

‘Collaborative Projects as Means to Transcend Western Epistemologies’

Diego Ballester

University of Bonn

Erik Petschelis

University of São Paulo

In the last three decades, museums and museological practices that are fundamentally based on Western knowledge systems have been strongly questioned by a collective that includes Indigenous Peoples, political activists, representatives of civil society and scholars. In the historiographic reconstructions promoted by the academy, one of the touchstones is the so-called ‘new’ museology of the mid-1980s (Vergo 1989).

The former called attention to the metonymic reduction of cultural complexity to one or two objects. Transforming the museum into an object of epistemological reflection, they claimed to move away from its conception as a static repository of cultural memory and redefine it as a place of social construction and change (Reca 2016). Interestingly, this ‘novel’ epistemological turn promoted by Western academia barely mentioned or omitted to refer to the experiences of the community museums that emerged in Latin America and Africa in the mid-1960s (Varine 1992). Nor did they account for resolutions arising from international meetings such as the Santiago de Chile Round Table (1972) or the first workshop on ‘Ecomuseums and New Museology’ in Quebec (1984), where objections were raised to the mode in which museological collections were exhibited, conserved and managed.

However, this critical turn, although having encouraged collaboration with Indigenous Peoples, occurred in a context of political, epistemological and cultural inequality (Ballester and Rattunde 2021). The persistence of the asymmetries of coloniality was reflected in the exhibitions, which continued to be conceived for a largely non-native audience, not considering indigenous knowledge systems in their development or marginalizing them (Chandra 2015; Coronil 1996; Mignolo 2014; Muñoz-Reed 2019; Sauvage 2010; Soares and Leshchenko 2018).

In this way, critical voices outside the academy strongly objected the epistemological and ontological hegemony of museums, which separated the exhibited objects from the multiplicity of histories, knowledge and subjectivities that signified them to materialize and objectify the ordering of the global social system (Ballester and Rattunde 2021).

Museums that became places of symbolic and political dispute, as well as of cross-cultural encounters and political negotiation, were objects and subjects of decolonial criticism (Peers and Brown 2003; Fabian 2004; Geismar 2018; Gonçalves 2009; Henare et al. 2007; Miller 2005; Pasztory 2005; Thomas 1991).

The struggle for epistemological and ontological sovereignty over the access, administration and exhibition of objects of material culture driven by individuals and/or communities outside institutionalized spaces went far beyond the claim to be given partial or total access to the objects. This struggle challenged the control of the discourses generated from the objects and the imposition of aphasia on a particular group by others (Ballesterro and Rattunde 2021). This was one of the central axes of community museology experiences in the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Brazil, where Indigenous Peoples demanded a power relationship of equality in the exchange of knowledge and resources (Barringer and Flynn 1998; Carr-Locke 2015; Clifford 1997; Haas et al. 2009; Hauenschild 1998; Horwood 2015; McCarthy and Cobleby 2009; McCarthy 2011; Russi and Abreu 2019; Smith 2019).

The above elements were discussed at length in the panel on 'Collaborative curation as a means to transgress Western epistemologies' that the editors of this volume organized at the fifteenth Congress of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) held online in 2021. One of the key points raised was the need to highlight the voices of the Global South, to strengthen transatlantic dialogues with colleagues and experiences developed in other latitudes, and especially to incorporate into the debate examples of the collective and collaborative production of anthropological knowledge.

By considering the fundamental role of material culture studies, the anthropology of art, the anthropology of objects and especially decolonial criticism, the contributions in this volume account for the importance of objects in the agency, mediation and materialization of discourses, social relations, knowledge, subjectivities and memories (Appadurai 1986; Gell 1998; Santos Granero 2009). But there is more: in recent decades, collaborative projects have come to be seen as capable not only of rethinking musealization processes, but also of creating knowledge through intercultural dialogues and proposing a critical approach to the scientific disciplines with which material culture is engaged, as well as to the humanities that aim to comprehend human behavior (Onciul 2015; Mignolo 2009; Mignolo and Vázquez 2013).

This means that the contributions to this volume not only discuss different forms of collaborative projects that do or do not deal with material culture, as well as the consequences of these partnerships for knowledge production, they primarily raise fundamental questions: What does 'collaboration' mean in fact? Are there different sets of significance and therefore of practices? Is this a sort of umbrella concept?

To deconstruct the concept of collaboration in the first place is precisely one of the axes of this special issue. In this sense, its contributions provide a series of critical perspectives on the epistemological and ontological deconstruction of museological practices, which include the epistemological meanings, practical limitations, ethical and political consequences of the concept of collaboration, the asymmetrical power

structures/relations of traditional museological practices and their plausible futures, the decolonizing potential of collaborative curation for museological agendas and praxis, the transcendence of local community agendas, the possibilities and limits of cooperation with stakeholders from the creator communities of the musealized objects, the need to consider the pluriversity of the public involved in exhibitions, and, in a much broader sense, the possibilities of decolonizing anthropology itself through intellectual partnership with Indigenous Peoples. Therefore, the articles of this special issue complement and, mainly, respond to the omission or absence of several points in the literary production of Western academic and museum sectors.

With this special issue, we intend to establish a process of multi-sited, transatlantic and interdisciplinary dialogue between different experiences of collaborative projects. We want to contribute to the visibilization of knowledge systems, subjectivities and agencies that have been historically marginalized, silenced or denied by museological practices that are based almost exclusively on Western knowledge systems. Far from imposing a particular form of collaborative project, this special issue presents several examples that demonstrate the viability of pluriversal museological and academic practices, where all actors, knowledge systems, subjectivities and agencies are equal in their differences.

This special issue is divided into two sections. The first, 'Institutions and Collaborative Projects', focuses on the deconstruction and analysis of the concept of 'collaboration' itself, as well as on projects with so-called 'source' or 'production' communities. Through their case studies, the four articles which are part of this section demonstrate the complex boundaries and relations between the actors involved in collaborative projects, as well as providing anthropologists and museum staff with discussions about the decolonization of museum practices and the democratization of knowledge production. The second section, 'Collaborative Projects: Paths and Narratives', is very much in consonance with the first, not only because they both address discussions and themes that provide for theoretical as well as practical actions in order to change the relationship between museum and university staff and Indigenous Peoples, but also because they challenge the proper meaning of the concept of collaboration, which is one of the key-discussions in this special issue. Nevertheless, the three articles which constitute this section move away from the established relationship between the museums and source communities by arguing in favour of collaboration with other persons who are also central concerns of museums, by discussing collaborative practices from an inside point of view and by showing these practices beyond museums and material culture towards a decolonization of anthropology itself.

In the article that inaugurates the special issue and its first section, 'Institutions and Collaborative Projects', Julia Ferloni, Alina Maggiore and Florent Molle, based on the example of the Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean (Mucem) in Marseille (France), discuss the proper concept of 'collaboration' in its practical multiple meanings in the engagement with vulnerable communities, focusing on the questions of the recognition, durability and remuneration of the work of the latter's individuals.

As the authors point out, these elements show that, although there has been an important change in traditional museological practices, there are still material and symbolic inequalities within collaborative practices.

Following this, Marília Xavier Cury gives an account of the resonance and importance of curatorship and indigenous agency in the processes of decolonizing museums in Brazil. She gives space to indigenous voices, highlighting their experience in curating exhibitions that promote the indigenous right to musealization. Based on her long-term collaboration with the Guarani and Kaingang people, Cury remarks that the inclusion of indigenous voices is a necessary condition for the construction of a decolonial agenda and a new museological praxis.

The contribution of Susanne Boersma and Dachil Sado discusses the limitations of collaborative conservation through the example of the participatory project 'daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives' at the Museum Europäischer Kulturen (Berlin, Germany). In this way, they address the continuity of colonial epistemological structures in museological practices based on collaborative curation projects with forced migrants. Drawing on the first-person experiences of former participants, museum professionals and the authors themselves, the article suggests that the decolonization of current museological practices and structures cannot be achieved without profound structural change in personnel, collection-management systems and especially an anti-discriminatory agenda.

Following on, Ilja Labischinski, Barbara McKillip-Erixson, Wynema Morris and Elisabeth Seyerl-Langkamp analyse the possibilities and limits of cooperation with creator communities. They base this on a five-year collaborative project with the Nebraska Indian Community College for the creation of an exhibition on the Umo^{ho} community for the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. By accounting for the embedded persistence of colonial contexts in the collections of ethnological museums, the article accounts for the potential of the latter as spaces of resistance against colonialism, as sites that intersect the community and connect them to the collective memory of their ancestors, and finally how this exhibit offers visitors a deeper insight into the world view of the Umo^{ho} and the core issues of their past and current reality.

These case studies focus on the epistemological potential of collaborative projects involving material culture and show how the cross-cultural encounter of scholars and source communities' experts may contribute to the decolonization of anthropological knowledge and to the transcendence of Western epistemologies in museum practices. In this sense, they not only critically discuss the concept of collaboration itself but also follow its unfolding in and beyond ethnographic museums.

The following three articles discuss the theme of collaboration from another perspective and with a different engagement. They constitute the second section of the special issue on 'Collaborative Projects: Paths and Narratives' and address the possibilities, arrangements, tensions and cooperation within and around collaborative projects from another point of view.

Anna Szöke's piece recalls the experiences of the first Preproom project at the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde in the German city of Leipzig, which aims to be a safe space for residents, museum staff and the audience to create a process of dialogical curation. Through the democratic access to this working place, the museum intends to deconstruct the asymmetrical power relations between the different actors within this institution, as well as to discuss curatorial epistemic challenges and propose dialogues about differences of ontologies in the museums, political engagement and affective reactions to the exhibitions and storage rooms.

In the following article, Heba Abd el Gawad offers a deeply critical reflection on collaborative projects between Western researchers and institutions with indigenous communities. Based on her experience as an indigenous Egyptian heritage and museum researcher, she argues that the Eurocentric decolonization project is characterized by its strategic narcissism because it ignores the lived experience and the scientific contributions of Indigenous Peoples. While it is a moral project framed by Global North academic institutions, it is based upon an exploitative extraction of indigenous knowledge, which means that collaborative projects are an extension of the colonial matrix of power themselves. So much more than merely personal dissatisfaction, this article provides powerful insights into the moral and ethical normativities that are framed by academic institutions, as well as an invitation for self-reflection and a proposal for the decolonization of decolonization.

In the last contribution of this special issue, Wolfgang Kapfhammer and Luana Lila Orlandi Polinesio describe their experience of an introductory course on Amazonian life-worlds at the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich with colleagues from the Núcleo de Estudos da Amazônia Indígena (NEAI) of the Brazilian Federal University of Amazonas (UFAM). The article is a multi-voiced report in which indigenous and German students share their insights regarding anthropology *with* and not *about* Indigenous Peoples. By filling the enormous gap existing in the bibliography on decolonizing methods of teaching anthropology, this article, which is rather a polyphonic experimental ethnographic piece than an analytic study, discusses the meanings of anthropology from the indigenous point of view and the possibilities of breaking 'through the wall of silence on the metropolitan "contact zone"'.

The contributions in this special issue show us a series of aspects that can contribute significantly to constructing alternatives that transcend Western epistemologies. Firstly, it shows that a collective and horizontal dialogue between researchers living and working in the Global South or the Global North is possible and, most importantly, necessary if we are to overcome the traditional structures and dynamics of knowledge production. At the same time, this dialogical process results in a knowledge profuse in its quality and pluridiverse in its content. Finally, the contributions to this special issue categorically expose the fallacy of the universalist pretensions of museology and curatorial practices based exclusively on Western-centric epistemes, demonstrating the

urgent imperative of a world where many forms of museology and curatorial practices can co-exist.

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