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INTRODUCTION



Decolonizing European Colonial Heritage in Urban Spaces – An Introduction to the Special Issue

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ABSTRACT

The contributions presented here were written in late 2019 and finalized in the early months of 2020. What unfolded on the global stage while the special issue was making its way through the publication process – the murder of George Floyd, the rise of Black Lives Matter as a global agenda and the reenergizing of protests against both material and ideological colonial heritage – seemed at times almost about to overtake it; to render it “preemptively anachronistic” as a consequence of a radical transformation of the stakes, forms and intensities of the decolonial struggle.¹ Ultimately, however, we think that this new context has only further validated the importance and urgency of the work undertaken here: not only is the connection between issues of contemporary racism and the colonial past which those events highlighted here explicitly conceptualized, but also the various forms and content that the decolonial struggle can be invested with are revealed and examined in both European metropolises and their global counterparts.

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Indeed, the great strength of the collection here – especially in the contemporary context – is the combination of empirical breath and a strong unifying focus on the decolonial struggles for and about the material heritage of urban spaces, be they centered on statues, museums, performance artworks, architecture or whole neighborhoods. Our collection of cities as such encompasses several dimensions; old empires are present here through the cities of Bristol, Amsterdam, Lisbon, Marseille and Nantes. But also, cities more or less violently subjected to European colonialism are key in this issue, such as Cape Town, Rio and Shanghai. The case of Warsaw demonstrates that notions of colonialism and colonization are also applicable in the Polish case, not only in the sense of internal colonization between European powers (Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union), but also colonization in the sense of eliminating and “othering” minorities in society.

The focus is on European colonial heritage. While European states differed in how successfully they played the “great game” of empire, most of them, nonetheless, shared in a zeitgeist informed by a racialized sense of superiority and enjoyed the benefits derived

from the politico-economic subjugation of much of the rest of the world. Of course, important differences between different European empires still persisted in both style, self-understanding and magnitude. Therefore, while there are as such good reasons to insist on colonialism as a “European heritage,” we should still seek to appreciate and investigate the very many different ways in which the historical experience of colonialism played itself out across and beyond the continent, and therefore the great diversity of heritage practices which unfolds in response to this.

The special issue focuses on the differences which emerge between different urban centers, each arguably situated in a unique position in the wider entanglement of European colonialism. It is how this accumulated particularity of position, relationality and historical context is signified and transformed in and through distinct urban heritage practices that the contributions in this special issue seek to reveal. What we hope to illustrate is that at the level of diverse cityscapes, European colonial heritage re-appears in novel, critical, creative and affectively engaging ways, able to question the silences in which the dark heritage of colonialism has been shrouded.

The focus on urban spaces is also grounded in the fact that cities are becoming global actors (Nijman 2016), and that this development can in fact be traced back to the era of colonialism. New imperial history posits a crucial relationship between metropole and colony, seeing them both as parts of a constitutive whole (Oldfield 2013). Cities, therefore, are important nodal points of entangled imperial systems. More often than not, it is here that dominant heritage discourses are created and where contested or divergent heritage practices are most likely to occur. Yet, aside from studies that focus on collection practices in former colonial museums, there has been little scholarly engagement to date with the ways in which the vast presence of European heritage has been perceived, managed and practised in urban spaces formerly dominated by European colonial powers. Cities are the sites of important heritage organizations such as large metropolitan museums and art galleries that are commonly supported by municipal authorities or the state. They are also the sites of new heritage practices, many of which are associated with specific city “quarters” or “districts” that are identified with specific ethnic groups, both historically and in the present day. These neighborhoods typically reveal themselves to be sites of divergent artistic and cultural practices. These practices are either formal or informal (festivals, parades, protests), and see citizens inhabiting and appropriating particular spaces, as well as artists performing site-specifically in relation to waterfronts, industrial relics and former commercial areas that stand as material links to the colonial past.

The scholarly authors of the contributions presented here come from a diversity of fields and write from correspondingly various perspectives. Whether out of history, anthropology, sociology, museology, art history or cultural studies, most draw inspiration not only from postcolonial scholarship, with its strong tradition for deep poststructuralist and deconstructive readings of the colonial (con)text, but also from what has been more recently formulated by scholars such as Walter D. Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova as the “decolonial option” (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2007). The decolonial option entails an insistence that, going beyond diagnosing the postcolonial condition, scholars should explore the forms and possibilities of decolonizing as a practice, as something that social actors, artists, curators and institutions do to rupture Eurocentrism and to push our societies closer to a truly de-colonial configuration; that is, towards a world devoid not just of direct and indirect forms of global colonial and neo-colonial domination, but also

finally rid of the echoes of colonial heritage in the form of the structural racism and systemic violence against minorities. Decolonizing, as a practice, as a project undertaken in various ways by various actors, thus entails both the critical deconstruction of ideological and cultural systems of racialized knowledge, and a search for the means to imagine alternative worlds and to push these into being.

Springing from this ambition to explore both the multifaceted meanings of a postcolonial condition and activist performances of the decolonial option, the arguments and investigations in this special issue might as such be said to share – to various degrees and in different intonations – a joint ambition to explore an “affective memory politics of the future” in various locations and situations.

An Affective Memory Politics for the Future

A fundamental starting point for such concerns would be the argument – also made by numerous other scholars – that all symbolic commemorations of the past entail social actors attempting to govern, control and encourage collective affects (Crang and Tolia-Kelly 2010; Anderson 2014, 26; Crouch 2015; Hourcade 2017). Whether it is the anger of protest activism, the ceremonial engendering of national pride, memorial sympathy with the victims of historical horrors or a connection with the hardship of earlier generations constituted through re-enactment, all forms of commemorations can be analyzed as events and media that attune audiences affectively (Massumi 2009). This attunement can be initiated by authorities – as illustrated in the article by Pozzi and Ifversen – wishing directly to engage and attune citizens to certain situated affective atmospheres for more or less overtly political and economic reasons (Massumi 2009; Böhme 2014; Bille, Bjerregaard, and Sørensen 2015), such as when tourists are invited into immersive heritage environments used to stage and engender a certain collective mood of consumption (Pine and Gilmore 1999). But what is clearly revealed in this special issue is that the state is no longer the only actor undertaking such affective attunement by way of heritage management. Even if museums can still be understood as institutions charged with disseminating authoritative heritage discourse in a society, articles such as that by Ariese and by Bukowiecki, Wawrzyniak and Wróblewska show that museums today navigate a complex set of tensions between the state and municipal authorities on the one hand, and an ever more vocal field of civil society actors on the other. Indeed, the latter, be they artists, activists or advocacy groups for minority populations, emerge in the pages of this special issue as a kind of heritage actor able to invent, mobilize and develop new strategies for and performances of affective attunement in the urban space.

The focus on urban space thus becomes important because it serves as the stage for articulating to the colonial past in and through place-based emotions strongly dependent on the in situ character and socio-material intensities of specific urban locations. As is well illustrated in the article by Chuva and Peixoto, the sadness, mourning and pain inextricably linked with some sites, due to their painful history, together form a general ecology of affect (Logan and Reeves 2009; Davidson, Park, and Shields 2011) which might spur contemporary citizens to react, to face and acknowledge, so to speak, the spectres haunting contemporary societies (Cho 2008; Gordon 2008). Being haunted is to be affectively drawn into often bodily experiences that we “cannot not” respond to and that thus carry the potentiality of not-yet-formulated futures (Derrida 1994; Blanco and Peeren

2013, 58). While in some cityscapes – often those of European metropolises – the challenge is to sufficiently evoke a colonial past effectively repressed or erased from the collective memory, in other cities – as is well illustrated in the article by Joffre and Shepherd on Cape Town – the echoes of past atrocities and the ghosts of individuals enslaved, abused or murdered are everywhere present. Here the challenge becomes how to live together while acknowledging that society is split between incommensurably different memories and embodied experiences of colonial and neo-colonial forms of oppression (Tuck and Yang 2012). How, in other words, to seek out communal healing without succumbing to either amnesia or perpetual antagonism. The protests, performances, artistic interventions or unofficial tours linked to such sites, districts or landscapes signifying the affects of colonial oppression might therefore be understood as something like a bodily or symbolic exploration or experimentation of this question of how to practically decolonize, of how to imagine futures of living together.

While this imagination, as mentioned, can be embodied in various different kinds of actors, we do feel that one point emerging from this special issue is that the ideal actor of decolonial heritage practices is something of an artist. By this we do not mean to assert that actual artists are or should be the primary actors forging a decolonial heritage practice. Rather, the point is that it seems as though the most effective interventions in the decolonial struggle make use of modes of signification, forms of performance, ways of seeing and strategies for affectively “touching” an audience which are also artistically informed when undertaken by non-artists. In the same vein as Peter Mostow’s idea of the memorial entailing “*an aesthetic mode of conveying a moral message*” (Mostow 1993, 408), this would imply a rethinking of the interface between information and aesthetics in the symbolic representation of past atrocities: If – as is illustrated in the article by Knudsen and Kølvråa – colonial oppression and its present echoes must be approached not just in terms of knowledge, but also understood in terms of affects, then we need a form of heritage management that can speak to that affective dimension of collective memory. Here a more flexible and less institutionalized mode of heritage management – as we see it emerging not just from artists, but also from activists employing situationist or other aesthetic means, and from museums seeking new collaborations with artists or advocacy groups – might better serve the decolonial agenda than more traditional and rigorous didactics focusing on imparting information to the public.

The decolonial artwork in this sense is unburdened by the responsibility to impart a precise knowledge of the past and instead, recalling Pierre Nora’s notion of the “*lieu de memoire*,” simply expresses a communicative intentionality; a “will to remember” (Nora 1989, 19). Indeed, many artists speak from an embodied position of being subaltern, or related intergenerationally to victims of enslavement and marginalization – thereby already erasing the line between art and activism. “Thinking decolonially means to start from ‘enunciation’ and not from ‘representation,’” declares Walter Mignolo (2014, 198), who continues by stressing the worldmaking material capacity of artistic enactment through the statement that “there is not a world that is represented but a world that is constantly invented in the enunciation” (198). The activist artwork or artistic activism – investigated in this special issue and elsewhere as instances of “reemergence” – points to a “phenomenologization” of critique from the standpoint of bodies, allowing us to recognize both the structures of domination and the possibilities for liberation. What Negri and Hardt have called an alternative production of subjectivity (Hardt and Negri

2009, 57) thereby (re)emerges simultaneously in the hope for a new world, in the counter-racist actions articulating the beauty and power of other bodies (38/61), and in the prospects of resisting the symbolic violence of states, institutions and authorized heritage agents (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2003; Smith 2006).

A last point to touch on here is then where this leaves traditional heritage management institutions such as museums. Here a more ambiguous image emerges. While on the one hand the articles in this special issue certainly show that museums are willing to change, to constitute new partnerships, to push unpopular agendas, and to creatively rethink audience engagement and involvement, a certain doubt remains as to whether such institutions in their present form are fully geared to engage with a decolonial agenda.

Even though many metropolitan European museums see themselves as progressive or even activist (Janes and Sandell 2019), seeking inspiration from the cultural repertoires of so-called “memory activism” (Kubal and Becerra 2014) and its agenda of “reshuffling and recharging a particular society’s memory-scape by making silenced voices heard, foregrounding counternarratives that challenge hegemonic tales, and bringing to light truths suppressed by mainstream society” (Katriel 2016, 264–265), a number of deeper questions remain regarding the prospects of fully “decolonizing the museum” of the European metropole. One of these concerns the extent to which it would be possible for museums to redefine their traditional role as privileged sites in which the nation’s heritage and memory is stored, ordered and displayed. As Benedict Anderson has already pointed out, the national history museum was part of the modern scientific ambition for a “totalizing classificatory grid” (Anderson 1983, 184), but also part and parcel of the modern construction of the “imagined community” of the nation as “a vision of eternal fraternity uncovered and represented in the museum” (Smith 1987, 172–173). As is made evident for example in the article by Chuva and Peixoto in their discussion of the plan for a “Museum of the Discoveries” in Lisbon, the museum can be still a site of national self-aggrandizement.

A first step – and one many museums are already taking – would then be to face head on the fact that the institution of national historical museums has its own cultural history, ideological function and part played in instituting various forms of “heritage repression” – not least that instated in relation to the atrocities of colonial domination. But the willingness to represent something else, more than the dominant national narrative, is neither sufficient nor without its own pitfalls. If the function of all collections is to organize an exchange between the fields of the visible and the invisible (Pomian 1990), and thus to allow the audience to “see through” the metonymic surface of the collection to the meta-object represented by its totality (the nation, history or progress), then the museum is a key ideological institution, a mirror in which the community is allowed to gaze at itself (Bennett 1995, 34–36). The visibility/invisibility struggle, as such, is not simply about what is represented in and through the collection, but about how to decolonize the position of the beholder in such a way that it better represents, and includes, the heterogeneity of contemporary societal multiplicity and heterogeneity – not least that constituted by the echoes of colonial heritage. But even such relatively complicated discussions of the politics of representation and the right to look are potentially undermined if we return to the decolonial insistence that what matters is enunciation. The fundamental question then becomes what right the European metropolitan museum has to remain

the enunciating agent of narratives, meanings, grievances and memories suffered by others at the hands of Europeans. For scholars such as Dan Hicks it is impossible to decolonize an institution founded on institutional racism (Hicks 2020), and equally to devise an ethical mode of representation, when the very objects whose metonymic materiality does the work of signification ultimately signify little else than the wholesale theft of cultural heritage undertaken in the shadow of colonial domination and imperial administration.

This special issue cannot offer any conclusive answers to these dilemmas, but its contributions do in different ways at least raise the hope that new forms of coalition and cooperation between new and old actors in the heritage field – between activists, artists and the archives – might allow for what we have here and elsewhere called “re-emergence,” a heritage practice aimed above all at imagining new and more just futures.

Outline of this Special Issue

Opening this special issue, Knudsen and Kølvråa present a conceptual framework to analyse colonial heritage practices in general and focussing especially on their affective dimension. The authors suggest four main modalities: Repression, Removal, Reframing and Re-emergence. Repression here denotes practices which involve an active denial of the past, removal denotes situations where the presence or absence of this heritage in public spaces is actively and often antagonistically politicized, and reframing points to situations which seek to incorporate this heritage into new often consensual frames. Finally, the term re-emergence opens up the social space to new voices, affects and bodies. Nantes, being the main slave port in France, is where the framework is put to use. Even though the article’s central ambition is to demonstrate and analytically employ a new conceptual framework for understanding different kinds of heritage practice, the authors demonstrate analytically how the official memory political strategy in Nantes is mainly articulated through a decolonial reframing of the city’s former industrial heritage.

Bukowiecki, Wawrzyniak and Wróblewska look at Warsaw and the complexity of a memory-political field in which the Polish history of European “internal colonialization” from both Soviet and German aggressors is potentially co-opted by political right-wing agendas seeking to portray the nation as victim. Examining a wide range of cases of museological, artistic and monumental character, they argue that a “decolonial option” in the Polish case must involve a dual decolonial gesture; both rejecting a past colonialism victimizing the nation, and also highlighting the history of the nation as a (colonial) aggressor – for example in the context of the Holocaust where the Polish Jewish community was reduced to the nation’s dehumanized Other. Through a meticulous analysis they are therefore able to offer a heuristic tool for studying other cases in which a dual decolonial approach is required because the nationalistic framing of heritage and memory has become the strongest decolonial response to the fall of empires and their aftermath. One needs in such cases to confront both the heritage repression born of the colonial past, and the heritage repression born of the nationalistic response, in order to open up a truly decolonial future. The artistic heritage practices that Schütz’ article on Marseille and Bristol revolves around are artworks that have the capacity to challenge existing civic narratives. The engaging interactivity of the decolonial artworks under scrutiny – whether this plays out through mobile app-based city walks, performances and installations –

has the potential to invite audiences to co-produce a counter-narrative of the city in question. Schütz treats two artistic initiatives in Bristol – Michele Curtis’ *Seven Saints* and Libita Clayton’s *Who was Pero?* – that express themselves through different artistic media: murals, interventions at already established sites, digital enhancements and performances – stress the agency and empowerment of black subjectivities and invite audiences to co-produce and embody that narrative by participating. In Marseille, Dalila Mahdjoub’s installation *La Maison, le monde* performs a familial archive to question France’s colonial relation to its colonial subjects, and Mohammed Laouli’s *Ex Voto* is a re-appropriation – in the form of a video – of an already existing monument in central Marseille that opposes colonial nostalgia within public narration of the colonial past.

Joffe and Shepherd in their contribution are themselves scholars performing a respectful listening to four voices from contemporary Cape Town – all differently implicated in colonial heritage practices. These voices belong to artist Thania Petersen, artist and architect Ilze Wolff, and museum practitioners Bonita Bennett from the *District Six Museum* and Calvyn Gilfellan CEO of the *Castle of Good Hope*. The caring ethos performed by Joffe and Shepherd, themselves former Captonians, is to listen carefully to local voices trying to respond to and struggling with the multilayered hauntedness of this city from various disciplinary positions and levels of power. A key-question that runs through the piece is, as such, how to live together in the present and future, having incommensurably different stories, destinies and current unequal possibilities.

Chuva and Peixoto reveal a double focus exploring how official colonial heritage is transformed, reused and reinterpreted in the uniquely entangled cities of Rio and Lisbon. Focusing especially on the discussion around a new museum of “discoveries” in Lisbon and on the ritual heritage practice of the “Washing of Valongo Wharf,” a site central to Rio’s history as a destination for trafficked Africans, they explore the myriad tensions that emerge between official heritage authorities and actors seeking to defend decolonial or national agendas, such as social movements or civil society agents. By closely reading the practices and discourses in both cities they show that authorized heritage discourse in either case reveals a “porosity” that allows for the transformation of meanings and ultimately acts as an opening for the reinvention of a heritage that transitions from colonial to decolonial.

Ariese’s piece is a detailed and careful exploration of the tensions and interactions between an environment of artists/activists and the museological sphere in Amsterdam, in the context of the discussion of how to “decolonize the museum.” Focusing on the exhibition *Afterlives of Slavery*, the

installation *Blood Sugar* and the publication *Words Matter*, she argues that the interaction between the museum and civil society actors, whether activists, artists or advocacy groups, is beneficial because they introduce new agendas into the museological space, which in turn are amplified by this institutional framing and staging. Ultimately, she also warns that this interaction is not without tensions, the museum still guarding certain public silences and the outside voices always risking domestication and limitation in exchange for amplification.

Finally, Pozzi and Ifversen explore how the official authorities in Shanghai have built an alliance between colonial nostalgia and conspicuous communism. The “old” nostalgia signifying a celebration of “Shanghai’s colonial era as a ‘golden age’” thus exists in parallel to the wilfully staged colonial nostalgia being used by the authorities strategically to reframe

colonial legacies from a tale of suffering to a tale of global financial glory, and in relation to this to attune citizens affectively to the futuristic ambitions of Chinese commercial-communism. The article thoroughly analyses various colonial heritage-related practices in the urban fabric of Shanghai, such as the newly opened Shanghai History Museum and particular sites of the former French Concessions – Sinan Road and at the Open-Air Museum of the historical district – that invite visitors to re-enact upper-class life in 1930s style with the shops offering fitted clothes and haircuts à la Gatsby. The cracks, omissions and non-fitting pieces that this strategy produces are also components of the picture drawn in the paper.

Note

1. Some indication of this transformation and a space for the voices driving it can be found at the website “Key interventions” (<https://keywordsechoes.com/interventions>) which the editors of this special issue have been involved in setting up.

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