1 Creating Visibility

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Abstract

Historically, museums are successors of private collections and thus increasing visibility was a crucial part of establishing modern museum institutions. By providing access to collected objects, museums seemed egalitarian and democratic in their service. However, they represented a particular system of Western knowledge, even though presented objects were taken from all over the world. The gap grew between Western terms and categories on the one hand and things that were not inherently part of Western society on the other hand. This rendered objects and knowledge invisible that were not a product of this particular cultural and epistemic system.

Keywords: system of knowledge, exposition, visibility, realm of significance, repression

The decision to make things visible or invisible in museums is always related to power.

The challenge

Visibility has always been the main principle of the modern museum institution. In the 19th century, formerly private collections gained unprecedented visibility when transformed into public museums. New domains of visibility were created out of previously hidden areas and practices, that had once only been accessible to strictly limited, closed groups of people. Visibility in museums has always had its axiological dimension and has been associated with a wide range of values from the beginning of the museum institution.¹

¹ Bennett 1995.

Krzysztof Pomian argues that all collections are involved in an exchange they establish between the visible and the invisible.² What can be seen on display is viewed as valuable and meaningful because of the insight it offers into a sphere of significance that cannot itself be seen. The visible in the museum, rather than being significant for its own sake, gains value by affording a glimpse of a realm beyond itself: the order of nature, in the case of a natural history museum, or the order of history or art, in the case of cultural collections. Museums, through their methods of classifying and arranging artefacts, and the settings in which they are placed, serve a realm of significance that is invisible and absent (like past events), but at the same time they mediate visitors' access to that realm by making it metonymically visible and present.

However, such an interpretation raises the question: to whom are things in the museum visible?³ Pierre Bourdieu's social critique of modern art institutions as instruments of social distinction argued that only those with the appropriate cultural capital can see the objects in the museum as well as the realm of significance that is mediated by them.⁴ The entanglement of this hidden order in colonial structures of power was revealed by Gyan Prakash, who drew from Indian examples.⁵ Colonial museums in late 19th-century India were established more for Indian people than for British residents or European visitors. These institutions were created to reorganize local materials and indigenous objects in such a manner as to demonstrate the superior ordering Western science was able to provide. As such, these museums were used by the Indian elite to demonstrate their privileged access to European knowledge, thereby distinguishing themselves from the illiterate peasantry. These elites had trained themselves to see the realm of significance imposed on objects displayed in museums according to the principles of Western science.

The decision to make things visible or invisible in museums is always related to power, as it involves a particular system of knowledge. Historically, most museums were agents of the Western realm of significance and involved in the colonial regimes of European empires. However, nowadays these institutions are being decolonized through a process that implies a need to make changes to what is visible in their exhibitions. These changes affect both the objects displayed and topics addressed, effectively entailing

2 Pomian 1994.

3 Bennett 1995.

4 Bourdieu 1993.

5 Prakash 1992.

changes of the underlying realm of significance. Sometimes this process brings about a deeper, structural change in the Western paradigm of the museum institution, being imposed as a sign of power or an educational tool. Increasing visibility in the museum used to be a privilege in the 19th century, but nowadays it tends instead to be perceived in moral categories, or as the responsibility every museum has to society. It is more about social justice and a voice being granted to those who were represented by others but had no means to present their own points of view. Simone Zeefuik, an activist from the Decolonize the Museum group, stated in 2016 that decolonizing is “to walk into your own family album without finding that all your pages are ripped out.”⁶ The consequences of making things visible in a museum are hard to overestimate: it means making something public and disputable, and this can provoke moral reactions and even social change.

The change

Increasing visibility in the case of colonial pasts initially involves discovering or rediscovering certain parts of hidden, forgotten, or repressed – and thus untold – histories. The creation of a brand-new institution to serve as a platform for expressing a colonial past can be an effective way of approaching change, as is clear from the *International Slavery Museum* in Liverpool, the *Musée des Civilisations Noires* in Dakar, or the *District Six Museum* in Cape Town. But attempts to increase the visibility of (the problems of) colonialism usually assume more readily achievable forms, for example, a temporary exhibition, an intervention in an existing display, a commissioned artwork, or the publication of a book or catalogue. Increasing visibility is not only a question of displaying difficult heritages and histories. It is also a matter of showing them from a perspective other than the dominant. It may be asked whose point of view on colonial pasts is being presented or who is speaking about the heritage of the colonial era.

Such a change in viewpoint may bring about profound change in an old colonial institution, as was case with the permanent exhibition projects at the *Tropenmuseum* in Amsterdam or the *Mutare Museum* in Zimbabwe, both of which are discussed below. Traditional means of exhibiting, of displaying museum collections, have proved to be successful at facilitating the process of making hidden subjects visible. However, temporary exhibitions may be even more effective and radical in the presentation of challenging histories.

6 Post by @SYFUCollective quoting Simone Zeefuik, 16 April 2016; cited in Van Huis 2019: 228.

This was certainly true in the case of the *German Colonialism* exhibition at the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* in Berlin in 2016, which was the institution's very first attempt to deal with the subject. Addressing the subject directly in this short-term project led the institution to revise and change part of permanent exhibition, namely its section about colonialism. It was opened on 1 July 2020, despite the Covid-19 pandemic and the fact that the permanent exhibition is soon to be closed for general renovations.

The challenge to colonial histories can also be made visible in museums' educational programs,⁷ irrespective of whether the exhibitions are critical and progressive. In some cases, guided tours and workshops with the public are perhaps more useful and effective media than the display of objects in space. One good example of such an approach is the *Untold Histories Guided Tours* offered to the public at the *Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology* (MAA) in Oxford. These tours, which promise to "tell what the labels won't," focus on displayed objects that were collected under colonial rule or during military conflicts in colonies. The tours were developed by three researchers of the University of Cambridge: Ananya Mishra, Danika Parikh, and Akshyeta Suryanarayan, with support of MAA curators. The project was inspired by an initiative by Alice Procter, who independently launched her *Uncomfortable Art Tours*. These present an uncompromised version of British colonial and imperial history at various London museums. On her website, which is called *The Exhibitionist*, she has published over 30 podcasts and shared an extensive bibliography for those who would like to learn more. She has also been active on social media (Facebook and Twitter), and her use of the internet for sharing knowledge and critically reflecting on museums' colonial entanglements is by no means exceptional. In fact, it reflects a new trend for communicating with museum audiences that has been used both by museums and their external critics, and has even enabled the establishment of alternative and independent museum institutions, like the *Museum of British Colonisation*.

International Slavery Museum | Liverpool, UK

The *International Slavery Museum* (ISM) in Liverpool opened on 23 August 2007, the date of the annual International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition, which marks the beginning of the enslaved uprising in Saint Domingue (now Haiti) in 1791. It serves as a strong reminder that enslaved Africans were the main agents of their own

7 Castro et al. Forthcoming.

liberation. The year 2007 was also significant as it was the bicentenary of the United Kingdom's Slave Trade Act of 1807, which abolished the trade in enslaved persons – though not slavery itself – inside the British Empire. It is not only the museum's date of opening, but also its location, that is meaningful. It is housed in Liverpool's Royal Albert Dock, at the center of a World Heritage Site, only meters away from the dry docks where the 18th-century slave trading ships were repaired and fitted out. The choice of location comments directly on the historical role played by Liverpool, which was regarded by the 1780s as the European capital of the trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved persons, and benefited for much of the 19th century from cotton and other trade goods that were dependent on slave labor and the colonial system.

Before the ISM opened, the history of the trade in enslaved persons was presented as part of the city's maritime history at the *Merseyside Maritime Museum*, which is also located in the docks. Subsequently, a dedicated *Transatlantic Slavery Gallery* was created in 1994, which immediately gained worldwide recognition and attention and attracted a high volume of visitors. Although it was innovative for its time, it had become dated a dozen years after its opening and it was felt that the subject of slavery needed greater recognition and a different approach. This all led to the decision to establish a museum specially dedicated to the history of slavery that would be more capable of exposing and explaining slavery and its legacy. The new museum is now three times the size of the previous gallery and occupies a more prominent position on the third floor of the *Merseyside Maritime Museum*. The story of establishing a museum in its own right is the story of increasing the visibility of the subject of slavery.

The display space is split into three main galleries which focus, in turn, on the lives of historical people in West Africa (*Life in West Africa*), their following enslavement (*Enslavement and the Middle Passage*), and their continued fight for freedom (*Legacy*). New exhibitions incorporate the latest historical research, but these are not limited to the past and cover wider issues of the legacy of trans-Atlantic slavery and its contemporary relevance. The topics they cover include freedom and identity, social justice and human rights, underdevelopment in Africa and the Caribbean, racial discrimination and injustice, and the transformation of British and other cultures. The museum is increasing the visibility of these subjects using collections that are developed through partnerships with human rights organizations such as Stop the Traffik and Anti-Slavery International. The *Contemporary Slavery* collection highlights contemporary forms of slavery, such as bonded labor, early and forced marriage, forced labor, slavery by

descent, human trafficking, and child labor. This collection is used as an interpretive tool to initiate discussions and dialogues about contemporary slavery, to support anti-slavery campaigns, and to raise awareness.

Tropenmuseum | Amsterdam, the Netherlands

The *Tropenmuseum* is an ethnographic museum located in Amsterdam. It forms the *Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen* (National Museum of World Cultures) with two other ethnographic museums: the *Museum Volkenkunde* in Leiden and the *Afrika Museum* in Berg en Dal. The *Tropenmuseum* has been housed since 1926 in one of the most impressive museum buildings in the Netherlands. However, it was originally founded in 1864 and opened to the public in 1871 in Haarlem, as the *Koloniaal Museum* (Colonial Museum) by Frederick van Eeden, secretary of the Society for the Promotion of Industry. The institution's main goal was propagandistic, to present Dutch overseas possessions, such as Indonesia, and to convince people of the benefits being gained from the colonies and colonial trade. The museum also began research activities, mostly to increase any profits made off of the colonies.

Following the independence of Indonesia in 1945,⁸ the museum's interests expanded beyond the Netherlands' colonial possessions to many other underdeveloped colonial states in South America, Africa, and Asia. Consequently, in 1949 it was renamed the *Tropenmuseum*. In the 1960s and 1970s the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs encouraged the museum to expand its scope to cover more social issues such as poverty and hunger and to develop its educational profile. In the early 1970s a new wing for children was added, now called *Tropenmuseum Junior*. From the 1990s, the idea emerged to change the *Tropenmuseum's* exhibitions and to present a different story of colonialism, including the role of the museum itself. A new permanent exhibition opened in 2003, titled *Oostwaarts!* (Eastward Bound!). This constituted one of the first attempts to expose the realm of colonialism, which had hardly ever been visually represented in museums anywhere in the world, let alone in the Netherlands. This aim was achieved by showing objects that were collected in Asia, mainly in Indonesia, as well as objects, images, and memories of the everyday life of colonizers.

Twelve years later, the exhibition became the subject of strong critiques by the Decolonize the Museum activist group and others who were using the hashtag #DecolonizeTheMuseum on social media, posting about issues

8 Indonesia proclaimed its independence in 1945, and this claim was finally acknowledged by the Netherlands in 1949 after years of colonial warfare and violence.

Figure 1.1 Label text: “How Did the Museum Acquire Its Collections?”

Tropenmuseum; photo by Csilla E. Ariese, 2019

related to the exhibition and the museum itself. They drew attention to the asymmetries in representing the perspectives of colonizers and colonized; to the lack of information about the violence and exploitation colonialism entailed; and to the museum's failure to adequately present how colonized peoples resisted. In response, in 2016 the museum organized a conference titled *Decolonize the Museum*. This enabled the Decolonize the Museum group to place a few text panels next to the original wall panels. These new panels contained critical descriptions that offered alternative views on the exhibition. They revealed what was invisible in the exhibition, namely colonial violence and exploitation, as well as the role of the museum itself in acquiring objects that had been stolen or otherwise taken as trophies.

The new texts were displayed for several months. Following their removal, the curators and activists began to cooperate intensively on the writing and editing of new museum texts. Since then, the curators have added these and other new texts to the older exhibits in order to make visible what was invisible before: the perspectives of colonized peoples.

Mutare Museum | Mutare, Zimbabwe

Mutare Museum is one of five museums administered by the *National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe*. It was opened in 1957 as *Umtali Museum*, when it was deeply rooted in the colonial regime. It consisted of five parts devoted to different topics: transport, geology, botany, antiquities, and ethnography. The latter, which was located in the *Beit Gallery*, contained objects obtained from source communities, presented as a random collection of various groups of artefacts without any contextual information: transport accessories, zoological and botanical objects, traditional beehives, geological displays, and traditional objects, such as drums. The last group of objects proved to be the most significant for curators who were working on the rearrangement of the gallery. Jindwi traditional drums had been ‘collected’ during the colonial period by ethnographers who wished to study the culture of the ‘African other,’ yet lacked a proper grounding in these drums’ social and cultural functions and the important associations with their makers.

The Jindwi drums were displaced from their original context and replaced in the museum’s glass cases, thereby becoming objects of colonial ethnography that were assigned new colonial meanings based on colonial scientific, historical, and aesthetic paradigms of Western knowledge. In the imperial realm of significance, the drums were no more than material objects referring to the ‘exotic, primitive, and distant’ African culture, but in the Jindwi community’s realm of significance, these same drums were important symbols of identity. For this reason, the museum was criticized by this community for being an alien entity, imported from the empire, that was elitist, urban-based, and above all served colonial interests.

A reorganization of the ethnographic collection took place in 2016. One of the curators, Njabulo Chipangura, declared that decolonization was one of the most important aims and this was examined from various angles.⁹ Firstly, the imperial policies that had facilitated the looting of drums belonging to the Jindwi community were critically examined by curators. But more importantly, decolonization was understood as “a movement away from

9 Chipangura 2020; Chipangura and Mataga 2021.

Western traditional object-oriented approaches in museums into becoming spaces of interactive engagement between various cultures.”¹⁰ Curators aimed to achieve a deeper understanding of local cultures and to invite the participation of dispossessed communities. The exhibition project started with research that revealed the importance of music for Eastern Shona people. Music forms part of their traditions in ritual ceremonies (like hunting ceremonies or rain rituals), as well as everyday activities such as cultivating, harvesting, joyful occasions, or funerals.

The exhibition curators observed that dances formerly performed by the Jindwi during ritual ceremonies had transformed into social dances for parties and other occasions. They also realized that the Jindwi were still using the same traditional drums as those found in the museum exhibitions, so they started to look for methods of bridging the gap between the static objects displayed in the museum and similar objects being used in community ceremonies. In the revamped *Beit Gallery*, which was opened in June 2016, specific songs and dances are explained alongside the social events they relate to and short videos of traditional musical performances are shown. According to the curators, “the new exhibition uses both audio and video depictions to illustrate the socio-cultural uses of the drums that were discursively collected when this museum was opened in 1964.”¹¹ They argue that the objects should not be separated from beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of African society. And even if they finally used some well-known museum means and methods, the exhibition reveals a different realm of significance, one that is truly important for local communities to share with the wider public.

Belmont Estate | Belmont, Grenada

The *Belmont Estate* (BE) on the Caribbean island of Grenada was opened to the public in 2002.¹² It is a former plantation estate, including extensive grounds as well as several buildings with diverse functions. Unlike many other plantations throughout the Caribbean that have been turned into heritage and tourism sites, the focus of the BE is not on its ‘great house’ or villa. Indeed, there is no great house to visit. Instead, the concept of the

10 Chipangura and Chiripanhura 2017: 229.

11 Chipangura and Chiripanhura 2017: 235.

12 Following the destruction of much of the estate due to Hurricane Ivan, it was closed from 2004 to 2007.

owner, Shadel Nyack Compton (who is a Grenadian of East Indian origin), is centered around agri-tourism.¹³

During the colonial era, much of the Caribbean region was characterized by plantation estates, with some islands being almost entirely divided into plantation parcels of land. Grenada, still known today as the spice island, was particularly used for the production of nutmeg, unlike many other islands which were mostly used for planting and harvesting sugar cane. This long-term and often violent colonial exploitation of the Caribbean – in terms of both the careless exploitation of the environment and the ruthless exploitation of the labor and lives of enslaved persons – has left many scars on the region's landscapes today and in the lives and memories of its populations.

Thus, contemporary relationships with plantation estates are complex. For the descendants of enslaved persons, they are sites of trauma and of grief, but often also sites of ancestral homes or huts and burials. Yet they are also popular heritage sites for local governments and sometimes also local communities. The great houses are frequently built in aesthetically pleasing locations with grand views and the buildings themselves are spacious, 'beautiful' according to European standards, and often heritage-listed. Few other kinds of historical buildings in the region have been preserved as often as great houses and once they are listed as cultural heritage sites their use becomes limited. As a result, many Caribbean plantations and their great houses can be visited today as museums. Some of these museums deal transparently and vulnerably with their history as a place of enslavement, violence, and exploitation. They may present stories of present-day descendants of enslaved persons who used to work on the estate or information about historical uprisings and revolts. Others focus instead on the histories of the colonizers who formerly lived in the great house. Such museums commonly present period-style rooms decorated with antique furniture. Still others focus solely on the production processes of sugar cane and rum, thereby entirely avoiding any connection to human histories and denying any ties to slavery and the trade in enslaved persons.

Within this broad range of different plantation tourism approaches, the *Belmont Estate* chooses to focus on increasing the visibility of the Grenadian environment and on advocating sustainable agricultural practices by leading through example. The estate grows many different kinds of spices, including of course nutmeg, which are used in its restaurant in typical Grenadian dishes. The BE also grows and produces organic cocoa and offers special

13 Ariese 2019b: 262.

Figure 1.2 The focus is on caring for the plantation estate's landscape rather than preserving its colonial mill

Belmont Estate; photo by Csilla E. Ariese, 2014

‘from bean to bar’ tours. The landscape of the estate is really the focal point for any visit, whether one tours the tropical garden, the fruit orchards and vegetable gardens, the animal enclosures, or the modern workings of the estate and its produce. All of these parts are accompanied by informative signs that focus on flora and fauna, mixed with culinary and medicinal traditions. BE has also offered a home to the Grenada Goat Dairy Project to support their mission of producing local goat cheese and empowering low-income farmers. Similarly, a small building is used by the Grenada Arts and Crafts Co-op for demonstrations and as a gallery. Finally, the BE contains a small museum building, which documents Grenadian traditional lifestyles as well as the history of the estate.

The BE practices decoloniality primarily by creating visibility for sustainable and fair agricultural practices – both in terms of the environment and their laborers. In doing so, it counteracts on a small, local scale the historical colonial destruction and exploitation of landscapes. Additionally, the *Belmont Estate* does not participate in the so-called ‘neo-colonialism’ of modern day tourism, by which choice landscapes and sites are purchased commercially for hotels, wellness centers, and so on, without considering the long-term strain on the environment or the negative impacts on

contemporary populations.¹⁴ Instead, the BE focuses on the wellbeing of its community first and foremost: ensuring a sustainable environment, providing fair employment, and also supporting literacy, language, and health programs through its charity.

Further reading

Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums | Amy Lonetree | 2012

Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times | Ann Laura Stoler | 2016

The Interrogative Museum | Ivan Karp and Corinne A. Kratz | 2015

Zimbabwean Museums in the Digital Age: A Quest to Increase Museum Visibility in Public Space through Social Media | Munyaradzi Mawere and Genius Tevera | 2015

Further examples

Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours exhibition at the *Immigration Museum* Melbourne, Australia (opened 2011)

“What does it mean to belong and not belong in Australia? This exhibition explores how our cultural heritage, languages, beliefs, and family connections influence our self-perceptions and our perceptions of other people – perceptions that can lead to discovery, confusion, prejudice and understanding.”¹⁵

With our thanks for this suggestion to Britta Timm Knudsen.

Lande: The Calais ‘Jungle’ and Beyond exhibition at the *Pitt Rivers Museum* Oxford, UK (April–November 2019)

“The exhibition reassembles material and visual culture that survives from the ‘Jungle’ as it existed at Calais from March 2015 to the demolitions of 2016. It does so in order to make visible the landscape of ‘borderwork’ at Calais. These range from photographs and artworks made by displaced people and undocumented children to images made by activists and

¹⁴ Williams 2012.

¹⁵ As quoted from the *Immigration Museum* website. Available at <https://museums.victoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/whats-on/identity-yours-mine-ours/> (accessed 1 April 2021).

artists, and from the Calais cross salvaged from the Orthodox Church at the 'Jungle' to a fragment of border fencing."¹⁶
 With our thanks for this suggestion to Britta Timm Knudsen.

African Presence in Finland exhibition at the *Finnish Labour Museum*
 Tampere, Finland (April-November 2015)

"The exhibition project provided new knowledge of the African diaspora communities' contributions to Finnish society and culture. It also enabled an examination of many theoretical questions concerning research on African and black diaspora(s) in Europe, including those focusing on African diaspora formations in a Northern European country with a relatively short history of migration from Africa and its global diaspora."¹⁷
 The project is also discussed in an audio series.¹⁸
 With our thanks for this suggestion to Lorena Sancho Querol.

Unheard Voices: Slavery, Gender, Migration and Diversity in the Allard Pierson
 audio tour at the *Allard Pierson*

Amsterdam, the Netherlands (February-March 2019)

A temporary audio tour developed by students of the University of Amsterdam.

"This tour highlights nine objects creating an alternative route through the collection, which allows forgotten voices from the past to be heard again [...] The tour *Unheard Voices* offers an extra layer that brings forward identities silenced since the ancient past."¹⁹

Засушенному – верить [*Believe in the Dried*] project and travelling exhibition
 Various locations, Russia (2017-2020)

This Russian exhibition is based on herbarium sheets which can be read to tell the stories and journeys of persons displaced by the GULAG, providing voices for those who have since died and who have rarely been recorded previously.

"This exhibition is about memory, fragility and implicit traces. The eye slips by until we know that these are footprints. People are leaving, the

16 As quoted from the *Pitt Rivers Museum* website. Available at <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/lande> (accessed 1 April 2021).

17 As quoted from researcher Anna Rastas' website. Available at <http://www.annarastas.com/the-african-presence-in-finland-action-research-project-and-exhibition/> (accessed 1 April 2021).

18 The audio series is available at <https://soundcloud.com/projectosomus/sets/somus-2-the-african-presence-in-finland-flm> (accessed 1 April 2021).

19 As quoted from the *Unheard Voices* booklet.

grasses-displaced persons also disappear, but the herbarium sheets remain – a document confirming that there were displaced persons – people and herbs. Botanists at the exhibition are translators deciphering the ‘language’ of plants. [...] All of them prepared the leaves of the herbarium and the stories associated with them: carnations from the runway of the Moscow airfield, a green carpet of herbs in the place of the women’s branch of the Norillag, five stems hanging upside down from the collections of a naturalist who spied on the Decembrists and Pushkin, sheets of Solovetsky prisoners, living human stories and survivor of wars and displacements.”²⁰

With our thanks for this suggestion to Daria Agapova.

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