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Decolonizing Through Public History – Introduction

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Abstract: Decolonization is the subject of an abundant literature, both as a historical event and as a contemporary process. In relations with the past, debates have risen about issues such as colonial monuments, museum collections, and repatriation. Rather than dealing with a specific type of space, institution, or material, this special issue in *International Public History* offers a discussion on the many links between decolonization and public history. The articles explore if and to what extent public history practices can contribute to decolonizing the history production process (through decolonized sources, decolonized interpretation processes, and decolonized space of communication of history). The articles discuss what ‘public’ in ‘public history’ means: who is doing history, for whom, with whom, and for what? The self-reflective approach of public history also questions the colonial bias and processes at stake in institutions such as archives, museums, and universities. The special issue includes contributions from various countries (South Africa, Kenya, Brazil, Canada, and Japan) to foster discussions on the plurality of links between public history and decolonization in an international context that goes beyond the too-often Western oriented public history frameworks.

Keywords: archives; decolonization; global south; indigenous; participation

Public history is becoming increasingly international, and literature and debates increasingly go beyond North America and Europe.¹ The internationalization of the field raises specific new questions.² While the whole process of making

the production of history more public – more accessible, engaging, and participatory – remains a common objective, the ways and practices by which this is achieved vary greatly depending on the geographical and cultural context. Power relations and their impact on the production of history have become a central theme of public history debates.

Despite the wealth of literature on the topic, decolonization has received somewhat limited attention in international public history.³ Most of the discussions have focused on museums, collections, and repatriation. Amy Lonetree, author of the seminal book *Decolonizing Museums*,⁴ for instance, not only stresses the need to change representations; she also argues for a “shift from curator-controlled presentations of the Native American past to a more inclusive or collaborative process with Indigenous people actively involved in determining exhibition content.”⁵ Decolonizing is an active process that calls into question the entire process of knowledge production in which public history can play a role. The authors of this special issue, together with several additional participants, organized a working group on “Public History and Decolonization” at the 2023 annual conference of the National Council on Public History. The discussion led to the publication of this issue, which includes contributions from various countries (South Africa, Kenya, Brazil, Canada, and Japan). While not comprehensive, the authors’ various understandings of coloniality can help contextualize the discussions and shed light on what it means to practice and study public history through the lens of decolonization.

In “Public History and Emancipatory Politics in Transition: From the Anti-Apartheid Struggle to Democracy in South Africa,” Noor Nieftagodien explores the changing contributions of history production to the process of anti-colonization

1 “Map of Public History Programmes,” International Federation for Public History, accessed March 24, 2024, <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1ZhqyOdB0BcJScyhKsjsTRo9V3Ps2mS2q&femb=1&ll=-3.81666561775622e-14%2C0&z=1>.

2 Thomas Cauvin, “The Rise of Public History: An International Perspective,” *Historia Crítica*. 68, (2018): 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.7440/histcrit68.2018.01>.

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3 Thomas Hellmuth, “Decolonizing Public History?” *Public History Weekly* 9, (2021).

4 Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

5 Amy Lonetree, “Decolonizing Museums, Memorials, and Monuments,” *The Public Historian* 43, no. 4, (2021): 21–27. <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2021.43.4.21>.

and decolonization in South Africa before and after the end of apartheid. In “Decolonizing Canadian Archival Practice through a Public History Lens,” Krista McCracken demonstrates how archives and more generally traditional history practices have contributed to and supported colonial structures and representations. Based on the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre, Krista argues for and proposes new collaborative practices with Indigenous communities to decolonize Canadian archives. The colonial structure of history production is not just reflected in archiving practices; it can also be seen in the production of sources. In her article “Counter-Colonial Aspects in and through Public History in Brazil,” Juniele Rabêlo de Almeida calls for the use of oral history and the consideration of corporality as a way of countering the colonial focus on official and written sources. Chao Tayiana Maina, Director of the Museum of British Colonialism, demonstrates in “Where is the Seeker who Searches for Another? – Decolonial Approaches to Digital Public History” that participatory digital methodologies and practices can help challenge and reclaim Kenya’s silenced colonial history. Finally, Emi Tozawa helps situate the concept of decolonization in a broader context. In Japan, decolonization is perceived as a Western approach and elicits strong criticism when applied to the history of Japan’s colonialist pre-World War II past. In “Can it Be a Gamechanger? Interrogating the Prospects of Decolonization through Public History in Japan,” she explores the very challenging practice of doing participatory public history in contexts where the majority of the public – or at least its most vocal components – support colonial interpretations of the past.

1 Decolonial, Anti-Colonial, or Counter-Colonial Practices?

The articles in this special issue focus on the links between public history and resistance to dominant colonial representations, narratives, and structures. Since colonial contexts vary greatly, it is difficult to establish over-arching concepts and methodologies of resistance. That is why every article starts by presenting the colonial context it is dealing with. Different types of colonization – for example, settler colonization in Canada and exploitation colonization in Kenya – can affect structures of history production in different ways. Tozawa distinguishes between internal (*naichi*) and external (*gaichi*) processes of colonization in Japan and the impact of this for the meaning of decolonization.

The process of resistance to coloniality and its continuing consequences can take different forms and be

described using different terms. Some of the authors in this issue use the terms decolonial, counter-colonialism, and anti-colonialism. While all three terms express an opposition to colonization (as a process of governance and subjection) and coloniality (the propagation of knowledge and ideas), there are some differences between them.⁶ Anti-colonial and counter-colonial involve “resisting, fighting against, and dismantling the aims of colonial regimes, systems, and ideologies.”⁷ Anti-colonialism developed more prominently in Africa and the Caribbean, while decolonization was conceptualized more in Latin America.⁸ Anti-colonialism focuses more openly on the process of overt political resistance to direct colonial rule – for instance against European powers in Africa (the Mau Mau in Kenya or the Front de libération nationale in Algeria).

While it aligns with anti- and counter-colonial, decolonization has been associated with the school of decoloniality in Latin America.⁹ The prefix ‘de’ indicates the removal of coloniality, suggesting that coloniality continues to exist even after the end of direct rule. While counter- and anti-colonial express direct opposition, decolonization “not only seeks to overthrow colonialism, but also to remove and redress its lasting traces and legacies afterwards.”¹⁰ Decolonization therefore has a longer timeframe. Decolonizing refers to the general practices of what Walter Dignolo defines as an active and emancipatory process of “de-linking” from Eurocentrism.¹¹ This “de-linking” from European colonial structures has implications for the preservation, interpretation, and communication of the past. While most recent discussions have focused on the repatriation of objects and monuments, decolonization encompasses broader concepts such as knowledge production.¹²

6 Anila Zainub, ed., *Decolonization and Anti-colonial Praxis: Shared Lineages* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

7 Lydia Ayame Hiraide, “Postcolonial, Decolonial, Anti-Colonial: Does it Matter?” *New Voices in Postcolonial Studies A Collaborative Multidisciplinary Network for PGRs in Postcolonial Studies*, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://newvoicespocostudies.wordpress.com/hiraide/>.

8 George J. Sefa Dei, “Foreword,” in *Decolonization and Anti-colonial Praxis: Shared Lineages*, ed. Anila Zainub, (Leiden: Brill, 2019): vii–x.

9 Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3, (2007): 168–78.

10 Hiraide, “Postcolonial, Decolonial, Anti-Colonial: Does it Matter?”

11 Walter D. Dignolo, “Delinking,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2, (2007): 449–514.

12 Leah Huff, “Museum Decolonization: Moving Away from Narratives Told by the Oppressors,” *Currents*, May 31, 2022, <https://smea.uw.edu/currents/museum-decolonization-moving-away-from-narratives-told-by-the-oppressors/>.

2 Decolonizing Through Public History

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, a leading figure of the school of decoloniality in Latin America, argues that “[t]here can be no discourse of decolonization, no theory of decolonization, without a decolonizing practice.”¹³ Decolonization is not a thing; it is a transformative, action-based process.¹⁴ As such, it shares similarities with the self-reflective process of public history. Statements of positionality can enable a more self-reflective practice of public history. Situating one’s work and structural position matters as it contributes to personal and group self-reflective practices to better identify power relations.

As a white cis-gender man with an academic career in Western (Global North) universities, my position towards these issues of inequality is precarious as I have not encountered its consequences in my working nor private life. I am therefore not contributing to this special issue as a direct actor, but rather as a facilitator to support discussions and debates between historians who have been fighting and resisting colonial structures of history production. I do so based on my long-term interest and practices in participatory public history work, its relation to power structures, and its potential to support decolonial practices.

It is crucial that we examine what the “public in public history” means – who is doing history, for whom, with whom, and why? – so that we are better placed to identify and fight the structures that continue to impose dominant colonial models and narratives.¹⁵

2.1 Public History and the Identification of Colonial Structures of Knowledge Production

Exploring the history of colonialism has been critical in developing a public awareness of the long-standing consequences of colonization. In her article in this issue, Tayiana discusses public history projects that have revealed parts of the colonial past in Kenya – in particular, the camps used to detain Mau Mau rebels – that had been silenced and censored by colonial powers. Identifying silences about the colonial past

through historical research is in itself a way to acknowledge and fight colonialism. Investigating the history of the colonial past can be controversial, and historians can encounter many challenges, especially if some or even most of the public oppose, refuse, or want to silence this history. Tozawa clearly shows how the history of Japan’s colonial past has given rise to tensions, censorship, and even threats against historians.

The importance of adopting a self-reflective approach applies to public history practices too. Public history should be understood in its own historical context. Nieftagodien’s article discusses the history of what was originally referred to as “a people’s history” and is now known as public history in South Africa. This historical approach to public history practices reveals changing definitions of what ‘history’ and ‘public’ have meant in different political contexts. Historicizing the production of history shows that some practices have clearly supported colonialism and colonial structures, while others have fought against them.

As a simple way of communicating history to large audiences, some forms of public history may have served and endorsed colonial structures and statements. The articles by McCracken and Tayiana highlight traditional and current historical practices (the concept of provenance) and institutions (archives and museums) that were either established during colonial periods or continue to support colonial ideology. It is important to reflect on the extent to which current historical practices have developed or still support colonial ideas.¹⁶

The recent development of public history as an identified field of practice, initially in North America and Europe, also raises questions about its Western understanding of history. Following Ijeoma Nnodim Opara’s argument that “the decolonization movement itself needs to be decolonized,” Tozawa points to the need to rethink relations between decolonization and public history in the specific Japanese context.¹⁷ Similarly, Nieftagodien stresses that international public history urgently needs to include approaches and practices from the Global South to avoid a re-colonization of the field. This assessment of international public history is especially relevant in light of the current proliferation of public history projects and courses in universities in the Western world.¹⁸ Despite its initial focus on

¹³ Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, “Ch’ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111, no. 1, (2012): 95–109, 100.

¹⁴ George J. Sefa Dei, “Foreword.”

¹⁵ Joanna Wojdon and Dorota Wiśniewska, eds., *Public in Public History* (London: Routledge, 2021).

¹⁶ “Decolonizing Public History: Indigenous Resistance to the Memorialization of Genocide in the U.S.” Youtube video, 1:34:41. Posted by “hsunas,” October 16, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OncVSU0xReY&t=4s&ab_channel=hsunas.

¹⁷ Ijeoma Nnodim Opara, “It’s Time to Decolonize the Decolonization Movement” *PLOS*, July 29, 2021, <https://speakingofmedicine.plos.org/2021/07/29/its-time-to-decolonize-the-decolonization-movement/>.

¹⁸ “Map of Public History Programmes,” International Federation for Public History.

the idea of history beyond the classroom, the academic development of international public history has been noteworthy. Nieftagodien shows how the university system in South Africa, and also more broadly elsewhere in the Global South, has been associated with colonial powers. Therefore, reproducing Western practices of public history through universities risks contributing to a re-colonization of historical practices.

2.2 Decolonizing Historical Production

Decolonizing structures of history production involves considering archives and other primary sources. McCracken clearly demonstrates how official archives in Canada originate from, convey, and repeat colonial biases and practices. The focus on written archives has been identified as a very specific settler understanding of the past. Diversifying archive types and broadening our view of what can be considered as an archive is essential. Almeida argues that oral history, especially when associated with corporality, can allow researchers to access Indigenous historical narratives in ways that written documents cannot do. Similarly, Tayiana draws on material, geographic, and oral archives to retrieve the silenced history of detention camps in Kenya. McCracken is adamant in fighting for the inclusion of an Indigenous understanding of identity, time, and provenance in the general conception of archives. More broadly, including sources such as folklore, landscape, oral traditions, and arts avoids reproducing a unilateral colonial perception of what is worth saving and remembering from the past. Public history can participate in decolonizing history production by broadening the types of sources used and developing an awareness of the coloniality that pervades current archives.

Decolonizing through public history also touches on concepts of ownership and authority. There are ongoing debates as to whether the inclusion of colonized voices and interpretations of the past in broader historical narratives is enough to decolonize history. The authors of the special issue agree on the need to decolonize the overall structures of historical production by involving colonized groups in deciding what needs to be preserved, interpreted, and researched. The decentralization of historical production –

from universities to communities (Nieftagodien, McCracken), from physical institutions such as museums to the digital space (Tayiana) or the public street (Almeida) – can further challenge colonial structures.

3 Remaining Challenges

The nexus between decolonization and public history is constantly developing. This reflects and contributes to international debates on the nature, practices, and frameworks of public history. Where public history is done – whether in (former colonial) institutions or in public or community spaces – and who can contribute to decolonization are some of the key questions raised. When discussing archives in Canada, McCracken concludes by wondering whether decolonization can actually take place in and with institutions that are still supported by, benefit from, or represent colonial structures.

Although public history debates generally stress the need for opening up the history-making process to a broader range of participants, questions remain about the inclusion and role of individuals, groups, and institutions that oppose decolonization. Public history that explores colonial pasts is sometimes censored and threatened by groups and individuals who simply refuse to decolonize history. How can participatory public history support decolonization if some or even most of the public continues to support colonialism and colonial interpretations of the past?

A reflective public history approach to knowledge production can make a major contribution to debates in the field. This issue of *International Public History* aims to launch a broader discussion on the coloniality of historical practices while reflecting on the type of processes that public history is offering. Public history practitioners from all around the world have a duty to critically examine the links between public history, Western societies, and their conception of history.

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