

# Decolonial Curatorial Methods: Impacts on Collections, Narratives, and Publics

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines decolonial curatorial methods and their transformative impacts on collections, exhibition narratives, and public engagement within cultural institutions. Grounded in postcolonial and decolonial theoretical frameworks, the study highlights how museums and related institutions are increasingly confronting their historical entanglements with colonialism and re-evaluating their roles as producers and custodians of knowledge. Decolonial curatorial practices are shown to operate across three key domains: the reframing of collections through provenance research, restitution, and shared stewardship; the reconstitution of exhibition narratives through multivocality, inclusive storytelling, and the integration of marginalized knowledge systems; and the reimagining of publics through participatory and community-driven approaches. The article further explores the ethical, institutional, and policy implications of these practices, including governance challenges, legal constraints, funding limitations, and risks of essentialism or performative decolonization. Drawing on case studies and emerging practices, it underscores the importance of epistemic justice, transparency, and collaboration in reshaping curatorial work. Ultimately, the paper argues that while decolonial curatorship offers significant opportunities for institutional transformation and social justice, its implementation requires sustained commitment, reflexivity, and structural change to ensure meaningful and lasting impact.

**Keywords:** Decolonial curatorship, Epistemic justice, Museum collections, Participatory curation, and Cultural heritage.

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## INTRODUCTION

Increasingly pervasive decolonial practices within cultural institutions derive from the historical entanglements between these institutions, colonialism, and empire [1]. Many museums, galleries, archives, and libraries remain substantially tied to the colonial project; exhibition practices, collection strategies, and audience engagement often reinforce colonial views and power structures [1]. Conversely, decolonial practices respond to these histories by actively transforming and subverting institutional practices. Debates concerning decolonial practice within cultural institutions benefit from the analytical lens of postcolonial and decolonial theory. Much decolonial thought interrogates the still ongoing, imperial, and colonial project of Western domination in its military, political, economic, ecological, and epistemic aspects [2]. Decolonial curatorial methods do not constitute a single established method, but instead embrace an expansive range of practices. Despite this diversity, contemporary decolonial practice consistently leads to three principal impacts on institutional activities [1]. Reframing of collections (including questions of provenance, possibilities for repatriation, new documentation practices, and access strategies), [2]. Reconstitution of exhibition narratives (through the multi-vocal installation of under-represented knowledge traditions, new modes of storytelling, and the prioritisation of audience perspectives), and [3]. renewed consideration of publics (focussing on means of community participation, alternative avenues for

collective feedback, and the exploration of ways to provide broad audiences, both on-site and online, with the opportunity to contribute to and shape collections and narratives)[3].

### **Theoretical Foundations of Decolonial Curatorship**

The fundamental theoretical foundation of decolonial curatorship rests on postcolonial and decolonial theory, which advances knowledge of colonial structures that underpin societal and associated policies globally. Postcolonial theory critically addresses the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism, examining the continued effect they exert on cultural practices and institutions, particularly as they are rooted in Euro-centric worldviews [4]. It interrogates the aftermath of colonisation in specific cultural and geographical contexts. A theoretical move from postcoloniality to decoloniality opens consideration to the epistemic, structural, and material aspects of knowledge [5]. Decoloniality draws attention to the global South, with particular focus on Latin America, as a knowledge-political critique. It relates to the social and biopolitical issues of a coloniality that challenges the modernising and civilising mission often associated with formerly colonised countries and their peoples [6]. Theories of epistemic justice play a crucial role within both decoloniality and curatorial practice [3]. The situation of the urban, contemporary, and transitory nature of large numbers of people of colour in Euro-American cities, as well as the political understanding of how to make art that so readily falls under these categories emerge as key issues that position an artist at the intersection of post-coloniality, post-nationality, and the de-colonisation of the postal[7]. The post-12 September 2001 era sees the time lag between the referencing of a cultural-fortress isolationism and the understanding of its effects upon processes of work irredeemably severed. Information does not flow only in one direction; read messages or propaganda from or for far away [8]. The idea of a museum of urban-formation-times remains attractively problematic to draw attention to socially investigatory projects and to much that is contemporary and transitory, and now to engage in a methodology that involves some of these issues [2, 9].

### **Postcolonial and Decolonial Theoretical Traditions**

Museums are complex sites of colonialism and decolonization; the politics of knowledge underpinning their collections, the decolonial turn in contemporary theory, and the political economy of exhibition practice across North America shape patterns of governance and engagement[10]. These frameworks are essential to decolonial curatorial methods, which reconfigure institutions and practices to respond to the decolonial imperative [2]. In parallel, postcolonial, decolonial, and related scholarship articulate epistemic justice as a foundational criterion for museums asserting institutional civic engagement, multiculturalism, and reconciliation in the postcolonial context [11]. Each paradigm identifies knowledge as a contested site; considers the involved institutions as nodes in a knowledge ecosystem substantially shaping what is known, how knowledge is produced and transmitted, and the broader implications; and links the governance of knowledge and knowledge institutions to collections, narrative politics, modes of engagement, and diverse public [4, 12]. Contingencies of colonialism, racism, and imperialism underlie curatorial practices that reinforce modes of knowledge organization and exchange, such as classification, canonical framing, curricula, speech acts, media forms, and routinized routines, excludes specific communities and constituencies, and perpetuates systemic injustices. Curatorial methods that address these antidemocratic yet often submerged governance issues mitigate the limitations imposed by differentially accessible forms of knowledge and modes of engagement [13]. Coloniality and its negative consequences persist between previous independence from colonial governance and current exacerbations through global connectedness [14]. Museum practices accurate to this situation need to recall practices developed to counteract colonial forms of knowledge governance, which continue to resonate and shape decolonial museum theoretical debates, yet neither derive from nor claim allegiance to a postcolonial or decolonial theory of modernity. The spectral overlap illuminates shared concerns, aligns with institutional programs articulated in postcolonial terms, and encourages reassessment of contemporary definitions of decolonial curatorship [15].

### **Museums and the Politics of Knowledge**

Museums function not just to conserve objects but to promote specific types of knowledge. Knowledge-building is fundamental to institutional philosophy, collection development, and curatorial practices; and institutional, curatorial, and community knowledge becomes intertwined in exhibition-making [16]. It is thus imperative to examine museum activities in relation to broader knowledge politics, including the epistemic pluralism and forms of knowledge justice explored by decolonizing movements. Knowledge politics shape the ways stories are told and who is allowed to tell them; who the audiences are; the kinds of messages being conveyed; who stands to gain from these narratives; and how exhibitions either reinforce, counter, or avoid colonial models[17]. The political significance of curatorial practices is highlighted by decolonial thought, which emphasizes the need to consider historical and ongoing systems of domination [5]. Curation accordingly involves a moral contract that, quite literally, gives voice to the voiceless, maintains invisibility of historically maligned communities, or, when goods have been appropriated, challenges institutional legitimacy [5]. At stake are frameworks that favour either individualism, considered an exclusionary Eurocentric practice or indigenous, sociocultural models that link knowledge to community [6]. The vexed question of authority also arises: authority over collective heritage

remains contested at global levels, in local contexts, and even regarding regional object-space locality in larger and heavily embraced communities [2].

### **Epistemic Justice in Curation**

Curricula across the globe offer reflections on the application of epistemic justice within museum practice. This term, which refers not only to the just distribution of knowledge but also to the fairness of how knowledge is produced and how it comes to be recognised and emphasises that the approach to contestations matters more than the specific content learned [7]. Approaching these with humility, critique, and acknowledgment of continuous improvement fosters progress. When curators, visitors, and museum directors recognise inherent problems in museology and seek ethical, inclusive, and culturally appropriate practices, they create space for decolonisation. Such advancement may emerge as visitors become critically aware of their colonial gaze [8]. In addition to epistemic justice, greater attention is being paid to the recognition of active knowledge through the investigation of gender bias in colonial collections [9]. Digitisation is becoming widespread across institutions internationally. If the digitisation process is rendered visible as a politicised practice, gaps can be revealed that disclose how successfully cultural heritage institutions have silenced particular narratives in the past [10]. Such transparency creates space through which other stories including women's stories can be articulated if those storytellers choose [6].

### **Reframing Collections Through Decolonial Methods**

An essential first step in decolonial curation involves re-evaluating the home historiographies to which the objects in a collection have been assigned [3]. By scrutinising provenance and permissions records and consulting relevant communities or sovereign authorities where possible, curators can ascertain the degree of appropriateness of existing narratives and the potential need for modifications or even complete recontextualization. Such processes are not limited to works that Europeans acquired during colonial control or internationally traded items still in global circulation, although these warrant particular attention [3]. Objects originally collected in apparent good faith prior to colonial domination or cultural appropriation may nevertheless remain acutely sensitive [4]. Many institutions now actively promote provenance research, often through online catalogues, thereby extending the theoretical basis of curatorial agency beyond objects of presumed Indigenous origin or colonially linked acquisition [7]. Repatriation, restitution, and shared stewardship emerge as further vital areas for decolonial intervention [2]. Curators must reflect critically on their own practice, including the socio-political power relations informing collection priorities, their established authority to determine the appropriateness of existing narratives, and the superficialities or untruths vitiating access frameworks exposed by contemporary documentary practices [3]. Oppression and injustice are hardly restricted to Indigenous communities of formerly colonized or oppressed countries. Indigenous materials may be entirely absent from a collection, national sovereignty may remain contested, and parallel macro-historical transformations may entail entirely different trajectories of injustice [4].

### **Reassessment of Provenance and Permissions**

Provenance illustrates the system of rules governing how objects enter museum collections. A decolonial approach recognizes the subjectivity of provenance and, as a consequence, clears the path toward alternative modes of documentation that include non-material values, such as worldviews, and align with the knowledge systems of diverse communities [8]. It is crucial to document and open up attributions of stewardship, especially for objects obtained in the context of colonial rule [9]. Museum regimes frequently neglect to make clear the terms under which they hold collections despite the existence of legal frameworks [10]. Reframing these terms and the forms of acknowledgement they entail enables institutions to express local relevance to collections acquired during colonial times. Acquiring objects on behalf of local communities is also a widespread practice among museums that continue to foster colonial relations. Decolonial provenance practice rejects imposing yet another regime onto the ongoing relations of these communities and the relationships they establish with museums [11]. Object provenance refers to the origin, subsequent ownership, and historical context of collected materials. In many cases, objects relate to peoples who were dispossessed of the land [12]. These goods are nonetheless kept and exhibited often without acknowledgment of the laws of land dispossession, that their continued existence in collection is visibly tied [13]. Expanding the understanding of provenance to encompass broader environmental concepts enables institutions to attend to these through documentation (Hoffmann, 2022). Documentation and provenance address the politics of knowledge production, including questions about what, how, why, and for whom knowledge is produced [14]. Yet institutions struggle to document these designations, and attributions of stewardship routinely remain unqualified or ignored altogether. An investigation of how stewardship is documented reveals distinct divergent patterns tied to colonial and postcolonial relationships. Direct relations with communities of origin are paramount for both acquisition and remaining entry, yet documentation of who owns what even at the stage of acquisition is rarely recorded [15]. Such relations are nonetheless further complicated by the presence of multiple documentation systems governed by a variety of logics intimately connected to conventional origin provenance [16].

### **Repatriation, Restitution, and Shared Stewardship**

A museum is a site of power, epistemologies and knowledge. Decolonial curatorial methods aim at overcoming the dominance of western capitalist paradigms and introduce alternative epistemologies. Repatriation, restitution and shared stewardship are decolonial methods reshaping museology [5]. They acknowledge the institutional and structural problems of Eurocentric museology and provide full spectrum cultural items to source communities. They ultimately recognize that museum practices remain colonial and the pursuit of decolonization requires humbleness and critique [2]. Through this framework, museums can fully unlock cultural and historical items and make available in a contextually resonant and supportive manner for communities, rather than recontextualizing into Eurocentric archival paradigms [9]. The Federal Cylinder Project represented the first digital repatriation project in 1979 by returning sound recordings and printed materials. Repatriation and restitution refer to the return of heritage items, human remains and cultural goods to their original source communities [10]. Such objects then enter new relations and, depending on the collection, gain new significance [10]. The *toi moko* of the Māori, for instance, travelled to France in 1823 and returned, reflecting evolving status over and across a two hundred year time line. Similarly, Indigenous peoples have asserted ownership over their heritage internationally, prompted by legislative developments such as the U.S. Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and the Nagoya Protocol [11]. Such frameworks explicitly recognize Indigenous rights over traditional knowledge and genetic resources. Throughout the last fifty years, Indigenous groups worldwide have gained acknowledgement of political rights, generating expectations for radical shifts in collections, policy and practices concerning their heritage [12].

### **Documentation Practices and Access for Diverse Audiences**

Educational institutions have increasingly acknowledged that marginalised audiences have an inherent right to document their cultural heritages and practices and participate in the production of societal histories through extensive documentation processes [13]. Accordingly, decolonial curation practices motivated museums and related institutions to undertake comprehensive analysis of documentation policies and revisit the collections presented to specific publics on the basis of the objectives and forms of documentation encoded within such collections [2]. Supporting practices facilitating the involvement of diverse communities constitute an essential step toward furnishing accessible information to broad publics. Activities tailored within the framework of outreach programmes establish enhanced accessibility to collections on which such communities hold their own examinations [11]. Enabling collections to be interacted with freely yet guided by the communities themselves challenges established conventions underpinning institutional authority and asserts the concept of a co-constructed space [10]. Under this model, members of the communities under discussion gain the opportunity to assert their expertise, thus enhancing the quality of such co-construction efforts [3].

### **Narrative Reconstitution in the Exhibition Space**

In the contemporary context of increasing globalization and decolonial thinking, exhibitions worldwide circulate knowledge across cultures, societies, and nations. Today's exhibitions also embody significant cultural coercion in their governance and construction [11]. Whose narratives take precedence? Whose heritage and perspectives are brought forward? Who organizes exhibitions? Such questions pertain to the curatorial voice, an often-implicit authority that embodies curators' choices about what to tell, include, and express [2]. Decolonizing museum practices have thus begun purposefully to forward marginal voices and to enable previously silenced communities and societies to shape interpretation and content on their own terms [12]. Some efforts foreground the role of language and translation, particularly when curatorial teams lack full mastery of a community's tongue. Exhibition space simultaneously represents the outreach of collections to new, diverse, and distant publics and the peril of overtly prioritizing object narratives over the silent knowledge underlying collections [13]. The extension of outreach meanings beyond authoritative dissemination of object knowledge, a term increasingly replaced as museums come to acknowledge preacquired knowledge, inevitably entangles exhibition practices again in decolonial critiques. Even on open-access platforms, despite increased dialogue about culture, display languages, or audience modalities, gatekeeping and surveillance remain entrenched facets of curatorial culture globally [14].

### **Curatorial Voice and Marginalized Perspectives**

The introduction of Indigenous and underrepresented communities' voices into exhibition narratives has led to a shift away from a singular museological voice and a corporate style of language to a broader curatorial voice that welcomes a diversity of perspectives [15]. The institution becomes the platform through which diverse voices, knowledge systems, and ways of engaging are presented [16]. This shift has important implications for framing the laments and claims of colonized peoples. Rather than normalizing damage imposed by outside actors, equitable curatorial processes emphasize the unrelenting pressure imposed on colonized societies and depict clamoring for redress as a means of supporting cultural survival [7].

### **Storytelling, Language, and Audience Engagement**

Storytelling functions as a key mechanism for enabling audiences to sense and feel historical accounts and memories otherwise relegated to archives [13]. Humanities scholars emphasize the role of storytelling in extending understandings of decolonization appropriation and oppression beyond an informational register. Such pedagogies seek to overcome indifference and motivate reciprocal construction of engaged knowledge. An engagement model merges mind and heart, bridging outside classrooms and community artists [2]. Individual experience connected to historical facts encourages actors to consider their own location regarding historical momentum and social justice. Final films reflect diverse community-identified themes and acknowledge multi-layered decolonization projects undertaken by different actors at different times [14]. Language constitutes another instrument that shapes audience experience and evokes different prisms of attunement, engagement, and meaning [11]. National-language hierarchies marginalize many works and limit visitor communities; by incorporating multiple languages into exhibition scripts and texts, curators signal wider welcome and diverse lenses of relation [12]. Complementary engagements with an archive embracing Indigenous, community-based, and incoming heritage knowledge prompt audiences to consider deeper, wider, and other matters than those usually put forth by the exhibition medium [13].

### **Multivocality and Other Knowledge Traditions in Displays**

Community participation and the integration of diverse perspectives into exhibit narratives remain the foremost objectives of decolonial approaches [2]. The work of Beene and colleagues illustrates how archives, collections, and exhibitions can engage multiple senses and alternative knowing, such as smell, touch, and the tactile, emotional, and conceptual dimensions of Indigenous artists' books [11]. To include silenced narratives, whether those of societies socially segregated by ethnicity and race, or of other knowledge traditions, such as oral transmission, institutions adopt decolonial models designed to accommodate the full spectrum of epistemological variations and to restore cultural agency [12]. Extensive cultural diversity coexists within and among contemporary societies, reflecting different worldviews, concepts of personhood through art, and perspectives on temporality. Just as the artworks of Academics, Outsiders, and Young Artists articulate different subjectivities and conceptions of being, so do the knowledges accompanying collections derive from varied experiences of life and existence [13]. Displays can articulate such perspectives through different ordering and emphasis; knowledge claiming universality invariably excludes what remains unacknowledged [14]. Different understandings of life, existence, time, sociality, and the universe underpin aesthetic, cultural, and indigenous legacy, this intersection of governance, epistemology, and ethics guides current and future engagement with collections [15]. Consideration of other knowledge domains invites reflection on what it means to curate, the knowledge demanded, and whether such knowledges merit consideration. Opaque provenance suggests that addressing still-unknown histories may proceed only on the basis of principle, subject to contingent equations of risk and reward. Such considerations consider the case, supported by governance models conducive to self-determined, future-shaping stewardship [15]. A further guiding ethic concerning access revolves around conditions for, and modes of, access. Open data and open collection, as deployed on contemporary digital platforms, encapsulate such paradigms as they afford freedom of appraisal, circulation, and transformation [16]. How these paradigms amuse validation, as critical turning points or mere transmutation, test notions of constraining capacity, authority tethered to heteronomy, and the ethics of intensifying public reflection, development, enhancement, and expression [16].

### **Publics and Participatory Curatorship**

Public engagement accommodates one-to-many and many-to-many forms of participation, where curatorial content is produced collectively, and responses elicited from broad audiences and conversations encouraged between participants [14]. Several innovative approaches have emerged. Many institutions carve out time and space for community input through workshops, shadowing schemes, and participatory exhibitions by local "experts," as at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Institutional teams, with the aid of external partners, explore audience values, needs, and aspirations and gather feedback on existing initiatives through surveys, focus groups, and test engagements at locations such as the Science Museum, London. Others, such as the Museo Universitario del Chopo in Mexico City, open curatorial processes, grant public curatorial privileges, and experiment with participatory exhibit content across regions through digital outreach initiatives [2]. The contemporary open-access movement further promotes democratic access to curated resources. Repositories of online collections, images, audiovisual clips, research histories, and strategies for shared custodianship increasingly widen national and institutional boundaries [15]. Initiatives supporting open data also encourage outside uptake in the creative reworking of material aligned with institutional prospects and personal agendas. Open annotation systems enable alternative commenting and critique on the content and direction of collections, exhibitions, and initiatives, as modelled by Princeton University. Conference convocation across the globe generates shared deliberation about area-based presence, relevance, and institutional commitments at venues such as the National Museum of African Art [16, 17].

### **Community Involvement Models**

Museums maintain an unequally distributed power of knowledge. Local communities across the globe are asserting their agency in the face of the deep and persistent historical injustices inflicted upon them by museums and cultural institutions [6]. Community involvement models focus on how different approaches to museology recognize these conditions and, consequently, seek to implement ethically conscious, inclusive, and culturally appropriate practices [2]. An acknowledgment of the distinct problems scholars experience with the practice of museology generates a space for movement toward decolonization as opportunities for intervention and remedy emerge [7]. Collective action against the onslaught of sensory atrophy and extreme forms of collecting that attend colonial practices remains paramount; the view of the man-made art of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples as decoration within a traditional Western Art Museum continues to offend [8, 9]. Early in the twenty-first century, community involvement practices began at the University of Alberta. Collections symbolizing a participant's home, tradition, language, or family were assembled across contexts, surfaces, and media in a manner that intermediated interaction rather than display [10, 11]. As a research university, Alberta engaged with such materials to foster a greater appreciation for the involved communities. Barriers separating ethnographic collections and the Alberta Book- and Paper-Making collection were removed to facilitate community access; targeted expressions of interest drew participants to take part without compromising anonymity, leading already to the realization of prototype exhibitions and guiding the evolution of future proposals [12]. Because the subjects represented countless times, and interpretations shifted with audience and context, participants were invited to handle rather than simply view archived materials [13]. Initial requests for descriptive feedback concerning the collections were denoted within the exhibition's title and introductory statement, serving as an invitation to fellows across disciplines to publicly exchange knowledge. Such an arrangement reframed the engagement instead of formalizing a predefined set of questions [14].

### **Audience Research and Feedback Mechanisms**

Public engagement with institutions has received renewed attention since the mid-2010s, notably because of the relevance of new media. A lack of feedback systems on exhibitions across Euro-American institutions has persisted for decades [3]. The emergence of non-hierarchical platforms and the practice of micro-stories broaden discussions from a mere spectator role toward active engagement on the part of diverse audiences. Friction arising from this shift and the constraints imposed is a topic of reflection and critique, and audience perception continues to be explored [2]. Research on motivations and lingering perceptions offers guidance toward integrating public engagement into curatorial practices. The pioneering use of web analytics indicates that much direct audience engagement with collection objects and public programming occurs through the museum's website rather than in explicit feedback processes [4]. Even with ongoing digitization efforts, an uneven distribution of access or knowledge across museum content persists [5]. While interactive exhibits foster positive views of museums, on-site visitation is viewed as less relevant today, and web traffic can correlate more closely with social media popularity than with museum content itself, contributing to a potential misalignment between institutional knowledge initiatives and public interest [6].

### **Digital and Local Access: Open Data, Open Curation**

Digital technologies have transformed the accessibility of cultural heritage collections, enabling new relationships with diverse audiences [1]. Numerous institutions share collections online, operate open access repositories, or provide freely available datasets of collection information [2]. As recent cultural practice develops in parallel to efforts to disclose and share collection information, a similar ethos is emerging in curatorship: new modes of curatorial engagement direct conversations towards the collection data itself [3]. Programming dedicated to curatorial open data invites recontextualisation, new scripts, and alternative perspectives, extending the conversation from public engagement with collections towards open curation of collection data. Open curation connects to broader movements exploring the ethics of engagement and participatory systems; it attunes the focus of agency and authorship towards the institution and its holdings while seeking to decentralise, decolonise, and reimagine the limits of narratives, protocols, and engagement [15].

### **Institutions, Policy, and Ethical Considerations**

Colonization fundamentally (re)shapes governance structures, power relations, and justice concepts, leading to epistemic domination, the marginalization of diverse ways of knowing, and practices that render the lives of colonized people unthinkable [1]. Arriving at the notion of epistemic justice provides a vantage point from which to address the ethics and politics of curatorial practice more broadly [2]. Individual care and institutional governance turn out to be key themes in addressing curatorial efforts. Curatorial practices in relation to decolonial theory can be treated as a threefold series of elements, from collection management through physical narrative presentation to exhibition participatory engagement [3]. Each element, however, remains marked by socioeconomic and political contexts. Within cultural institutions, for instance, considerations inevitably arise

concerning an organization's operational mandate; the scope and governance of broader social institutions; potential access, reproduction, and engagement; resource availability; and policy commitment [3].

#### **Governance, Accountability, and Legal Frameworks**

In order to implement decolonial curatorial methods, it is vital that the ethics and governance of institutions are examined, as well as their existing rules in regard to the ownership, display, and care of the collections they maintain [6]. From a decolonial perspective, attention must shift from deconstructing power above the institution to building balanced and ethical governance of collections within institutions [7]. Collecting institutions often operate within legal frameworks and policies that may conflict with decolonial curatorial methods. It is critical to understand the laws and public obligations that govern the institution [8]. In many cases, broader discussions and exploratory research on repatriation, restitution, and sharing across borders are viewed as privileged discourse reserved for institutions that enjoy sufficient independence from existing legislative constraints [2].

#### **Funding, Commodification, and Cultural Value**

Financial constraints often delimit the capacity of institutions to reflect decolonial principles and guidelines in their curatorial practices [9]. At the same time as the Inuit Gallery of Vancouver has attempted to "practice decolonization" throughout various activities, the institution has also focused on challenges related to material commodification while grappling with the philosophical implications of such transactions. Many Indigenous communities operating gallery spaces are challenged with the demands of commodification [10]. Seeking funding support to develop public programs oriented around "knowledge decolonization" can often prompt questions around the gallery's material exchange practices and whether they are engaging in authentic decolonial actions. Although commodification within Indigenous knowledge could translate into financial support toward decolonizing educational initiatives, reliance on such exchanges leads to dependency on externally controlled financial resources [11]. This dependency jeopardizes self-determination and undermines the possibility for communities to establish and pursue their own decolonizing priorities. Within the gallery's material exchanges, prioritizing community-defined need and quality, rather than acquisition of funding or dependence on institutional resources can contribute to the strengthening of self-determination and support for community-governed priorities [12].

#### **Colleague Networks: Collaboration across Borders**

Colleagues who embrace, actively research, and initiate the decolonisation of museum practise contribute to the individual but also to the collective efforts of people engaged in securing epistemic justice [3]. Shared knowledge, forms of co-operation, and understanding transcends geographical, cultural, and colonial boundaries. Museums and cultural contexts have developed inventive and practical means of expressing decolonial objectives, practices, and repertoires through colleague networks [4]. These networks offer opportunities for short- and long-term exchange, studies, internships, peer-learning, seminars, and multi-institutional dialogues. Funding institutions acknowledge and enable such cross-institutional engagement beyond country borders [5]. Decolonising museum practises demands substantial institutional time, but collaborations provide institutional respite and opportunity for curatorial interconnections and exploration across governance and geographical structures [6, 11]. These exchanges facilitate museum colleagues and wider-spread discussions around institutional ethics and hegemonic and unchallenged narratives, supporting the further exploration of decolonisation as institutional, spatial, and place-based; and restrictions associated with collections or a focus on collections, return, or return-demanding communities massively influence the possibilities for ethical curation [7].

#### **Case Studies of Decolonial Curatorial Practice**

Decolonial curatorship is gaining traction among many museums, galleries, and art centres, which increasingly strive to dismantle colonial tendencies within their practices [6]. Projects targeting collections, narratives, and publics offer practical examples and demonstrate the rich potential of collaborative, participatory, and community-driven work [7]. Three projects by the Smithsonian Institution exemplify meaningful reframing of collections, reconstitution of narratives in exhibition space, and engagement with broader audiences through online participation [8, 9]. Together, they illustrate the diverse directions and possibilities of decolonial methodologies and the varied impacts they may engender [16].

#### **Recontextualized Collections in Galleries**

Recontextualized collections in galleries emphasize how curators, visitors, and museum directors acknowledge the inherent, inevitable, and continual problems within museology and strive to make practices more ethical, inclusive, and culturally appropriate [6]. Recognizing space for progress allows for decolonisation to emerge, as visitors become critically aware of their own colonial gaze and engage with collections thoughtfully [2]. Works on display challenge the silos and sensory atrophy critiqued by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. They suggest that Mexican artists' books reflect an indigenous expression through collective action, engaging multiple senses, emotions, and ideas. Interactions with these pieces go beyond mere display or labels, fostering a sense of empowerment [4]. Instead of viewing collections as dusty wares, better access enables communities to interact with pieces symbolizing their homes, traditions, languages, and families [5]. Words alone are insufficient; outreach and engagement with

community collections are vital. Inviting community members to handle archival materials without restrictions improved the exhibition, which continues to evolve based on feedback [6]. This collaborative approach redefines traditional authority, positioning audiences as equally knowledgeable partners and creators of knowledge. Engaging diverse perspectives enhances collective expertise and promotes shared authority [11].

#### **Museum Labs and Community-Centric Initiatives**

Decolonial methods advocate for the involvement of communities traditionally excluded from exhibition-making. These proposals emphasize that the act of curating can simultaneously serve as pedagogical engagement and a challenge to museum authority [9]. Museum labs, experimental spaces integrating collections, community voices, and new operational philosophies have emerged within this sphere [10]. Such collaborative efforts wish to provoke reflection on institutional functions while invigorating the relationship to collections [11]. Community-centric initiatives also promote a broader view of public engagement in curation, from the emphasis given to audience feedback and participatory dialogue to the idea of shared authority or co-curation [13]. Curatorial experiments developed in these spaces acknowledge the challenges involved; nevertheless, they point toward different pathways for collaborative practice [2]. Exhibitory projects employing diverse epistemic traditions and co-curating exhibitions with communities serve as models of community involvement within curatorial praxis. Furthermore, a focus on audience research, participatory dialogue, and digital extensions of local programming affords various entry points for exploratory experimentation within public engagement [11].

#### **Digital Platforms and Global Publics**

Digital environments present opportunities to counter institutional and spatial constraints, extending outreach to global, place-based, and mobile audiences [2]. Frameworks such as the OpenGLAM initiative and the development of digital commons encourage curators to share collections freely, collaborating with users to expose blind spots and enrich materials. Partnerships across museums, libraries, and archives enable large projects like the World Digital Library ([www.wdl.org](http://www.wdl.org)) to flourish, underscoring the continued relevance of territoriality alongside decolonial trends [2]. A multitude of platforms social media, personal blogs, the “aesthetics of hashtags,” and online virtual exhibitions, amplify the voices of artists, activists, and curators and serve as fertile ground for disseminating and reinterpreting contemporary art [3]. Archive and library indexing provides cues for linking, remixing, and reinserting material into the web for curatorial engagements on the World Wide Web [17]. By establishing, expanding, and activating networks, curators of colour forge international collaborations bolstering knowledge-sharing and interrogating hegemonic categories [12]. Intermatrices of movement and mediation, place and non-place, digitisation and (re)materialisation emerge as key provocations navigating the digital arts and curatorial domain [13]. Museum directors and curators seek to nurture ethical practices, create space for decolonising methods, and mobilise counter-narratives through staging exhibitions in these environments. Reflecting on modes of address, vantage points, and institutional quoting of the topics covered, they aspire to present a more equitable representation without conflating geographies or claiming to know [14]. Recognising the pervasiveness of colonial legacies, museum practitioners pay careful attention to art, institution, and vernacular combinations of voice to facilitate broader access and enable conversations transcending otherwise circumscribed locales and contexts [15].

#### **Challenges, Limits, and Critical Perspectives**

Contesting narratives and perspectives within exhibitions sometimes challenges the museum’s institutional narrative, risking dissonance between public programming and visitor experience. Such frictions highlight the complexities of installing collections or narratives that disrupt the dominant institutional storyline [16]. Moreover, while curatorial initiatives aim to foster awareness of colonialism and oppression through engagement with silenced collections and omitted stories, they frequently implicate the museum and its staff as a source of colonial power, oppression, and erasure in direct contradiction to their stated goal [4]. In similarly ambivalent situations, institutions redirect responsibility for either critical engagement with hegemonic history or restoration of agency over marginalized narratives back to the public, raising questions of legitimacy, ownership, and complicity [2]. Establishing non-essentialized, contextually intricate narratives about culture, identity, colonization, and resistance across multiple displays inevitably places the museum as an institution within the broader systemic context of governance and control [7]. Individual exhibitions can offer critical perspectives on specific subjects, yet uncertainties remain concerning the overall integrity of the institution’s identity and operations, leaving audiences uncertain whether the decolonial content constitutes a genuine institutional shift, a depoliticized byproduct, or merely a marketing strategy [8]. In particular, the presentation of complex, nuanced, and historically situated perspectives or critique on cultural topics risks being perceived as reductive, de-contextualized commodifications that privilege aesthetic concerns over ethical engagement, yet conversely, a constrained approach invites the risk that the institution might define the “correct” position. Establishing clarity regarding the institution’s role in shaping public narratives and addressing the entangled subject matter thus becomes critical [1].

### **Tensions between Narratives and Institutional Histories**

Curatorial practice can enact radical change when it prioritizes the narratives of collections and their institutions without seeking to challenge the legitimacy of the institutions or their narratives. Such a strategy permits the graceful cohabitation of multiple historical frames [6]. At the opening of “Decolonizing Architecture,” held at the Architecture Museum in Rotterdam in 2011, curators Eyal Weizman and Janina Löwensberg highlighted critical architectural developments in postcolonial contexts [7]. The work of contemporary architects expressed a keen awareness of histories of colonialism and exploitation, yet the accompanying materials remained strictly bound to earlier phases of the discourses; curating such works without recontextualizing these earlier phases would have rendered these contemporary positions unintelligible [2]. Contemporary reminders or reexaminations of colonial foundations and canons that complement postcolonial narratives might therefore occupy scarce exhibition space alongside decolonial works rather than departing from them [8]. Such cohabitation would better allow decolonial works to be understood and to instruct without essentializing them into uniform contemporary “post” positions [9]. Concurrent preoccupations, such as anxiety over sustainability at a time when the cartographies and architectures of intervention are being rewritten yet again and increasing panic over commercial pressures on free speech in the public sphere, further complicate the feasibility of inviting all the possibilities to participate. The present focus on decolonial curatorship remains therefore provisional [10].

### **Risks of Essentialism and Cross-Cultural Misrepresentation**

Curation based solely on imagined cultural boundaries lends support to essentialism and cross-cultural misrepresentation, especially where knowledge of the collections is thin [14]. The conflation of or complementary links between such epistemic traditions as Indigenous, African, and Asian, although socially and politically valid, is further complicated by cross-cultural interventions that flatten out similar, but geographically and historically sensitive distinctions [15]. Curatorial decisions that link different traditions or lay claim to them may also be informed by the political histories of contemporary decolonization [16]. Institutions vying for seriously contested claims to cultural heritage deposit in same space such important anthropological legacies as the Montagnais, Sámi, Skolt, and Kven, each with distinctive ontologies and scholarly literatures demonstrating the urgency of thirty years of independent research and international publications. Pragmatic cross-cultural interventions, however valuable, risk setting back long overdue initiatives to treat Indigenous, post-colonial, and minority knowledge systems as worth the same scholarly scrutiny as Western canons [2, 1].

### **Sustainability and Long-Term Impact**

Decolonial practices have emerged in various fields, including literature, philosophy, and visual culture. Specific methods have developed in three areas: a reframing of museum collections, reconstitution of narratives within exhibitions, and active engagement of diverse publics through participatory curatorship [10]. With the historical origins of many collections linked to colonialism and cultural dispossession, reflexive reassessment of provenance is a foundational activity [11]. Institutions retain artefacts acquired under exploitative or unethical circumstances, necessitating permission to retain custodianship. Shared stewardship is a priority where access and safety are paramount. Documentation and access remain crucial for safeguarding cultural heritage, especially in the face of increased post-colonial migrations, historically the dominant mode of knowledge transmission across cultures [2].

### **Implications for Future Practice**

Decolonial curatorial practices echo the theoretical foundations underpinning the broader decolonial movement, marked by a self-critical approach of honesty, humility, and continuous dialogue. Such practices acknowledge the inherently colonial origin of museums and their transnational operations [2]. They stem from recognition of the legitimacy of critiques directed at museums and curation, as well as of the need for these institutions and their curators to decolonise themselves and the roles they play [3]. This decolonial turn influences collection curation, exhibition narratives, and the institutions’ relationships with their publics worldwide. Addressing such impacts and the challenges to their implementation is particularly important in the context of knowledge, authority, and practice-sharing [4]. The current momentum of the decolonial movement offers greater visibility to the work of curators pursuing decolonial practices, inviting institutional and collective reflection on methodologies developed without the intention of signalling an adherence to a shared agenda or the assumption that other curators adhere to such methods [5]. Curatorial frameworks based on decolonial theory and critiques of coloniality seek to respond to this motivation, encouraging extension beyond museums to any institution calling itself a museum. In this sense, the attention to the methodologies guiding decolonial curatorial work represents both a shared appreciation of the individual trajectories and principles shaping curatorial approaches worldwide, as well as an implicit political commitment to fostering open dialogue that does not filter encounters through pre-established positions [6]. While focused on curatorial considerations, these methodologies also remain attuned to wider reflections on institutional priorities. They engage with significant debates around the sorting and circulation of museum collections, the motivations and justifications underpinning collection practice and display, and the politics of material culture and representation affecting the selection of individual objects for the museum [7]. The enduring problem of defining the boundaries of the museum, or questioning whether it remains a legitimate label,

invariably accompanies curatorial reflection on the ownership and exhibition of objects from collection. Such critical conversations generate insights that feed into the elaboration of curatorial methods [8].

#### **Methodological Reflections for Researchers and Curators**

The following passages reflect on decolonial methodologies for researchers and curators working with ethnographic and cultural collections [6]. Ethnographic and cultural collections and archives are repositories of past ways of life and surviving resource for a continuing scholarly and artistic engagement [7]. However, they are embedded in colonial and imperial histories, and the care of these collections in museum and gallery spaces remains speculative and uncertain. Rooted in knowledge of the collection history and attention to collaboration across wider global and local scholarly ecosystems, decolonial methodologies the international practice of museum ethnography. These practices, where curators consider the subjectivities of acquisition and exhibition of object-based collections, help address such ethical concerns and consider future direction [8].

#### **Training and Capacity Building**

Training and capacity-building initiatives enable audiences to engage actively with collections, exhibitions, and the wider institution [8]. In co-development projects, community members are invited to handle archival materials, free of gloves and heavy oversight [7]. By learning alongside them and integrating their insights into the curatorial process, traditional hierarchies are dismantled and relationships with audiences are redefined as partnerships in knowledge creation. Such open-ended, participatory experiences develop communal expertise and enable shared authority [11]. Rather than preserving collections as inaccessible, dusty artifacts, institutions can enhance access and outreach that allow communities to engage with objects reflecting their homes, traditions, and languages. Content evolves collaboratively and exhibits undergo continuous alteration informed by community feedback. These models highlight the critical importance of inclusive dialogue with collections and audiences as a foundation for decolonisation [2].

#### **Policy Recommendations and Ethical Guidelines**

Indigenous peoples and communities worldwide are often at the forefront of efforts to repatriate their cultural heritage and historical records [9]. Rapidly decolonising societies are moving toward the establishment of paradigms that are dynamic and inclusive [10]. Curators are called to respond to the cultural values, concerns, and needs of diverse communities. A process of decolonisation might therefore embrace new ideas about policy, use, assumption of power, and vision [11]. The following suggestions encourage engaging in dialogue with diverse peoples and contributing to the negotiation of fresh educational, cultural, and creative horizons. Cultivating such horizons might foster a potentially far-reaching “justice-movement in museums,” extending beyond colonisation and echoing and resonating with the pro-indigenous concerns of the twenty-first century [12]. To facilitate a potentially far-reaching justice movement in museums, the following recommendations and guidelines seek to accompany and support engaged curation, curatorial outreach, and culturally sensitive and socially relevant initiatives [13].

#### **Recommendations**

Engagement in decolonial curation can nurture a contemporary epistemic justice movement in which museums are encouraged through institutional practices, foundational documents, and umbrella policies to acknowledge, address, and perhaps be inspired by governance issues concerning the shared heritage of diverse peoples in contextually relevant and community-responsive ways [14]. Such engagement might facilitate the articulation of successful contemporary curatorial practices while informing what remains unachieved institutionally [15]. Eyewitness documentation and oral history are important modes of research and contemporaneous recording that might accompany the arrival of new collections of artefacts and data, establishing their historical and cultural provenance and significance determining the reasons for acquisition before evaluating whether the objects are still perceived to be culturally and socially relevant items of heritage and expertise [16].

#### **Ethical Guidelines**

Decolonial curation generally constitutes a consideration of how contemporary cultural items and knowledge can contribute to new understandings and new “knowledge-systems” that might assist, for instance, international-thinking about cultural expression and social distinction in societies seeking pathways out of coloniality towards alternative conceptualisation of the local [17].

#### **CONCLUSION**

Decolonial curatorial methods represent a critical and ongoing shift in how cultural institutions understand and enact their roles in society. By interrogating colonial legacies embedded in collections, narratives, and institutional structures, these approaches challenge longstanding power dynamics and open pathways for more inclusive, equitable, and community-centered practices. The reframing of collections through provenance research, restitution, and shared stewardship enables a more ethically grounded engagement with cultural heritage, while the reconstitution of narratives through multivocal and interdisciplinary storytelling fosters a richer and more representative understanding of history and identity. Equally important is the redefinition of publics, where participatory and collaborative models reposition audiences as active contributors rather than passive recipients of

knowledge. However, the transition toward decolonial practice is neither straightforward nor uniform. It is shaped by institutional constraints, including legal frameworks, funding structures, and entrenched governance systems, as well as by broader socio-political contexts. Moreover, challenges such as the risk of tokenism, essentialism, and superficial engagement highlight the need for careful, context-sensitive implementation. For decolonial curatorship to achieve its transformative potential, institutions must move beyond symbolic gestures toward sustained structural change. This involves embedding ethical accountability, fostering genuine partnerships with communities, and committing to transparency and reflexivity in all aspects of curatorial work. As cultural institutions continue to evolve, decolonial methodologies offer a vital framework for reimagining museums not merely as repositories of objects, but as dynamic spaces of dialogue, justice, and shared knowledge production.

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