structures.

The 19th century saw the development of several disciplines that underpin contemporary museums – natural history, ethnography, palaeontology, archaeology, folklore to name but a few, have all either emerged or developed at the time, invariably influenced by their context. Many of them have been developed in colonial contexts, through colonial networks or were themselves colonial sciences. They

produced and reproduced patterns of exclusion, including a racial classification of the world. These disciplines emerged as part of the arsenal of classification, putting in place »an ungenerous taxonomy that segregates kinds and types of knowledge as well as the spaces where ideas are generated«¹⁸. This segregation of knowledge, and in particular between art, ethnography, anthropology and history, has come to shape our understanding of the world, and of the people in it. Today, in German-speaking areas, there is still a distinction between the disciplines of European ethnology, anthropology and area studies such as Indian studies or African studies. There is an unbalance in who produces knowledge and who can have access to exposure, something Nicola Lauré al-Samarai and Peggy Piesche discuss in detail in the context of Black Studies in Germany¹⁹. This question about the power dynamics of knowledge production translates into the way disciplines are used in museums: Shahid Vawda sees in the very act of classification by ethnographic museums, an act that decontextualises objects to make them into representations, a form of epistemic violence²⁰.

This disciplinary taxonomy is reflected in the division between museums, the museum landscape forming what Mirjam Shatanawi has called a »discursive chain«²¹. When each type of museum is taken in relation with the others, the constellation creates a taxonomy that keeps different types of knowledge separate, and through this reinforce our understanding of the world. On one side, regional museums are implicitly defined by concepts of the nation as well as Europe. In contrast, ethnographic museums are still constructed as non-European [*außereuropäisch*], but do not in truth follow geographic patterns: it is whiteness that is outlined by the collections. Associations generated by the disciplinary taxonomy, supported by the existence of separate museums, create and reinforce these

16 Stuart Hall Foundation: *Can the museum be decolonised?* [01:07:19].

17 Brulon Soares: *The Anticolonial Museum*.

18 McKittrick: *The Smallest Cell*, 47.

19 Lauré al Samani et al.: *Exclusionary Acts*.

20 Vawda: *Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice*, 77.

21 Shatanawi: *Museum Narratives*, 163.

epistemic landscapes. Together, these museums form a picture of the world »made in Europe«.

Contemporary to the formation of these disciplines, collections gathered outside of Europe, including natural history collections, follow similar patterns, and were mostly taken around colonial networks in deeply extractive ways. Ethnographic collections, often the product of coercion, when not outright theft, were often gathered in conjunction with human remains, meant to establish a typology of human being²². Charles Mulinda Kabwete, Maurice Mugabowagahunde and Jérôme Karanga have shown that this was a very organised endeavour, »a comprehensive industry for the theft of Human Remains«²³. They formed the basis of a later racist science which must be viewed together with the frenzied collecting of cultural objects. It is a general racist worldview which informed and sustained the collection process. The knowledge that was gathered and developed around these collections is also deeply colonial in nature. Natural history collections also follow this pattern, and current research practices are still extractive in nature. Dissociating these collections from the context they were established in is also misleading: their history matter.

This is why processes of decolonisation implicate all sorts of museums, including art museums, archaeological and natural history museums, beyond the focus that has been given to ethnographic museums, where most decolonising initiatives have taken place. It is this compartmentalisation of the world, acted, filed and catalogued with collections built on violence and injustice, reinterpreted by disciplines built on a Eurocentric worldview and framed by museums formed in this history that restrict the possible interpretations and meanings, and prevent an in-depth epistemic re-imagining. What stories can then be told in these places that already structure the gaze of their visitors before they enter them? What this call for is an epistemic re-entanglement of these visions, in order to re-link these museums and these disciplines, an un-doing of

this unceasing compartmentalisation. Understanding the shaky foundations that ethnographic museums are built on, Boaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung asks if we are witnessing the »death throes of the ethnographic museum«²⁴. Indeed, ethnographic museums and the epistemic violence they carry might need to die, not because there are no meaningful stories to be told about other parts of the world, but because they cannot be told on the ruins of the 19th century imperialist projects. Yet most projects shy away from such sweeping changes. In order to disrupt this white, Eurocentric worldview, museums have to bring in the »voices« of those that can help them.

DECOLONISATION AS POWER REDISTRIBUTION

Another way of looking at decolonisation is to consider it, as Bruno Brulon Soares does, as a way of redistributing power in the museum – after a process of deconstruction and reconstruction²⁵. Inscripting decolonisation initiatives into a longer history of critical museology, he sees them as an exercise in sharing the museum, which is not in danger, but disputed²⁶. Yet who are the stakeholders who can share these museums, and under which conditions? Who could disrupt the eurocentric colonial gaze buttressed by the museum apparatus? Implied are here so-called »source communities« and diasporic communities in Europe, minorities in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, marginalised communities demanding access to representational power – the possibility to write their own stories and not only to be written about. In order to bring in different perspectives and voices into institutions that remain desperately white, a first possibility is to bring in external people, intermediaries who offer commentary, as artists and thinkers, or through participative projects, and as co-curators. A second possibility is to encourage the diversification of staff, while a third is to create collaborations with institutions abroad.

22 Heeb et al.: *Human Remains*.

23 Kabwete et al.: *The Colonial Context*, 86.

24 Soh Bejeng Ndikung: *South Remembers*.

25 Brulon Soares: *The Anticolonial Museum*.

26 Ibid., 131.

Bringing in people who are external to the institution usually brings questions of power dynamics, as the framing, initiative and mastery over the project ultimately rest in the hands of the institution, whether it concerns diaspora groups, groups of people who have migrated or »source communities« (an essentialising term in itself). Wouter Hillaert clearly describes the ambiguities of the work of Black artists working with institutions²⁷, and the rush of institutions and art dealers from the Global North towards African artists also feels exploitative²⁸. In many ways, exhibiting the work of artists engaging with these ideas allows museums to outsource political statements, and to profit from their political commitment. Participative projects also have their own pitfalls, sometimes leading to difficult experiences for participants. An important question is how productive and how sustainable these projects are, often happening on the edge of organisations, and how exploitative they can be²⁹. These precarious positions, on the margin of institutions, are often badly remunerated.

The questions tend to be similar when talking about bringing a more diverse workforce: not only are there fears of these inclusions being tokenistic and leaving people powerless, but the onus to effect transformation in institutions then falls on individuals, demanding too much of them³⁰. Several programmes have emerged, mostly in Germany, to allow for the hiring of People of Colour³¹ in cultural institutions, including the programme 360 degrees, running from 2018 to 2025, creating »diversity« or »outreach« position³². In November 2021, a conference on the programme – attended by more than 300 people – was titled »Impatience« [*Ungeduld*], reflecting the frustration of practitioners with the glacial pace of change, and displayed

initiatives thwarted by the rigid structure of institutions. In the meantime, more and more positions are explicitly created for people with minority experiences or asking for knowledge of specific languages. But the new positions are often precarious, reproducing what Nora Landkammer calls the »combo diversity/precarity«³³. Many people end up feeling burnt out, navigating the labyrinth of intuitional diversity that Sara Ahmed has described³⁴.

Endeavours of museums working with people who are descendants of those who were implicated in colonial histories outside of Europe, whose heritage (material, spiritual, but also ecological and scientific) is now in European museums, are characterised by their power imbalance. These collaborations, co-curations and co-creations cannot happen on equal ground as the power remains with the European institution³⁵. A redistribution of power cannot happen in German-speaking museums in the same way that it does in the Brazilian museums that Brulon Soares interrogates, due to the distance – geographic, but also politically enforced – between the communities that could claim this heritage and the holders of the collection. This »inequality of access«³⁶ means that, as proxies, museums often work with diaspora groups, People of Colour or people who have migrated. Recently, exhibitions and talks have been organised around the experience of Black people in German-speaking Europe, disproportionately in ethnographic museums. The corollary is that this situates minority discourse in ethnographic museums, symbolically outside of majority society. These implications still need to be explored.

Redistributing power in museums seems to be an elusive goal. In these initiatives, the power remains in the hands of the institutions, as they select, and sometimes essentialise, these intermediaries through invitation processes. And through it all, there is a danger

27 Hillaert: *Decolonising Cultural Institutions*.

28 Adeagbo: *Why Are so Many African*.

29 Vid. Kassim: *The Museum Will Not Be Decolonised*.

30 Ballo et al.: *The Price*.

31 For the use of People of Colour, see El-Tayeb and Thompson: *Alltagsrassismus*.

32 Zosik: *Diversität Als Zukunftsfaktor*.

33 Landkammer: *Das Museum verlernen?*, 633.

34 Ahmed: *On Being Included*.

35 Brulon Soares: *The Anticolonial Museum*.

36 Eyssette: *The Renovation*.

of co-optation and tokenisation³⁷. Many professionals in German-speaking museums do share the opinion of Yvette Mutumba, that decolonial perspective needs to be an integral part of museum work³⁸. Yet the disciplines, the collections, the education of the museum professionals, the borders of the institution itself all limit the impact of decolonial theories on museums. The very structure of project work, precarious and operating under time constraint, makes museums unable to affect the changes that they are looking for, as these projects occur without changing the structure of institutions³⁹. What they do is to relocate critiques from outside the walls and marginalised voices inside the institution, where they can be controlled and incorporated into institutional functioning. To evade this, Olivier Marboeuf imagines new modes of financing in order to escape institutions, creating new spaces⁴⁰. Yet the claims of all these stakeholders are coming closer to the surface, asking for more than participation: for justice, in the form of accountability, representation and reparation.

DECOLONISATION AS JUSTICE, DECOLONISATION AS REPAIR

The idea of repair, of justice has also become essential to discourses of decolonisation. Many museums have adopted the language of activism, of social justice, both in their production geared towards the public, on social media, in the events they host, in exhibitions such as in the Exhibition *Resist! The Art of Resistance*, in 2021 in the Rautenstrauch Joest Museum in Cologne, and on a meta-level in numerous scientific publications. Following Gayatri Spivak's concept of epistemic violence, Miranda Fricker has developed a concept of epistemic injustice, in which she looks specifically at a testimonial injustice, where non-white voices are discredited, and a hermeneutical injustice, a lack of »collective interpretative resources« to make sense

of their experience⁴¹. These have added to a growing discourse on epistemic justice, reparation and repair: the 2022 Berlin Biennale was called *From Restitution to Repair*⁴². Magalie Bessone, examining contemporary responsibilities for slavery in the French context, has proposed three key actions to effect reparations: establish and disseminate a sound historical knowledge, encourage the systemic de-racialisation of social relations, and establish preferential policies to help populations that were systematically marginalised⁴³. In the same way, seeing colonialism as a historical injustice to repair implies just this: recognise and teach far and wide what colonialism is and the consequences it has today on our world, encourage the systemic unlearning of colonial imaginaries and patterns and provide policies allowing for the expression of other epistemologies beyond Europe.

Repair starts with acknowledgement. Part of the historical reckoning is looking at violence of colonialism, embodied in museum collections. Whether mineral, zoological or ethnographic, they recall a history of loot, theft and coercion⁴⁴. This had been addressed by individual museums internally in various projects on provenience research – the Linden Museum for instance released a report in 2018⁴⁵ – and the German Museum Association published guidelines on the care of collections from colonial contexts⁴⁶. While some talks can also be quite critical, provenience research in itself is not a disruptive process, and also must be examined in-depth. Albert Guaffo has also spoken about provenience research adopting colonial categories and language⁴⁷. The debate seems to be mostly centred around the notion of a clear »context of injustice«, a notion which is both vague and limiting. In

37 Marboeuf: *Suites décoloniales*.

38 Mutumba and Grosse: *Kanon, Wissen, Sprache*, 114.

39 Vergès: *Programme de Désordre*, 156)

40 Marboeuf: *Suites décoloniales*, 114.

41 Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice*, 1.

42 <https://12.berlinbiennale.de/program/from-restitution-to-repair/> last accessed 17.02.2025

43 Bessone: *Faire justice de l'irréparable*, 211.

44 Machona and Legall: *Possessions*.

45 Grimme: *Provenienzforschung*.

46 Lang: *Umgang mit Sammlungsgut*.

47 Guaffo: *Terminologie in Der Provenienzforschung*.

Germany and Austria, this debate was grafted on the debate around the restitution of art to Jewish families dispossessed during the Nazi regime, which brings in its own set of assumptions. In a keynote address to a conference on restitution in 2022, Bénédicte Savoy raised an important point: if the violence of the taking of objects is fully known and made transparent in museums, how will it be possible to enjoy even viewing them in that context?⁴⁸

Although restitution has been a topic since the moment of collection, it became particularly present in the decades following independence of many colonies and was debated internationally in the 1970s and 1980s, the opposition from European museums and cultural institutions eventually succeeding in burying the topic⁴⁹. Following the publication of the very mediated report of Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy at the behest of Emmanuel Macron, restitution has come back to the fore. The German government's decision to return their collection of Benin Bronzes in 2021 has endorsed the idea. Following this, Austria has appointed a council to discuss returns in 2021⁵⁰, and Switzerland has established a group to discuss the return of the Benin Bronzes specifically, although both countries have so far been fairly timid on the matter. It has also become a diplomatic tool as this affinity for restitution is linked to the geopolitical and diplomatic manoeuvres of European presence in Africa⁵¹. Several ethnographic museums have explicitly campaigned in favour of restitution, including the Grassi museum in Leipzig, headed by Leontine Meijer-Van Mensch, and the Rauterstrauch-Joest Museum in Köln, headed by Nanette Snoep, both very vocal supporters of restitution who have been attacked as a consequence. Several museum exhibitions – in ethnographic museums – have addressed the topic. Yet the restitution process

is far from being smooth, and negotiations that happen at the state level often leave out the main interested parties⁵². The terms of the debate are also set by Western museums themselves: a recent report by Molemo Moiloa from the project Open Restitution Africa has highlighted the marginalisation of African voices in the discussion⁵³. Beyond ethnographic museums, these discussions are also relevant for all collections taken in colonial context.

The restitution of Ancestral Remains has remained a separate discussion – the need to return is barely disputed anymore, a strong activist demand for return having eroded institutional reluctance⁵⁴. While talk about the restitution of cultural objects is aimed at ethnographic museums, Ancestral Remains are mostly in the care of Natural History Museums and anthropological collections in universities. And yet they were brought to Europe at a time when ethnography and physical anthropology were not separate, participating of the same wish to classify and hierarchise human beings, which is why it is important to grasp them together. There are multiple guidelines for museums on how to return and care for them in a humanising way. Thus returns occur, albeit sporadically, not least because of the difficulty of conducting the research for remains that have been long ignored⁵⁵. It is hard to get an estimate of the magnitude of these collections across institutions in the Global North, but the recent report commissioned by the association Berlin Dekolonial counts more than 21,000 across the four largest Berlin collections⁵⁶. It is vital to link these two discussions of restitution, as well as to acknowledge the sheer scale of this operation. In this, the difference of tone and clarity between the careful German scientific language and the emotional and direct language of non-European actors is often quite pronounced, re-

48 Savoy: *A Monument to Burnt Villages?*

49 Savoy: *Afrikas Kampf um seine Kunst*.

50 <https://www.bmwmks.gv.at/themen/kunst-und-kultur/service-kunst-und-kultur/beiraete-und-gremien/beratungsgremium-zu-bestaenden-bundesmuseen-aus-kolonialen-kontexten.html> [10.02.2025].

51 Hamm: *German and French Colonial Restitution*.

52 Adjei and LeGall: *Fifteen Colonial Thefts*.

53 Moiloa: *Reclaiming Restitution*.

54 Reimann et al.: *We Want Them Back*.

55 Heeb et al.: *Human Remains*.

56 Reimann et al.: *We Want Them Back*. 205.

minding us of the violence and coloniality of museum language⁵⁷.

Restitution of just one of the paths to repair that can be acted upon museums, along with ideals of epistemic justice. In truth museums cannot act alone in deeper projects of repair, which include reparations. In this, they are dependant on initiatives around the globe for whom artefacts or ancestral remains have a far deeper meaning than they do for depots in Europe. The glaring injustice, the wound represented is far too deep to be anywhere near closed as long as collections are not systematically inventoried and returned – again, a project that needs political will, effort and funding, but that is the prerequisite for any collaboration.

CONCLUSION

Decolonisation cannot be a system with a finite destination – you cannot undo, or possibly even untangle what results from colonialism in the world. As Ariella Aïsha Azoulay has said, »it is impossible to decolonise the museum without decolonising the world«⁵⁸. This world museums represent, made in Europe, has yet to be rethought from within institutions. Maybe the word decolonisation is not the right one as it concerns museums, yet it has come to crystallize these ideas of relinquishing of authorship, of acknowledging the past and making other perspectives visible. It can both be productive, giving a direction to isolated efforts, as well as obfuscate specific issues. The increasing visibility of colonial history, the reworking of disciplines,

the opening of institutions to new voices, the pathways opened by restitution, however flawed, timid or cynical, are shifting the background of the discourse. Yet many initiatives remain superficial – a nice quote on the wall does not a decolonial approach make – due to the very nature of museum work.

Museums cannot decolonise themselves. The profound changes that are needed to re-link these collections and create new spaces to talk about the world require letting go of institutions more than many people are either willing to admit or able to consider. The nature of project work, dependant on limited funding (always an election away from disappearing), prevents the sweeping changes which would be needed. By incorporating critique into institutional life, it also maintains the status quo in institutions. It keeps institutions chasing after grants, and leaves them unchanged as the funding dries out, another report on the table. Restitution, and beyond it, repair, is also not the province of individual, well-intentioned actors, but a political project. When power and funding remain within this system, how can a deeply entrenched Eurocentric view, this world made in Europe, become anything else? But the unceasing work from outside the institutions as well as from within is not in vain, even if it cannot, without a commitment to radical change, break down the concrete foundations of institutions. It will eventually grow roots that may damage the buildings and let leaves and flowers grow through the cracks.

57 Vawda: *Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice*, 77.

58 Alli: Ariella Aïsha Azoulay.

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