Do We Care? Reflections on the Multi-Layered Challenges and Opportunities Posed by a Decolonial Approach to Collection-Based Museum Practices

Nadia Kabalan
Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Myriam Perrot
Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Szandra Tebbe
Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Abstract: Collections play a crucial role as a meeting point between community stakeholders, guest researchers, international fellows and museum staff, while also carrying the traces of a violent (colonial) past. Conceived as a cross-disciplinary open conversation between the fields of museology, design and fellowship coordination, this article raises questions within the framework of the decolonial ambition of the Collaborative Museum, highlighting notions of care, critiques of racism and a hierarchy-critical understanding of interdisciplinary collaboration.
[ethnographic collections, decolonization, preservation, critique of racism, museum design, transdisciplinarity]

Introduction

The Collaborative Museum (CoMuse), which was initiated at the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin in 2023, comprises over forty international collaborative projects and hosts regular international fellowship programmes. It aims to foster the decolonization of museum practices, promote greater accessibility, and encourage transcultural collaboration across institutional and disciplinary boundaries. As non-curatorial staff engaged with CoMuse from different professional backgrounds – museology (Myriam), design (Szandra) and fellowship coordination (Nadia) – we are coming together after two years to reflect critically on the project's decolonial ambition: Where do we currently stand with regard to our respective fields of practice? What are the aspects we believe need greater attention in the future of the Collaborative Museum project (CoMuse), as well as regarding the transformation of museum practices at the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst? Where is the potential for greater understanding and exchange on a more equal footing, given the intensification of diversification and transcultural collaboration? We

 10.60827/zfe/jsca.v150i2.8875

have deliberately chosen to speak from the vantage point of non-curatorial staff. We believe this is essential, as decolonization should not be the concern of those who usually produce discourse alone but should extend across all strata of the institution. Given the three different functions and perspectives, each with its own concerns, it is essential for us to articulate our own positioning clearly by avoiding the use of supposedly neutral language. As Julian Dörr argues, giving up the idea of neutrality is a premise for efforts towards decolonization in the museum, as it begins by questioning assumed certainties and shaking up one's own conceptual framework (Dörr 2022). In alignment with Clémentine Deliss's assertion that a decolonization process requires moving beyond boundaries that are delineated by traditional disciplines (Deliss 2020), we pursue a reflexive dialogue across various fields of practice. To remain true to the nature of our day-to-day critical exchanges at the museum, we have chosen the principle of collective creation in textual form as we enter into a layered dialogue. Throughout the text, each one of us has highlighted concepts, terms or examples in bold that are central to our arguments and that the following author refers to in more detail or approaches differently in the course of the exchange. Using this format, we seek not only to articulate our reflections, but also to embody an approach that disrupts traditional hierarchies of discourse production and opens up a space for alternative ways of engaging and producing knowledge within the museum.

Moments of Encounter

(Myriam) Over the course of the Collaborative Museum, there has been a distinctive intensification of visits to the museum's storage spaces as part of an advocated decolonial effort to improve access to them. Various guests, fellows, artists and community stakeholders have entered the collections for shorter or longer periods of time in order to engage with the material culture held in their premises and to which they are connected.

I have had the opportunity to host various visits to collections in the storages of the Ethnologisches Museum and have always found these moments of encounter an eye opener for grasping the underlying rationale operating within the institution. Having worked in the collections on a day-to-day basis, I see myself as having incorporated a kind of **'conservation habitus'** over time (Perrot 2022). That is, I have developed methods to orient myself within the collections and strategies to engage with museum 'objects'[1] which are representative of a Western positivist conservation rationale. If finding my way through the multitude of corridors that make up the

1 We have chosen to refer to 'object' in quotation marks in order to problematise assumptions around the term that are deeply rooted in a Western positivist world-view, while recognizing that a significant part of the museum's work is to this day built around this kind of terminology.

huge storage rooms of the museum might now seem intuitive to me, I have seen visitors react to the location of the collections, their scenography and composition with a sense of shock and often a feeling of emotional heaviness. The Eurocentric logic by which museum 'objects' are classified, as well as the sheer quantity of 'objects' accumulated and visible across the multitude of cabinets, are just a few manifestations that testify to the **colonial legacy** that is embodied in the collections. My experience of accompanying visitors into the collections has shown me that, far from being a neutral moment, a visit to the museum's collections is intersected by **power relations** inherited from a violent history that can evoke strong emotional responses in those who enter its facilities.

The Museum as a Political Space

(Nadia) When considering the **colonial legacy** of collections, I think that the notion of the museum as a political space is helpful in understanding the kind of **power** dynamics at work in the context of museum collections. In my day-to-day work as a fellowship coordinator, where I had the chance to accompany CoMuse Fellows on their first visits to the collections, I could sense the weight that lies on this special place and its history. Scholars who have pushed critical museum theory forward in recent decades have pointed out the political and social dimensions of museums. They have coined the idea of museums as 'speaking spaces' (Bal 1996:87ff.) and 'contact zones' (Clifford 1997) of ongoing negotiation that challenge given power asymmetries, highlighted the importance of 'radical democratic' participation (Sternfeld 2018, Simon 2010), or emphasized the need for restitution, justice and the redistribution of knowledge (Sarr and Savoy 2018).

Mahret Ifeoma Kupka argues that the museum is not a depoliticized space, but rather a political space 'that has always either excluded those categorised as different or turned them into exhibited "objects"' (Kupka 2022). It is precisely these power mechanisms of exclusion that, in my opinion, require more attention when considering colonial continuities, collection visits and the museum's responsibility for decolonization today. The Guidelines for German Museums published by the Deutscher Museumsbund highlight the significant 'overlap' between colonialism and racism (Deutscher Museumsbund 2021a:26). They remind us that 'labelling and categorizing collection items originated in western museums' follows a 'Eurocentric way of thinking' (ibid. 2021:52) and that they 'may contain discriminatory images and reflect colonial or racist ideologies' (ibid. 2021:20). 'The ethnic groups constructed in the colonial era can be deeply engrained in the documentation of collections and have now first to be painstakingly deconstructed' (ibid. 2021:52). While everyone who works at the museum is well aware of the fact that cultural belongings from colonial contexts are historically sensitive items and that 'their acquisition often involved the use of force' (ibid. 2021:20),

less is spoken about how the institution actually deals with discriminatory images or archival descriptions that reflect racist ideologies. The Germanist and historian Dr. Ohiniko M. Toffa confirms this importance when he says (Toffa 2024:91):

> It is about demonstrating the power dynamics of racism in the German colonial period and using this to create spaces for reflection on a de-racialising knowledge practice. De-racialising means, above all, epistemically understanding racism and countering it in order to demand and promote a postcolonial knowledge ethic. De-racialising is thus a crucial component of decolonisation work.

Decolonization and anti-racism therefore go hand in hand (Mbembe 2013:65). I would even say that a critical approach to racism must be at the very core of every decolonial approach, be it in the museum or in civil society. More and more museums[2] and museum initiatives[3] in Western countries with historical ties to colonialism are rightly asking themselves: 'Why is it important for the museum to work critically on racism and discrimination?' And: 'What can educational work critical of discrimination look like in a museum' (Mörsch and Piesche 2025)[4]? If ethnographic museums have been highly political spaces that shaped colonial notions of superiority, new solutions are needed to counter the mechanisms of exclusion and demarcation that still permeate

2 To cite a few examples: an exhibition at the Deutsches Hygiene Museum Dresden: 'Racism. The Invention of Human Races' (2018–2019) (Deutscher Museumsbund 2021b:25); the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam has established a working group for the 'adjustment of colonial terminology' since 2015 by revising discriminatory or racist wordings in archives, collections and digital databases (ibid. 2021:7); Weltmuseum Wien: Project 'Sharing Stories. Dinge sprechen' (2015-2017) (ibid. 2021:19): 'The history of racially motivated research and dispossession and the problem of talking about and interpreting '"the others"' often remains invisible in the way museum 'objects' are exhibited. The project seeks to engage with this history and develop alternative practices of collecting and storytelling.' See also the tour guide 'Change of View: Tracing Racism' at the Historisches Museum Frankfurt which 'takes a look at the permanent exhibitions of the Historical Museum Frankfurt from a perspective that is critical of racism': https://historisches-museum-frankfurt.de/en/interventionsspur?language=en#:~:text=The%20intervention%20tour%20takes%20a,stories%20with%20their%20exhibition%20contributions, accessed October 2025.

3 The membership organization 'Museums Association' in London campaigns for socially engaged museums and has established an anti-racist museum programme, an anti-racism and decolonization steering group, and offers online learning courses as part of their 'Museum Essentials' to introduce anti-racism work for staff in museums:
https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/anti-racism/steering-group/, accessed July 3, 2025.
https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/anti-racism/anti-racist-museums-programme/, accessed July 3, 2025.
https://www.museumsassociation.org/careers/museum-essentials/#museum-essentials-supporting-anti-racism,
accessed July, 3 2025.

4 https://www.lab-bode-pool.de/de/t/museum-bewegen/diskriminierungskritisch-arbeiten/warum-diskriminierungskritik-im-museum/?material=aufsatz-carmen-moersch-peggy-piesche, accessed July 3, 2025.

collections today. The Ethnologisches Museum has, through CoMuse, just started to give this topic more attention, as in collaborative projects like 'MWANO: a decolonial exploration of the Cameroon photo archive'[5] or in the project 'Intertwined Memories',[6] both of which constitute very important steps towards the insight that decoloniality and anti-racism must be thought together. I ask myself how CoMuse could address this important debate further in the future. How do we act and care for those who are still affected by racism today? Could we introduce a kind of discrimination-sensitive 'disclaimer' before entering the collections for the first time? CoMuse as a framework allows a space for experiment and empathy, and potentially for reflecting on the colonial continuities and racist labellings in the collections in order to identify them and to dismantle discriminatory terminology as far as possible. A decolonial approach not only addresses the most explicit forms of racism: it may also reflect on the more subtle forms of epistemic violence that are inscribed in the collections. It may also consider how the construction of a racialized **'Other'**, with all its possible prevailing attributions in a colonial logic, has indirectly impacted other levels, such as spatial designations, archiving and regional or ethnic ascriptions, continuing to leave its mark on the museum and its collections. This requires a multi-perspective approach that takes many voices and an intersectional expertise into account.

The Compliance of Design

(Szandra) You address structural questions that reveal how racist attributions manifest themselves not only on the level of content but also physically. These processes unfold through collective negotiation: as Herbert Blumer emphasizes, the meaning of a thing is not inherent in the thing but is constructed relationally (Blumer 2018:21). Communal attributions are also reflected in design: the layout and materiality of collection and exhibition spaces are based on specific assumptions about how these spaces, and the 'objects' within them, are to be used or preserved. When I recently had the opportunity to visit the storage rooms with you, Myriam, some questions arose: For whom are these spaces designed? Whose scholarly and conservation practices are they intended to serve? Whose perspective on the 'objects' is being affirmed through their design?

What I'm getting at is that the design of spaces, exhibitions and graphic elements is an active player in the museum narrative. It organizes spatial ar-

5 A collaborative project between the Cameroonian film-maker and researcher Augustine Moukodi, Marianne Ballé Moudoumbou, the Media and Education Department of Ethnologisches Museum, and partners in Cameroon. It builds on a first research fellowship conducted in 2024.

6 See essay 'Intertwined memories' in this issue.

rangements, establishes visual hierarchies, emphasizes or disrupts, creates connections, and evokes emotions through colour and form. These design decisions carry cultural inscriptions and can reproduce colonial patterns of thought that are already embedded in the collections' genesis. Design that formally supports classification systems while subordinating the individuality of an artefact to a systemic, material gaze not only reflects institutional logics but also contributes to the construction of an **'Other'**. Building on this observation, I find Dörr's argument for the necessity of abandoning neutrality especially compelling. The design discipline, too, must undergo critical self-examination (Recklies 2022, Khandwala 2019). To what extent do design concepts contribute to the reproduction of Eurocentric thoughts or ideas of cultural superiority? Looking ahead, can storage and exhibition spaces be deconstructed or even re-imagined in decolonizing ways?

If we follow this line of thought regarding the presentations in permanent exhibitions, it becomes clear on multiple levels how design reflects a Western perspective on collection 'objects'. Classical exhibition practices (von Hantelmann et al. 2010:79) tend to decontextualize these 'objects', for example, through being placed in display cabinets. The design neither responds to the individual character of the collection's 'objects' nor acknowledges the fact that these were not created for museum display. The visual and spatial appearance of the collection spaces follows a logic that not only conveys institutional authority over content but actively reproduces it. Just as you, Myriam, speak of a **'conservation habitus'**, we could understand these observations in terms of a **design habitus:** a set of formats rooted in a Western attitude towards collection 'objects' that is used to translate curatorial content into spatial and printed forms. The design directs the gaze and draws on a long-standing tradition that shapes our visual habits and can convey a sense of interpretive authority. It is therefore crucial to recognize the design language that has helped to make Eurocentric world-views visible (Papanek 1971), with the goal of deconstructing, expanding and unlearning them.

To illustrate the normative dimension of design and its influence on our perceptions, I decided to set my contribution in the typeface 'Comic Sans', a font typically associated with children's themes or comics and one that appears out of place in the context of an academic journal.

So, how can design support the transformative aims of ethnological museums? How can design, with its competencies and responsibilities, take part in the discourse? 'Decoloniality is about shattering the familiar', asserts designer Danah Abdulla, as cited by Khandwala in her essay (Khandwala 2019:201). To leave well-trodden design paths behind, it is necessary for me as a designer to develop an understanding of the **individual biographies of 'objects'** and to adopt a fundamentally different approach in framing them. It seems

important to attempt ways that explore sensuous and more-than-academic forms of storytelling and that embrace subjectivity and experimentation. The possibilities here are vast, but for this idea to be implemented practically, designers would need to be integrated differently into the project process, granting them meaningful involvement in content development and the freedom to shape it accordingly.

Perspective is Everything

(Nadia) I would like to take up this crucial point on the **individual biographies of 'objects'**. When we speak about the importance of subjectivity as an antithesis to **neutrality**, perspective is everything. It determines what we perceive as true or false and shapes the way we see the world, how we identify ourselves and how we relate to terms or complex concepts, such as transculturality, justice or equality, based on our lived experiences. From which perspective do we talk when addressing the terms 'collaboration' and 'decolonization', and what types of (maybe contradictory) consequences emerge from asking these questions, depending on our positionality, privileges and possibilities of access? As part of its fellowship program, CoMuse has invited a range of perspectives embracing diverse knowledge production and cultural or artistic inquiry beyond the academic realm. Artists, film-makers, musicians, journalists and educators, alongside historians and scientists, have explored multidisciplinary approaches, created artworks which enter into dialogue with the collections or exhibitions, or have challenged established structures and narratives in other ways, highlighting their personal and **emotional** connection with cultural belongings.

Decolonizing Preservation?

(Myriam) Evoking the **emotional** dimension of a subjective relation to museum pieces leads me to McMaster's notion of 'culturally sensitive' spaces (McMaster 2019:151), which he uses to highlight the ontological complexity of what make up ethnographic collections and the inherent asymmetrical relations that constitute them. He justifies his use of this term in three ways:

> Sensitive because of the manner in which many of these 'objects' were acquired at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth; sensitive because of the need to include Indigenous voices in exhibitions; and sensitive because many Indigenous "things" are, in fact spiritually active and not just dead matter in a Western sense. (McMaster 2019:151)

The latter aspect challenges me directly in the work I do in the collections. As a museologist and collection manager, my tasks fall under one of the five core museum's principles, namely that of preservation. In my everyday practice I am expected to commit to a duty of preservation as stated in the core principles set out by the Deutscher Museumsbund, to which the Ethnologisches Museum conforms.[7] This states that it is the responsibility of the museum to prevent the 'objects' from deteriorating and to implement preventive conservation strategies in order to ensure their maintenance as whole entities available for future generations. Today, the term 'preservation', in the way it is applied in the context of the Ethnologisches Museum, very much embodies a Western positivist world-view, as it is mainly understood in relation to the materiality of the 'objects'. For me, this current understanding of preservation poses challenges to the implementation of a decolonial agenda in the context of the museum collections.

When it comes to entering the collection storages, I observe a dual movement at play that contributes to the emotional impact that visitors might experience. Besides the physical setting, which conveys a Eurocentric rationale, it is the regulatory system embedded in the visit itself which might further amplify a sense of emotional intensity. The process of engaging with collections is regulated by Western conservation standards[8] and unfolds within a logic that reflects a particular way of dealing with 'things', a mode of engagement that usually prioritizes the preservation of 'objects'.[9]

If a decolonial ambition comes hand in hand with fostering access to museum collections, it also necessarily entails opening up to a variety of ways of seeing, feeling and making sense of museum pieces that go beyond their understanding as fragile matter. Depending on one's world-view, cultural belongings may be perceived as relational entities (Dilger et al. 2025) or **'living objects'** (Sully 2007:111) and may, according to those who engage with them, require certain kinds of 'nurturing care' (Ivanov et al. 2024:44) and a type of interaction that differs from Western norms of conservation.

---

7 https://www.museumsbund.de/museumsaufgaben/, accessed 4 April 2025.

8 Such standards involve, for instance, defining how many visitors are allowed in the collections, for how long, and under what conditions 'objects' may or may not be handled. While some of these measures have been introduced for safety reasons, they are also deeply rooted in a Eurocentric framework for engaging with material culture.

9 From a conservation standpoint, collection visits can be seen as a potential threat to the maintenance of the material conditions of the 'objects'. This may be caused by the mere transport from one location to another, while, when it comes to the moment of the visit itself, the presence of individuals amongst the collections impacts on changes in temperature and humidity levels, which in turn may lead to physical damage. The same goes for movement and interactions around and with the 'objects', which can lead to vibrations and potential material deterioration. And so, during a so-called handling session, efforts will usually be made to ensure that the session unfolds in such a way that it does not cause material damage to the 'objects' involved. This in turn has implications for the ways in which 'objects' may or not be manipulated.

Living 'Objects'

(Nadia) I would like to add a perspective from two of our CoMuse Fellows on the aspects of **preservation** and the understanding of 'objects' as **living** beings. In the course of a conversation with Fellow and artist Nada Tshibwabwa, he pointed out that 'objects' are not inanimate things and that museums are, in some sense, antithetical to the living energies that flow through 'objects' and all existence on earth. This is because their focus on preservation conflicts with the transient nature of physical matter, death and decay. In contrast, the relationship with history as he knows it from the Democratic Republic of Congo is characterized by a belief in **re-creation** rather than preservation, emphasizing transformation and dialogue that involves a broad, responsive exchange that goes beyond human interactions.[10] This conceptual understanding of 'objects' as relational entities also resonates with the voice of CoMuse Fellow and cultural scientist Ifunanya Madufor. In her poetically written essay (Madufor 2024) about her experience in Berlin, she not only refers to the scientific context of her research on Igbo spirituality but also reflects on the human experience of someone who gets in touch with the heritage of her community during collection visits at the Ethnologisches Museum. She quietly protests against the labelling of the artefacts as mere 'objects', as 'it diminishes their profound significance and central meaning'. She suggests instead identifying them as 'symbols', which, in her words, 'acknowledges not just their roles as manifestations of cultural realities, but gives a deep sense of understanding [to] a people's cosmological framework.'[11] What consequences could possibly emerge from acknowledging 'objects' as living entities in practical terms? How can we re-think preservation with a greater focus on **'re-creation'**, as suggested by Nada Tshibwabwa? These are the kinds of bold and uncomfortable questions CoMuse creates a space for, enabling change to evolve from a multitude of perspectives.

Towards a Duty of Care

(Myriam) This idea of **'re-creation'** as evoked by Nada Tshibwabwa brings me back to what anthropologists Paola Ivanov, Jonas Bens and Laibor Kalanga Moko (see Ivanov et al. 2024) refer to when evoking the Maasai 'objects' held in the

10 Conversation between the author and Nada Tshibwabwa, April 2025.

11 She points out that these symbols, like communal deities or ancestral masks, are much more than static material representation; rather, they express an entire microcosmos of the broader Igbo world-view and 'serve as conduits through which the essence of the divine is deeply experienced.' Ifunanya Madufor quotes a popular saying among the Igbo people that reflects their philosophy of life: *'Ife kwudo, ife ozo akwude be ya,* or nothing stands alone, for there is always an invisible counterpart to everything that has life' (Madufor 2024).

Ethnologisches Museum's collections and whose interpretations they investigated in consultation with Maasai communities in northern Tanzania. According to them, belongings understood as imasaa are 'nonhumans that belong to humans in a way that goes beyond possession' (Ivanov et al. 2024:35). They are relational elements in the sense of 'life-giving entities (...) imbued with a capacity to act, react, and even feel' (ibid. 2024:36–38). Here I wonder: how does one care for museum pieces which are to be understood as body parts (ibid. 2024:37) by those who are connected to them?

If it is the museum's duty to preserve its collections, then I ask: what understanding of preservation emerges from a decolonial framework in light of the multiplicity of interpretative frameworks? I believe that, if increasing the accessibility of collections is a necessary part of the Ethnologisches Museum's decolonial agenda, then it also calls for a rethink of the meaning of its duty to preserve belongings and for a redefinition of the role of those who usually carry it out. I argue that moving away from a duty of preservation to a **duty of care** (Sully 2007) may allow the recognition and incorporation of the human dimension into the work done in the collections and constitute just one step in the process of **repairing** relations and rehabilitating power dynamics.

From Project to Process

(Szandra) Our approaches demonstrate how an ideology of dominance which once helped establish museums (Bennett 1995) continues to permeate all areas of these institutions, from the very existence of collections to collection management, architecture and design, and even the interpersonal dynamics within the institution itself. But how can we use this knowledge, which has already been articulated by numerous authors before us? How can an ideology defined by interpretive authority over the 'foreign' or 'Other' be more thoroughly deconstructed? An intention to decolonize should also apply to the internal institutional hierarchies regarding their emergence and impact. If we want to embody decolonization, we may need to approach the institution's power structures with scepticism. As I have outlined, this takes integral unlearning, including within the field of design. This process can only succeed if it is conceived holistically. In a collaborative practice based on mutual respect and involving a shared process across disciplines, the design part could be iteratively linked to the development of content. Decolonizing, in the sense of pluriversal thinking, would then become a shared practice in which we continuously negotiate how diversifying approaches influence both content and form. In practice, shifting from a project-oriented to a process-oriented mindset seems essential. Lorena Vicini expresses this goal as follows:

> In the context of decolonisation, cultural management is called upon to reflect on democratic processes that maximise the space for collective construction and enable people to take responsibility for the processes they set in motion. (Vicini 2019:172)

She invites institutions to become **spaces of imagination** or **'spaces of experimental setup'** (Vicini 2019:172). From the perspective of my discipline, the following approaches are essential: developing a critical awareness of how design shapes narratives respectively, how design itself entails narratives; cultivating scepticism towards established formats; engaging continuously with design from a decolonial perspective; and establishing long-term, project-independent visual strategies for dealing with **racist and discriminatory imagery**. Additionally, designers should foster an awareness of the individuality and complex contexts of each 'object' presentation and create sensory, inclusive and diverse forms of access that enable layered understandings. Ultimately, engaging with Indigenous concepts of 'objects', such as their perception as living beings, is a prerequisite for rethinking exhibition design. For any of these approaches to be meaningfully integrated, however, it is crucial that designers be involved from the conceptual phase and well before any final presentation format is determined.

Design methodologies such as Design Thinking or Design Ethnography offer tools for mapping processes, defining positions and developing innovative formats through prototyping. In such processes, content and form are developed collaboratively across disciplines, and the design perspective can take on a co-curatorial role. After all, how can meaningful change in design take place if design continues to be regarded within institutions primarily as an executive task, rather than as an integral part of curatorial and interpretive processes?

Within the framework of CoMuse, we are experiencing some promising approaches. I am grateful that we have, across disciplines, embarked on the experiment of writing this joint article. Our at times challenging exchange has, in a short time, given me many impulses to reflect further on my own practice. The work on the expanded collection's visitors' booklet with you, Myriam, is also trying to take a different path. From the very beginning of the conceptual phase we have been in close dialogue, developing the content and visual structure alongside each other using a shared digital platform. Our joint collection visit, along with the conversation with cultural studies scholar Marianne Ballé Moudoumbou and artist Tina Moukodi, further deepened my awareness of the emotional dimension of collection visits, as both of you describe in this article. From a design standpoint, I am currently exploring ways to indicate, alongside the provision of factual information, that the museum critically reflects on the various layers of violence, loss and trauma

embedded in the collections, which can be reactivated during visits. While on a structural level a more sustained response can be imagined, the visual dimension can serve in parallel to communicate this awareness. Drawing-based attempts could be made to make the violent dimensions of the collections visible and to acknowledge visitors in their painful confrontation with it. For example, this could be taken further by artistically documenting future visits and compiling them into a kind of 'archive of encounters'. In this way, greater emphasis could be given to the identities, reactions and ongoing negotiations over the colonial legacy.

Anchoring Anti-Racism in Practice

(Nadia) The notion of institutions as **spaces of imagination and experimentation** is a very fertile ground, which also requires an attitude that is open to trial and error and a self-reflective interrogation on all levels at all times. As an outlook for the future, I would like to think of decolonization as a fruitful path towards an attempt to balance out historical asymmetries and contemporary inequalities of access, while understanding decolonization not as something that 'takes away' but that completes, as Mahret Ifeoma Kupka (Kupka and Raabe 2021) argues:

> The term decolonisation may at first come across as though something was being removed, deconstructed, and dismantled. However, the process is really about making complete, which means integrating the missing, hidden, forcibly excluded parts into the whole. (Kupka and Raabe 2021)[12]

As I have tried to outline, as the very basis of a politics of **repair and care**, it is crucial for an honest and holistic decolonial approach to confront the **racisms** that are still embedded within the museum, its archives and collections, both historically and also with a critical view towards its contemporary continuities. This could be achieved by anchoring anti-racism in collection-based museum practices through working groups, own projects, conferences and think tanks. In practice, how to 'de-racialise' collections (Toffa, 2024) without erasing the historical evidence of violence perpetrated during colonial times? We might think of incorporating principles that introduce a reflection on a meta-level, as has been done in the exhibition 'Leerstellen. Ausstellen',[13] on a large scale for the collection. And this would need to be done systematically, together with voices arising from colonized areas.

12 https://www.talkingobjectslab.org/interview-mit-den-kuratorinnen, accessed July 3, 2025.

13 The exhibition 'Leerstellen.Ausstellen: Objekte aus Tansania und das koloniale Archiv' was on display from 2022 to 2024 at the Humboldt Forum.

To care means acknowledging the emotionality that can arise during collection visits and to think of ways to mobilize expert advice[14] when trauma or pain[15] (Kilomba 2023) is involved. To care means to show empathy, as it unfolds already on a personal and heartfelt level between curators, fellows and museum staff, as can be read in this issue.

Curate as in Curare

(Myriam) I began my reflection by considering how the museum's duty to preserve deserves to be critically assessed in light of a decolonial effort to move away from a dominant Western referential framework while implementing a pluriversal (Mignolo 2018) approach. Referring back to the earlier mentioned example of Maasai perceptions of museum pieces, authors Ivanov, Bens and Moko further explain how, according to their interlocutors, their treatment as inert matter alienated from the individual and social body turns them into 'unhappy objects' (Ivanov et al. 2024:42). Inquiring into what would necessitate their re-establishment as 'happy objects' (ibid. 2024:44), Maasai interlocutors state: 'it is urgent to re-establish a proper relationship of **love and care** towards the belongings in Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum in order to somehow reintegrate them into the community' (ibid. 2024).[16] The implementation of such a relationship would involve various sets of caring strategies, one of them being a purification process which would demand the rubbing of animal fat into the 'objects' (Moko 2023). I assume that carrying out such a caring approach from the current museum's conservative standpoint would prove challenging today, as it would go against the standards of preventive conservation to which it currently conforms. To be able to honour the diversity of approaches to the care of cultural belongings (which cannot be reduced to the singular) according to the sensitivities of those who are connected to them would demand a change in the definition of the museum's core principles. Here, and in light of this unfolding conversation,

14 This could be done by collaborating with initiatives in the future like the 'Mental Health Art Space', a non-profit organization in Berlin with expertise in decoloniality that centres the mental health, well-being, experiences, knowledge, histories, narratives and archives of Black people, Indigenous people and People of Colour, as well as other migrant and marginalized groups: https://mhasberlin.com/, accessed 1 April 2025.

15 The author, artist, psychologist and cultural scientist Grada Kilomba says about colonialism: 'Colonialism is a wound that has never been properly treated, a festering wound that always hurts, sometimes becomes infected, and sometimes bleeds.' In: Exhibition 'O Quilombismo' at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, artwork 'Table of Goods' (2017) by Grada Kilomba: https://www.hkw.de/programme/o-quilombismo/grada-kilomba, accessed 1 April 2025.

16 'The appropriate relationship to *imasaa* is expressing their affection for them, approaching them with love and care' (Ivanov et al. 2024:38).

I believe that the necessity to re-think the museum's responsibility in its duty to care is one that concerns all the sectors of the museum and that would deserve being made an overarching principle for those that are already in place. If looking closely at the term 'curate' – whose Latin etymology refers to 'curare', meaning 'to care for', 'to heal' – then how might the perception of all of us as curators inspire a further sensibilization to broader epistemologies and support the embracing of an underlying responsibility to care?

References

Apraku, Josephine, Jocelyne Stahl, and Maike Schimanowski 2024: No Consent - No Object? Das Ausstellen von Leerstellen als Möglichkeit Rassismuskritischen Kuratierens. In: Anna Greve and Sithara Weeratunga eds., *Rassismuskritisches Kuratieren. Kunst und Politik, Jahrbuch der Guernica-Gesellschaft* 2024(1):25. Pp. 97–106, Göttingen: V&R Unipress.

Bal, Mieke 1996: *Double Exposure: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*. London: Routledge.

Bystron, Daniela, and Anne Fäser eds. 2022: *Das Museum Dekolonisieren? Kolonialität und Museale Praxis in Berlin. Brücke-Museum, Stiftung Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin, Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin.* Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

Bennett, Tony 1995: *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics.* London and New York: Routledge.

Blumer, Herbert 2018: Symbolische Interaktion. In: Francis Müller ed. 2) *Designethnographie: Methodologien und Praxisbeispiele*. Pp. 21, Springer VS.

Clifford, James 1997: Museums as Contact Zones. In: Clifford, James ed., *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century.* Pp. 188–219. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Deliss, Clémentine 2020*: The Metabolic Museum*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz.

Deutscher Museumsbund 2021a: Guidelines for German Museums Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts. 217 pp. Berlin: German Museums Association. https://www.museumsbund.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/mb-leitfaden-en-web.pdf, accessed March 20, 2025.

Deutscher Museumsbund 2021b: E-Reader zum Leitfaden: *Umgang mit Sammlungsgut aus Kolonialen Kontexten*. 2021. https://www.museumsbund.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/e-reader-zum-leitfaden-umgang-mit-sammlungsgut-aus-kolonialen-kontexten-de.pdf, accessed 23 February 2025.

Deutscher Museumsbund: Museumsaufgaben. *Museumsbund.de*. https://www.museumsbund.de/museumsaufgaben/, accessed April 4, 2025.

Dilger, Hansjörg, Barbara Göbel, Lars-Christian Koch, Stephanie Schütze, and Alexis von Poser, eds. 2025*: Collections as Relations: Contestations of Belonging, Cultural Heritage, and Knowledge Infrastructures*. London: Routledge.

Dörr, Julian 2022: Räume in Denen sich Menschen Begegnen Können – Diversitätssensible Kommunikation und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit im Museum. In: Daniela Bystron und Anne Fäser eds., *Das Museum dekolonisieren? Kolonialität und museale Praxis in Berlin. Brücke-Museum, Stiftung Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin, Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin.* Pp. 85–92. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

García Sossa, Juan Pablo et al.: *A Design Department: Questioning Coloniality in Design Theory and Practice.* Online: https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/pillars/design-department/, accessed March 24, 2025.

Greve, Anna, and Sithar Weeratunga, eds. 2024: *Rassismuskritisches Kuratieren. Kunst und Politik. Jahrbuch der Guernica-Gesellschaft* 2024(1):25.

Von Hantelmann, Dorothea, und Carolin Meister, eds. 2010: *Die Ausstellung: Politik eines Rituals.* Zürich: Diaphanes.

Historisches Museum Frankfurt: Tour Guide 'Change of View - Tracing Racism'. https://historisches-museum-frankfurt.de/en/interventionsspur?language=en#:~:text=The%20intervention%20tour%20takes%20a,stories%20with%20their%20exhibition%20contributions, accessed October 2025.

Ivanov, Paola, Jonas Bens, and Laibor Kalanga Moko 2024: *Unhappy Objects: Colonial Violence, Maasai Materialities, and the Affective Public of Ethnographic Museums.* In: Margreth Lünenborg and Birgit Röttger-Rössler eds., *Affective Formation of Publics: Places, Networks, and Media.* Pp. 33-49. London: Routledge.

Khandwala, Anoushka 2019: What Does It Mean to Decolonize Design? *Aiga Eye on Design*.

https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-design/, accessed April 4, 2025.

Kilomba, Grada 2023: *'O Quilombismo'* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Artwork 'Table of Goods' (2017) by Grada Kilomba: https://www.hkw.de/programme/o-quilombismo/grada-kilomba, accessed April 1, 2025.

Kupka, Mahret Ifeoma and, Isabel Raabe 2021: Healing, as We Know it, Is about Following a Holistic Approach. *Talking Objects Lab*.

https://www.talkingobjectslab.org/interview-mit-den-kuratorinnen, accessed July 3, 2025.

Kupka, Mahret 2022: *Schwarze Körper in Weißen Institutionen: Für eine Kultur des Kontakts*. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.

https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/schwarz-und-deutsch-2022/506173/schwarze-koerper-in-weissen-kunstraeumen/, accessed April 1, 2025.

Madufor, Ifunanya 2024: Exploring Existence in Berlin. *Museum and the city Blog der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin*.

https://blog.smb.museum/exploring-existence-in-berlin/, accessed March 30, 2025.

Mbembe, Achille 2013: *Sortir de la Grande Nuit: Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée.* Paris: La Découverte/Poche.

McMaster, Gerald 2019: An Indigenous Curator's Perspective: Non Indigenous Museums as 'Sensitive Spaces'. In: Iris Edenheiser, and Larissa Förster eds., *Museumsethnologie - Eine Einführung: Theorie - Debatten - Praktiken.* Pp. 148–157. Berlin: Reimer Verlag.

Mental Health Art Space. https://mhasberlin.com/, accessed April 1, 2025.

Mignolo, W. D. 2018: The Conceptual Triad: Modernity / Coloniality / Decoloniality. In: W. D. Mignolo,, and C. E. Walsh eds., *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics Praxis* Pp. 135–152. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Moko, Laibor Kalanga 2023: *Sensing the Colonial Order of Things: Maasai Materialities and Ethnographic Museums* (unpublished PhD).

Mörsch, Carmen, and Piesche, Peggy: Warum Diskriminierungskritik im Museum? *Lab.Bode Pool, Museum bewegen*. https://www.lab-bode-pool.de/de/t/museum-bewegen/diskriminierungskritisch-arbeiten/warum-diskriminierungskritik-im-museum/?material=aufsatz-carmen-moersch-peggy-piesche, accessed July 3, 2025.

Museums Association: *Museum Essentials Online Learning Programme, Course: Supporting Anti-Racism.* https://www.museumsassociation.org/careers/museum-essentials/#museum-essentials-supporting-anti-racism, accessed July 3, 2025.

Museums Association: *Anti-Racist Museums Programme*. https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/anti-racism/anti-racist-museums-programme/, accessed July 3, 2025.

Museums Association: *Anti-Racism and Decolonisation Steering Group*. https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/anti-racism/steering-group/, accessed July 3, 2025.

Papanek, Victor 1991 [1970]: *Design for the Real World.* London: Thames and Hudson.

Perrot, Myriam 2022: Experiencing Handling Sessions at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin: The Perspective and Reflection of a Collection Manager. *Baessler Archiv* 68:184–188.

Recklies, Mara 2022: Engaging in Epistemic Disobedience: On the Decolonialization of Design Discourses. In: Maries et al. eds., *Critical by Design? Genealogies, Practices, Positions.* Pp.94–97. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

Sarr, Felwine, Bénédicte Savoy 2018: *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*. Paris: Ministère de la Culture.

Simon, Nina 2010: *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz, California: Museum 2.0.

Sternfeld, Nora 2018: *Das Radikaldemokratische Museum*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Sully, Dean 2007: *Decolonising Conservation: Caring for Maori Meeting Houses outside New Zealand*. London: Routledge.

Toffa, Ohiniko M. 2024: Provenienz: Rassismus! Kritische Betrachtung einer Kolonialzeitlichen Ausstellung in der Rheinstraße 54 in Wiesbaden im Jahr 1900. In: Anna Greve and Sithara Weeratunga eds., *Rassismuskritisches Kuratieren. Kunst und Politik, Jahrbuch der Guernica-Gesellschaft* 2024(1):25. Pp. 91–96, Göttingen: V&R Unipress.

Vicini, Lorena 2019: Die Dekolonialisierung des Kulturmanagements: Vorschläge für sich Ändernde Zeiten. In: Matthias Beitl, et al. eds., *Gegenöffentlichkeit Organisieren: Kritisches Management im Kuratieren*. P.172. Berlin: De Gruyter.