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Reviewed: Unlearning the Museum? Coloniality and Mediation in Ethnological Museums

*In these two volumes, *Das Museum Verlernen?* explores the field of education in ethnographic museums through a decolonial lens. Looking at the interaction between educators, artists and activists and the institution, it sheds a light on the dilemmas faced by actors in a conflicted field, as well as the wide arrays of positions, strategies and solutions they adopt to remedy to it.*

Rezension zu: *Das Museum verlernen? Kolonialität und Vermittlung in ethnologischen Museen.*

Band 1: Nora Landkammer: Eine Analyse gegenwärtiger Diskurse in einem konfliktreichen Praxisfeld.

Band 2: Praxen und Reflexionen kritischer Bildung und Wissensproduktion. Hg. Stephanie Endter, Nora Landkammer, Karin Schneider. Wien: Zaglossus, 2021

We are becoming quite aware that no amount of well-meaning reform and self-reflection can change the fact that, as Ariella Aïsha Azoulay puts it, "It is not possible to decolonize the museum without decolonizing the world." (Alli, 2021). In the ethnographic museum itself the structures, collections, research and display modes still showcase the epistemic violence of what Shahid Vawda has called "the persistence of colonialism" (Vawda, 2019, p.74), even as they pass through various decolonial iterations. Yet every aspect of museum praxis, from labelling, to curating, co-curating and participatory work, provenience research, is now the focus of decolonial praxis, the work of many committed actors slowly eroding the most visible aspects of colonialist legacies.

»Das Museum Verlernen? Kolonialität und Vermittlung in Ethnologischen Museen«(Unlearning the museum? Coloniality and Education in Ethnographic Museums) has its focus on the practical application of decolonial theories to education work in ethnographic museums. A substantial part of the work of diversification and decolonisation occurs on the edge of the museums, where external actors and educators intervene (Hunter, Ntakyica, and Tinius, 2019, p. 16). It is a key position as this is where the curatorial and research work is confronted with the public. And it is also the place where decolonial aspirations can be measured and practiced, where the tensions play out through interactions between representants of the institution and visitors. Around the concept of unlearning – for the

professionals themselves first, for the public as well - these two volumes offer a picture of the decolonising wave from the other side of the exhibition.

Eine Analyse gegenwärtiger Diskurse in einem konfliktreichen Praxisfeld

The first volume, *An analysis of contemporary discourse in a conflictual practice field*, is a very extensive study of educators in ethnographic museums and their attitudes and interrogation towards decoloniality, conducted by Nora Landkammer. The study took place from 2012 to 2015 across 15 museums in Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

The first part of the book describes the field and, after a short history of education work in ethnographic museums, interrogates both postcolonial (notably Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) and decolonial (thinkers from Latin America, among which are Aníbal Quijano and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui) research to present theoretical support for a post/decolonial pedagogy. As many of these authors are now being quoted on the walls of exhibitions and in various museum spaces, the focus on the relevance of their work for education is particularly appreciated.

The second part of the volume is the main study, in which Landkammer analyses the discourse of educators in depth, the ambiguities and contradictions of their own particular position as mediators in such an institution. Identifying several strands of discourse and their intersections, she weaves a complex picture of their aspirations and the profound quandaries they face, engaging with problematic collections and discourses. In fact, she analyses the dilemmas of educators through Gayatri Spivak's use of Bateson's concept of the double-bind. But she also presents an array of strategies and solutions that educators have put in place to explain or counter colonial traces. A point of note there, which colours the whole study (and the whole field), is that the professionals in question – baring department heads - are mostly in a precarious position, freelancers with multiple jobs with more or less close links to the institution.

The study brings up an interesting picture as to how much the discursive background on which the debates are painted has shifted in the last years. It would probably be harder to find answers stating that racism is not a problem in institutions today (a minority position then also), when educators – and the public, to a lesser extent – are hyperaware of the colonial undertones and histories of ethnographic

collections. There is more diversity in the teams – although, as Nora Landkammer mentions, seeing People of Colour in the one department where contracts are given on an hourly basis is a repetition of the “combo diversity/precarity” (p. 633) It would have been nice to see a longer reflexion on the changes that have occurred since the study has been done.

The book goes back and forth on many points, in a bit of a spiral structure, but there are two topics which merit further in-depth study. The first is the link between migrant communities and “source” communities. This diffuse link hangs on the ascription of “foreignness” (Fremdheit) and carries many questions with it, regarding work with diaspora communities as proxies for source communities, about legitimisation and activism. Another particularly interesting point is the exploration of visitors’ expectations and their demand for exoticism – what Landkammer calls the problematisation of the public. The expectation of exoticism is placed (projected?) on the public, that museums are forever in need of attracting (to attract funding). As marketing departments, museum shops and museum designers rely heavily on exoticism, as cultural productions outside the museum do as well, visitors’ expectations rise accordingly. Who is then responsible for what is shown?

But this volume’s strength lies in the exploration of the educators’ discourses and the tension they face: there is much to unpack in what they say. By focussing on the personal dilemmas, Landkammer is also able to focus on the emotional side of the uncertainties that plague museum workers in general, caught between personal implication, a general discourse and various institutional hierarchies. Their tension replicates a tension felt inside the institutions themselves – how to decolonise, what to decolonise, and how to unlearn something that is hiding in every institutional nook and cranny. The in-depth look at personal positioning paints a detailed picture of the wider debates as they play out on the margins of the museum, and reminds us that institutions are also built with people.

Praxen und Reflexionen kritischer Bildung und Wissensproduktion

If the first volume describes the field, the second, *Practices and reflections for a critical education and knowledge production*, explores its contemporary debates in more depth, through a variety of articles grouped in two parts: one for theory and discussion, and one for practice-led research. The starting point for these essays is

a series of reflections, exchanges and workshops which took place from 2016 to 2018 as part of the Project TRACES, Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritage with the Arts. What is particularly interesting in this volume is the interplay between actors outside the museums, the institution, and the ambiguous position of the educator. In fact, most of the articles address these relations at some point, posing curators and directors as sometimes encouraging, sometimes tolerating but mostly distant figures.

This volume includes some contributions by artists and activists working on projects in museums. Hodan Warsame, for instance, describing her project *Decolonize the Museum* with Simone Zeefuik and Tirza Balk in the then (2015) Volkenkundemuseum in Leiden, captures this tension with some of the museum staff and the real difficulty these interventions can pose for external contributors. The participants had to ask each other if it was worth the stress (p.106). Simone Zeefuik came from the same project with what looks like quite a bit of scepticism and animated with a real sense of urgency. Contracted by the museum, sometimes supported, sometimes co-opted, the ambiguous position of artists and activist groups also allows them to create these critical spaces.

The educators themselves seem a bit lost in front of the institution, asking, as does Nadine Golly, how they can have a decolonial practice in a non-decolonised museum. Educational interventions are described by several commentators as uncomfortable, for themselves and visitors – as most decolonial work is. Recognising the emotional labour that comes with such positions is essential. In fact, institutional support needs to be much deeper on these topics in general. And what filters through is a general sense of unease, of being uncomfortable with their role in the institution, bringing back the uncertainties and impossibilities described by Nora Landkammer.

It is this level of reflection and commitment which emerges. The play-by-play and in-depth analysis offered by Karin Schneider of transition points offering moments of research and politization during workshops attests to this. Tracking moments of dissonance that can lead to connection, to interest, spark something, her text also follows the subtle group dynamics which count for so much during educative interventions, offering a far clearer picture of the day-to-day work of decolonising – conflicted educators and students that are sometimes bored. Esther Poppe, while talking of the disturbing images that lie in wait in the museums' photographic archive and how to make sense of their violence, also discloses her hesitations

and the practical pedagogical questions raised by using them. The grounding working principles for education elaborated by the group are testament to the richness of their exchanges.

The variety of positions and solutions to the dilemmas show a complicated field, as well as the energy and reflexivity with which education work is being offered. It also brings to light all that education activities can be, and how much they can help in bringing depth to exhibitions and institutions.

Conclusion

What stands out from these two volumes is the wide array of strategies and solutions that can be put in place to enhance, deepen, analyse, and criticise the displays and activities of ethnographic museums, that can add another layer to the reading of the exhibition text. Stephanie Endter describes “a museum education that views itself as an independent means of accessing an exhibition, which does not just passively reflect the narration proposed by the exhibition curator, but takes a stance on it” (p. 174), and these are definitely principles that explain and guide great and necessary education work.

Unlearning is a strong principle, individual and collective both, and the way that it is documented here is encouraging. But in filigree remains the tension between the work of committed professionals and a near impossible defence of ethnographic museums, the dissonance between the discourse, the collections and the displays. Having to defend, correct, dig deeper, reframe and expand the museum discourse – which, however rebranded and reworked cannot go beyond a certain point– is exhausting, is indeed a double-bind, as much as it is one of the most vital ways to keep ethnographic museums alive. By inviting more and more external curators and educators, institutions play on this meta level, inviting healthy criticism to go forward. And at some point, you wonder if it is necessary to keep defending the fact, to agree with Pernilla Luttrupp in the second volume, that “yes, ethnographic museums are a terrible problem” (p.146).

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