Decolonial Practices

Decentering

Disalienating

In this five minute lightning flash, I want to focus on 'decolonial practices'. I take this term broadly to refer to approaches which aim to decolonize, but also those which work at decentering or disalienating. I will draw my examples from two research projects.

The Social Museum in the Caribbean – C. Ariese 2018

For my PhD, I visited 195 museum across the Caribbean region and focused on community engagement. I included grassroots museums and reconsidered what a museum might be.

Now, for the ECHOES project, I am studying the Amsterdam Museum and how its staff is dealing with the colonial pasts of the city and its collections. You'll notice most of my examples are from this city museum. But from the local focus, global relevance can be drawn.

EMBRACING VULNERABILITY

I will present four decolonial approaches which my colleague and I are planning to work into a publication for museum professionals. Embracing vulnerability here means opening up the museum for external critique, with the aim of leading to change.

New Narratives Tour – Amsterdam Museum. Photo: C. Ariese, 2019

The Amsterdam Museum has been organizing New Narratives tours, inviting external persons such as writers, journalists, politicians, and others, to give guided tours to the public. What do they notice? What stories would they tell? What is missing in the museum?

New Collection Narratives Event – Amsterdam Museum. Photo: C. Ariese, 2018

Beginning last year, the museum also created New Collection Narrative events where the focus is on a single object from the collection from multiple narratives. How is this painting of a plantation framed in the current exhibition? What labels used to accompany it? What could the museum say about this in the future – and how?
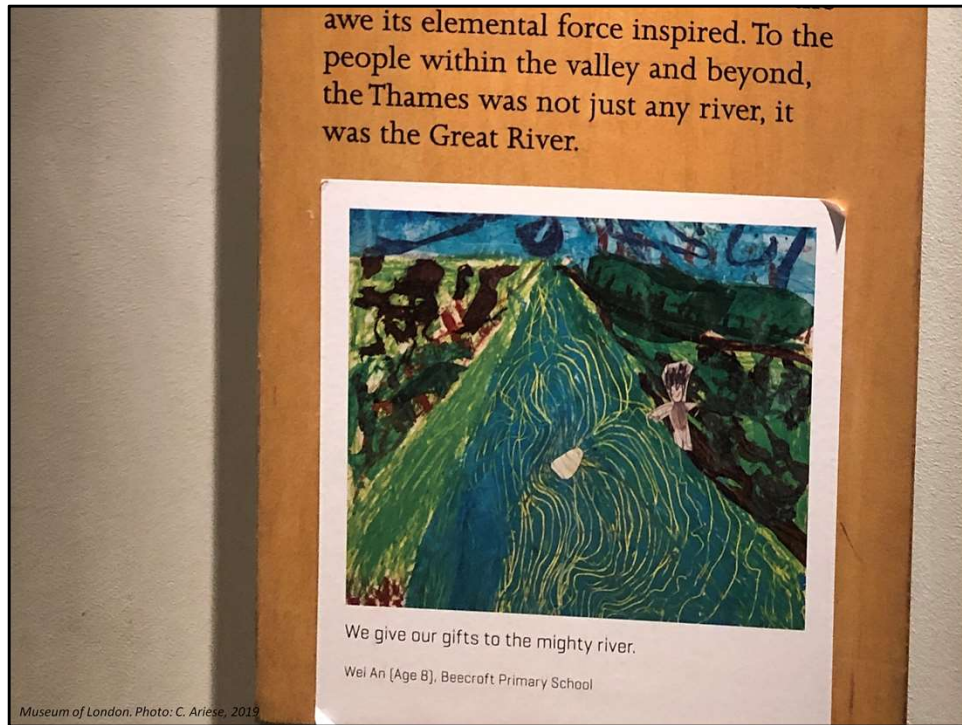
CREATING VISIBILITY

The second decolonial approach is creating visibility, illuminating histories that have been under-represented, amplifying the voices of communities who have not equally been heard, or finding ways to visualize that which was not collected.

*San Nicholas Community Museum, Aruba. Photo: C. Ariese, 2014*

On Aruba, the San Nicholas Community Museum is a grassroots initiative to collect local, recent histories that were fading from living memory. It is an important resource for local children who can see and value the history of their own town and ancestors.

awe its elemental force inspired. To the people within the valley and beyond, the Thames was not just any river, it was the Great River.

We give our gifts to the mighty river.

Wei An (Age 8), Beecroft Primary School

Museum of London. Photo: C. Ariese, 2019

In the Museum of London, a collaboration with children from the Beecroft Primary School is on display as illustrations of prehistoric life, visualizing intangible aspects of the past not easily imagined only from archaeological remains.

CHAMPIONING EMPATHY

The third decolonial approach I want to mention is championing empathy. In increasingly polarizing societies, supporting interpersonal respect and empathy is important to ensure both past and present human beings are treated with dignity in tone and form.
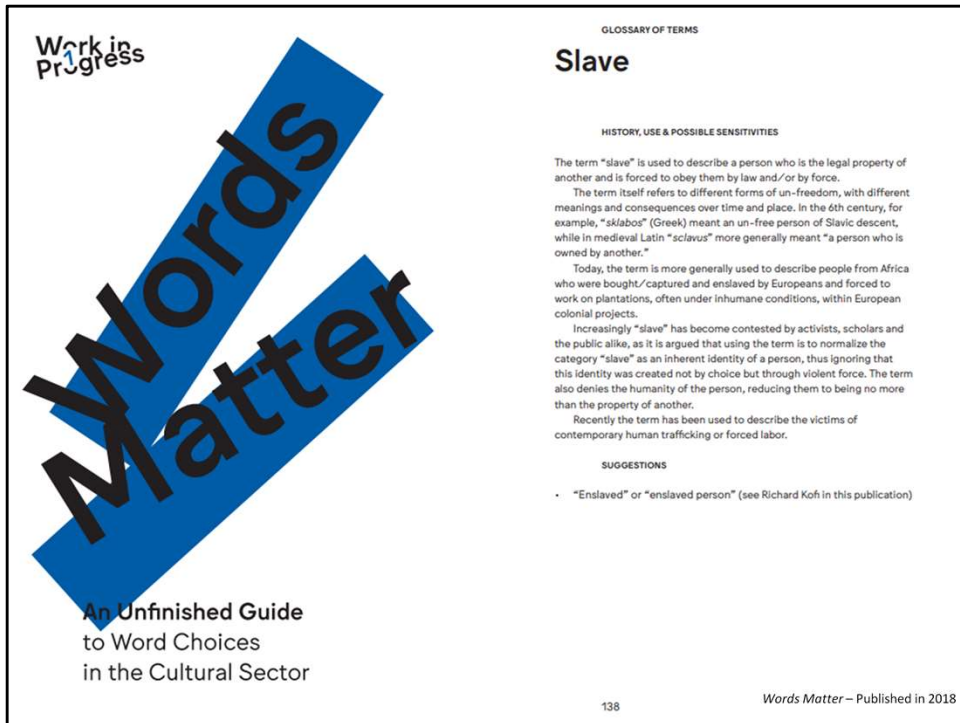
Last year, Words Matter was published (open access) in the Netherlands. A work in progress, it combines essays with a glossary. For instance, it discusses the term "slave," its historical uses, sensitivities and suggestions for alternative terms. Your choice of words can be an act of empathy.

INCREASING INCLUSIVITY

I would like to conclude with the decolonial approach of increasing inclusivity. Ensuring that museums work not only for communities but alongside or with communities. Not only outreach, but also truly collaborative programming, on-site.

Shakespeare Club – Amsterdam Museum. Photo: Amsterdam Museum 2019

This photo was taken a month ago at the Amsterdam Museum. For the whole week of pride, activities and events were organized by LGBTQI+ organizations and communities at and with the museum, in a sort of week-long "museum takeover"

For the thunder after this lightning, papers by myself and colleagues are available on our project website dealing with the city museums of Amsterdam, Shanghai, and Warsaw, as well as other topics related to decolonial heritage practices in urban spaces.

Thank you

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Finally, I would like to ask you if you have any ideas, suggestions, tips or examples of practices which might help our planned publication and research, to please reach out to me. We would be grateful for your global expertise. Thank you very much!