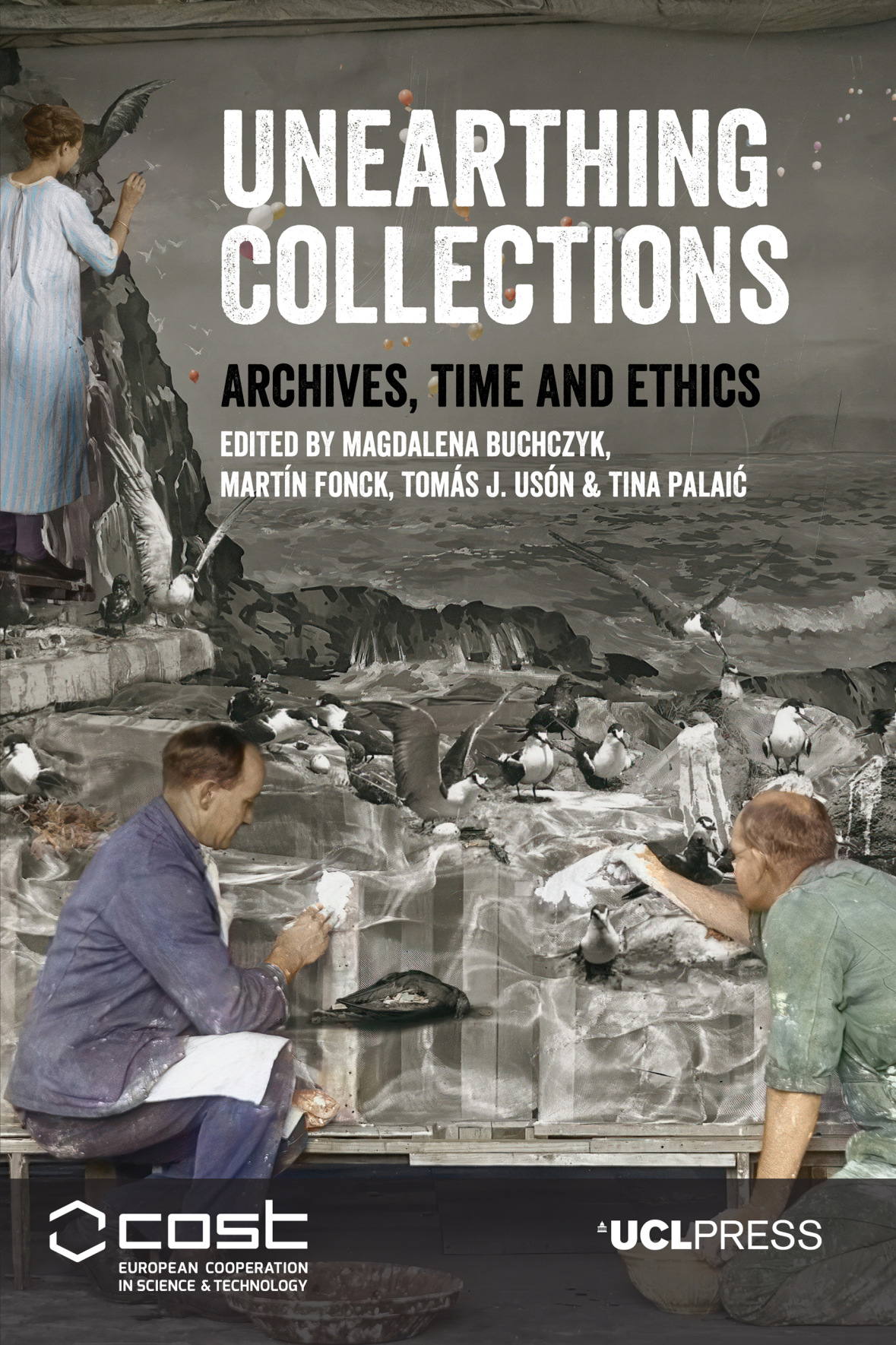
UNEARTHING
COLLECTIONS
ARCHIVES, TIME AND ETHICS
EDITED BY MAGDALENA BUCHCZYK,
MARTÍN FONCK, TOMÁS J. USÓN & TINA PALAIĆ
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Unearthing Collections

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Archives, time and ethics

Edited by
Magdalena Buchczyk, Martín Fonck,
Tomás J. Usón and Tina Palaić

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Re-earthing traces: rethinking ethics in collections and archives through the lens of temporality

Magdalena Buchczyk, Martín Fonck,
Tomás J. Usón and Tina Palaić

Introduction

In April 2023, members of the TRACTS COST Action, working on trace in the context of social justice, technology and climate change, gathered at a gallery in the historic Tieranatomisches Theater (TA T), a former animal anatomical theatre located on the leafy campus of Humboldt University in Berlin. The meeting focused on the ethics of traces, exploring the connections between institutional archives, including museum collections and earth archives, such as geological collections. At the centre of the discussions were questions about how these traces could be approached with a renewed awareness of their complex temporalities – that is, the diverse constructions, relationships and lived experiences of time across social, historical and political contexts (Fabian, 1983; Stewart, 2003, 2016). The group included multiple perspectives on traces, archives and collections, ranging from anthropology, conservation, cultural and media studies, museology, literature, history and geography to visual arts and curatorial studies.

The fact that the gathering that brought our interdisciplinary group together took place in an anatomical theatre is not merely circumstantial. TA T now serves as a vibrant space for interdisciplinary exchange and experimental practices in exhibition-making, artistic and scientific collaborations and collection research. It includes exhibition and performance spaces, as well as an object laboratory dedicated to exploring

the collections of Humboldt University. Founded in 1790, TA T's predecessor – the animal anatomical theatre – served as a site for presenting scientific knowledge that combined veterinary scholarship with public education, offering insights into the depths of the animal body. It features a stage and steep amphitheatre seating, facilitating the public staging of the body in pieces (Holzapfel, 2008). The room, which now houses multimedia displays and exhibitions, was once a space where carcasses were moved from the preparation room, placed on a circular platform and then lifted to the upper floor for public autopsy (Sattler, 2018).

Public demonstrations in venues such as anatomical theatres were among the various theatrical techniques used by scientific institutions to present 'science on stage' to a general audience (Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Hilgartner, 2000). For the public, science became a spectacle as they watched the animal's body emerge dramatically from below, only to be dissected live before their eyes. This performative act of turning the body inside out symbolised a transition from darkness to the 'enlightenment' of scientific knowledge. The audience's gaze played a crucial role in this postmortem performance, actively engaging with the exhumation and dissection of the animal's body. The theatricality of science was linked to the act of unearthing – exposing hidden mysteries and bringing them into view under the public gaze.

We view the practice of unearthing as a fundamental operation, not only in the production of scientific knowledge – aimed at revealing the 'secrets' of nature and human life – but also as a generative provocation for the explorations that shape this book. We consider unearthing as fuelled by a desire to excavate buried traces, uncover obscured realities, expose concealed information, bring new understandings to light and unmask mysteries. Building on our transdisciplinary discussions at the TA T, this volume considers knowledge beyond unearthing – the dominant practices of separation, displacement, excavating or distancing from the ground.

This book asks how we can reimagine the ethics of collections and archives through the lens of temporality. Drawing on a diverse range of cases – from glacial sampling to museum acquisitions of ephemeral political art – it uncovers the critical potential of engaging with traces, such as archives and collections, in ways that move beyond traditional extractive practices of dispossession, control and commodification (Joyce, 2024). At the heart of these practices is the concept of 're-earthing', which calls for a shift in knowledge production. As we demonstrate in the following chapters, the framework of re-earthing moves beyond viewing unearthing simply as revelation and challenges the entrenched legacies of extractivism. Instead, it calls for a generative practice that reconfigures how we

understand and interact with knowledge. In doing so, this book aims to merge debates on traces and ethics with contemporary concerns surrounding the Anthropocene and decolonisation within museums and archives.

Knowing through unearthing

To better understand the implications of re-earthing, it is useful to look at the historical practice of unearthing, particularly in scientific settings. Anatomical theatres, such as the one we visited during our workshop in Berlin, were central to staging scientific knowledge. These theatres not only presented animals as subjects of scientific enquiry but were also often accompanied by exhibitions, including the 'cabinet of curiosities', which served as a precursor to modern museum practices. Dissection focused on studying the body as a collection of organs and processes, while the 'cabinet of curiosities' displayed bodily specimens alongside a diverse array of objects of knowledge. These included antiquities, books, everyday objects, animal skeletons, rocks, corals and mussels gathered from various parts of the world. Many of these collections originated from colonial encounters, which enabled the large-scale accumulation of goods that were transported to colonial centres.

The anthropologist Andrea Ballestero (2019) describes cabinets of curiosities as a reflection of the European colonists' confrontation with the frontiers of knowledge. As Ballestero explains, 'the collection of oddities reconsidered inherited hierarchical structures and the limits of nature. It was a "force-filled microcosm" unlike any other, since each collection was a unique and unrepeatable assemblage' (2019: xi). These collections disrupted established systems of knowledge and opened up new possibilities.

Through such displays, collectors sought to impose order on an increasingly complex and perplexing world (Zytaruk, 2011: 6), presenting their findings to European audiences. However, this reordering the world for the Europeans also involved dismissing, ignoring and rejecting the diverse knowledge systems associated with those collections (Mignolo, 2002; Quijano, 2007). The *terra incognita* (unknown land) that European travellers traversed was soon redefined as *terra nullius*, an empty land open to conquest and occupation (Lind, 2020; Finbog, 2021). Traces of the past and the living present – whether the land, natural resources or the material culture of the populations inhabiting *terra nullius* – were uprooted, looted or lifted from the ground to be examined and showcased back in Europe.

Cabinets of curiosities presented a miniature version of the world, with their small-scale displays reflecting the vastness of the universe.

These collections emphasised the interconnectedness of all things – a 'mirror of nature' (Macdonald, 2006: 85) – showcasing the relationships between the microcosm of humanity and the macrocosm of divine creation and the natural world. This idea was represented through the pairing of corresponding objects classified as *artificialia* and *naturalia* (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992: 90). Much like the anatomical theatre, where science and spectacle merged in a public performance, the cabinet of curiosities served as a space for unearthing the secrets of the universe from every angle – below, within and beyond – by collecting, archiving and displaying objects that represented all facets of existence. As collectors, scientists and archivists unearthed objects, they often discarded the surrounding materials. Artefacts were separated from their original soils – often dismissed as mere dirt – in an attempt to preserve them in a clean, isolated state. This reveals a paradox of unearthing: by becoming part of collections, traces are used to highlight connections and correspondences, yet this is achieved by severing the very relationships that made these traces worth unearthing in the first place.

At its core, unearthing involves discovering hidden truths, excavating layers and revealing the unknown. The act of unearthing emphasises 'opening' the truth through the extraction of artefacts and ideas, exposing the problematic necessity of capturing, removing and displacing these objects and traces for further analysis – a fundamental operation of imperialism and colonialism. This approach to acquiring knowledge justified practices such as disembowelling creatures in anatomical theatres, excavating tombs and sacred sites to reconstruct the past, and drilling into mountains to uncover the secrets of deep time or extract rare minerals. All of these can be understood as examples of what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls 'epistemic extractivism' (Grosfoguel, 2019), in which knowledge is acquired, decontextualised, commodified and controlled to serve specific economic, academic or symbolic interests.

We argue that unearthing reflects the methods of post-Enlightenment disciplines, which, as Pratik Chakrabarti (2020) suggests, focus on 'digging the ground' to uncover and naturalise antiquity. It also exposes the ways knowledge is produced, offering insight into scientific practices that extract traces to reconstruct historical periods and processes. In this sense, unearthing is connected to temporality, shaping how societies perceive, experience and engage with time (Olick, 2007: 25). Unearthing operates on the belief that traces must be archived and placed within a temporal framework. Underlying this process is the assumption that history exists independently, like raw data waiting to be discovered and claimed (Azoulay, 2019).

In this book, we critically examine the process of unearthing and its connections to extractivism. One way to understand these connections is by recognising that traces, such as collections, are often unearthed as a direct result of extractive operations – whether through colonial violence or resource exploitation (Bertschi et al., 2023). Another key link between unearthing and exploitation emerges in the process of decontextualisation. Traces are stripped of excess residues to ensure proper storage and preservation. However, in doing so, they are detached from their original contexts, practices and knowledge systems.

When working with traces, researchers and curators engage in the complex task of classifying, recontextualising and interpreting them to make them understandable. In this sense, the act of 'unearthing' within a collection involves making a cut – selecting, limiting and excluding the contexts or aspects that were originally part of the trace (Trouillot, 1995). This raises crucial questions: What is truly being collected when the context – including the earth itself – is removed? How can we make sense of traces without the earthly contexts from which they originated? And perhaps most urgently, when we strip away the surrounding earth, we must confront a range of ethical and political concerns: who has the right to access these traces, and for what purposes?

This book goes beyond using 'unearthing' simply as a tool to expose the legacies of extractivism. Instead, the chapters explore various ways of engaging with the past and its reconfiguration that do not rely solely on practices of appropriation, displacement or detachment from the ground. In researching archives and exploring traces, scholars and curators unearth, recontextualise and recompose fragments, revisiting contexts that are themselves in constant flux. By focusing on the recomposition of collections and the care practices surrounding them, we open up new approaches to understanding the complex temporalities embedded in traces.

We draw on debates on traces as complex knots of entwined histories (Derrida, 1982; Napolitano, 2015; Joyce, 2024). As Stuart Hall observed, 'the shadow, the imprint, the trace' reveals structures of power, representation and resistance (Hall, 1992: 284). Through their auratic presence, traces become unsettling, embodying fragments of thickened temporalities. Even fleeting traces can carry the weight of what has been forgotten or marginalised, lingering like ghostly presences and transforming into future spectres (Tuck and Ree, 2013). By reflecting on the earthly, often impure, thickened and time-warped nature of these 'revealed' traces, we can begin to imagine new ways to respond to the urgent call to 'come down to earth' (Latour, 2018).

Towards re-earthing

The book proposes a shift towards 're-earthing' collections and archives: a return to the earth and all the messy relations that traces hold. Re-earthing, we argue, becomes an analytic that connects concerns around temporality and the ethics of traces to debates on the Anthropocene and decolonisation. We draw inspiration from Cornelia Walker Bailey's notion of 're-earthing', which, in the case of Sapelo Island, involved reintroducing heirloom sugarcane crops to reclaim and reimagine the racist history tied to these plants as a form of emancipation and restorative justice (Heynen, 2021). Bailey's practice addresses gaps and silences in historical narratives, opening up political possibilities and envisioning alternatives. Tilling the soil and tracing the archive become intertwined acts – ways of engaging with history, resisting objectification and recalibrating our understanding of the past to reimagine the future (Hardy et al., 2022). Similar to Bailey, we understand re-earthing as a refusal of purity and transcendence – an act of getting one's hands dirty to make a difference in the world.

As Donna Haraway (2016: 117) reminds us, 'we need a hardy, soiled kind of wisdom'. This approach embraces earthy connections, demanding care and a commitment to making time and space for these unruly relations. Re-earthing is not about returning things to their 'original' place but rather engaging the ethical and political challenges of the discarded or overlooked, as well as grappling with the complexity of bringing them to the surface. By framing re-earthing as a critical practice of working with traces, we focus on the sediments, footprints and contaminants that are often purified before objects are integrated into collections or archives. It is a practice that acknowledges the inherent messiness of context – the dirt, clay, earth and its impurities – viewing these not as raw materials to be purified through scientific methods but as entangled entities with their own agency and significance.

This approach embraces earthy relationality, demanding care and a commitment to creating the time and space necessary for connections, even if they reveal contamination and toxic legacies. Engaging with traces through the act of re-earthing challenges notions of purity and transcendence, recognising that these misrepresent trace and fails to 'fully describe the complexity of socio-material relations', especially in our permanently polluted world (Liboiron, 2016: 104). This work requires awareness of how material and social contexts shift across different spatial and temporal scales – and how these scales are produced or complicated by the complexities of traces.

Typically, unearthing anchors traces within a stabilised knowledge framework where understanding and interpretation are carefully constructed. This approach reflects a desire for control, situating objects within specific systems for collection, analysis, categorisation and, ultimately, ownership – both intellectual and physical. In contrast, re-earthing challenges the conventional treatment of traces as mere 'artefacts' or 'data'. Rather than confining them to a predetermined and controlled space of knowledge, re-earthing envisions the ground – much like soil – as lively, interconnected and constantly changing. Crucially, re-earthing requires allowing traces to take root, break free from predefined paths within collections and germinate into new forms. A central element of this process is the willingness to relinquish control over these traces, prompting a reflection on the implications of their multiscalar nature and political potentialities. As discussed in the following sections, this approach calls for a nuanced engagement with the time dimensions of traces, particularly when confronting the pressing ethical questions they raise.

Collections and deep time

The temporality of traces has long been a central concern in both the scientific and narrative traditions of geoscience. As Pratik Chakrabarti (2020) convincingly argues, geology emerged from the physical practice of digging into the earth, a practice that has significantly shaped our understanding of deep time. This process of unearthing involves studying geological traces of the past, framing deep time as a distant, seemingly untouched dimension of nature, separate from human influence. John McPhee's concept of 'deep time' captures this perspective, where nature's temporality is portrayed as beyond historical imagination, existing in remote landscapes like the Great Basin. However, Chakrabarti suggests that this view of deep time often overlooks the political dimensions of nature's history, particularly in the context of colonialism and the exploitation of natural resources. In this way, unearthing temporality is not just a scientific exploration of the past but also a lens through which we can examine the complex interplay of human agency, imperialism and environmental politics.

This critical view of deep time finds further support in the work of Martin Rudwick (2014), who challenges the common assumption that the geosciences emerged in opposition to religious accounts of the Earth's history. According to Rudwick (2014), the geosciences did not emerge in opposition to religious accounts of the Earth's history but

rather originated from them. By analysing the debates surrounding the 'discovery of the deep time', a revolutionary expansion of the Earth's timescale and the public acceptance that the planet's history is at least millions of years old (Hutton, 1788; Irvine, 2014), Rudwick argues that such an expansion involved the transfer of a sense of historicity from culture to nature. According to the author, an important source for this new vision of nature as historical was the strong sense of history embodied in Judeo-Christian scriptures and narrative temporal sequences with

> an underlying structure closely analogous to the modern view of Earth's deep history (and cosmic history) as similarly finite and directional. More specifically, the science of scholarly chronology, as a way of plotting human history with quantitative precision and dividing it into a qualitatively significant sequence of eras and periods, was closely analogous to the modern science of 'geochronology', which seeks to give a similar kind of precision and structure to Earth's deep history, dividing it in the same way into eras and periods. (Rudwick, 2014: 29)

This temporal conceptualisation, this sense of contingency influenced by geohistorism, would have a significant impact on the practices and historical imaginaries that inform disciplines associated with restoration and museums. For historians of temporality, this transformation has simultaneously affected the experience of time and led to forms of time differentiation (Olick, 2007: 25). Changes in this regard have resulted in stretching and multiplying temporal frames ranging from calendrical, factory and public time to archival history or geohistory. As Timothy Attanucci (2020) shows, the influence of the broader nineteenth-century imaginaries of geochronology informed geological and historical reconstruction practices under dreams of scientifically and imaginatively reconstructing historical worlds by recomposing ruins and fragments 'step by step'.

In the geosciences, geological and stratigraphic traces – specimens from diverse global regions – have been instrumental in shaping the concept of deep time. These specimens contributed not only to the scientific understanding of the Earth's history but are also intertwined with broader historical contexts, highlighting the intricate relationship between the Earth's archives and the socio-political forces that shape them. The geological record is a historical narrative, revealing significant shifts such as the lasting effects of colonialism and fossil modernity, as articulated by Lewis and Maslin (2015). The intertwined connections

between geological records and historical epochs make it evident that the concept of deep time is far from apolitical, with the Earth's archives often entangled in the complexities of fossil modernity and extractivism. This entanglement raises profound ethical dilemmas, particularly concerning the acquisition and use of these collections for research (Chakrabarti, 2019).

As we demonstrate, the transformation of time as an intrinsic dimension of society – strongly influenced by the possibility that the geosciences opened for the exploration and articulation of a deep, geological time – would come together with the possibility of appropriating those lost pasts to consolidate a universal present by colonial regimes. As Rolando Vázquez (2009) argues, the Eurocentric imaginary, perpetuated since the conquest and invasion of the Americas, was sustained through concrete politics of time that positioned modernity – and its Western origins – as the ultimate stage of history. Within this framework, the present became the only time that counts – temporality in which reality was legitimised.

This colonial construction of time was reinforced by chronopolitics (Wallis, 1970), which defined the present as the sole real time, denying the existence of alternative temporalities. Through this lens, non-European societies were situated in a backward stage of time. Access to these so-called 'prehistorical' realities was made possible through practices of unearthing – both through the excavation of layers of soil that had accumulated over ancient artefacts (Chakrabarti, 2020) and through ethnographic encounters where the past was perceived as still alive (Fabian, 1983). Ethnographic and natural history collections perpetuated myths of timeless societies and pristine nature (Wolf, 1982; Haraway, 1984), obscuring histories of colonial violence and dispossession (Fabian, 1983; Hicks, 2020). Building on the argument that deep time is inherently colonial means we must extend this critique to the temporality of collections and archives. It demands reimagining how we engage with traces and the politics of time.

Collections and the politics of time

Museums and archives have long positioned themselves as custodians of unearthed traces, safeguarding fossils, antiquities, plants, cultural belongings and stories for future generations. In doing so, they present themselves as time machines, offering a carefully curated engagement with the past (Lumley, 2003; Walklate, 2022). Yet, as Susan Crane

(2006: 99) notes, this creates a paradox of 'fixed ephemerality': while museums and archives, with their grand facades and secure storage, project an illusion of permanence, they simultaneously construct their own deep time. Conservation techniques, climate-controlled environments and expert interventions are all deployed to suspend decay, reinforcing the perception that these collections exist outside the passage of time.

However, this illusion of fixity is increasingly being challenged, both within and beyond museum walls. In the uncontrolled environments of the Anthropocene, collections – whether seaborne debris or industrial waste – complicate conventional ideas of fixed time. As Þóra Pétursdóttir (2020) demonstrates with the example of 'drift matter' – seaborne debris that washes up on beaches around the globe – the continuously accumulating objects that outlive us are not timeless artefacts under the control of conservation specialists but unpredictable becomings. Heritage scholars examining the uncertain longevity and potential loss of seed and plant specimen archives, along with the haunting presence of accumulated nuclear materials, demonstrate that collections not only impact the present and cast a shadow over the future but also actively shape future-making practices (DeSilvey and Harrison, 2020; Harrison et al., 2020).

This brings us back to Susan Crane's (2006: 102) point about preservation – 'preservation is predicated on posterity sharing the desires of the present, although … those desires can never be taken for granted and do, in fact, change with time'. The tension between the present's desires and the unpredictable future is at the heart of the collections' politics of time. This can lead to potentially undesirable effects and ethical challenges such as in the context of collection care and conservation practices. For example, safeguarding objects from the passage of time often relies on energy-intensive techniques and chemical treatments, which increase an institution's carbon footprint and make collections toxic or inaccessible (Hölling, 2021). Similarly, while digitisation of collections seeks to improve accessibility and extend the life of vulnerable documentation and audiovisual material, it relies on energy which can cause environmental harm (Etienne, 2021). These preservation efforts, while prolonging the life of collections, may inadvertently bring the spectre of climate disaster into the present.

This temporal complexity has long been central to how collections shape public engagement with the traces of the past and the passage of time – what has been termed 'past presencing' (Macdonald, 2012). From the early days of modern museums, collection managers, conservators, curators and documentation specialists have played a crucial role in shaping the temporal order of collections. Objects are categorised

into distinct time frames, such as 'Renaissance art' or 'Cold War material culture', which reflect institutionalised ways of thinking about the past. Through their display and categorisation, collections influence how the past is understood in the present, often reflecting dominant political, social and cultural values.

In the context of ethnographic and art museums, these dominant historical narratives are increasingly challenged by decolonial activists and descendant communities, who question fixed temporal frameworks through calls for restitution and reparatory justice. In this shifting context, collections become arenas of contested temporalities, where ongoing social debates about ethics, politics and justice unfold (Caswell, 2021).

Scholarship has long explored the ethical challenges of enduring colonial and imperial legacies in collections and archives (Kreps, 2012; Mbembe, 2002; Turner, 2022). One set of challenges relates to the question of possibilities of decoloniality as articulated within the museum context. Although decolonisation rhetoric is often embraced through restitution efforts and exhibition projects, it rarely results in meaningful transformations of institutional practices. Critics argue that decolonisation rhetoric frequently recentres whiteness and preserves a sense of innocence: 'Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks' (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 3). This raises concerns about co-option, tokenism, appropriation and time-limited, eventful gestures that merely pay lip service to anti-colonial or decolonial agendas (Boast, 2011; Kassim, 2017; Moosavi, 2020; Whittington, 2021).

Another challenge concerns the material realities of restitution, particularly with toxic artefacts. The use of pesticides, for example, has contaminated many collections, and ancestral remains or sacred objects handled by museums may pose further harm after repatriation (Cusack-McVeigh, 2024). This raises urgent questions about the timelines of collection preservation, the temporalities and scales of pollution and contamination (Liboiron, 2016, 2021), and reparatory justice. As Tuck and Yang (2014) note, the linear logic of time, moving from broken to repaired, reinforces dominant time structures and hierarchies, suppressing alternative temporalities. They propose 'time-warped' and 'distemporal' frameworks that challenge these dominant structures, remaining rooted in the present yet textured by both past and future – 'living in the gaps between the ticking machinery of disciplinary institutions' (Tuck and Yang, 2014: 231).

Similarly, Ariella Azoulay (2019) critiques linear temporality as a mechanism of imperial violence, advocating for 'rooting' and 'grounding' time by rejecting neutral sequences of events that relegate violence to the past. Azoulay's concept of 'potential history' challenges dominant temporality and imperial orders of time, insisting that events must be traced in the present and cannot be relegated to the past. In this framework, reparations are essential, as 'the labor of reparations could yield the recovery of a shared world of common care' (Azoulay, 2019: 567–568). This shift requires rethinking the relationship between past and future, no longer viewing them as separate time zones. It involves unlearning the habitual impulse to 'unearth secrets' in collections and archives (Azoulay, 2019: 137) and instead embracing a 'present continuous' to unlock their potentiality.

Yet, temporal frameworks also influence our understanding of potentiality. Keri Facer (2023) contends that concepts of time structure our experiences in ways that can either constrain or expand possibilities. These frameworks often reflect and reinforce dominant power dynamics, normalising particular perceptions of time. Facer advocates for cultivating a 'temporal imagination' that challenges these entrenched ideas of time while acknowledging the chronopolitics embedded within them. This approach requires care and relationality – attuning ourselves to diverse timescapes and embracing their pluriversal possibilities.

Collections and care

Collection care, as a well-established field in museum research and practice (Agostinho, 2019; Morse, 2020), provides a space to explore how temporalities shape not only the physical preservation of objects but also their meaning and value over time. As Lisa Baraitser (2017) argues, care involves an intimate relationship with time, sustaining connections with oneself and others amid legacies of oppression that continue to shape the present. She contends that centring on the temporalities of care creates space for hesitation and cessation, allowing opportunities to pause and challenge dominant models of time.

Baraitser emphasises that care, particularly through maintenance practices, is a quintessential temporal act. Maintenance, she explains, involves a suspension of time where 'acts of maintenance are durational and repetitious; they may concern time that seems frozen or unbearable in its refusal to move on, and entail practices of bearing the state of nothing happening' (Baraitser, 2017: 51). While Baraitser describes maintenance

as practices that sustain an 'elongated present', it also becomes a temporal operation that strives to keep things in motion within an otherwise frozen moment, all while holding promises for both the present and the future.

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) explores the temporality of care through soil practices, which disrupt conventional understandings of time by engaging with multiple timescales. For Puig de la Bellacasa, care operates in its own time – one that is immersive, immanent and grounded in material and affective relations. Care time opens up space for more-than-human connections, challenging and decentring anthropocentric and linear notions of time.

She examines practices like permaculture, which prioritise relationships of care over a focus on future outcomes and linear time logic:

> Soil is created through a combination of the long, slow time of geological processes such as those taking thousands of years to break down rock – that Stephen Jay Gould (1987) qualified as 'deep time' – and by relatively shorter ecological cycles by which organisms and plants, as well as humans growing food, decompose materials that contribute to renew the topsoil. Both micro and macro timescales at stake in ecological relations involve different timeframes than those of human lifespan and history (Hird, 2009) … The emphasis on temporal diversity has implications for how we live together and how we belong in communities, that is, in creating 'temporal belongings' for humans and nonhumans. (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 176)

Engaging with these diverse timescales is inherently complex, laden with ethical, practical and political implications. Puig de la Bellacasa argues for rearticulating the relations between temporality and care, viewing care as both 'a doing and an ethico-political commitment that affects the way we produce knowledge about things' (2017: 161). Drawing on feminist approaches, this approach resists the impulse to unveil or unearth facts or explain things. Instead, it fosters deep, caring relationships with things and intervenes in their potential becoming. It is a disruptive and political stance, bringing us closer 'to the earthy doings that foster the web of life' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 88). In this sense, care becomes a generative force for knowledge production, critical to life-sustaining practices like maintenance, sustenance and repair.

Building on these ideas, we view care as an everyday, uneventful yet transformative practice that rearranges and rebalances relations between diverse temporalities, often in quiet, everyday ways. This view

positions care as a way of aligning timescales, allowing things to become 'thicker' through their multiple relational obligations. By reframing care in this way, we are encouraged to consider not only the immediate, human-centred concerns of preservation but also the broader ecological, geological and cultural forces at play. As Tsing et al. (2017: 176) suggest, we must 'think geological, biological, chemical, and cultural activity together', recognising that these activities form a network of interconnected histories and unstable futures.

This insight is particularly critical when grappling with the complexities of the Anthropocene, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009: 213) reminds us: addressing the epoch's challenges requires reconciling intellectual frameworks in tension with one another – such as the planetary and the global, deep and recorded histories, and species thinking alongside critiques of capital.

Engaging with these connections and tensions cultivates a sensitivity to the ways timescales intertwine, enabling a productive exchange between different temporal logics – such as archival time and planetary temporality. Embracing the temporality of care, as articulated in Walker Bailey's concept of 're-earthing', invites us to slow down and reconsider how we interact with traces in collections and archives. It calls for a pause – a space to hesitate – recognising that the work of preserving and understanding these traces demands patience and multiple timescales. In this process, we create 'temporal belongings' that connect humans and non-humans, reminding us that care is not just about keeping things in the ongoing present but about nurturing relationships across time.

How to read this book

This book is structured around three key themes – *Durabilities*, *Occlusions* and *Crystallisations* – which guide our exploration of collection and archive ethics through the lens of temporality, examining how traces endure, become obscured and take on distinct forms over time. Part I, 'Durabilities', examines the capacity of traces to persist over time. Engaging with questions of durability allows us to critically assess the ethics of unearthing, acquiring and isolating traces for archives and collections, as well as stabilising them as if they were frozen in time. This section explores how traces pose the challenge of navigating tensions between unchanging presence and transformation while also questioning the ethical commitments underlying ideologies of preservation. In contrast, the concept of 're-earthing' that we introduce here moves beyond

the notion of permanence, advocating for more ethical and politically engaged alternatives that acknowledge the dynamic and interconnected nature of traces within their broader ecologies.

In Chapter 1, Lee Douglas examines the shift towards the 'molecular museum' at Madrid's Reina Sofía Museum, where the collection of Latin American political art from the 1960s to 1980s challenges static preservation. She explores how ephemeral traces of political art become recontextualised and transformed into those that circulate within institutions, activist movements and broader publics. Douglas reflects on the ethics of preserving fleeting yet politically significant moments. These traces make tangible the violence of forced disappearance while also reinforcing collective strategies of remembrance, justice and world-making.

Chapter 2 by Pablo Martínez critiques the static preservation practices in art museums that prioritise the durability of collections in climate-controlled environments. It explores the paradox faced by contemporary museums: institutions dedicated to the eternal preservation of traces while simultaneously obscuring the materiality of their exhibits. Martínez examines how the environmental controls of the white cube – temperature and humidity – reflect the broader context of museological petroculture within fossil modernity and neoliberal museum practices. He calls for a radical rethinking of preservation policies, urging a shift away from fossil legacies towards practices that prioritise the broader ecological relationships.

Similarly, in Chapter 3 conservator Ayesha Fuentes challenges the focus on object durability and restricted access by questioning the dominant authority and foundations of preservation expertise. Focusing on Tibetan and Himalayan ritual objects, she explores the ethical dilemmas that arise when recognising the diverse temporalities of different forms of material heritage. She emphasises the importance of considering these notions of time for their ethical handling, maintenance and care. By contrasting various approaches to material custodianship, Fuentes advocates for re-evaluating conservation practices through a Buddhist lens on time.

In Chapter 4, Alberto Berzosa critiques the durability-centred model of film conservation, particularly the energy-intensive preservation of nitrate-based films at the Arquivo Nacional das Imagens em Movimento, the preservation centre of the Cinemateca Portuguesa. He challenges the traditional focus on static preservation, advocating for counter-hegemonic forms of archiving that question the 'thermal exception' that underpins current heritage policy.

In the final chapter of this section, Tomás Usón and Sandra Jasper explore the durability of ice as an earthly archive, focusing on a conflict between a scientific expedition and a local community in the Huascarán

Mountains, Peru's highest peak. They examine how ice, viewed as a threatened archive of millennia-old geodata, intersects with narratives of land appropriation, colonialism and extractivism. The authors advocate for an ethical approach that acknowledges these hidden histories of violence, suggesting that unearthing ice can also be understood as a form of re-earthing. They call for an ethical reframing that recognises ice not only as a fragile geological trace but as a dynamic entity with its own materiality, embracing its multiplicity and earthly condition.

Part II, 'Occlusions', examines the ethical challenges within collections, where the complexity of traces is often obscured and unseen. In geology, occlusion refers to processes in which certain materials become trapped within others – such as air pockets in minerals or fossils encased in sediment – resulting in visual imperfections. In the context of ethical questions related to archival and collection practices, we examine how to work with traces which are hidden, overlooked or deliberately suppressed within dominant narratives. This section explores the interplay between visibility and concealment, highlighting how specific temporal frameworks and representations are either reinforced or disrupted. In this context, re-earthing is not merely about uncovering what has been hidden or unseen; rather, it engages with how traces persist, unsettle and demand attention to their spectral presence.

In Chapter 6, Órla O'Donovan and Róisín O'Gorman explore the ethical challenges of visibility in historical wax moulage collections, which often include casts of diseased body parts from marginalised individuals, such as women with syphilis under colonial health regimes. Although these moulages are direct traces of past violence, they often conceal the complexities of that history, reinforcing unethical representations. The authors advocate for an approach that highlights the ongoing impact of these histories. Here, re-earthing these traces includes revealing the spectres of past injustices and prompting a more responsible, empathetic engagement with their ongoing reverberations.

Diego Ballestero, in Chapter 7, illustrates how certain narratives surrounding remains and museum traces of South America's Indigenous peoples have been foregrounded, obscuring their complex histories and reinforcing colonial power structures. Ballestero uses the repatriation case of Aché Kryygi to highlight how anthropological collections perpetuate these extractivist and violent legacies. He explores repatriation as a form of re-earthing, calling for the abandonment of control of these traces and advocating for relationships of respect and reciprocity, moving beyond the exploitation of land, objects and bodies.

In the final chapter of this section, Susanne Kass examines Australian artist Anne Zahalka's reimagining of habitat dioramas through the lens of the politics of visibility. Over two decades, Zahalka has used digital manipulation to introduce man-made objects into these supposedly pristine depictions of nature, blending past, present and future in a layered visual narrative. Kass argues that Zahalka challenges traditional ideas of preservation and visibility, addressing environmental concerns with humour, hope, grief and urgency. Her work offers a visual form of re-earthing that embodies a messy yet hopeful ethics of care.

Part III of the book, 'Crystallisations', examines how traces are shaped over time, solidifying into specific meanings, representations or systems of knowledge. Crystallisation refers to a transformative process in which materials reorganise into structured forms under particular conditions. Similarly, archives and collections often 'crystallise' traces by stabilising them into fixed interpretations, stripping them of their messy, relational entanglements. Yet, even when perfected and polished, the presence of traces unsettles – carrying fragments of layered temporalities in the refractions of their many surfaces. This section explores the ethical challenges of activating traces within archives and collections, considering the implications of revealing their crystallised forms. Here, re-earthing these traces invites a deeper engagement with their complexity, allowing them to take root in new contexts and reveal the fragility of their crystallised meanings.

Chapter 9 by Miguel Errazu, Miguel Hilari and Isabel Seguí focuses on the recovery and reactivation of the Super 8 film workshop archives from Telamayu, Bolivia. Established in 1983 by the French Centre de Formation et Recherche Cinéma Direct, in collaboration with the Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia (FSTMB) and the Corporación Minera de Bolivia (COMIBOL), the workshop gave the children of young miners the opportunity to document Bolivian working-class life. This chapter examines the workshop as a site of interstitial history between Bolivian labour movements and French cinema, shedding light on its overlooked legacy. Errazu, Hilari and Seguí investigate the challenges and opportunities in tracing the workshop's history and developing an archive that supports restitution and activation, considering the diverse ways social actors influence the creation, loss, reassessment and circulation of audiovisual memories.

In Chapter 10, curators Tina Palaić, Magdalena Zych and Marija Živković, and researcher Anna Remešová, examine the interconnected histories and challenging efforts to decolonise ethnographic museums across Central and Eastern Europe. Their chapter scrutinises how

these institutions address the legacies of condensed post-socialist, post-colonial, post-imperial and post-totalitarian pasts (Chari and Verdery, 2009), and their present reverberations. They propose the practice of 're-earthing' these museums through co-creating knowledge and narratives alongside heritage bearers and challenging conventional museum practices in the region.

Finally, in Chapter 11, Miguel Mesa del Castillo and Juan Manuel Zaragoza Bernal examine the extraordinary Museo del Mar (Sea Museum) in San Pedro del Pinatar. Managed by the Fishermen's Guild, the museum engages with traces of maritime history and local identity in the middle of an eco-social drama experienced in the region. The museum's strong bond with its local community reflects a form of mundane re-earthing of maritime heritage, where the collection's seemingly disparate elements are brought together to form a dynamic representation of both human and non-human relationships with the sea. Together, the chapters in this edited volume explore the ethics of collections and archives through the lens of temporality.

As the chapters demonstrate, our proposal to 're-earth' traces is not only an effort to challenge, but also to intervene and work counter to, the frameworks that currently shape how we engage with collections and archives.

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Part I
Durabilities

1
Of networks and molecules: reflections on trace, museum practice and webs of relation after disappearance

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Between 2017 and 2018, I worked in the Collections Department at the Reina Sofía Museum (MNCARS) in Madrid, contributing to its goal of becoming one of Europe's leading repositories of Latin American conceptual and political art produced between the 1960s to 1980s.[1] Focusing primarily on ephemeral modes of artistic production, rooted in performative, action-driven strategies of representation, I was responsible for mapping political art practices, many of which developed in response to the state-sponsored political violence that affected the region during this period.[2] The opportunity was unique – or, perhaps, rather unfamiliar – in that I was researching *for an institution* rather than conducting independent ethnographic fieldwork. As such, my work at the museum was informed by innate observations of day-to-day museum practices, the demands the institution placed on those working there and the multiple forces that gave shape to how the museum collected this particular genre of political art, as well as my long-standing engagement with the visual, material traces of what performance scholar Diana Taylor (2003) describes as a 'repertoire' of performative artistic practices used to evidence bodily absence in the Americas. Overall, my research was marked by a demand to locate art objects – traces of ephemeral art actions – to facilitate the museum's acquisition of these pieces for its permanent collection. In this sense, it was entangled with the powerful forces of the art market and processes of valuation, as well as MNCARS's unique approach to collection and display.

In this chapter, I reflect on my experience of carrying out collections-based research from *within* this specific institution while also meditating on my long-standing and ongoing engagement with the visual, aesthetic and collective practices that emerged in Latin America, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, in response to a wave of dictatorships that deployed forced disappearance as a strategy of 'social and political control' (Douglas, 2023: 227). As such, this text is not rooted in ethnographic observation but rather in an anthropological and political commitment to understanding how these visual interventions, artistic practices and performative strategies have been used to evidence violence both at the moment of their inception but also in our collective present. Similarly, it tracks how these collective tactics have circulated to other contexts and what it means to engage with the ephemeral traces left by these aesthetic interventions. It is, as such, a reflection on trace as both an epistemological category and a form of practice, both an instrument of poetic-political intervention and a mode of producing alternative forms of knowledge across temporalities. It is a text that traverses past, present and future.

In Latin America, forced disappearance emerged as a practice that was both disturbingly palpable and carefully concealed. A strategy deployed by civil-military dictatorships to eliminate political dissidence by transforming individuals into non-entities, it forced the missing to occupy a permanent state of suspension between life and death. Snatched from their homes, university classrooms and public streets, individuals were detained and their bodies hidden from view. In many cases, these detentions initiated a process of elimination, making it difficult, if not impossible, for victims' bodies to be located or recovered. These strategies were laser focused on those committed to enacting political projects dedicated to reimagining social worlds, forms of collective action and a more equal distribution of rights, opportunities and resources. In sum, the state used disappearance as both a weapon of elimination and a warning of what might come. As I have argued elsewhere (Douglas, 2023), the endless limbo of forced disappearance situated state terror as something that could be perceived but not seen or made evident. It was what Michael Taussig would describe as a 'public secret' (1999: 5), that which 'is generally known but cannot be fully articulated', a phenomenon through which publics learned 'to know to not know' (1999: 4). In this context, everyday citizens, victims' kin and artists developed new ways to evidence violence through collective aesthetic interventions that would render visible multiple forms of bodily absence.

In our contemporary moment, traces of these forms of presencing – video reels, photographic images and paper remnants that document and narrate specific moments of creative intervention and aesthetic subversion – are valued works of art. These traces – at once artwork and archive, ephemeral trace and valuable object – move across museums and galleries, posing important questions about the traceability and visibility of ephemeral interventions, the right to be seen and to remain unseen, and the politics, indeed ethics, of museum collecting. As such, this chapter is a meditation on how our contemporary treatment of and engagement with the traces left by these collective interventions reveal important questions regarding how knowledge about the past is produced. It also, I argue, calls attention to questions regarding who has rights to these materials, who makes decisions about what can and cannot be seen, and what the politics of this visibility (or invisibility) might be. It is, above all, a thought experiment that considers alternative approaches to museum practice, thereby navigating the fissures, impossibilities and, indeed, possibilities that these new approaches reveal. By tracing these networks, connections and fractures through anthropologically informed reflection and situated description, the chapter responds to this edited volume's call to 're-earth' the trace. As the editors of this edited volume articulate, re-earthing 'challenges the conventional treatment of traces as mere "artefacts" or "data"' (Buchczyk et al., this volume). Envisioning the soil as 'lively, interconnected and constantly changing', they argue that 're-earthing requires allowing traces to take root, break free from predefined paths within collections and germinate into new forms' (Buchczyk et al., this volume). Following, mapping and writing about these ephemeral traces and the institutional practices employed to collect, keep, care for and reinterpret them reveals their 'inherent messiness and agency', their uncontrollability and their existence 'in states of flux and potentiality' (Buchczyk et al., this volume). It is here, I posit, that tending to the remnants of fleeting performative interventions-made-art-objects is, therefore, a rich methodology for identifying what is at stake when reactivating art archives inside and outside of museums, as well as across the very networks of which they are part.

I do this by first describing the urban intervention *Scene Inversion* orchestrated by the Chilean art collective CADA. By describing an art action whose very objective was *to disappear* Chile's National Fine Art Museum and the Chilean avant-garde scene's response to this, I identify the articulation of new political-aesthetic practices that produced ephemeral traces never meant to reside within art institutions. I then move on

to a description of how MNCARS acquired the CADA art archive and how this acquisition was informed by the institution's collaboration with Red Conceptualismos del Sur (RedCSur), a network of researchers, curators, activists, archivists and practitioners who work at the intersection of art and politics as it relates to Latin American conceptualisms. Unique in its approach to research as a form of political, affective engagement, RedCSur has situated itself as an important global player in re-examining but also revaluing conceptual art practices within Latin America. While much of RedCSur's work has focused on keeping the visual, material and, at times, ephemeral traces of radical political art geographically rooted in Latin America, it has also affected how such works are valued in the transnational art market and, thus, how they circulate globally. Using this acquisition as a point of reflection, I move to consider how the museum's collaboration with RedCSur connects to its embrace of what former MNCARS director Manuel Borja-Villel (2021: 6) describes as the 'molecular tissue' of the institution, that is, the connective articulations it establishes between art objects and ephemera, between artworks and archives, between actors and networks.

In my interpretation, Borja-Villel's concept of the molecular museum is about connective matter, the bonds that bring together the singular and atomic to produce a more complex collective entity that can mutate and transform. Drawing on molecular vocabulary rooted in concepts like bonds, synergies and connections, I consider what it means to envision museum practice – including the collection and display of traces left by ephemeral, body-centred interventions – as an engagement with the commons. I do so by tracing how the museum's collaborations with projects like RedCSur and its *Archives in Use* platform serve as points of departure for envisioning alternative models of museum practice.[3] I argue that concepts like networks, the commons and the molecular museum counter extractive modes of collection by articulating webs of solidarity. Finally, I conclude by positing that the metaphor of molecular tissue does not resolve the problematics of art collection but rather provides a space to consider the tensions between the politics of ephemerality, the ethics of trace and the possibility of reimagining (or resituating) museological desires for material permanence. Navigating tensions between stability and longevity, durability and accumulation, presence and absence, the chapter considers how MNCARS and its collecting practices, as they relate to Latin American political art, are a point of departure for enacting a museum practice that acknowledges complex histories of violence and erasure.

A museum not meant to be: ephemeral art practices in contexts of disappearance

On a Wednesday morning in Spring 1979, members of CADA – or the Art Actions Collective – staged an urban intervention, a performative spectacle that made visible the explicit and implicit violence that the Pinochet dictatorship imposed upon private and public life. Commencing with the appearance of 10 milk trucks ceremoniously parading through the streets of downtown Santiago, the intervention tapped into the recent, at times latent, collective memory of the 1973 coup d'état and its aftermath, when heavy military tanks rumbled down empty streets, policing a city under siege. In this case, however, armoured vehicles equipped for military operations were replaced by lorries emblazoned with logos linking them to the increasingly capitalistic market of mass-produced and imported goods. Working on multiple levels of signification, the urban-made-artistic intervention metaphorically brought into view the weight of state surveillance, the violence of disappearance and the almost imperceptible forcefulness of censorship and neoliberal change. After their initial itinerary, the trucks parked in front of the National Fine Arts Museum where a group of artists greeted the flock of vehicles by skilfully covering the building's baroque facade with an enormous white sheet. Through the actions of an artistic intervention, the museum was made to disappear.[4]

In *Scene Inversion*, CADA's intentional, though temporary, removal of the museum's facade from public view stands in stark tension with the dramatic acts of violence committed on 11 September 1973, when Chilean Air Force aircraft bombed the La Moneda Presidential Palace located in the heart of downtown Santiago. The building's crumbling and smouldering external walls marked a spectacular, performative end to the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende. The US-backed military coup also ushered in a new age of state-sponsored repression, in which political, social and economic wars would be fought *on* and *through* the bodies of Chilean citizens who opposed the regime and threatened its project of rapid neoliberal transformation. In the 17 years that followed, Pinochet's dictatorship systematically employed public and private forms of violence to establish a culture of fear, silence and self-censorship that made it difficult, if not altogether impossible, to express dissent and organise resistance. The most arresting of these strategies was forced disappearance. A practice both hauntingly palpable and carefully hidden from view, *desaparición* used bodily absence as a form of social and political control (Douglas, 2023: 227).

In this context, the field of cultural production quickly shifted and changed. Like the bodies of those who threatened the regime, artworks and artists were made to disappear, while universities – once hotbeds of cultural debate and artistic production – were kept under watch. Violence evoked absence, and surveillance transformed into silence as the dictatorship forcibly adjusted the limits of what could be enunciated and made public. Consequently, the mechanics of representation were modified and revised. However, as is often the case, the closing down of fields of signification eventually gave way to the emergence of new strategies that would redefine and rearticulate how meaning could be made – how knowledge could be produced – within a context marked by violence and bodily absence. Under these circumstances, things and persons made absent would be rendered present by activating traces that articulated a new visual language of resistance, through what Chilean theorist and cultural critic Nelly Richard has described as 'ellipsis and metaphor' (2017 [1986]; see also Richard, 1998). While artistic activations like CADA's *Scene Inversion* used allegory and analogy in sophisticated ways – where milk trucks and disappearing museum facades could point to the pervasive effects of political violence and violent neoliberal reforms – they also built on the strategies used by the disappeared's kin across the region, who publicly displayed ID photographs, family snaps and anonymous silhouettes to make present bodily absence. In this context, presencing became a central practice in the new 'regimes of signification' (Richard, 2004) that Chile's *Escena de avanzada* – or avant-garde scene – brought into being.

A term first coined by Richard (1986), *Escena de avanzada* identifies a complex, at times heterogeneous field of artistic production and practice that sought to radically break with the institutions that had supported Chilean artists and their creations prior to the dictatorship.[5] This anti-institutional stance can be explained, in part, by the state's surveillance of and control over museums, cultural centres and universities, as well as by collective desires among artists and cultural producers to enact radical, novel forms of resistance. Emerging during the latter part of the Chilean dictatorship, these articulations, argues Richard (1986), intentionally and self-consciously reclaimed positionalities and practices at the margins of Chilean society. It was from this peripheral place at the margins of control that a new wave of cultural producers articulated a nexus between art and life, between artistic medium and the corporeal human form (Richard, 1998). By questioning materiality and abandoning object-centred forms of production, *la Escena* operated within a regime of signification where the unseen and the unheard operated as

a scathing political commentary on the violence that had come to shape everyday life.

Scene Inversion is but one example of CADA situating its artistic practice at the margins of cultural production permitted by the regime. This determination to speak and *to act* from the periphery was central to the collective's understanding of what politically committed art could and should be. By covering the museum facade, CADA carried out what Richard (1994: 40) has described as 'a double act of censorship'. The performance censored a monument that housed an institution charged with canonising a particular narrative of the past – a process which, of course, also implicated its opposite, the erasure and silencing of other voices and historical traces. It also artfully blotted out a symbol of cultural officialdom, Chile's National Fine Arts Museum (Richard, 1994: 40). By removing a monument-made-institution from view, CADA inverted 'the national spectacle' of disappearance (Taylor, 1997: 194) by forcing the public's gaze somewhere else: to the erasure of an architectural form key to the urban landscape. As the collective temporarily and spectacularly erased an iconic building from view, it called attention to the forms of bodily absence permeating everyday life. *Scene Inversion* emphasised that the museum was no longer located in a building. It could no longer be understood as an institution. It was now occupying the city streets where, despite the tight grip of forced disappearance, human bodies were defiantly and subversively put on display and viewed. In performatively declaring the museum to be an institution *not meant to be*, CADA made present the human, social and political implications of political violence.

Scene Inversion is but one of many examples of conceptual art practices that emerged in response to political violence. Like other Chilean artists, including Hernán Parada, Luz Donoso and Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis, the members of CADA were invested in making visible that which could not be seen, clearly identified or verbally articulated.[6] To adopt the language developed by Richard (2017 [1986]), CADA inverted signs, made visible fractures and inhabited the space between 'ellipsis and metaphor' to make evident forms of violence that could not be identified, labelled or even observed (see also Richard, 1998). The emergence of these practices is a clear reflection of a broader phenomenon in Latin America: the entanglements between body-centred, conceptual art, memory activism and radical collective aesthetic practice. Described by theorists Marcelo Expósito, Ana Vidal and Jaime Vindel (2012) as '*activismo artístico*' (art activism), these performative public strategies are part and parcel of the transnational 'repertoires' (Taylor, 2003) of tactics used to make public and visible forms of bodily absence resulting from political

violence in the region. As I have argued elsewhere (Douglas, 2023),[7] enunciating, making present, indeed evidencing absence, were tactics integral to forms of collective resistance. At the same time, the articulation of these creative practices pointed to the nexus between art and life, while also developing an aesthetic language for exploring the tensions between visibility and invisibility, between enunciation and silence. Often ephemeral and self-consciously anti-institutional, these artistic practices generated visual, material traces of artistic events that placed value on the unexpected, the fleeting and the impermanent.

I have described this text as a thought experiment rather than a narration of ethnographically informed conclusions. I pose questions about what it means to collect and display artistic works intentionally made to resist and critique museum institutions through their very refusal of material permanence across time and space. What does it mean to collect radical political art, whose very form – or, rather, ephemerality – was a key element in the pointed institutional critiques that artists and art collectives developed in Latin America between the 1960s and 1980s? If art collection is analogous to extractive practices, what are the ethical implications of accumulating ephemeral traces produced in contexts marked by forced disappearance? At a moment in time when restitution and repair are entering the lexicon of museum practice with force – when questions over ethics and ownership are informing how we envision museum and archival practices – working through these questions serves as a point of departure for considering how engagements, both anthropological and otherwise, with institutions might help us collectively reimagine how we understand artistic and ephemeral traces in contexts of state violence, how we treat the archives and museums that collect them and how we approach the projects and initiatives that care for them. I argue that ephemeral traces-made-art-objects, such as those resulting from CADA's *Scene Inversion*, are an opportunity to reflect on the ethical implications of engaging with trace as both an epistemological category and a methodological practice. This makes evident the complexities of collecting, keeping, caring for and reinterpreting ephemeral marks left by collective actions that sought to make present all that had been made to disappear.

'If and when': rethinking the acquisition of ephemeral political art

In 2010, two of CADA's original members, Lotty Rosenfeld and Diamela Eltit, contacted MNCARS with an offer to sell a substantial part of the

CADA art archive to this public institution geographically distanced from Chile and its recent past. As narrated by the then director of the Public Programmes Department at MNCARS, Jesús Carrillo, both women were aware of the value of the graphic and audiovisual traces left from CADA art actions and the complexity of conserving such a materially delicate archive. They were also acutely aware of the museum's renewed curatorial interest in this documentation for its aesthetic and historical value, as well as its potential contribution to MNCARS's growing collection of Latin American political art (Carrillo, 2023: 103–104). In July 2009, almost a full year prior to this offer, RedCSur had hosted its third plenary meeting in Santiago de Chile. The gathering, entitled *Memorias y Archivos*, collectively explored how to manage and protect the materials generated by art interventions activated to contest political violence between the 1960s and 1980s. Recognising the unique material and institutional conditions of local museums and archives, as well as regional debates about how to best preserve and make public the ephemeral traces of these aesthetic interventions, members of the network created space to consider the complex intersections between local memory politics, art-heritage practices and the global art market.[8] Given MNCARS's ongoing dialogue with RedCSur, and then-director Manuel Borja-Villel's implication in and support of the network's research into Latin American conceptualisms, the offer to acquire this particular art archive and the political but also market implications of this acquisition were not taken lightly.

Before turning to these entanglements, I want to pause on the significance of RedCSur and its connection to and collaboration with MNCARS. RedCSur defines itself as:

> An affective and activist network that, from a plural South-South position, seeks to act in the field of epistemological, artistic and political disputes of the present … The network works to influence the critical dimension of artistic, archival, curatorial and social movement practices, under the idea that research is itself a political act, intervening in different conjunctures that mark the non-synchronous presents that we inhabit. (2007, author's translation)

As the collective notes in their *Instituting Declaration* (2007), the use of the word *Red* in their name 'speaks of a network of connections (which can contain, contact, trap) that are open to integrating with places in Southern locations' (2007, np). It understands the South 'not as a geographical position but as a place of geopolitical and affective enunciation' (2007, np). By bringing together researchers, activists, curators and

practitioners from Latin America and Europe, RedCSur generates 'south-south relations' (2007, np) while also defining politically and affectively what it means to claim these so-called peripheral positions.[9] RedCSur is a web of practice and thoughtful exchange that redefines, in situated terms, what it means to produce and circulate knowledge by interrogating the intersections between art and politics, absence and presence, and visibility and invisibility.

RedCSur's second grounding principle is that the conceptual practices that first emerged in Latin American art circuits between the 1960s and 1980s and that continued throughout the 1990s possessed a powerfully political 'catalysing' potential that was 'broken up', de-emphasised and, in some cases, erased by the wave of state violence that consumed the region and the neoliberal market logics of late capitalism (Longoni, 2016; see also RedCSur, 2007). Following Latin American artists' embrace of the conceptual turn as an emancipatory project that would free them from the constraints of purely object-based practices, the network approaches dematerialisation as an aesthetic shift in practice whereby bodies and urban landscapes emerged as flexible materials through which art could be made. In doing so, the network argues, Latin American conceptual artists and their interlocutors not only expanded the definitions of artistic form and practice but also rearticulated the links between art and life. This was (and *is*) particularly notable in contexts where life, to quote philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998), had been rendered 'bare'. As such, RedCSur seeks to recover what Ana Longoni (2016) has described as the 'poetic-political potential' (see also MNCARS, 2021; Longoni and Weiss, 2014) of these interventions and the experiences that they provoked.

RedCSur provides a radical, alternative approach to the practice of art collecting that challenges and questions traditional forms of museum acquisition. The material remnants of politically charged art actions – traces whose materiality is often unstable and marked by art actions' ephemeral, performative nature – are culled through, organised and analysed from within the geographical boundaries that once contained their production. Working closely with institutions like MNCARS and its global counterparts, the network advocates for the local preservation and analysis of materials that are, at once, artwork and historical heritage. In doing so, RedCSur does not completely escape the capitalist and neoliberal logics of the art market but does reject, resist and challenge them, dramatically altering how Latin American conceptual art archives and art objects circulate globally. This has also affected how they are valued in market terms and, by extension, how they are kept and cared for by art collecting institutions.

Against this backdrop, MNCARS responded to Rosenfeld and Eltit's acquisition offer by proposing to pay them for numbered serialised pieces and exhibition copies of materials documenting CADA's artistic interventions and safeguarded in their private collections. As Borja-Villel (2019) narrates in his description of the acquisition,[10] this exchange would also stipulate that the complete, original art archive would stay in Santiago, guaranteeing RedCSur's access to these materials. In exchange, members would be responsible for elaborating an inventory of the art archive's contents while waiting for a Chilean institution – what would eventually be the Museum of Memory and Human Rights – to take charge of the complete collection. In effect, MNCARS, in conversation with the artists and members of the network, articulated a plan for acquisition that would honour RedCSur's archival and curatorial practices while also remunerating CADA artists for their artistic labour. By acting in accordance with the network's ethical and political commitment to evaluating, preserving and caring for archives on critical Latin American artistic practices *from the contexts of their original production*, MNCARS limited its range of action and intervention. By committing to only acquiring materials documenting these radical and artistic interventions *if and when* copies were available, MNCARS also restricted what it could and should collect.

Anyone who has worked in the art world or in institutions dedicated to collecting ephemeral traces of unrepeatable events will be familiar with the ongoing, perhaps unresolvable, entanglements between institutional commitments to preservationist desires, internal processes of valuation and the forces of market value. These conflicting pressures often result in ambiguities, contradictions and problematics that complicate art collection. At times, they may also affect how artworks are displayed and made publicly accessible. While not explicitly part of its political objectives, RedCSur contributes to rethinking the intersections between art and heritage, between aesthetic practices and the politics of memory, by proposing alternative politically and ethically informed protocols for acquiring these art archives. In doing so, they also reinvent the politics of circulation, valuation and collection. The introduction of qualifiers such as *if and when* to museum acquisition conventions is an intervention into museum time and process. It makes the act of collection contingent on the material and geographical conditions of the ephemeral documentary traces that art institutions seek to acquire. It also directs institutional attention to these traces' original provenance and, most importantly, their political significance in the contexts where they were first produced. When these correspond with places where things

and persons were systematically made to disappear, engaging with these remnants is also a commitment to thinking across time and geographies of distance. 'Re-earthing' these traces (Buchczyk et al., this volume), allows the epistemological, methodological and ethical challenges that emerge when handling these traces to be situated, fluid and dialogic.

MNCARS's acquisition of the CADA archive – and its work with and alongside RedCSur – provides an important window onto new forms of museum practice. While each museum acquisition and curatorial project is a social world of its own, the acquisition of the CADA art archive is an important case study because it delineates possible forms of collection that are more politically in line with radical art practices like those described in my narration of *Scene Inversion*.[11] These practices neither wholly resolve institutional desires for material permanence nor the global art market's fetishisation of art objects. They do not extract art museums from the acquisition–extraction nexus. However, they do provide alternative models of collaboration, collection and display that prioritise networks and ecosystems over accumulation and durability. These networks are part and parcel of the metaphor of molecular tissue so central to MNCARS's institutional practice.

Between networks and *lo común*: the 'molecular' museum

MNCARS distinguishes itself as a museum committed to working *en red* or 'in networks' to respond to changing definitions of what art museums are and what they do. The institution's open dialogue with and support of RedCSur is but one example of this networked approach to museum practice. In the case of MNCARS, the networked museum is also a methodological, conceptual and institutional investment in *lo común* – that is, what is shared, familiar and common. In this section, I will unpack what is meant by the concept of *museo en red* – or networked museum – as it has been articulated by the recent MNCARS director Manuel Borja-Villel. Tracing this idea to the emergence of new institutionalism debates in Spain but also to a re-emergence of 'the commons' as a driving concept in the articulation of new twenty-first-century political imaginaries, I consider how these different descriptors are entangled with Borja-Villel's concept of the 'molecular' museum, where institutional connections and collaborations are as much about responding to the changing economic conditions that public museums face as they are about introducing new methods of collection and display. I argue that the metaphor of

the molecular counters extractive modes of collection by articulating and bringing into being solidarity networks.

Institutions and museums are not solely defined by their directors. However, Manuel Borja-Villel – one of Spain's most singular curatorial minds and museum innovators – played a fundamental role in reinventing MNCARS during his directorship between 2007 and 2023. During this period, the networked museum became a guiding conceptual force and a form of local practice that would profoundly alter the museum's collaborations with art institutions in and beyond Europe, as well as its dialogue with political actors and networks in its local neighbourhood, in Madrid, and beyond. These changes built upon Borja-Villel's prior institutional experiments as the director of the Fundació Antoni Tàpies and the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). In both instances, he introduced a radically new approach to the curatorial and museological by situating the contemporary art museum as a point of encounter between institutions and the public and by insisting on museological approaches less centred on reifying art 'History' with a capital 'H' and more focused on ruptures, an ability to move fluidly across temporalities and a commitment to producing the contemporary not in a silo but in a space of plurality. In this sense, one could argue, his approach to museum practice was, in many ways, a commitment to trace, to following and celebrating the intersections between art objects, aesthetic practices and the processes of signification and valuation that accompany them.

In a 2011 text entitled 'Towards a new institutionalism' in MNCARS's newly inaugurated publication *Cartas*, Borja-Villel described the need to reconsider and reimagine models for museum practice. Penned less than three years after the global financial crisis, the editorial-made-treatise was in line with the times, referencing the harmful effects of speculation, the unrelenting expansion of precarious labour and the danger implicit in prioritising financial rescue over social welfare. For Borja-Villel, global phenomena demanded an urgent reinvention of the art museum:

> In this context, it is necessary to rethink the institution from the realm of what is shared – from the commons or *de lo común*. This emerges from the multiplicity of singularities that [at present] create a public sphere that is neither wholly public nor wholly private but rather at the margins of both. To do this, it is essential to break with the franchise dynamic that seems so attractive to museum managers and to think, instead, of an archive of the commons, a confederation of institutions that share the works housed in their

> centres and, above all, that participate in the experiences and stories generated around them. (Borja-Villel, 2011: 1)

The networked museum is a museum of connections and collaborations between and among institutions. It is an alternative model – a 'new' form of 'institutionalism' – that is as much about alliances and relationships as it is about redefining economic and institutional models for collecting, keeping and displaying art.[12] At the centre of the networked museum is also a re-embrace of *lo común*, a term that works on multiple levels of signification, referring to what is common, frequent and habitual – to that which is shared – but also to 'the commons" shared resources and cultural values, that which is public but also belonging to all; that which can also be depleted (see Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom and Hess, 2006). In his own definition, Borja-Villel (2011: 1) argues: 'The commons is not an amplified expansion of the individual. The commons is something that is never completed. The commons only develops through the other and by the other, in the site of the commons, in an act of being that is shared.' Building *lo común* – envisioning the museum as an archive of the commons – emphasises collaboration and connection but also accessibility and shared practices. It underscores the urgency of collecting and keeping that which can be erased, lost or disappeared. *Museo en red* also emphasises this collaborative, collective spirit. The networked museum is both institutional connection and webs of relation.[13]

It is not by coincidence that the concept and practice of the networked museum emerged against the backdrop of the 2008 global economic crisis and, more specifically, local responses to the harmful effects of Spanish austerity measures and their intersection with increasingly audible (and visible) public debates about democratic institutions and participation.[14] This included the emergence of the 15-M movement, growing public visibility of community housing struggles, and shifts in local debates about the role of the past in shaping the present, particularly relating to Spain's troubled history with Franco's fascist violence and the pacted transition that followed (Martínez, 2012). This ushered in a new era in which collective imaginaries celebrated the commons by focusing their energies on 'storming' institutions and reinventing forms of governance. Without a doubt, this political shift or 'change of cycle', as it has often been described, at times accompanied seismic shifts in creative, cultural practices and the institutions charged with supporting, collecting and displaying them. While in Spanish political discourse the commons emerged as political shorthand to emphasise new forms of collective action, the redistribution of resources and the emergence

of other forms of *doing* and *making* politics in the public sphere, it was also becoming an art world abbreviation to describe an experiment in networks – a new institutional, relational and economic model for collecting and displaying art as well as a new mode of artistic and curatorial practice.[15]

The *museo en red* has been Borja-Villel's response to institutional forms but also to changes in the global system of art and art collecting. He has argued that the networked museum addresses a very particular need, specific to Spain – but also to Southern and Eastern Europe – where art museums see themselves as occupying both centre and periphery. This is a response to fierce art market competition and an articulation of shared needs and desires to resist these forces (Expósito, 2015: 270). Undoubtedly, it gives shape to how these institutions produce imaginaries and the debates emerging from these institutional and extra-institutional practices. The networked museum has also served as a point of departure for creating cross-institutional collaborations, such as those between MNCARS, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and the MG+ MSUM in Ljubljana,[16] rooted in the shared common objective of 'collectively empowering ourselves against the pressures exerted by neoliberal hegemony in the global art system' (Expósito, 2015: 270). Over time, these networks have developed into other configurations, such as L'Internationale, which connect a broad range of institutions and actors to think with, against and at the margins of art museums. In *Radical Museology* (2013), art historian and critic Claire Bishop traces the early stages of these institutional constellations. Like Borja-Villel, she describes museum labour carried out in and through networks as a practice that responds to turbulent economic shifts that complicate how public institutions like MNCARS compete in the increasingly voracious grip of the contemporary capitalist art market. By extension, she argues, the museological imaginary – indeed, the reality of the networked museum – is also about creating other models for radical museum practice that materialise the critical character of these institutions. Like the concept and practice of trace, the networked museum bridges theory and action across past, present, future and, thus, beyond time.

MNCARS's collaboration with RedCSur is yet another example of Borja-Villel's articulation of the networked museum, where multiple webs of practice make it possible for diverse actors to change the shape of the art world system, the politics of museum collection and display, and the very ways in which these practices produce knowledge. As I have described, however, RedCSur is committed to knowledge practices that situate poetic-political aesthetic practices in relation to the contexts

surrounding their invention. Privileging local forms of recuperation over international art world circulation, the collective produces knowledge about situated aesthetic practices in ways that contest extractive logics. An articulation of opposing forces, the intersection between the networked museum and the RedCSur platform draws attention to both connection *and* situatedness (Haraway, 1988; Longoni, 2021). It is about cross-institutional, international and interdisciplinary reach, but also the specificity of location, experience and (historical) context. It is about movement across time, space and social worlds in ways that are at once grounded and flexible. In an age when networks and the language associated with them are ubiquitous, MNCARS articulates the *museo en red* as a world of oppositions, where that which is shared and collective is also unique and situated, where what moves is also what is kept in place. The commitment to inhabiting this world of oppositions is also an affirmation of an anachronistic approach to understanding art history and museum practice where time is not linear but rather multidirectional (Didi-Huberman, 2002, 2003).[17]

This anachronistic approach to museum practice is closely linked, if not entangled with, Borja-Villel's (2021) articulation of 'the molecular museum', where the white cube is replaced by something akin to Aby Warburg's Atlas (Expósito, 2015: 263). In this conceptualisation, the museum is a living organism – a collection of the commons – where history is not linear, hierarchical or static and where spectators are agents that actively transform the narrative contained within the museum's walls. As noted by Borja-Villel's long-time interlocutor, curator and photographer Jorge Ribalta, the concept of the molecular museum reverberates with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's differentiation between the molar and the molecular (Ribalta, 2009: 262–264; Deleuze and Guatarri, 2013 [1980]).[18] Here, the molecular, in contrast to its structured and inelastic counterpart, emphasises fluidity, multiplicity and flow. The molecular is about processes of becoming and states of transformation – the movement of desire and affect. For MNCARS during Borja-Villel's directorship, the metaphor of the molecular was mobilised to hold together the anachronistic and the ever-changing micro-level processes of a museum invested in working across temporalities and geographies of distance. Like the language of networks, the metaphor of the molecular emphasises connection and webs of relation. It does so by rethinking, in part, how collections are reinterpreted and displayed.

So, how does MNCARS define and categorise the artworks, objects and documents that become part of this institution? Unlike many of its counterparts, MNCARS understands, at least conceptually, its role as an

art gallery and art archive as being one and the same. From a collections point of view, the museum does not differentiate between art objects and art documents. This is reflected in what museum practitioners often describe as 'the house style', where objects like notebooks, magazines, photographs and flyers are encased and displayed. The care exerted towards these material traces springs not only from a desire to contextualise artworks but from a particular conceptual and theoretical position – one in which the museum is invested in promoting a flexible cacophony of voices regarding events and the artistic practices surrounding them rather than reproducing a singular, linear historical narrative. Moving away from the traditional modern art museum and towards an archive of the commons, MNCARS-as-molecular-institution is at once archive and art collection. Both rooted and mobile, the molecular museum is, above all, an 'ecosystem' (Borja-Villel, 2021) – a form of connection and interrelatedness that opposes extraction and depletion by putting forth other ways of keeping, caring for and making public art.

Working in the Collections Department, I observed how delicate this ecosystem could be, particularly in relation to the collection of ephemeral traces made in poetic-political aesthetic interventions carried out between the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America. While articulating the museum as an archive of the commons, a network of connections – indeed, a molecular tissue – the institution also fulfilled the mandate to acquire. For many Latin American artists, the ability to have work in the collection could potentially shift their position and status within multiple art markets, including local and international ones. As such, the role of the museum as a collecting force weighed heavily and often resulted in a conglomeration of opposing views and practices coming into contact and, at times, in conflict. While some artists wanted or even economically needed their works to become the property of the museum, members of RedCSur might advocate for artworks to stay in their places of origin. These tensions and debates are part and parcel of the molecular tissue of the networked museum, where the acquisition and collection of action-centred, ephemeral art – whose traces were never meant to exist within the museum institution – was an experiment in rethinking relation, resisting extraction and reinventing *lo común* even from within the inescapable forces of late-stage capitalism. This exercise in trace, I argue, is as much about calling into question and shifting forms of museum practice as it is about reinventing the politics of visibility and invisibility in the aftermath of violence.

As I mentioned in earlier parts of this chapter, my aim in describing how an institution like MNCARS approaches the task of collecting

ephemeral traces of political art actions is not to arrive at any ethnographic conclusions but rather to engage in a thought experiment that considers how these approaches are also an engagement with trace. It is hard to disentangle concepts like *museo en red*, the archive of the commons and the molecular museum, in part because these notions emphasise what is shared and connected. They also speak to MNCARS's relationship with time and narrative and to broader, indeed, global debates regarding reparative forms of museum practice, institutional collaboration and strategies of collection, circulation and display that consider the ethics of the acquisition–extraction nexus. I would argue that, in the case of MNCARS, the metaphor of the molecular – its emphasis on bonds, connections and the language of tissues – speaks to the emergent forms of art collection that are less focused on extraction and more fixed on the articulation of solidarity networks, forms of institutional and non-institutional dialogue and collaboration. This does not excise MNCARS from the contradictions of museum practice, where the fetishisation of the art object, the need to expand collections and the allure of ownership come into conflict with the ideals of networked, molecular practice. Nor does it erase the very complex, at times conflictual, labour of working across contexts with individuals and institutions who have different interests at stake. Somewhere between the networks and *lo común* – between webs of relation and the commons – the molecular museum makes it possible to ponder the sites where art object, aesthetics and time intersect. In this sense, it shares much with the concept and practice of trace and the politics of re-earthing. Both are an epistemological, methodological and ethical approach that is as much about a mark in time as it is about the materiality, visuality and audibility of the vestige and its ability to travel across temporalities, provoking engagements and imaginaries that contribute to the form and shape of shared knowledge but also to the very implications of re-worlding.

A coda in times of genocide: unearthing and re-earthing everything made to disappear

In my writing on the aesthetics of disappearance in Latin America's Southern Cone and post-Franco Spain, I use the term 'corporeal evidence(s)' to accentuate the centrality of visual representations of the body in artistic practices that seek to undo absence through acts of presencing (Douglas, 2023).[19] I use corporeal evidence to emphasise the evidentiary potential of the body (Maguire and Rao, 2018) and its capacity

to traverse, inhabit and make evident multiple forms of knowledge. This insistence on the evidentiary is not intended to frame aesthetic representations of disappearance in relation to ontological or even forensic-judicial debates about what is real. Instead, drawing on anthropological discussions about *how* evidence is constituted (Csordas, 2004; Hastrup, 2004; Crossland, 2013), I consider how the body, its absence and its representation are activated in the service 'of and for' something (Csordas, 2004: 254; see also Wittgenstein, 1958, 1969; Daston, 1991; Poovey, 1993). In these activations, I argue, experiences with the intimate everyday effects of disappearance become shared realities, collective imaginings where those directly affected by political violence repair, rebuild and reconstitute social worlds. The concept of corporeal evidence(s) reveals the assumptions underpinning what bodies and their absences can make possible and how forms of presencing – like those of CADA's *Scene Inversion* – can transform fleeting political, aesthetic art actions into visual and material traces that circulate, moving in and around different institutions and involving a wide range of actors and collectives. Tracing these processes, pausing on what it means to collect and display these ephemeral image-objects, speaks not only to collective loss but also to what is at stake in these violent projects of elimination.

During the elaboration of this text, the genocide in Gaza has been a constant reminder of the contemporary persistence of political violence firmly focused on bodily erasure. It has also evidenced the important collective and creative strategies used to publicly denounce the ongoing genocide. These actions focus less on ellipsis and metaphor and more on evidencing events that, in our digital age of networked image sharing, are happening in plain sight. Indeed, it is difficult to write about trace, about political art and its entrance into complex constellations of institutions, activists and publics without thinking about the acts of unearthing and re-earthing that we must insist upon now and in the future, as artists and activists produce work that uncovers, indeed, evidences the persistent historical and ongoing acts of violence being waged against Palestinians. This, too, is trace: making present all that was made (and is being made) to disappear.

The traces left by political art interventions like *Scene Inversion* are invaluable in that they speak not only to the gravity of state-sponsored violence but also to important articulations of collective resistance. They make palpable the everyday and extraordinary effects of forced disappearance, censorship and cultural silence. They also emphasise the necessity and utility of ephemeral, embodied political strategies of enunciation. It was, after all, the impermanence of these art interventions that

made it possible to articulate institutional critiques rooted in recognising all that had been made to disappear. This, undoubtedly, reinforced and contributed to broader citizen-led initiatives that made and continue to make claims to truth, justice, reparation and no repetition. As such, these art actions are, in fact, world-making. How we deal with aesthetic, ephemeral, even bodily traces of the genocide in Gaza will shift how we make and re-make worlds in museums and institutions but also in our everyday lives.

In this chapter I have narrated how museums engage with traces that are products of both political violence and collective acts of resistance. Here, the networks of connection and webs of relation that result from grappling with what to do with these materials – how to care for these art archives – are not only an engagement with trace but also with the very complexity of what it means to collect, display and interpret works that make visible, indeed palpable, absence in all its forms. An emphasis on a molecular approach to museum practice celebrates fluidity and polyvocality. It emphasises processes of transformation that are as much about the passing of time as they are about a coming into being. There is something powerful about being able to (re)witness and see these interventions, to consider what these poetic-political strategies bring to light about the past but also what they reveal about the present and future. While museum collection can certainly be rooted in extractive, colonial logics, a molecular approach to acquisitions and display also demonstrates how institutional practices can find ways to engage with these traces in ways that do not extract them from one public – one commons – but rather introduce them to other ones. The metaphor of the molecular becomes a vehicle for celebrating forms of interaction, dialogue and exchange that recontextualise, renarrate and re-earth these art archives not in the vein of extractive art market logics but rather in the name of memory and all the labour it demands. These are acts of presencing, forms of holding tight to that which has been made to disappear. We need this now more than ever.

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Notes

1. The full name of this institution is Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. I will use the abbreviation MNCARS or Reina Sofía to describe this museum.
2. It is important to note that my work at the Reina Sofía was collective and not individual. My contributions built on the ongoing research that was being carried out in the Collections Department, overseen by Rosario Peiró, and particularly that being carried out by the Performative Arts section led by Lola Hinojosa Martínez and the Graphic Arts section then led at the time by Guillermo Enríquez de Salamanca. Research completed in the Collections Department was also shaped by input from the Department of Public Programming, particularly from then-director Ana Longoni. Finally, the 'mapping' of Latin American conceptual art was initiated in the 2012 exhibition *Perder la forma humana. Una imagen sísmica de los años ochenta en América Latina*, a collective curatorial project directed by RedCSur. A second exhibition in 2022–3, *Giro gráfico: Como en el muro la hiedra*, was also curated by members of RedCSur. This illustrates MNCARS's ongoing engagement with the labour of mapping, collecting and connecting political art from the Americas.
3. To consult the *Archives in Use* platform, see https://www.archivosenuso.org/. For the CADA Collection, including documentation from *Scene Inversion*, see https://www.archivosenuso.org/cada/accion.
4. For a description of this intervention, as well as other artistic interventions designed by CADA, see *Cada día: La creación de un arte social* (Neustadt, 2012), *Márgenes e instituciones. Arte desde 1973* (Richard, 1986a) and 'Chilean Art and Action: Subverting Order, Performing Change' (Neustadt, 2008).
5. For descriptions of Latin American conceptualism more broadly, see Cullen (2008), López (2010), RedCSur (2012), Vindel (2013), Barreiro López and Martínez (2015) and Longoni and Weiss (2014).
6. The original members of CADA included sociologist Fernando Balcells, writer Diamela Eltit, poet Raúl Zurita and visual artists Lotty Rosenfeld and Juan Castillo.
7. My research on these issues has drawn on the important work of of Latin American scholars who have traced these artistic practices and whose approaches to the intersections between research and political practice, as I will discuss later in this chapter, have profoundly shaped this field. For examples of this work, see Longoni and Bruzzone (2008), Carvajal and Nogueira (2012), Blejmar et al. (2013), Gómez-Moya (2013), Fortuny (2015), Varas (2018), Varas and Manzi (2016) and Blejmar and Fortuny (2021).
8. Given the meeting's location in Santiago, these questions were particularly present in the public conversation held between Rosenfeld and curator, activist and RedCSur member Paulina Varas (Rosenfeld and Varas, 2009).
9. As noted in the same text, RedCSur believes that 'Every act of naming has performative effects; it produces reality' (RedCSur, 2007, translation by author). As such, the term 'conceptualisms' is equally important to understand as part of the network's self-definition: 'The term

Conceptualisms was born from the initial conjuncture of the foundation of the Network in 2007 in the context of a meeting in Barcelona (Vivid Radical Memory) in which other stories about the beginnings of conceptualisms were debated. We have often felt uncomfortable with that name and have even considered changing it to reflect how our ways of doing things far exceed that specific affiliation anchored in a specific moment of the art/politics relationship. However, we have chosen to take charge of this legacy, that is also ours, and compress that name into an unknown ***C*** when we chose to sign as RedCSur, so that the C can mean so many other *things*, *paths*, *conditions*, *caresses*' (RedCSur, 2007; emphasis in original, translation by author).

10. These processes have also been documented and discussed by RedCSur members in *El Archivo CADA: astucia práctica y potencias de lo común* (Carvajal et al., 2019).
11. It is important to note that the example of the CADA archive is one of several. These processes are never devoid of conflict, and the acquisition of some art archives have been more successful than others. The complexity of these processes has been documented by RedCSur. See also *El museo, ¿un Proyecto inacabado?* (Carrillo, 2023) for a description of these processes in MNCARS.
12. Tracing MNCARS's connections to debates on new institutionalism in art curation and museum collection is beyond the scope of this chapter. I highlight some of the key texts that describe these shifts, many of which dominated local and national discussions on curating in the 2000s and 2010s. See Möntmann (2009), Ribalta (2009), Kolb and Flückiger (2014) and O'Neill et al. (2017).
13. It is worth noting that *red* can be translated as network but also web. Like its counterpart in English, network centres on connection *and* relation.
14. See Rodríguez López and López Hernández (2010) and Rodríguez López (2013).
15. See Mollona (2021) for an in-depth articulation of these themes.
16. This specific network is described in detail by Claire Bishop in her book *Radical Museology* (2013).
17. A more expansive discussion of how contemporary art and its institutions engage with conceptions of time is included in *Radical Museology* (Bishop, 2013: 18–24). See also Roelstraete (2009), Nagel and Wood (2010) and Ross (2014).
18. It is important to note that Borja-Villel's embrace of the molecular is also part of his longer trajectory as a museum director. As narrated by Jorge Ribalta, the concept was key to the MACBA's reinvention of its relationships with broader publics between 2006 and 2008. See also Bourriaud (2002 [1998]) and Rolnik (2005). For the purposes of this chapter, I connect this concept specifically to MNCARS and its treatment of Latin American political conceptual art that was ephemeral in its anti-institutional critique.
19. I have discussed the concept of corporeal evidence(s) in writing completed in another language (Douglas, 2023), specifically Spanish, where the word evidence can be both singular and plural. I use this form to emphasise how visual representations of the human form can be used to represent both singular individuals as well as entire collectives. This is particularly salient in the Latin American context, as well as in other contexts of mass violence, where disappearance has been used as a strategy of social and political control. In English, evidence is often used as an uncountable noun. As Diane M. Nelson (2015) has argued in her work on death and life after the Guatemalan genocide, the mathematics of disappearance and the politics of counting are significant arenas of contestation.

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2
Inside the climatic cube: the ideology of preservation

Pablo Martínez

Since 2019, multiple local, national and supranational governments across the globe have declared a climate emergency. At the time of writing, one billion citizens are ruled by people who are more or less aware of the devastating effects of a system that ignores the planet's material limits. So, we know that our house is on fire, but those in charge still aren't doing enough to put out the flames: the fire rages on, and all life on Earth is in peril. It would seem, then, that forecasts, data and facts are not enough to change policies, let alone habits. The preservation of the planet as we know it is being sacrificed by the imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen, 2021): comfort and unbridled freedom of consumption – enjoyed by a tiny part of the planet's population – are taking precedence over the common interests of all living beings.

The materiality of the museum, its participation in petroculture (Wilson et al., 2017) and the key role it plays in modern forms of imagination, as well as in the distribution of the sensible (Rancière), have become more evident in the light of these recent events. It's perhaps time for the museum – a place that preserves the past to construct new possible futures – to take a stand and commit to the conservation of the planet, as demanded by the high-profile climate protest actions that have rocked the museum world of late. This is a very broad topic, but here I would like to focus on museum conservation policies and the ideology of preservation, as well as the museum's relationship to temporality that needs to be, at least, reconsidered.

This chapter borrows its title from Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, a canonical work of curatorial studies that was originally published in 1976 as a series of articles

in *Artforum*. Here, I claim that O'Doherty overlooked a key aspect of the issue: he did not recognise that one of the main ideological foundations of the white cube is its climate-controlled condition, whereby a supposedly neutral space is formed in which both temperature and time must stand still. This condition is both aesthetic and ideological, yet the museum's visitors – including O'Doherty, it would seem – remain unaware of the artificial climate being contrived all around them.

At the start of his essay, O'Doherty refers to the museum's condition of eternity and he alludes to the conception of space within ancient Egyptian funerary chambers in exclusively idealistic terms (2000: 8), without relating it to the material conservation of art. As it happens, the process of embalming pharaohs for eternity is not so different to some of the techniques used in museums, from dissecting animals to stabilising pigments in paintings. As Didier Maleuvre has pointed out, in the wonder world of the *Kunstkammer* (that is, before the modern, enlightened separation of art and natural sciences), art and taxidermy used to coexist, and for the French author, this was a possible sign of the same origin of the modern museum, that is, the 'domination of nature by imitation of nature' (Maleuvre, 1999: 214). In my interest to think of other relations between art and nature, I seek not to discredit O'Doherty's reading of the white cube in the (dematerialised) Western idealist tradition, since I agree with him insomuch that it is 'like Plato's vision of a higher metaphysical realm where form, shiningly attenuated and abstract like mathematics, is utterly disconnected from the life of human experience here below' (O'Doherty, 2000: 11). Rather, I hope to add further layers onto O'Doherty's reading of the modern museum space by reflecting on themes including preservation as part of petromodernist ideology, materiality and autonomy, in connection with various artworks made from cubes. Some of these cubes highlight the infrastructure needed to ensure the climatic neutrality of museum galleries; some show the cracks of the contemporary exhibition system based on global mobility; some introduce new concepts of preservation, more akin to the feminist ideas of care, by embracing loss and paying attention to the matter of the object and its context. In short, these are artworks that, rather than performing autonomy, stability and durability, take into consideration the interdependence of all life forms, along with the instability of matter and its decay.

The ideology of preservation

The second law of thermodynamics was developed in the nineteenth century, as was the universe's condition of entropy. In the very same century,

the modern form of the museum was conceived as a place where objects and things could be preserved in perpetuity. This coincidence might well be the reason why the contemporary museum is based on a paradox: it preserves the materiality of its (necessarily perishable) traces while at the same time seeking to erase their material condition. Essentially, in the modern museum, the material vibration of physical artworks is occluded since they are not allowed to obey the laws of physics. This erasure must be understood in ideological terms: in the museum, rather than appreciating matter's inherent transformation and degradation, its possible stability and durability are constantly prioritised instead – everything must be box-fresh and unspoilt. Moreover, objects are displayed for what they represent rather than for what they are; the tangible material condition of the art is denied in favour of focusing on the meaning of the objects, the experience they provoke and the knowledge they activate. Thus, the vitalism of matter itself – which Jane Bennett (2022: 242) describes as 'vibrant, vital, energetic, lively, moving, vibratory, evanescent and efflorescent' – is quashed, censored and revoked.

The museum of today, as an alien cube, gravitates in a different climatic universe and is frozen in time. Each thing that enters a collection activates a whole conservation protocol, the main function of which is to stop the clock, halt the matter's deterioration and, therefore, prevent any loss of value (in all senses of the word). The modern museum, then, is designed as a place for preserving the past, where some expressions of human creativity are chosen to be kept for eternity. It is the place, furthermore, for preserving the memory of all that which capitalism and extractive practices, if left to their own devices, would drive to extinction – from animals to artisan production, from ritual masks to farming tools.

Without the strictly controlled climatic conditions, the material of the museums' objects would crumble, as would modernity itself. The artefacts, artworks, specimens or human remains that museums exhibit and (above all) conserve – at MoMA, less than 1 per cent of their whole collection is on display at any given time – are at the service of a discourse that reflects particular ideas of progress, evolution and development, all closely tied in with the colonial project (Bennett, 2004). Many museums still present the evolution of the human species or the history of art as a succession of styles, alongside the aforementioned erasure of works' material condition for the sake of discourse. Essentially, the modern notion of conservation is all about a permanent struggle against time, and the museum, as a place for accumulation, is understood as a machine that must keep producing the right conditions for exhibiting its belongings.

Since the nineteenth century, museums have demonstrated the colonial state's power in terms of collecting, accumulating and displaying things and beings, and this endeavour, in turn, has shaped the modern petro-patriarchal and capitalist world, with its disciplines and categories:

> Modern categories such as object, subject, authenticity, originality, or chronologies, cannot survive au naturel. They require creating and maintaining a very specific kind of environment, filled with a very specific form of light, a very specific type of air, and a very specific range of temperature and humidity. Because, as it turns out, modernity only runs within a very specific environment. (Domínguez Rubio, 2020: 23)

In the case of art, the proposed erasure of materiality first came about with the modern configuration of the white cube, where 'the work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself' (O'Doherty, 2000: 14). Art is presented in a singular space, so it can 'take on its own life' (2000: 15) as part of the museum's self-created ceremony. Crucially, this space has specific thermal conditions and it hides away all forms of labour in a paradoxical operation of absolute visibility (it inverts the panopticon, as Tony Bennett (2004) put it): here, the artwork – which, historically, only the ruling classes could access – is displayed to the public on the proviso that all the underlying exploitation, implicit in the institution's very existence, be concealed. Museums work to cover up the provenance of these objects, as well as how they were produced, their (illegitimate) forms of acquisition and their actual market value.

Karl Marx noticed this phenomenon in his visit to London's Great Exhibition of 1851, held at the newly built Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. As he strolled among the many prodigious displays of science, art and industry, all exhibited within the clarity of that vast greenhouse, he had a revelation about the commodity's fetishistic nature: 'With this exhibition, the bourgeoisie of the world has erected in the modern Rome its Pantheon, where, with self-satisfied pride, it exhibits the gods which it has made for itself' (Hetherington, 2014: 14). In that show, everything revolved around the world of work, but the labour itself was swept under the carpet: it was the first exhibition of its kind to omit the productive processes in favour of showing only the machinery and merchandise. It was, as well, a powerful space to propagate the ideology of progress as something in direct correlation with technology and the latest machinery. As Jaime Vindel (2022: 46) so deftly points out, 'the (fossil) fetishism

of commodities is a culture of transparencies, bodies and reflections, whose blind spot is colonial ecological extractivism'.

The ideas about art's autonomy, which underpin the modern notion of the museum, are closely linked with a disconnection from time. Not only does the museum preserve works, but it also constructs the image of an 'eternity' where the 'ungrubby surfaces [of art] are untouched by time and its vicissitudes' (O'Doherty, 2000: 15). In the historical museum, periodisation exists (it is central to many museums and their discourses associated with progress) but 'there is no time' (2000: 15). To be more precise, the museum evades the passage of time, while, paradoxically, through restoration, it seeks to construct a specific image of the past.

Fernando Domínguez Rubio (2020: 79) calls this manoeuvre 'the mimeographic labour of maintenance and repair' of an artwork, which is not exactly restoring the original object but rather 'creating a new working image' of it. This can be seen in the restoration of artworks where not all the cracks are removed or not all of the patina is completely cleaned, so they do not look brand new (as happens with the restoration of old films). Amending figures in paintings, for example, is about the museum's longed-for construction of a particular image of the past, more so than any overarching desire for preservation per se. And, if we also accept the idea that climatic conditions, as we shall see below, are not essential for proper conservation, then we can conclude that restoration – as understood in the West, since the nineteenth century – is as ideological as it is aesthetic.

The autonomy of the climatic cube

Given museums' urge to generate a dematerialised experience, the bodies of visitors are always a nuisance. They pose a huge threat to the art, not only in terms of possible accidents or theft, but also because the human body – that great walking repository of bacteria, sweat and germs – can impair both the conservation of matter and the stable climatic conditions of the museum.

Many of the artworks in the early museums had previously hung in palaces and churches for centuries. When the museums were opened to the general public, novel conservation challenges began to emerge. For the first time, people and art were being condensed in the same unconditioned space, leading to material repercussions. Furthermore, without ventilation systems, the works were exposed to the pollution of coal-powered cities. In nineteenth-century London, for example, the

soot-laden air began to spoil the paintings at the National Gallery, to the extent that the museum was forced to close once a year in order to clean the canvases (MacGregor, 1995: 41; Domínguez Rubio, 2020: 230). When the windows were shut, though, the unbearable stench of the crowds would fill the air instead. The debate was eventually settled in Parliament: rather than moving the museum somewhere outside the city centre, such as Kensington – that is, away from the smoke, but also away from its audience, who had got used to having their favourite paintings on their doorstep – it was decided that the right of citizens to enjoy the museum should be given precedence instead. As one parliamentarian put it, keeping the National Gallery open was a risk worth taking because art was vital for the experience of people in the city: if a painting were completely spoilt, it would not be in vain but rather 'like the soldier who dies in combat defending his country' (MacGregor, 1995: 42).

As a result of this situation, museums became the first large public spaces to incorporate ventilation systems. Technological advances in the twentieth century meant that the indoor climate could become a commodity to be 'fabricated, standardised, replicated and transported at will' (Domínguez Rubio, 2020: 163). Climate-control standards for exhibition spaces were agreed upon in the 1940s, in response to the growing industry of temporary exhibitions and the necessary loaning and transporting policies for artworks. This was led, to some extent, by American post-war cultural policy that felt a 'missionary' responsibility for 'promoting an understanding of what it regards as the most vital art being produced in our time' (The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art, 1954: 5), and was partly funded by oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller and his Rockefeller Foundation. In its first 20 years, MoMA sent around 7,400 works to over 3,700 public and private organisations in America and 37 other countries (1954: 3).

The 'magic numbers' (Michalski, 2007: 9) were 60°F and 60 per cent relative humidity, as defined by Ian Rawlins – the official physicist of London's National Gallery – in 1942; these figures would remain the standard for the climatic conditions in museums for several decades. Rawlins acknowledged the impossibility of establishing a minimum temperature for the maintenance of a building and that many materials behaved well in different thermal contexts, as long as the variations in temperature and relative humidity were stable. Nevertheless, in his famous and influential article on museum conservation, he stated that, 'coincidentally', the figures he recommended were 'easy to remember'. Rawlins' handy mnemonic, combined with the energy abundance of the capital of the empire during the post-war boom – due to the cheapest gas

and oil in history – helped define the modern 'ideology of preservation', based on blind faith in technology, standardisation and universality.

The rigidity of these preservation conditions, prescribed from the damp, grey capital of the British Empire, has historically excluded institutions in the Global South from the network of art loans, since museums located in those geographies have often failed to meet the imposed specifications. Seen this way, the decolonisation of the museum would involve not only revising its collections but also challenging the way in which its founding as an autonomous space was based on the import of raw materials and energy from other territories, combined, in turn, with the export of waste and polluting elements to those same territories whose material heritage was also plundered under the pretext of their 'inability' to preserve it.

These material conditions, imposed by the museums of the Global North, were the object of thinly veiled criticisms at the *Santiago Round Table* (1972) in Chile, which was still under the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende at the time. The event was a turning point in the critique of the colonial notion of the museum expressed in the first definition of the International Council of Museums (1958) (Adotevi, 1992 [1971]), and there was intense debate on the social role of the museum. The declaration that came out of the meeting, which paid particular attention to Latin America, defined a new 'integral museum', close to its communities and at the 'service of society'. It also discouraged 'the use of expensive and sophisticated techniques and materials' that would lead to 'a trend of wastefulness alien to our Latin American reality'. These costly techniques, like refrigeration and other sophisticated conservation technology, were far removed from the unprecedented transformative movement that swept across the globe in the decade following the Santiago declaration. Hundreds of new museums opened, responding to this transformative concern via the emergence of new museology, critical museology, social museology, participatory museology, ecomuseology or the museology of liberation (Hernández, 2019: 264; Mellado and Brulon Soares, 2022).

That the modern museum is based on the idea of preservation and has a powerful climatic condition seems to have been understood very early on by the conceptualist artist Hans Haacke in works like *Recording of Climate in Art Exhibition* (1969), which consisted of a thermograph, a barograph and a hydrograph. With these instruments, Haacke was proposing a kind of readymade, which would show, in real time, the climatic conditions inside the exhibition room. In a way, Haacke – the pioneering conceptualist of the so-called institutional critique, a practice interested in a 'critique of the ideological and representative social function(s)' of

artistic institutions (Sheikh, 2006) – could see better than O'Doherty that the invisible air-conditioning systems were fundamental to the museum experience and central to its functioning. Haacke's readymades, unlike those of Marcel Duchamp, were stripped of any fetishistic quality and instead took on an operational function. He made the invisible visible: he pulled back the curtain that covered up what really happens inside the white cube, a space apparently independent of its own infrastructure and reliant on air-conditioning systems, whereby a surface-level environment of dazzling, clinical 'purity' conceals a multitude of not-so-salubrious actions.

Haacke made a similar point, albeit less literally, in the previous *Condensation Cube* (1965), part of a series that the artist began to call, from 1966 onwards, 'real time system' works. This piece consists of a hermetically sealed transparent plexiglass box with roughly two centimetres of water inside. It relates to the artist's interest in the idea of process itself and is linked with the general systems theory developed by Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who described systems as a set of interacting elements and proposed that the laws of thermodynamics might be applied to closed systems, but not necessarily to all open systems. The temperature inside Haacke's cube is always higher than the temperature outside of it because of the effects of the light and other determining factors and this difference makes the water condense into droplets which then stick to the cube's transparent surface. In a space which has 100 per cent relative humidity, as inside Haacke's cube, the water vapour in the air condenses at a temperature of 18.3°C, the museum's usual temperature. In this particular case, the 'conservation' conditions are imperative to the correct functioning of the piece, the material of which, plexiglass, is the same as that of many museum display cabinets. The cube is constantly functioning and transforming, in a permanent motion driven by the vapour and water droplets that always condense in a different way: 'It was the behaviour of a meteorological system that determined the appearance', as the artist himself put it (see Haacke, 2016 [1971]: 48–61).

With this cube, Haacke shines a spotlight on the sustainability of the museums' systems for preserving art and puts them to the test, since the very materiality of this particular work is utterly contingent on how it is stored. The art system demands certain climatic conditions, which are not only entirely artificial but also (and paradoxically) environmentally harmful and ecologically unsustainable: conservation in the museum is detached from the conservation of the planet or so it would seem. Furthermore, when there are people in the exhibition room, Haacke's transparent box reacts to the heat of their bodies, showing that

the museum as we know it today, in all its hyper-purity, whiteness and fixed temperature, is 'tainted' by the arrival of warm-bodied visitors who alter the autonomy of the artistic space. This confirms, again, that the museum world is now set up this way, based on its interior climate, to form an autonomous, parallel space: it is somewhere timeless, supposedly neutral and constant, far removed from the smelly, stuffy, contaminated galleries of the early nineteenth century.

The cracked cube: traces of forced labour, mobility and value

> The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself. This gives the space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values. Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of aesthetics. (O'Doherty, 2000: 145)

In this paragraph, O'Doherty seems to have overlooked two substantial differences with the other spaces he mentions. Firstly, in churches, courtrooms and laboratories, the temperature does not *define* the space, and secondly, the work of the people is necessarily visible there: such places simply cannot function without the overt, active presence of their workers. And so, in this hiding-away of the museum's operation and conservation, the subjects who create its material state – essentially, those who move, restore or clean – also get hidden. The entire labour and chemical infrastructure that maintains the museum's image of stability is kept out of sight of visitors.

In this ideological peekaboo of showing and hiding, of producing perfect worlds while outsourcing and concealing the impacts and waste produced, the museum stands as a vast machine for erasing infrastructure. Yet the underlying labour plays a determining role in the configuration of material and cultural relations at different scales (Kinder and Stepanik, 2020: 3). This has been the case ever since the origins of museums and universal exhibitions, to such an extent, as noted above, that it inspired Marx to formulate his ideas about the fetishistic nature of the commodity. The ideology of the climate-controlled white cube is the way it so skilfully hides the entire museum's infrastructure: generally speaking, we know nothing about the museum's energy expenditure or

insurance costs, its engineering projections or the imagination of which the modern museum is a product.

In the series *FedEx* (2007–), British artist Walead Beshty shows part of the invisible labour of care and transportation that is central to the modern form of exhibition. He started the series by making boxes out of safety glass, in the same size as FedEx's standard boxes (Figure 2.1). In the exhibition room, both boxes – Beshty's box and the branded FedEx box – are exhibited together. During their many trips, the safety-glass boxes (which are both artwork and commodity, and objects normally

Figure 2.1 Walead Beshty. *FedEx© Kraft Box® 2005 FEDEX 330504 10/05 SSCC, Standard Overnight, New York–Ann Arbor trk#862382316109, May 10–11, 2009, Standard Overnight, Ann Arbor–Los Angeles trk#868274625680, July 9–10, 2009, International Priority, Los Angeles–London trk#793438866670, April 10–12, 2012, International Priority, London–Naples trk#812621789975, September 5–6, 2018*, 2008-laminated glass, FedEx shipping box, accrued FedEx shipping and tracking labels. 40.6 x 40.6 x 40.6 cm. 16 x 16 x 16 in. © Walead Beshty. Courtesy the artist, Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Thomas Dane Gallery.

used to protect precious things) would get damaged: their cracks were visible, as were the different marks of their origin/destination. Here, the work's form is unfixed: it is literally produced by its incorporation into a system of exhibition, commercialisation and distribution. Through the capacity of a company such as FedEx, which is able to record a delivery's trajectory, the work acquires its identity: the title of each box includes the different stop-offs on its itinerary. The work highlights how the general productive system 'ceaselessly produces forms that constitute a medium unto itself' (Bourriaud, 2011: 148). In these boxes, the artwork's cracks, like in old paintings, are materialised forms of time.

Beshty produces these boxes collectively, with unseen collaborators. The works are a visualisation of the inherent risk involved in transporting art around the world: they are vulnerable objects which resist being constantly moved. They raise an important question related to the art market, since value in the contemporary art world is strictly linked to visibility and participation in the system – whoever buys one of these boxes is aware that subjecting it to the traffic of contemporary art will lead to it getting broken. However, if the buyer is interested in increasing the work's value, it must partake in international exhibitions and thus accumulate, in its form and its title, the traces of its international success. The cracks (like in paintings such as the *Mona Lisa* or *Las Meninas*) show the precariousness that makes each of these boxes unique.

Beshty's works are inherently connected to risk, as is the case of many artworks that must tour to be seen and admired globally, either for their subsequent release to the market or in order to increase the symbolic value of the museum to which they belong. Whoever owns this work knows this contradiction: to exist, the work needs to be put at risk, in permanent danger of its own destruction. Given these facts, it is worth thinking about whether the modern system is really concerned with preserving artworks or whether it is more about preserving the system itself. That is, these artworks circulate as commodities, as fetishes, as objects of diplomacy and not only at the service of capitalist liberal democracies – the same cycle was also ongoing in the socialist bloc during the Cold War (Buck-Morss, 2002).

In the case of Beshty's *FedEx Copper Box* series (2009–), the work of the handlers is visible on the very material of the piece – these traces *are* the piece (Figure 2.2). The copper looks dirty and the exposure of the material to the workers' sweat poses a challenge to the preservation of the artwork, making it clear that 'a museum is not a collection of objects but a collection of slowly unfolding disasters' (Domínguez Rubio, 2020: 6). The fingerprints on the copper reveal, as well, how the art displayed in the fictional space of the white cube is the result of a set of work

Figure 2.2 Walead Beshty. *24-inch Copper (FedEx© Large Kraft Box 2005 FEDEX 330510), International Priority, Los Angeles–Ecatepec trk#793425792928, April 8–9, 2010, International Priority, Mexico City–London trk#857840146641, Oct 13–15, 2010, International Priority, London–Busan, trk#138787127040, April 20–29, 2021*, polished copper and accrued FedEx tracking and shipping labels. 61 x 61 x 61 cm. 24 x 24 x 24 in. © Walead Beshty. Courtesy the artist, Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Thomas Dane Gallery.

relations – erasing the traces of labour is a fundamental part of the fetishistic condition of commodity – while the transport company's stickers, on the surface of the box, emphasise the link between collecting art and transporting it. This relation has been fundamental since the very beginning of the idea of collecting (from the transportation of plundered trophies from the conquered lands of the Roman Empire to the shipping of the finest works of art on the international art market), but it exploded in the 1990s, amid what we can consider the biennialisation of the art world.

In recent decades, mobility has become intrinsically related to contemporary art, as seen in *trans_actions: The Accelerated Art World 1989–09* (2011), by Stewart Smith, Robert Gerard Pietrusko and Bernd

Linterman. This piece was an immersive, panoramic projection about the evolution of the art world amid the expansion of neoliberalism around the planet. Using data-visualisation technology, it showed the dramatic increase in the number of biennials and art fairs following the Cold War: from six biennials in the 1980s, the number rose to more than 90 in the 2000s. The data was not limited to the number of art events, since it also considered other indicators, such as economic growth by country and art imports. A central part of the installation was devoted to showing the flow of curators and artists, travelling from one biennial to another, revealing the mobility of these agents of the cultural economy and showing what Arjun Appadurai (1996) called the 'global cultural flows'. In the installation, these biennials appeared not as mere events of the culture of the spectacle but rather as true transnational contact zones: in the words of Hans Belting, one of the exhibition's curators, they reflected a world made up of a multiplicity of worlds.

In the same installation there were quotations from some of the curators of the new global art economy, such as Elena Filipovic: 'Biennials have become, in the span of a few decades, one of the most vital and visible sites for contemporary art and the production, distribution and generation of public discourse around it.' These ideas of celebrating globalisation contrasted with other political movements of the 1990s – from the Zapatistas to the emergence of the anti-globalisation movement in Seattle in 1999 – that criticised the abuses of the neoliberal form of capitalism on the commons, territories and bodies. We could safely say that, in the ensuing decades, art fed into the idea that creativity and mobility were inextricably bound to the idea of progress and the cultural class duly accepted the neoliberal postulate of total mobilisation. However, *trans_actions* didn't show the underlying infrastructural requirements and impacts of this celebration of movement, flowing and cultural exchange, including roads and airports, cars and fossil fuels. Until recently (and still not for everybody), the ecological consequences of transport infrastructure have been one of the most enduring (and inexplicable) blind spots of modern social thought (see John Urry), and the museum system still cannot fathom a future beyond this resource-hungry model of movement. The temporality of the biennial, its intensity and its commitment to the mobility of artists, curators and visitors, might seem opposed to the nature of the museum. However, the museum's insatiable desire for production and accumulation of value has been scuppered by the biennials' rootlessness. Both biennials and museums are not only a reflection of petroculture, but they are also one of its most powerful agents because they operate on the levels of sensibility, habits and ways of life.

The *Timefall* box: curated decay

In his seminal essay *The Climate of History: Four Theses*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) raises an issue that needs to infiltrate the museum's language, policies and practices. As the vast and secular challenge of climate change blurs any previous distinction between natural history and human history, Chakrabarty asks, 'how does the crisis of climate change appeal to our sense of human universals while challenging at the same time our capacity for historical understanding?' (Chakrabarty, 2009: 201). With this in mind, how can we reorient museums' preservation policies? Should we continue with the disciplinary divisions that modernity put in place to organise (and control) bodies, peoples, knowledges and things? And what would happen if, instead of trying to stop time in its tracks, the museum became a place for showing the true vitality of matter? What would the ecological consequences of this radical shift be, in which human creations were placed on a par with other non-human interventions? And would it be possible to do so without falling into apocalyptic narratives that dispossess human communities of agency in the face of climate change? These issues are under debate in the field of architectural or industrial heritage conservation, but how can we bring them into the museum, the quintessential institution of preservation?

Some of these issues appear in the three boxes that comprise Karlos Gil's *Timefall* (2023) (Figure 2.3), in which a range of different matter

Figure 2.3 Karlos Gil, *Timefall*. Courtesy of the artist.

undergoes distinct forms of accelerated deterioration (specifically oxidation, erosion and colour mutation). The three boxes, which look like aquariums containing mini sci-fi worlds, show the acceleration of the processes of decay that we are currently living through, and they speak to the global condition of entropy. In the words of the artist, the main idea behind *Timefall* is 'to compose sensorial encounters with the nature of time through a study of how natural and artificial bodies operate, how media affect memory and the relationship between life and death' (Gil, 2023: 222). The different temporalities to which he subjects matter in these 'aquariums' give rise to new ways of understanding time, beyond any formula that thinks of temporality as unique and its effect on matter as linear. Gil showcases near futures which, as Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2019: 41) note, have turned out to be not just 'unpredictable, but also unimaginable outside of the framework of science fiction or messianic scatologies'.

With these boxes, Gil's proposal breaks down the idea of preservation that lies at the heart of the museum, bringing us closer to what DeSilvey has defined as 'curated decay', whereby she invites us to explore alternatives to the modern preservation paradigm. DeSilvey (2017: 179) proposes a distinction between those practices of care that are imposed on the subject and respond to a rigid, predefined agenda, and those practices based on the relationship with that which is to be cared for. These relationships, which are based on the vulnerability and finiteness of human life, also recognise the same qualities in non-human beings and things.

Under this framework, a central question is raised: what would happen if museums – which, in recent decades, have welcomed into their auditoriums the thinking of such authors as Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway and Jane Bennett – began to treat their collections from the standpoint of recognising non-human agents not just as objects but as relevant players in the configuration of the world? We can begin new strategies that offer care, without sticking to rigid ideas of conservation – the kind of care that attends to processes of transforming matter because 'attending to processes of decay and disintegration can be as productive of heritage values as acts of saving and securing, but these may be different values than we are used to identifying with heritage practices' (DeSilvey, 2017: 184). This would undoubtedly call into question the notions of value and accumulation, the founding principles of the modern museum.

The manifestation of decay in Gil's boxes also shows us the obsolescence of historical time and the idealised time of the museum (Aguirre, 2023). The transformation of humans, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's words (2009), from mere biological agents to a geological force, has its repercussions, namely 'the intrusion of Gaia into the human world, which gives

the Earth system the threatening form of a historical subject, a political agent, a moral person' (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, 2019: 43). The ecological crisis has further exploded historical temporalities to show us the gaze of geological time, which expands beyond human existence on the planet, both into the past and the future, but which also shows a dilemma in which the future is altering the present. Our relationship with the future has become much more immediate. In these times of calculating emissions and the ongoing forecasts of the impact they might have, each of our actions has future consequences in the form of collapses, extinctions, rising temperatures and the acidification of soils and waters. As Jussi Parikka (2023: 135) puts it:

> All of these events may to some extent defy traditional notions of history and instil in us the necessity of returning to the terminologies of a natural history that addresses geological periods and durations without humans. This is not in order to naturalise the contemporary cultural or economic situations but to demonstrate how the cultural politics of time is also prescribed through its relations with the non-human. … Cultural heritage, cultural memory, and social memory are increasingly debated in relation to the planetary, the geological, and the Anthropocene – scenarios involving chemical, geological, and biological processes that displace the concepts and frameworks that are typically associated with 'the social'.

The current ecological crisis is above all a danger for human and other-than-human life, but it is also a civilisational crisis which, together with the shaking up of some of the foundations of Westernised modernity, challenges the logics of its institutions. In the case of the museum, as an institution that has been at the service of the disciplinary division over the last two centuries, as well as the imperialist interests of fossil capitalism, the challenge is multiple: it entails both its collection policies and the modern conception of preservation, as well as the forms of exhibition. If we accept that one of the tenets of the museum was to dominate nature and expel it, to keep it at a distance, then the current crisis is demanding a museum that participates not only in the production of history and the preservation of material culture from the past but also in the preservation of life right now. This is not a call to change the themes of the programmes and exhibitions: more than anything, it is about changing the ways of doing, the structures and the episteme of the museum as an institution.

The challenge now goes further than the objects exhibited, the institutional narratives and the curatorial discourses: it also involves

greater democratisation of spaces and a connection with temporalities other than those of modernity and its categories. In this sense, the non-human agents that operate in the field of culture must take part in new compositions of time, matter and decay so that objects are not limited to their historical or contextual relationship and so that they are not stripped of their semiotics. They must be extracted from the white cube and its infrastructural conditions, that is, its ways of exhibiting and its climatic conditions. Moreover, there must be an acceptance of times that go beyond evolutionary time, and entropy must be acknowledged as something more than a metaphorical evocation of some creations, but rather as one of the fundamental conditions of matter in the universe. Our relationship with matter in the museum is fundamental if we, as cultural producers, want to continue taking part in the debates about other possible pasts and, above all, about other possible futures. Beyond any approach based on superficial strategies of greenwashing or whitening the museum as a cube, the institution should be aware of what is behind its ideology of preservation. It must, therefore, ask radical questions of itself – such as what it is willing to preserve and what should be left to perish (see Fuentes in this volume) – as a vital operation to reconnect with the living world. A museum for earthlings that acknowledges and states the fact that we are simply vibrant matter.

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3

Buddhism, death and thermodynamics: decentring the language of conservation expertise

Ayesha Fuentes

In 2023, I was in Bhutan to collaborate on the development of local collections care and risk management policies for their small consortium of national museums, each established after 1968. Very few of the staff at these institutions have had formal training in conservation or studied museum practice as a profession, though many of them have years of experience in their posts. As we were walking through the galleries in one of these museums, a colleague was sharing their feelings with me about the objects in their care and remarked that when they looked at them, they sometimes had the feeling of being in an intensive care unit in a hospital. I was surprised to hear them say this because – despite the differences in our educational backgrounds, native languages and access to global resources – as an object conservator, I often feel the same way.

My formal education and current position as a researcher in conservation are part of the institutional infrastructure for heritage preservation as a profession: I have a graduate degree in my conservation specialisation of archaeological and ethnographic materials, I work in a university collection built on a global legacy, and I have years of experience in cultural institutions across the US and UK. Throughout my training, it has been the use of what were vaguely referred to as 'scientific methodologies' – observation, research, documentation, empirical study and/or the use of analytical instrumentation in a controlled, primarily institutional context – that distinguishes my formal training from other types of expertise in the care of cultural objects. Complementary to this, a

significant amount of my learning, teaching and professional experience has been among Buddhist communities of the Himalayas, and South and Southeast Asia. Even as a non-practitioner, this has expanded my perspective on the nature of conservation expertise, its pedagogy and the ways in which systems of material care rely on stakeholder engagement and the capacity of its practitioners to communicate their goals and create appropriate methods for different settings.

Using examples drawn from my own journey of unlearning, this chapter reflects on the ways in which the established standards and practices for conservation have been conditioned by specific models of knowledge production, professionalisation and expectations about change over time, including Eurocentric narratives about the history of science and institutional biases in the ways cultural objects are valued.

Museums, stasis and a Eurocentric paradigm for material care

At present, the dominant narrative for the origins of museums and archives – and conservation standards within them – often resonates with a period of social, cultural, economic and intellectual expansion of Europe between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Through the study of art history and anthropology, for example, I was taught that current museum practice is related to a systematic approach to the study of material culture first adopted by private (European) collectors in their cabinets of curiosity and that conservation as a profession is the result of combining scientific methods of documentation, classification and analysis with the application or appreciation of material skill.[1] As a specialist working with global traditions of object-based knowledge production, I have come to see this as a relatively under-examined historiographical representation of museums and the practice of material care, one that describes them as European inventions which have been exported, adopted, refined and rejected by every other cultural group with whom they have come into contact between approximately the seventeenth century and the present. And yet alternative histories of collecting, curating and maintenance are abundant. In my own work, for example, I have come to refer to the Buddhist scholar Xuanzang (1996: 602–664), who described the public display, circulation and valorisation of objects as relics across the 'western regions' of South Asia at sites as old as the third century BCE, as well as the many examples of mending and repair found in global material heritage, including highly refined technical traditions

of repair, reuse and reconstruction like the well-known Japanese *kintsugi*.[2] None of this is to suggest that conservation was invented outside Europe; rather, it aims to complicate the notion that expertise in the material care of cultural objects was ever the exclusive innovation of any one group. It is, therefore, not necessarily fixing or even maintaining objects that is a uniquely Eurocentric tradition of skill and knowledge production but rather, apparently, the presumption that this type of human activity should be universally standardised as a professional qualification.

At present, conservation is supported by the institutions that employ it in the care of material heritage – often museums, archives, governmental entities or private collectors – and the mechanisms of its pedagogy include formal graduate training programmes, apprenticeship, accreditation schemes and professional organisations for continued development. Standards have been quick to evolve: following its emergence in the early twentieth century and primarily in museums in Europe and North America, conservation was quick to establish itself as a formal profession within a few decades through primarily English-language networks like the International Institute for the Conservation of Museum Objects (later, International Institute for Conservation), founded in 1950. After the 1980s – with the introduction of legislation like the North American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the United States and the Burra Charter in Australia (1992) – the profession became increasingly sensitive to the colonial legacy of its supporting institutions and, as a result, more aware of its responsibilities as a global network engaged with a vast diversity of stakeholders, including originating communities, educators, living artists, craftspeople, donors and governing bodies.[3]

Yet current best practices continue to reinforce certain social and economic biases in the expectation of supporting institutions and conservation practitioners within them, often reinforcing a proprietary attitude that values material longevity and resilience within a collection (Beltrame, 2023). This can be seen in certain assumptions about material change over time and our professional capacity to articulate it. For example, the brief section on conservation in the 2017 International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics states that:

> The museum should carefully monitor the condition of collections to determine when an object or specimen may require conservation-restoration work and the services of a qualified conservator-restorer. *The principal goal should be the stabilisation of the object or specimen.* All conservation procedures should be documented and

> as reversible as possible, and all alterations should be clearly distinguishable from the original specimen or object. (ICOM, 2017, emphasis added by author)

Here, the priority is placed on stability, documentation and reversibility – and also professional qualifications – as desirable standards for recognised conservators within a global network of museum practitioners. Though relatively clear, this articulation of conservation's purpose nevertheless provokes a range of ethical considerations, including whether all forms of material heritage are meant to be indefinitely preserved and how one is qualified to decide this.[4] It also raises questions of how 'stability' can be articulated or established. In a Eurocentric tradition of empirical or scientific methodologies, one might propose to measure it through chemical or thermodynamic stability, what can be defined as the least energetic state of a system and nearly impossible to achieve at the macroscopic level of most cultural sites or objects (Goldstein and Goldstein, 1995: 193–211). Nevertheless, discussions of conservation ethics are generally limited to what Laurajane Smith terms 'authorised heritage discourses' that benefit proprietors by treating heritage materials as something to be 'mapped, studied, managed, preserved and/or conserved' rather than used to engage or destabilise various stakeholder identities, values, relationships or narratives (Smith, 2006: 3). As Henderson (2020) has critically examined elsewhere, within this institutional context conservators are often being encouraged to think of their work as benefitting unknown 'future generations' of collections users.

In its decades of existence, conservation as a profession has largely been supported by libraries, archives, fine arts collections and national museums in Europe and its settler-colonies, establishing itself as a discipline with robust bodies of technical scholarship on the preservation and deterioration of paper archives and manuscripts, bronze or stone sculptures, paintings in oil and acrylic, architectural decorations, metallic coins and ceramics. East Asian collections and their caretakers – especially for ceramics, textiles, wall paintings and pictorial arts – have also made significant contributions to recognised bodies of professional literature. Many of these materials enjoy relative chemical and physical stability in a museum or collections storage environment. Something like the sugar skull seen in Figure 3.1 and found in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, on the other hand, might be described by a conservator as exhibiting 'inherent vice', a term borrowed from commercial law and meant to suggest an object's tendency to deteriorate and become unstable over time without specialist support

like a controlled climate or periodic intervention by a trained conservator who might extend its physical life. This sugar skull's incapacity to meet the expectation of material longevity placed on heritage collections – because it is vulnerable to pests, benign neglect or fluctuations in moisture and temperature – is therefore framed as its own shortcoming and an institutional liability. For many conservators, the stability of material heritage is taken as its measure of 'fitness' in a way that one scholar of object permanence has remarked equates material fragility with 'moral failure' (Cooley, 2022: 385–386). And yet, for objects like the Mexican sugar skull seen in Figure 3.1 – as well as many of the fragments, baskets, masks, tools, storage containers, funerary objects and ritual offerings that I work with in archaeological and ethnographic collections – it is possible, if not likely, that long-term stability was neither an option nor a priority for the original fabricators or users.

Diverse concepts of material longevity and their relationship to heritage as a practice are not the only epistemological distinctions that I have been forced to reflect on in my work. For my doctoral research, I wrote on the use of human remains in Tibetan and Himalayan ritual objects (see Fuentes, 2021). Somewhat disappointingly, interactions with museum

Figure 3.1 Sugar skull, offering for Day of the Dead, collected in Mexico, 1898. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, available at https://collections.maa.cam.ac.uk/objects/489594.

colleagues regarding work with these objects – musical instruments, vessels and ornaments worn on the body and often made from human bone – are rarely about their present use or rich historical presence in the region's visual and material culture. Rather, the concerns of my fellow heritage professionals are almost always about human remains as the substrate and issues of consent or repatriation resulting from an awareness of legislation like NAGPRA. Every time I share my research in a non-practitioner setting, I explain that part of the function of these objects is to destabilise the perceived relationship between the self and its body, to provoke through proximity to death and to reinforce the value of the human body in facilitating liberation or enlightenment. Further, I describe how the Eurocentric (i.e. Cartesian) perspective of knowledge production, which governs global standards for museum practice and our management of human remains – even the idea that a specific human body is associated in linear perpetuity with a named individual or cultural group – can be understood as somewhat foreign to many of the users, designers and originators of these particular objects. Rather than engaging with the ways in which they are used or valued to access these diverse perspectives on the integrity of the body or understanding death as a tool of Buddhist pedagogy, my professional interactions are more often conditioned by the institutional context in which we work as museum professionals than the systems of thought and practice in which these objects originate.

It is at this point I would like to return to my conversation from the beginning of this chapter and the ways in which my colleague and I were expressing our roles as material caretakers; in the context of a museum collection, its display and storage, we both experienced a feeling of witnessing transition and an acute awareness of the inevitable passage of time. To each of us, it seemed the expectation of our role as a museum professional was more or less that we should do something about it and slow the processes of material change, or at least make them less obvious. In the same region, these conversations might take a very different form. Through my collaborations with a diversity of local caretakers, I have adopted a working vocabulary that includes many Buddhist concepts, rituals, objects, events and entities, as well as perspectives on creative production, curation, renewal, patronage and disposal. These perspectives are as distinct and robust as what I have learned in my formal training as a conservator. The second part of this chapter will more closely examine thermodynamic concepts of entropy, pedagogy and material change over time as some of these multifaceted concepts.

This expanded vocabulary is significant to our specific moment in the practice of conservation – and in the institutions that support it – where an increasing emphasis on incorporating global perspectives, sustainability and collaborative practices of care has made it evident that shared vocabularies, goals and decision-making processes are needed for successful stakeholder engagement with a broad diversity of groups, something Fekrsanati and Marçal (2022) have discussed as an initiative that would help establish parity and epistemological plurality between institutions and the communities that support them. As the rest of this chapter will explore, reconsidering how conservation expresses itself might invite new forms of participation while cultivating a broader awareness of our work as a field of expertise and platform for knowledge exchange. At the same time, as the anthropologist E. Summerson Carr has suggested, expertise is only as effective as how it communicates within its specific network of engagement (Carr, 2010). How, therefore, might conservation make better use of material change as an opportunity to cultivate shared goals or narratives? And how might we learn from or navigate the ethical dilemmas provoked by this to create new stories about the human science of material care? In the following section, I will reflect on these questions by looking at the interpretation of material change as both a scientific tradition and a theme in Buddhist teaching.

Science and storytelling in material care

Anthropologists have not only articulated the various ways in which expertise is socially 'enacted' through the language it uses, but they have also noted that it tends to formalise itself through ceremonies, institutions, certificates, titles and even garments (Carr, 2010: 24). For many conservation professionals, this might be a degree from a recognised training programme or even the white lab coat and single-use gloves that so often make up our working image in promotional photographs. The former almost always requires the study of chemistry and the latter adopts the protective wear of a chemical laboratory as a professional distinction – it is an understanding of 'science' that is meant to distinguish the conservator from other museum workers or material caretakers, including those practising 'traditional' methodologies outside the museum.[5]

Yet in Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), he describes the epistemological contexts by which the processes of

scientific enquiry have been conditioned, refined, refuted or accepted as changing 'paradigms' for knowledge production. Though his writing draws primarily from European examples, he nevertheless emphasises throughout his work that empirical methodologies and their historiography – in other words, the histories of science – are dynamic, complex and non-linear, and that their legitimisation is socially and culturally specific. He moreover writes that any attempt to articulate a universal or 'scientifically neutral' perspective on human learning should be treated with caution.

> Is sensory experience fixed and neutral? Are theories simply man-made interpretations of given data? The epistemological viewpoint that has most often guided Western philosophers for three centuries dictates an immediate and unequivocal, Yes! In the absence of a developed alternative, I find it impossible to relinquish entirely that viewpoint. Yet it no longer functions effectively, and the attempts to make it do so through the introduction of a neutral language of observations now seem to me hopeless. (Kuhn, 1996 [1962]: 126)

Here, Kuhn suggests that epistemological complexity and processual learning are inherent to even the 'hardest' of sciences. How, then, can conservation as a profession and form of cultural historical knowledge production attempt to position one form of science – that which wears a lab coat – as universally accessible or neutral?

Though this seems abstract, as someone who works in various social and cultural contexts, I find it has real consequences for the ways in which conservation is understood as a professional discipline. Skilled and respected colleagues have told me that they do not consider themselves conservators – nor are they paid as such – because, despite their years of experience and devotion to the collections in their care, they were not able to complete formal training or do not understand the use of scientific instruments, though they may not need them in their work. I have also seen donated supplies and equipment – microscopes, glassware, chemical reagents and environmental monitors – gathering dust in less affluent settings where local caretakers do not use them out of a perceived lack of training or the inability to repair or replace them. Rather than an open category for empirical learning, experimentation, documentation and the transmission of skills or knowledge on the care of cultural objects, conservation has been promoted as something that is accessible only to those who understand what it recognises as universal or epistemologically 'neutral' science.

It is at this point I would like to turn to Buddhism, thermodynamics and storytelling traditions in order to complicate science as a form of expertise. There is a story dating to the final centuries BCE of a previous birth of the Buddha as a prince named Mahāsattva, a young man who goes hunting and encounters a hungry tiger and her cubs. Unable to leave and search for food, the tiger family is in danger of starving but the prince – recognising that all life is interdependent in its origination and suffering in the cycle of rebirth – feeds himself to the animals, dies and is subsequently enlightened and liberated from rebirth. This tale is common enough in Buddhist communities to be illustrated in public buildings and repeated across a number of historical and geographical contexts. Its central lesson – that all beings are part of the same cycle of impermanent phenomena – is an oft-repeated message central to the teachings that came to be known after the second century BCE as Mahāyāna. This pedagogical tradition continued to expand over the subsequent two millennia through an emphasis on adaptability, innovation, and 'skilful means' (see Conze, 1968). Even before this, around the same time as the historical Buddha (c. sixth century BCE), the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* describes a teacher repeatedly explaining to his student that his own subtle nature and origin of being are shared with the world around him, using the phrase 'thou art that' (Skt. *tat tvam asi*), arguably the best-known and most debated single phrase from this body of literature.[6] These same axioms would be expressed again much later by European scientists of the nineteenth century in relation to the development of heat engines – for example, as the first law of thermodynamics or principle of conservation of energy, which holds that it can neither be created nor destroyed (see Goldstein and Goldstein, 1995).

However, if we consider these various sources as rivalling one another in terms of their intellectual accessibility, we can also acknowledge that for all these forms of knowledge production – both empirical and religious – the position of the observer is an essential condition for drawing conclusions about processes, events and change over time. Could it be that the lesson – that energy, or matter, cannot be created or destroyed, and that all things are related – is an essentially human observation of our relationship to the material world? And rather than science, could the source of our expertise as conservators and caretakers be our capacity to witness, document and articulate material change, and to support it as an opportunity for learning or liberation? Finally, rather than indefinite stability, how might professionals engage with material heritage in a more dynamic, epistemologically diverse and death-positive way, and what new pathways for practice or knowledge exchange might this reveal?

This is not intended to advocate for the wanton deterioration of material heritage but rather to encourage what all of us might learn by engaging with the way cultural objects experience change over time, how we articulate it, and how this shapes our relationship to both them and the experience of time itself. Even in Buddhist contexts, many forms of material heritage – though understood as impermanent – are valued as expressions of longevity within the community of practitioners, as examples of 'skilful means' or as platforms for learning and the accumulation of religious merit. Embracing material change in archives and collections may be an opportunity for learning and engagement and facilitate a more dynamic, sustainable, even circular relationship to heritage as a process, rather than as a 'thing' to be maintained, as suggested by Smith (2006: 3). Moreover, though impractical and abstract, it may be that this reconsideration of our professional and institutional relationship to time is exactly what is needed for our own well-being, as suggested by Sarah Staniforth's manifesto for 'slow conservation' (2010) as a strategy for environmental and social sustainability.

In my own practice, I find this has required a shift in the language I use to describe the condition of materials, which is otherwise most often articulated in terms of relative stability. Adopting the perspective of risk management has provided me with new vocabulary to address the ways in which different objects have experienced or will continue to experience change over time in different settings. In *Risk Assessment for Object Conservation* (1999), Jonathan Ashley-Smith explores the pejorative use of 'damage' or 'deterioration' to describe alterations in material heritage relative to the priorities of custodians rather than an object's capacity for longevity. He writes:

> Damage is usually associated with a loss of material, a loss of well-being or a loss of expectation. Not everything people consider as damage results in a change of value. Not every change in physical or chemical properties results in loss. The relationships between state, value and use [should be] examined in an attempt to arrive at definitions of damage. The most useful definition is related to changes in utility. (Ashley-Smith, 1999: 99)

Change, he writes, is not always damaging, and the role of a conservator might therefore be understood as defining, documenting and understanding the conditions of risk to the value or utility of an object. The expression of our expertise would then be our capacity to communicate this risk to the relevant stakeholders.

In addition to learning the value of religious storytelling as scientific pedagogy, there is one further way in which my work with Buddhist communities has destabilised my professional identity. Returning briefly to my doctoral research as an example, I found that any attachment to ego or sense of self quickly became a distraction when surrounded by human skulls being used as liturgical vessels. I came to understand the Buddhist analogy of the snake and the rope: once you've seen the rope (that all bodies are a vessel for enlightenment), you no longer fear the snake you thought it to be (that the ego and the body are one, and that death is an end rather than a transition). As I have learned new ways to express the work of conservation in terms of the value and utility of material heritage in different contexts, I have also come to reflect on the ways in which I project my expertise as the capacity to prevent or resist change over time. Do we identify with the longevity of the objects in our care? How often am I motivated by ego, rather than by the transmission of knowledge through the care of cultural objects?

It is at this point the reader may have noticed that I have made no mention of a coherent 'Western' approach or any such cultural historical qualification, and this is deliberate. Based on my own experience and that of other critical heritage researchers working between various social, cultural and linguistic settings (see Winter, 2014; Gao and Jones, 2020), there are often as many similarities as there are differences in the ways in which people engage with heritage sites or objects across these regions. Many of these are contingent on the perspectives, expectations and experience of individuals rather than – or in addition to – their geographical origins. Moreover, given the dependence of European observational methodologies on earlier, 'non-Western' traditions of empirical knowledge production – including other non-European religious communities (see, for example, Saliba, 2007) – it would not be accurate to equate 'science' with European empiricism after the seventeenth century. By relying on generalisations like 'Western/Eastern', 'scientific/traditional' and so on – many used in opposition to one another rather than defined within their own systems of technology and practice – we might obscure more than we learn about the dynamic interdependence of human learning, material care and evidence for their cultivation across space and time.

This chapter has suggested how the language of conservation expertise might be expanded, rather than translated, in order to engage a broader diversity of professionals and stakeholders in heritage processes of material care. By making connections between Buddhist pedagogy and the European study of thermodynamics, this work has proposed new pathways to explore the ethical and epistemological complexities of

heritage conservation as a global practice. Rather than relying on under-examined and/or Eurocentric narratives and vocabularies, this chapter is intended to introduce complexity and creativity as a critical engagement with different perspectives on time and their relation to material care.

Conclusion: material heritage and the right to decay

Returning once again to the death-bed analogy for archives and collections with which I opened this chapter, I would like to consider whether or not cultural objects – like bodies – have a right to experience time as instability, fragility or even death, and how this might be established, valued or enabled. Do they, in fact, have a right to be returned to the earth and its natural, inevitable processes of decay? Further, as a conservator, what language do I need to explore or facilitate this discussion across diverse contexts or groups of caretakers? Framed mainly by my own professional experiences, this work has suggested storytelling as well as multivalent concepts of well-being, compassion, liberation and our relationship to the material world through the experience of time as various pathways for communicating and navigating these ethical dilemmas.

While there is a growing minority of conservators, museum workers and other heritage professionals willing to explore end-of-life care for objects – through disposal, deaccessioning, restitution and creative reactivation – the overwhelming majority of our professional governance seems to continue supporting an attitude summarised by Ashley-Smith that while 'death is an inevitability for all humans … it need only be an academic concept for museum objects' (Ashley-Smith, 1999: 10). For many conservators and the institutions within which we work, a thermodynamically unrealistic expectation for stability – rather than value and utility – remains the dominant paradigm for articulating standards of material care. Therefore, if this chapter has introduced more questions than it has answered, it can be considered a success. Revising the language of our expertise will take collective effort, creativity and awareness, and it will need to relate somehow to the current institutions and pedagogies which support our expertise. This work may never be resolved, but that does not mean we must continue to rely on what no longer serves us as a global community of conservation practitioners.

In the form of an ending and as a reflection on time, our earthly context and the experience of self, I have included a text from one of my favourite Buddhist sites. At the top of a hill, there is a monastery with a

well-maintained collection of wall paintings and statues; at the near end of the forest path leading up to it, among birds, orchids and occasional monkeys, a cheerfully hand-painted red and blue sign reads:

> Have you ever on earth or in the heaven[s]
> Seen a being born who will not die,
> Or heard that such a thing has happened.
> Or even suspected that it might.
> Everything that is born is bound to die.

Notes

1. A recent edited volume on *Conserving Active Matter* (Miller and Kai, 2022) promises to engage with conservation as a human science, yet it is once again framed by the skills and interests of European antiquarians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, first through their valorisation of archaeological objects and later the circulation of global material culture facilitated by European colonial expansion and the development of public (imperial) cultural institutions like the Louvre and British Museum.
2. See Xuanzang (1996), *The Great Tang Dynasty of the Western Regions*. On recent interest in technical traditions of conservation in non-European settings, see for example the 2007 exhibition at Musée du Quai Branly '*Objets blessés: la réparation en Afrique*'.
3. For a critical engagement with the institutionalisation of heritage practices and its governing documents, see Smith (2006).
4. Those working with contemporary artists and time-based media are generally more engaged with conservation as a dynamic material process; see *Performance: The Ethics and Politics of Conservation and Care, Volume I* (Hölling et al., 2023). Note that at the time of writing, the ICOM Code of Ethics was under review.
5. The 2017 *Theatre of Conservation* at the University College London's Repair Café made satirical use of these distinctions in dress at a public event with a line of caution tape on the ground separating lab coat, glove-wearing conservators from 'unsuspecting', non-expert members of the public. 'When Heritage Mending Meets DIY Repair', *Conservation Lab Chat*, UCL Institute of Archaeology Conservation Team. Accessed 25 March 2024. https://uclconservation.wordpress.com/2017/12/08/when-heritage-mending-meets-diy-repair/. Thanks to Dean Sully for sharing this work at the Endangered Material Knowledge Programme's *Mending and Making: A Two-Day Workshop on the Role of Mending in Material Histories* at the Wellcome Collection, 25–26 January 2024.
6. This is part of the Vedic corpus that forms the foundation of brahmanical or, later, Hindu traditions. See *The Upaniṣads* (2003). On the interpretation of this phrase in particular, see 423n12.

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4

Film archives and energy: tracing heritage policies between land colonisation and collective agency

Alberto Berzosa

In recent decades, film studies have paid increasing attention to environmental issues, particularly themes arising from climate, ecological and energy crises. Under the umbrella of emerging disciplines such as energy humanities, which explicitly centre discussions on the political, economic and aesthetic roles of energy in modernity, most contributions focus on analysing specific stages of the film process, from production to audience viewing. This is reflected in studies examining the energy and resources required for filming, the production of film materials (celluloid, development chemicals, etc.) and certain viewing conditions closely linked to transportation models dependent on fossil fuel consumption, such as drive-in theatres or cinemas located in shopping malls on the outskirts of cities. This chapter is framed within what, in the absence of established categories, we might call energy film studies. It demonstrates that adopting a material approach to film archives shifts the focus of analysis to a different time and place. This new framework seeks to observe the specific metabolic exchanges between these archives – functioning as cultural, heritage and technological devices – and the environment. Ultimately, this text asks about the material connections that are involved when we unearth in order to gain space to build film archives and to maintain certain climatic conditions.

The chapter offers a perspective on the film archives located in the Iberian Peninsula. It is based on research conducted in four film archives of reference in Portugal and Spain, in particular interviews with directors or heads of recovery and conservation: Tiago Batista of Portugal's

Arquivo Nacional das Imagens em Movimento (ANIM);[1] Marian del Egido of the Centre for Conservation and Restoration (CCR) of the Filmoteca Española;[2] Mariona Bruzzo of the Filmoteca de Catalunya[3] and Inmaculada Trull of the Filmoteca Valenciana.[4] The first part of the chapter reflects on the relations between film archives and their natural setting, fundamentally based on the case of the ANIM. The chapter then defines the paradigm of the 'climate exception', which provides the framework for the preservation policies of the film collections in these archives, and summarises the measures these institutions are taking to improve the sustainability of conservation and reduce the environmental impact of film preservation. Finally, it outlines some alternative heritage policies to those based on the climate exception, which explore different ways and levels of re-earthing, of returning to the land. As the introduction to this volume states, this involves rethinking the relationship between archives and their territories beyond extractivism and fostering new ethical commitments among the different stakeholders involved in the process of memory recovery and heritage conservation, in the face of the urgent challenges that the climate crisis is imposing on the cultural sector too.

Archives and their territories

In times of fossil modernity,[5] it is possible to trace the connections between the archive as a device for the accumulation and organisation of information, knowledge and materials; the colonisation of nature expressed through processes that increase the distance between the city and the countryside according to the productivity of the land; and the precariousness of care conditions both for vulnerable people and their memories and for culture in present-day societies. To make these bonds visible, we ought to first look at the territories where the film archives are located.

One point in common among the four cinematheques we are interested in is that along with the rest of the world's film archives that meet the security recommendations of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF), the location of their conservation and restoration facilities is away from city centres. In some cases, their destination is an industrial complex, as in the case of the CCR of the Filmoteca Española at the Ciudad de la Imagen [Image City] in Pozuelo, or the archives of the Filmoteca Valenciana at the Leonardo Da Vinci Technology Park in Paterna. In others, it is a rural or natural setting, as in the case of the

installations of the Filmoteca de Catalunya in Terrassa or the ANIM in Bucelas. Each illustrates a way of relating to the territory, addressing very different conditions, be it Madrid's hyper-urbanised periphery, inland eastern Spain, the lowlands of the Sant Llorenç del Munt i l'Obac Natural Park or the forests of the municipality of Loures, respectively. I will now focus on the latter case, the ANIM, to shed some light on how film archives are integrated into their territories.

The ANIM was set up in 1996. Its facilities are located in Bucelas, a town 35 kilometres north of Lisbon, in a wooded area mainly forested with pine and eucalyptus trees. It is an 18-hectare walled site owned by the Cinemateca Portuguesa. The complex comprises several buildings of classical palatial-style architecture, including the main building that houses all the technical services, such as the laboratory, several reinforced cabins where the films are conserved, a telecine studio and another for projection and administrative services. The most striking aspect of the complex is perhaps the building known as the bunker, a half-buried construction reserved for the oldest films that need particularly delicate conservation conditions, in addition to being highly flammable. Altogether, the facilities centralise all activities related to the care of Portuguese cinematographic heritage: searching, collecting, conserving, preserving, restoring, cataloguing, providing access to heritage for researchers or other people who request it and bringing copies into circulation for projection as required.

In the late 1980s, the decision was taken to purchase an estate on which to build the ANIM offices, firstly to avoid the repetition of incidents like the burning of several films, which happened in 1980 on Cinemateca Portuguesa premises in the heart of Lisbon. However, security was not the only issue involved in this decision. Other factors, also seen in Madrid, Valencia and Catalonia, derive from the effects of neoliberal modernity, such as the vast gap in land value in and outside the city, dependent on the vicissitudes of urban property speculation. Since land in the countryside is worth less, the Portuguese government considered that the tasks of restoration and heritage preservation – caring for a part of national cultural heritage– would be cheaper and more profitable in a rural setting. The link between the poor value of land in the periphery, in economic terms, and the traditionally precarious and feminised space of care work begins to be clearly seen here.

Therefore, it seems appropriate at this point to extrapolate a gender-based analysis of the distribution of labour at the Cinemateca Portuguesa, the cinematographic institution housing the archive, which could theoretically apply to other film libraries. Firstly, it becomes evident

that reducing the cost of care (in this case, of heritage) is essential for the efficiency of preservation tasks, which are often carried out far from the most visible centres. Secondly, heritage preservation – largely inexpensive and invisible to the public – also ensures the viability of the more prominent cultural role of film libraries: producing a cultural agenda by programming and screening films in their own or other cinemas. This, in turn, fosters public debate and extends beyond national borders, as seen in national film institutions' participation in international film festivals.

This interpretation connects with an old idea in feminism. As Carolyn Merchant (1990) explains in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, cultural and scientific imaginaries are replete with illustrations and ideas that reinforce an essential link between nature and women, particularly between land and women. She describes this bond using a dual image. The first is positive: the nurturing mother who offers an orderly universe and provides the material conditions for life. The second is its darker counterpart: women associated with wild, uncontrollable nature, with the capacity to draw humanity closer to the abyss (Merchant, 1990: 1–41). Both images highlight the connections between women, land and the colonial imaginaries of Modernity, alongside its civilising development project based on the domination, expropriation and precarisation of nature and women's labour (among other vulnerable groups). These logics of colonisation ultimately provide the material conditions to sustain the hegemonic ideas of progress during Modernity, long before it acquired its fossil dimension. In the lands where the archives we study are located, these connections are also nourished by the shared element of the precarisation of land value and use.

When analysing the ANIM's relationship with the territory it occupies, the two images Merchant describes somehow coexist. Firstly, the care of Portuguese audiovisual heritage is relocated to a natural environment, far from the productive space of the city and, in the case of the bunker, where some rolls of celluloid – particularly the more vulnerable ones with a cellulose nitrate base – are literally preserved in the bosom of the earth, connecting both with the mental framework of nature as a nurturing mother and with the unearthing drive linked to processes of epistemological construction. However, this is not an innocent action; it is influenced by neoliberal doctrines of land value that frame property speculation in response to fluctuations in financial markets, allowing budgetary savings in heritage care. One of the explanations given by Tiago Batista, director of the ANIM, when asked about the reasons for locating the archive outside Lisbon, was that the lower land value there allowed for greater expansion.

This is neither surprising nor exceptional. It highlights that just as care tasks are rendered precarious on a social level, leading to the maintenance of an unequal productive and economic model, using heritage care within the nurturing mother framework allows us to sustain the film industry paradigm we know at a lower cost. This is partly due to the lower value of rural land, but also because, according to estimates by the Filmoteca de Catalunya team, excavating to build conservation vaults in the earth saves 25–30 per cent on electricity costs and also aligns with sustainability objectives.

Alongside the image of the nurturing mother, reinterpreted through neoliberal logics of land value and the precarisation of care, the location of the ANIM in the countryside also evokes the imaginary of nature-women as a threat of chaos and disaster. To understand this, we need to examine the variety of trees on the estate where the archive is located and in the surrounding forest, which is mainly composed of pine and eucalyptus. According to Roland Brouwer in his book *Planting Power* (1995), these two species played a defining role in the economic and environmental impact of the construction of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar's philofascist New State, starting in the 1930s.

In 1938, the *Lei do Povoamento Florestal* put an end to the traditional practices of use and conservation of common land in Portugal and paved the way for a subsequent law that laid the legal bases for the industrial exploitation of the countryside with the systematic afforestation of unoccupied land, initially prioritising pine plantations in keeping with the industrial standards of the time. However, in the mid-1950s, the conditions of the logging industry changed worldwide, and the Salazar government (like Franco's in Spain) started to plant eucalyptus trees (Brouwer, 1995: 264). With its rapid growth, this tree increased the productivity of the land and Portuguese competitiveness in the paper pulp industry worldwide. Between 1956 and 1985, eucalyptus plantations in Portugal increased from 60,000 to 405,000 hectares (Brouwer, 1995: 267). The ecological problems derived from this type of monoculture increased in the same proportion: drying out of the land, absorption of nutrients from the soil and expulsion of native species, both animals and plants. Added to this were its ease and speed of combustion, which implied an additional risk factor for Portuguese forests.

In the 1970s, with the emergence of Portuguese environmentalism, the planting of eucalyptus trees was identified as a significant ecological problem and has been the cause of social mobilisations against it up until the present day; Portugal now has the largest area of eucalyptus forests within the European Union.[6] The land that houses Portuguese film

heritage and allows it to prosper is, at the same time, marked by traces of natural corruption accumulated in the process of industrial modernisation of the country under dictatorship. This land simultaneously incorporates the threat of chaos to the nurturing imaginary presented by the ANIM's estate.

Over and above the particularities of the environmental and economic history of the forest where the ANIM is located, this initial look at the metabolic relations between the film archive and its territory raises issues that are common to the rest of the peninsular archives mentioned. The tasks of film heritage conservation are directly linked to the neoliberal dynamics of use and value of the territories, and their geographical dispersion is a direct consequence of these dynamics. Behind this also lies a metaphor for the gender division of labour in the distribution of tasks within film libraries. It is crystallised in the image of the ANIM bunker (replicated in the underground vaults of the archives of Madrid and Terrassa) as the nurturing mother who collaborates in the maintenance of national film heritage, while the species of trees on the estate highlight the policies of rural land exploitation that became systematised in the twentieth century. The relationship between archives and the environment is not merely territorial, however. The following section discusses the energy parameters of the heritage policies implemented by film archives.

Accumulation and cooling

In recent texts, the researcher Pablo Martínez, who is also a contributor to this volume, has addressed what he defines as 'climate exception' in the context of museums. With this formula, Martínez highlights the dynamics that museums must adopt if they wish to be part of 'the international network of exchange and transit of works of art' that requires them to comply with thermal stabilisation regulations. These regulations define a series of parameters that, although varying slightly depending on where on the planet the museums are located, establish limits of temperature and humidity conditions, generating a particular 'climatic universe' (Martínez, 2022: 387–388) that aims to guarantee the health and appropriate aesthetic experience of users, as well as prevent deterioration of the works on show. The construction of this exceptional universe requires investment in energy and material resources in the form of specialised heating, ventilation, air-conditioning and cooling systems that not only generate CO_2 emissions but also have a very short operating

life. If we transfer this idea from the field of museology to that of the film archives, the climatic conditions and the energy investment to maintain them become more intense due to the particular maintenance requirements of the different types of film collections.

Celluloid is a type of analogue film and behaves like a living material, regardless of its format. It responds to environmental stimuli, mainly temperature and humidity, which are further influenced by the lighting and ventilation of the vaults where it is stored. Depending on the combinations of these parameters, different types of celluloid degrade at varying rates. During their degradation process, both cellulose film and cellulose acetate film emit gases that act as catalysts for further degradation processes, which vary in each case (Del Amo García, 2007: 51). Preventive action is necessary to stabilise the film, delaying the process and, as much as possible, mitigating the effects of entropy. Once again, the key is to stabilise the climatic conditions to which the materials are exposed, and this, once more, requires substantial energy input.

In the case of cellulose nitrates, there is the added danger that large amounts of heat are produced in the degradation process, making it highly flammable (Del Amo García, 2007: 51). This is the oldest type of film, with a base of nitrocellulose, a natural plastic produced by mixing cotton or wood pulp with nitric acid. To reduce fire risk and ensure optimal conservation, these tapes first require their own space and particular insulation conditions. At the ANIM they are stored in its bunker, made up of 56 isolated vaults, placed half-buried and separate from the rest of the complex. Secondly, they need the same as the rest of the photochemical formats: highly demanding climatic conditions. At the ANIM, the nitrates are conserved at a temperature of 10ºC,[7] whereas at the CCR of the Filmoteca Española they are kept in 'El voltio', a structure also isolated from the rest of the complex, at 5ºC and 25 per cent relative humidity (RH).[8] At the Filmoteca de Catalunya, nitrates are also conserved in a bunker that comprises eight fridges that keep them at 5ºC and 45 per cent RH. The Filmoteca de Valencia, meanwhile, conserves its nitrates at between 0ºC and 2ºC, with a RH of 40–60 per cent, in a vault insulated by thick walls but not located underground.[9]

Celluloids with a cellulose acetate base, the degradation of which mainly results in what is known as vinegar syndrome, are preserved at the ANIM in vaults which, depending on whether they are colour or black-and-white copies, range between 8ºC and 12ºC; in the CCR of the Filmoteca Española, between 5ºC and 15ºC; at the Filmoteca de Catalunya, the unique and oldest copies are in refrigerators at 1ºC and 30 per cent RH, and new copies and polyesters are in others at 10ºC and

40 per cent RH; at the Filmoteca de Valencia, colour acetates are stored between 2°C and 5°C, with 30–40 per cent RH, and black-and-white ones between 10°C and 14°C, with 60 per cent RH.

The use of the appropriate machinery to maintain these thermal levels and humidity conditions and ventilation to renew the air inside the conservation vaults requires a vast energy investment with a corresponding economic cost.[10] In the context of the climate crisis, this high energy consumption and the resulting CO_2 emissions raise ethical implications associated with celluloid stabilisation processes, which will inevitably involve setting limits on the preservation of film heritage.

Within the framework of these ethical approaches, the interviewees were asked about the possibility of reducing energy consumption and its associated emissions by making the conservation of heritage a sustainable practice, considering that one of the objectives of the UN Agenda 2030 is the decarbonisation of societies. The response of Tiago Batista was that 'all archives want to grow'.[11] This opinion, without being expressed directly, is also apparent in the way the rest of the archive directors approach conservation tasks, and it is logical since, in this context, growing means expanding the capacity for heritage preservation. However, the inertia of continued growth also means maintaining accumulation as the guiding idea of property policies. It is, in turn, a reflection of the logic of capital accumulation that has defined the capitalist system for centuries. In the case that concerns us, this translates into the purchase of land outside cities to care for heritage and grow more economically, accumulating land to accumulate more films. In a report on the twentieth anniversary of the ANIM, one of the archive's conservators said that 'archives are built not to last ten years, but rather a thousand or ten thousand' (Pincha, 2016). This too, then, is accumulating for eternity.

At the same time, conservation centre directors all share a growing awareness of the responsibility to contain carbon emissions. In this sense, film archives in Europe and North America are discussing various formulas, though there are as yet no systematised protocols, which may be framed within an ecomodernist imaginary. Among the measures that the ANIM, for example, is considering implementing is to schedule power cuts of one or two hours at night to avoid the costs of producing cold air when temperatures drop, taking into account the fact that the vaults are capable of maintaining their temperature for a given time; studying thermal evolution inside the vaults in relation to the year-round climate to develop a seasonal energy consumption plan; and directly investing in more efficient machines that produce more cooling at less expense.

To this end, the CCR at the Filmoteca Española has eliminated hygroscopic materials from its facilities to lower the impact of relative humidity, installed solar panels, and applied protocols for warehouse entry and exit to maintain climatic conditions that are as stable as possible. The Filmoteca de Catalunya chooses to invest in solar panels to move towards decarbonisation and to build inside the earth as a way of reducing the temperature of its collections. The Filmoteca Valenciana is also considering the installation of solar panels. Apart from these measures, however, the Valencian archive is the only one that mentions the possibility of setting limits on collection growth, specifically video collections. In the opinion of its head of recovery, video was developed in a context where the production of images was very common, and transferring from video to digital is now very simple and can be done in non-specialised places, unlike photochemical formats. Accordingly, unless the tapes hold events of special historical or cultural singularity, video donations are not accepted.[12]

An interesting aspect of the conservation strategies practised in archives has to do with the paradigm of digitising film heritage. As Fabrice Flipo explains, according to data for 2021, digitisation processes consume 3.3 per cent of the world's energy and represent 4 per cent of the emission of greenhouse gases. What is most worrying is that the tendency to digitise the world has grown since 2007 at an annual rate of 9 per cent, undoubtedly due to the perception that this is the cheapest solution to the problem of space in cumulative processes and to speed up the circulation of materials (Flipo, 2021: 9–10). In the Iberian film archives consulted, this practice is completely normalised. Conservation tasks take two parallel paths: stabilising photochemical copies and preserving copies in their current production and circulation format, which is digital, just as films used to be preserved by conversion to video, DVD or Blu-ray.[13] Recent films that are already in digital format are kept on special servers, as are digitisation efforts of old films made so that they can be shown around the world.

At the same time, workers in archives are aware of the harmful effects of widespread digitisation in conservation processes. Tiago Batista directly links these effects to equal or higher costs in terms of expenditure and investment of time and personnel. Servers and data centres where digital files are stored require careful monitoring; they demand stringent temperature and ventilation conditions; they must operate continuously; they undergo constant migrations and data analysis; and, in many cases, the information must be duplicated for security reasons and stored in geographically separate locations.

The general consensus among the directors and heads of preservation of the film archives consulted is that the digital paradigm leads to a duplication of resources, consumption and emissions, in stark contrast to the transformation processes associated with previous conservation methods. Added to this are the energy investment and CO_2 emissions associated with the online dissemination of films and the streaming of archive content stored in data centres, as explained in research by Laura Marks and colleagues (2020) and Kate Oakley and Mark Banks (2020: 3). All this complicates the scenario and reduces the room for manoeuvre that archives have when developing strategies to effectively and systematically reduce energy consumption and emissions associated with film heritage preservation. However, as the next section explains, it is possible to implement specific proposals that offer alternatives to hegemonic heritage policies based on 'thermal exception' and the paradigm of conservation for eternity.

Archiving in times of post-climate exception

Despite the climate emergency and energy crises and the shortage of materials, heritage policies offer few proposals to break with the discursive frameworks of sustainable growth that seem to mark archives' scope of action. This at least is a possible interpretation of the environmental sensibility shown by all of them in their use of solar energy in their facilities and the reduction of energy input by incorporating technological improvements, but without renouncing the express growth of their collections (with the exception of the Valencian archive) and installations.[14] Nor is there any sign of interest in degrowth or other forms of conserving national and regional film heritage and memory that challenge the paradigm of accumulation for eternity. To question this principle is to challenge a privilege enjoyed by the cultural sector: Martínez's 'thermal exception'.

It is obvious that, in the process of decarbonisation of society, consequent degrowth and transition towards a different systemic model, the most polluting industrial production practices such as mining, the construction industry, transport and the tourism sector are priority areas of action.[15] By contrast, the decarbonisation of the cultural sector in isolation, without investigating (if this were possible) its interconnection with sectors such as tourism or transport, may seem like something to be undertaken in a future yet to be seen. But since this is a civilisational imperative that will soon reach the field of culture and heritage

preservation, it is appropriate to bring a different approach to heritage strategies than that of accumulation and eternity, over and above privilege. This is not a plea against investment in more efficient technology based on the use of renewable energy, but rather an effort to point out that this alone is insufficient, and that it is necessary to promote and publicise archival strategies of re-earthing that emerge outside established frameworks.

In this respect, contributions by researchers like Erica Avrami in the field of architectural heritage conservation are thought-provoking. She points out that preservation is not just a final state and that its reason for being is not just to make things last, but that it is also an interactive way to gain collective agency (Avrami, 2021: 9). The perpetuation of heritage places understood as such – not just architectural spaces but also socio-political institutions, such as archives, as well as the collections and films that comprise them – paves the way to imagining a series of strategies to open up the processes of preservation to society. This involves collectively reconvening the different levels of stories associated with those places, fostering strategies of re-earthing that aim to – drawing on Liboiron's words quoted in the introductory chapter of this book – fully describe 'the complexity of socio-material relations' (Liboiron, 2016). According to Avrami, it is possible in this way to promote social resilience by reinforcing notions of lasting, shared values that we have inherited, in which groups of people and individuals recognise common ground. Addressing this aspect of culture as an activator of collective agency should be the task of bold, innovative and re-earthing heritage policies that do not follow the paths of continuous growth and preservation for eternity. It means opening archival technologies to communities that maintain ties of identity or affection with documents, images, objects or places, so that they can decide how to inventory, order and preserve legacy materials; or so that they can participate in their dissemination processes in addition to enjoying their symbolic and material benefits. As we will see below, some of these strategies have been put into practice experimentally by associations and critical institutions.

Alongside the movement that Avrami proposes for heritage conservation policies – shifting from the centrality of preservation to the promotion of collective agency – I believe it is also valuable to examine discourses critical of the hegemony of progress, development and the belief in sustainable, continuous and infinite growth. Here, one of the most insightful voices is that of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, particularly her reflections on precariousness and feral proliferation within the landscape structures of the so-called Anthropocene. According to Tsing,

precariousness is the condition of reality created by blind faith in progress, which characterises the present-day context at various levels, from labour market conditions to ecological situations. This not only evidences the accelerated loss of biodiversity but also poses a clear risk to the continuity of life on the planet (Tsing, 2015: 20).

Let us now consider this category in the context of heritage conservation, using Tsing's simple definition of precariousness as 'life without the promise of stability' (Tsing, 2015: 20). With this phrase, she contrasts the material conditions of economic, labour and ecological precariousness with the principles that govern conservation policies. These policies are grounded in a clear confidence in technological development and progress, manifested, for example, in the ability to control thermal conditions to create exceptional climatic environments capable of mitigating the effects of entropy on photochemical formats. This vision, deeply rooted in the promise of stability that Tsing describes, is entirely disconnected from the precarious conditions of the contemporary world. The loss of that promise, by incorporating the factor of precariousness into preservation policies, would mean dismantling the climatic exceptionality enjoyed by the sector, leading to a reduction in the requirements for preserving cinematic memory indefinitely. Precariousness, in the context of the climate and energy crisis, is a variable that shapes a conservation relationship, creating a distance between the utopia of eternal preservation and systematic accumulation (purity and transcendence).

Thinking about conservation policies in a context of precariousness means bringing them closer to the states of reality in which other spheres of life are in motion. It also means questioning the energy privilege enjoyed by heritage practices and accepting that, just as continuous growth in productive or infrastructural terms is not possible because we live on a planet with physical and material limits, we cannot expect to preserve all artistic or audiovisual productions forever – or for a thousand years from now. In a world of precariousness, the purity and stability of cultural heritage cannot be guaranteed forever, just as employment in stable conditions or the durability of certain ecosystems cannot be guaranteed. It is, then, necessary to look for heritage policies that accept the precarious conditions in which we live in times of climate crisis.

In more recent works, Tsing and scholars such as Andrew S. Mathews and Nils Bubandt (2019) and Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena and Feifei Zhou (2024) have explored the concept of landscape structures as a framework for understanding hybrid infrastructures involving both human and non-human elements in the Anthropocene. They have examined the possibilities of constructing narratives based

on these analyses, identifying two basic landscape structures: modular simplifications and feral proliferations. Modular simplifications refer to infrastructures resulting from colonial logics, such as coffee plantations or the Panama Canal, which create both human and non-human landscapes and lead to ecological simplifications in terms of biodiversity and labour relations (2024: 153). Feral proliferations arise as disruptions within these modular simplifications, resulting from undesirable social and ecological effects, such as the coffee rust fungus in coffee plantations or the problematic water hyacinth in Gatun Lake, built to support the Panama Canal. Feral proliferations introduce chaos, destabilisation and threats to the principles of progress and the social, ecological and economic organisation underpinning modular simplifications. However, these aspects should not be understood in isolation, similar to the two images of nature in relation to women discussed earlier in the chapter.

According to the relationship of the film archives to their territories described above, I believe that these archives can be considered a particular form of landscape structures of the modular simplification type. On the one hand, archives are integrated into the territories literally by modularity. The square metres gained from the subsoil are used in the construction of celluloid conservation chambers under the ground. On the other hand, archives have traditionally been fundamental to the production and reproduction of dominant historical ontologies – imperial, heteropatriarchal, supposedly universal and future-centric – with collections based on the concentration and rationalisation of limited, primarily written documentary sources to which expert users have easier access. Although these forms of violence have been nuanced and questioned over time, they have often inevitably led to simplified historical narratives.

Closely related to archives as modular structures of simplification, the accumulation of archival violence has given rise to feral forms of heritage management. These are viral archival practices that emerge from the intimate and affective relationship between heritage materials and the people and territories they belong to. They encapsulate a desire to dismantle traditional archiving technologies by making their structures permeable, their collections dynamic, their thesauri malleable and their access policies fluid. Feral archives are monstrous institutions (Universidad Nómada, 2008), infected by diverse historical sources, images, photographs, amateur films, oral testimonies, fabrics and other objects. In feral archives, the border between inside and outside is blurred, developing, for instance, dynamics of access, cataloguing and learning together with the social webs mobilised around the care of memory. These archives question the logics of accumulation

and preservation for eternity of materials and explore technologies of diminishing archives that incorporate the precarity factor. In the following, I will highlight two examples of partial experiments that point towards the formation of feral archives and I will conclude by presenting a successful, fully developed case of this type of archive.

The first remarkable example occurred between 2011 and 2014, when Fundación Cerezales carried out a project called Territorio Archivo based in the Condado-Curueño region (León, Spain), involving research that, among other things, led to the creation of a photographic archive available on the project's website.[16] I consider this initiative as a feral archival proliferation due to the way it was conceived against the hegemonic trends of heritage preservation. The project made great contributions in this sense, seeking the possibility of an archival science that addresses its ecological imprint, by accepting the variable of precariousness and looking beyond climate exception. It developed the idea of 'domestic conservators' to refer to people who, after digitising photographs, store, care for and disseminate them from their own homes, in direct connection with traditional ways of being in the territory. In this case, the preservation of documents depends on efforts based on emotional ties to preserve collective memory rather than on investment in specialised materials and technology. Caring for the region's memory does not depend solely on the promise of the material stability of the photographs, which are cared for in the homes of the region's residents and therefore subject to the same deterioration processes that may affect those homes.

This photographic archive is also notable for the way it facilitated documentation processes for each photograph through collective sessions aimed at evoking memories. The information gathered about shared stories at these social events later took the form of various media formats in the files of each photograph, which are accessible online. These files include sound, visual and written documents, ensuring access to the region's memories through different channels. Territorio Archivo emerged as a device that strengthened the collective agency of the communities, positioning them as caretakers and guardians of the photographs' memories. Their approach was driven more by affection than by the pursuit of permanence.

Film archives have also carried out activities that blur the logic of climatic exceptionality. In this sense, the work with family collections carried out by the Filmoteca Española between 2018 and 2021 seems like a good approach that at the same time explores the plasticity of the institution's structures and makes it more permeable to be affected from the outside. Over these years, a research programme

was designed to focus attention and resources on materials that the Filmoteca Española had been drawing on mainly since the 1990s (Berzosa and Cerdán, 2022: 27) but that had not traditionally constituted historical or cinematographic sources of particular interest. For three consecutive years, the Filmoteca Española opened the doors to research, increasing beyond the limits of its structure the number of voices contributing to the construction of historical accounts. Firstly, teams of researchers with different backgrounds inside and outside academia were asked to work on a specific topic, exploring the amateur film collections of the Filmoteca Española and the rest of the Spanish film library network. Secondly, the research involved finding materials that were sometimes found outside its collections, in the closets of amateur directors and their families, which affected historical readings with stories and images never seen or heard before. After analysing and digitising these materials along with the Filmoteca Española's collections, the team of researchers had to produce a new piece that brought these materials together in a hybrid and speculative way. There were three editions of the research programme. The first commemorated the Spanish Transition, marking 50 years since the enactment of the Spanish Constitution; the second, the memory of Republican exile after the Spanish Civil War; and the third, the perspective of colonists in Spanish Africa in the twentieth century.

The idea of addressing a little-known area of film heritage, comprising materials in narrow-gauge, non-commercial, non-professional formats, meant reassessing the value of cinema as a cultural phenomenon. However, it also involved moving beyond the paradigm of mere accumulation of films and collections to design strategies with the aim of linking cultural products – films – with a series of values and stories shared across the country. In the edition that dealt with Spanish colonial memory, the research process led to an active search for films outside the holdings of the Filmoteca Española archive itself, representing a reactivation of memory processes in the networks of former settlers and their heirs, in the form of family films. This search occasionally ended with the donation of new material to the Filmoteca Española archive. On other occasions, the rights holders chose to keep the tapes in their homes, reinforcing the idea of decentralising materials as a leitmotif of counter-hegemonic archiving. The process of activating thought around memory did not necessarily depend on the logic of accumulation and concentration, and when family films were eventually donated to the Filmoteca Española, the accumulative drive was not the same as described above.

In the case of researching Spanish colonial memory, the process was the opposite. The incorporations of amateur colonial films came about as a result of the activation of memory through processes of social agency that implied reconnecting with part of the donors' family memories and talking about a shared past which, as in the case of the colonies in Africa, is still largely unknown in Spanish society as a whole. The desire to debate common values and memories is followed by the accumulation of heritage and the investment of resources. The same occurs with the digitisation of family materials from the Filmoteca Española collections, which only happens once researchers have viewed them and determined the historical value of the pieces for the specific project. This is, then, an inversion of the hegemonic logic of conservation because it prioritises the use of memories when allocating economic and energy resources to the digitisation process, as opposed to the systematic digitisation logic. Despite this, it should be noted that in this experiment some of the hegemonic logics of the archive remained, since the institution continued to control the copies. In addition to these bold institutional proposals, which inevitably aim to grow, albeit not compulsively, there are alternative experiences. Perhaps the experience of La Digitalizadora de la Memoria Colectiva (The Collective Memory Digitiser) is the clearest example of a feral archival structure capable of developing its own imaginative working methodology.

La Digitalizadora is a collaborative archive fostered in 2019 by a group of 25 people, professionals in the archival and audiovisual fields. The starting point was the awareness of the risk of disappearance of films and videos that were recorded with non-professional technologies and small-gauge formats, such as Super 8, Video 8, VHS and VHS-C, by people and educational, cultural and political collectives, who filmed their neighbourhoods, their parties and demonstrations. The natural degradation of this type of tape entails the loss of an important part of the collective memory.

To address this situation, the members of this platform conceived a methodology through which archival technologies are at the disposal of the popular classes and social movements. From our perspective, this has two fundamental points of interest: the activation of works of recovery of memory and audiovisual heritage through processes of collective agency, as well as the deployment of preservation policies that go beyond the general logics that set the horizon of conservation of cultural heritage as having the aim of accumulation for eternity.

The platform's work begins with strategic attempts to draw people's attention to the archive by asking them to search their homes and

attics for discarded or forgotten films that they can deposit in 'memory mailboxes'. This call makes the archive aware of the existence of a wide variety of tapes with different origins and formats. At first glance, the tapes appear like strange bodies carrying memory, which are identified and located but not absorbed within the archive or centralised in any institutional space, since La Digitalizadora has no physical headquarters. Then, the materials found need to be contextualised through dating and cataloguing processes that can be done in several ways. Through the 'sponsorship' of a person responsible for researching and providing context for the pieces, or through collective processes (which are not mutually exclusive), the goal is to describe and label the films through group viewings attended by people from the neighbourhoods and movements where the films were shot. The sponsors are archival agents external to the structure of La Digitalizadora itself, who are committed to investigating the origin of the tapes and the stories they contain.

In parallel to this process and in return for the donors, digitisation of the materials is carried out. Given that the platform's economic resources are limited, the step towards digitisation depends on whether it enables the initiation of socialisation processes, with the support of sponsors and the collaboration of the communities and groups in which the films were originally created. The digitisation therefore only occurs in the event that the people, values and thoughts that once inspired the films are brought back together. It is a similar gesture to the one we saw in the projects promoted by Filmoteca Española, but with a much deeper radicalism and ethical commitment with the communities that donated the films, due to the methodological framework in which it is inscribed.

Finally, the practice of La Digitalizadora de la Memoria Colectiva opens a space for discussion about the possibilities of developing conservation policies for film heritage that go beyond the models of archives focused on the accumulation and preservation of photochemical stock over time. Since it is not an archive with its own headquarters where the copies are centralised, but a platform that coordinates different collections preserved by the owners in their homes, as in the example of Territorio Archivo, I consider it as a feral archive, an eccentric experience that dislocates the logics of the hegemonic archives in terms of concentration of materials and, therefore, entails a lower investment of energy and material resources for its maintenance. This platform seeks to preserve memory through a process of digitisation and circulation, rather than stabilising the original plastic object, which is considered as a limited entity that participates in the natural processes of degradation of matter. At the same time, as we have seen, the path of digitisation of

films, which always involves an energy cost and an increase in the carbon footprint, is conditioned by the possibility of promoting socialisation processes in order to recover the memory and reactivate the common values and shared beliefs of the communities where the films were produced.

From an ecological perspective, prioritising approaches that enable transformative processes – rather than focusing solely on extending the lifespan of objects through energy and material investments in a finite world – provides a stimulating basis for rethinking archival practices within degrowth paradigms. In this way, La Digitalizadora, as a feral archive, operates in a cultural and energetic manner, setting it apart from hegemonic film archives. It becomes a porous entity, embracing neglected and forgotten materials cast aside by commercial cinema and navigable by people outside its structure. This perspective challenges conventional heritage policies, redefines the value parameters of the sources from which history is formulated, and creates mechanisms to revisit and reframe the ideas and energies that drove social change in the past.

Conclusion

La Digitalizadora de la Memoria Colectiva is a film archive that operates as a malleable institution, staffed by people with expert archival knowledge but accessible to people and collectives outside of it; it is attached to the local communities and territories in an open process of re-earthing. It is an archive with physically scattered collections, cared for under a paradigm of precarity, operating within a post-climatic state of exception on the energetic plane. This platform presents in a reduced form the characteristics that we have been defining for what we could call a decreasing film archive, which will be fundamental in a horizon of decarbonisation of the cultural industry. For the consolidation of this type of archive, I consider it essential to initiate a discussion centred on the core issue addressed in this chapter: the complex interplay between the metabolic relationship that archives maintain with their territories and the need for functional heritage policies in a post-fossil fuel context. To guide this debate, it is useful to organise the results of our research around two key parameters for exploring re-earthing strategies related to territory and heritage: scale and value.

In the alternative re-earthing archiving cases mentioned above, one of the key points is scaling down, whether in relation to territory, storage space, material resources and energy invested in maintaining the

original heritage assets, or directly in relation to the scale of the format of the materials to be preserved. In La Digitalizadora's practice, these reductions are concentrated. There is a direct relationship between the reduction in the scale of the archives and the territorial constraints of the memory being preserved. When archives operate in a situated manner, in other words, when they return to the earth, it is possible to connect archival expertise with the real issues facing local territories. This shift then changes the relationship between communities and heritage assets.

The calls made by La Digitalizadora to the San Diego and Los Carteros neighbourhoods, in Seville, attracted the attention of their inhabitants regarding the risk of losing the memory of the cultural and social mobilisation of these neighbourhoods in the 1980s and 1990s, since it depended on the precariousness of materials that were in the process of decomposition. The residents donated family tapes, mainly in video and Super 8 – thus in reduced-scale formats within the audiovisual universe – but also photographs and newspaper cuttings. The reduction of scale entails a direct encounter with the condition of precariousness, which, in turn, defines a radical division in patrimonial terms between memory and the objects that contain it.

On the one hand, the memories of communal experiences, collective agency and collaboration in the cultural integration of San Diego and Los Carteros are preserved in the same way that they were built, in a collective process. To this end, spaces are opened to the residents for cataloguing and discussing the materials together. New productions are also fostered, such as the re-photographing of historical images[17] or montages that include interviews or comments from the neighbours about the images.[18] By recalling the energy still present in the residents, which flows through the channels of shared memory, this gives way to the processes of digitisation and circulation of memories, both in person and online.

The energy of the past is recycled in the present in the form of collective memory and in this way the shared values recompose the social networks through time. The former teachers of the Escuela Profesional de Minas de Riotinto (Professional School of Minas de Riotinto), with whom La Digitalizadora has collaborated recovering several tapes of alternative education experiences in the last years of Franco's regime (1973), put into words this enlargement of the energy contained in the collective agency: 'after so many years, La Digitalizadora facilitates our dream: that these pioneering experiences for their time, worthy of being known, of replicating their process and of going down in the Andalusian educational history, continue their journey'.[19]

On the other hand, this radical division leads to dispensing with the objective of stabilising the heritage objects, that is, the photochemical films. La Digitalizadora and other similar proposals, such as Territorio Archivo, advocate that the owners should be the ones to keep and take care of the material in their homes. No energy investment is promoted, nor are any particular material resources dedicated to conservation. In fact, the concept of conservation is suspended, and heritage assets are inserted into the common drift of the finite world of the storage rooms of the residents, social associations and amateur filmmakers. A new level of re-earthing by downscaling is introduced here. In this horizon of finiteness, in which the thermal exception is diluted and heritage assets become equal in entropic terms to everything that exists on the planet, there is also an effect of territorial dispersion of both the materials and the situated experiences of memory restoration. The processes of heritage care on a small scale and scattered throughout the limited territories in which the decreasing archival policies are practised provoke the subversion of the fundamental logics of traditional archives – the concentration and accumulation of materials and energy. In this new relationship, a new deal is made between the archive and the keepers of the films, between their memory (the content) and the celluloid reels (the objects), which is part of the ethical turn that operates under the paradigm of re-earthing: new temporalities, engagements and care are blossoming.

At the same time, all that has been discussed so far is possible thanks to the fact that, parallel to the reductions in scale, a change in the value of patrimonial policies that works within the social metabolism in decreasing archives is taking place. In metabolic terms, the benefit of what is extracted from the land is transcended as the sole indicator of value, and in return the socioecological benefits (Savini, 2023: 8) that derive from the revitalisation of collective agency and downscaling in energy and resource investment are also considered as influential factors in the exchanges between archives and nature. The change is produced by shifting the resources previously destined to the conservation of objects, which involve high investments of energy and resources, to develop strategies focused on the promotion of traditional knowledge and affections that give the memory of the territory meaning. A memory embodied in social agents – such as the residents of San Diego and Los Carteros, or the teachers of the Professional School of Minas de Riotinto, who constitute heritage care circuits – puts their political imagination, their expert knowledge and the institutional resources at their disposal; in other words, they have invented a new form of care focused on promoting the eco-social value of the archives of each territory.

The turn that takes place within the decreasing archives drives us to a re-earthing framework from where we can address audiovisual heritage preservation beyond the dynamics of expropriation and coloniality. To put it in the words of Tsing, Mathew and Bubandt: from archives as landscape structures of modular simplification, as could be the constructions excavated in the earth – such as the ANIM bunker or the subterranean vaults of the Filmoteca de Catalunya, where there still persists an extractivist mindset – we move to the feral proliferation of new protocols of care and recall of memory in concrete territories, such as those promoted by La Digitalizadora de la Memoria Colectiva. This change contains the germ of a new ethical pact in heritage conservation policies to be made between public institutions, foundations, citizen associations and individuals committed to collective memory. This commitment must be based on the elimination of thermal exceptionality in conservation, on the acceptance of precariousness as a framework for reality and on the transition from centralised conservation institutions to a circuit of care platforms scattered throughout the territory.

Under these three premises, the new pact must be integrated into the horizon of regionalisation strategies in a sort of situated and downscaled development of the cultural heritage network. This idea is supported within the framework of the proposals that have been put forward for decades by theorists such as Murray Bookchin (1992), Molly Scott Cato (2013) or Emilio Santiago Muiño (2016), among others, for the elaboration of social metabolism through the relocalisation and deglobalisation of the production and circulation of commodities and services, which necessarily implies a parallel commitment in terms of re-earthing. The planning of policies for scaling down archival heritage, when incorporated into broader bioregionalisation programmes, opens up a new direction for the cultural sector amid the necessary push for decarbonisation. However, the precise trajectory and the terms of the new ethical pact among all stakeholders remain to be determined. The reflections and proposals for counter-hegemonic archiving discussed in this chapter are designed to offer guiding traces to follow on the path towards these objectives.

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Notes

1. Interview conducted on 19 October 2022.
2. Interview conducted on 20 December 2023.
3. Interview conducted on 19 December 2023.
4. Interview conducted on 21 December 2023.
5. Fossil modernity is the historical period initiated in the nineteenth century defined by an economic model based on the consumption of fossil fuels that has defined modes of production, political regimes, social behaviours, and individual and collective identities and imaginaries. To find out more about this concept, please refer to Malm (2016) and Vindel (2020).
6. For a follow-up on the implications of the eucalyptus monoculture for common land in Portugal from the twentieth century onwards, consult the related entry in the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice: https://ejatlas.org/conflict/eucalyptus-monoculture-and-common-lands-portugal (accessed 14 April 2024).
7. Information obtained from the interview with Tiago Batista, director of the ANIM, on 19 October 2022.
8. Information obtained in conversation with Marian del Egido, director of the CCR of the Filmoteca Española, on 20 December 2023.
9. Information obtained in conversation with Inmaculada Trull, Head of Restoration of the Filmoteca Valenciana of l'Institut Valencià de Cultura (IVC), on 21 December 2023.
10. The ANIM has an electricity expenditure of 168,000 euros a year, of which only 40 per cent is allocated to maintaining the vaults where the films are kept. The Filmoteca de Catalunya spent €219,000 in 2023; the Filmoteca Valenciana, in approximately the same period, invested €42,251.75 in electricity, and the CCR at the Filmoteca Española spends some €800,000 a year. All these amounts were provided in their respective interviews by the above-mentioned archive managers.
11. Information obtained from the interview with Tiago Batista, director of the ANIM, on 19 October 2022.
12. Information obtained in conversation with Inmaculada Trull, Head of Restoration of the Filmoteca Valenciana of the IVC, on 21 December 2023.
13. Information obtained in conversation with Inmaculada Trull, Head of Restoration of the Filmoteca Valenciana of the IVC, on 21 December 2023.
14. The three archives in Spain studied have approved projects to extend and improve their facilities or are in the process of designing them. The CCR of the Filmoteca Española has approved a project to renovate the bunker in which the most sensitive films are conserved, and both the Filmoteca de Catalunya and the Filmoteca Valenciana are developing extension projects.
15. Matthew T. Huber (2020) explores the priorities and challenges of decarbonisation processes in these sectors.
16. https://www.territorioarchivo.org/ (accessed 4 April 2024).
17. https://archive.org/details/videoresumen-encuentro-san-diego-memorias-periferia-urbana-2021-sevilla-espana_202204 (accessed 9 August 2024).
18. https://archive.org/details/velada-de-san-diego-sevilla-comentada-por-amparo-perez (accessed 9 August 2024).
19. https://ladigitalizadora.org/coleccion/coleccion-riotinto-una-modesta-experiencia-de-reforma-educativa/ (accessed 9 August 2024).

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5

Ice as trace: correspondences and conflicts around earthly archives in the Cordillera Blanca, Peru

Tomás J. Usón and Sandra Jasper

In 2019, an expedition led by US glaciologist Lonnie Thomson headed to Huascarán Mountain in the Cordillera Blanca to drill the mountain's glacial core and extract ice samples containing ancient bioclimatic data from Peru's highest peak. Suffering the dramatic consequences of climate change, glaciers are perceived by the scientific community as endangered formations holding thousands of years of accumulated geodata that could be lost due to continuous ice melting. Thompson's expedition, in this sense, was an effort against time to collect a massive amount of paleoclimatological data before its erasure by the dramatic consequences of centuries of industrialisation.

Such a fragility, however, also alarmed local communities. Fearing that the work of Thompson and his team was putting Huascarán's ancient ice at risk, to the point of even accusing them of conducting scientific activities for mining purposes, a group of community members detained the expedition and forced them to leave the place. Although the scientific group finally reached an agreement with the community to take the collected samples out of the mountain, the assault against the expedition sparked all sorts of bitter reactions in the media and among national authorities.

For Thompson and other glaciologists, ice cores sourced from the towering peaks of the Cordillera Blanca serve as genuine archives of atmospheric deposition (Schwikowski and Eichler, 2010), preserving a wealth of data on biodiversity, geoclimatic conditions and precipitation spanning millennia. This information, as stated by the president of Peru's

National Institute for Research on Glaciers and Ecosystems (Instituto Nacional de Investigación en Glaciares y Ecosistemas de Montaña, INAIGEM) at the time, 'is related to the history of Peru, the history of the Andes and the Amazon, and the climate worldwide' (Prensa Huaraz, 2019). The rapid pace of glacier retreat in the Cordillera Blanca, a phenomenon that glaciologists have been studying in the region since the 1940s (Carey, 2010), has prompted strong concern within the scientific community, given the loss of these archives of climate and biodiversity and their significance to the Earth's history. The dwindling, in this sense, poses a profound setback for scientific enquiry into past climatic and environmental conditions. Thus, any assault on scientific expeditions like in Huascarán is seen as an action that undermines global scientific endeavours aimed at deepening our understanding of glaciers and long-term climatic patterns. By uttering any form of repudiation of the presence of foreign scientists in the Huascarán, local communities were outrightly turned into enemies of science by public opinion.

But the retreat of tropical glaciers is not only a dramatic process for the international scientific community. Local inhabitants are suffering the direct, threatening consequences of unstable ice bodies. The loss of glacial surface represents an existential risk for localities all over the foothills of the Cordillera Blanca, which rely on these vast water reservoirs (Drenkhan et al., 2015) for human consumption, agriculture and livestock. Moreover, the retreat of glaciers has led to the formation of highly unstable mountain lakes that, with a chunk of glacier or landslide falling into their water, can run the risk of collapsing and producing a runoff downstream. This phenomenon, known by the scientific community as glacier lake outburst flood (GLOF), has already happened several times in the last decades. In 1941, for example, such an event struck the region's capital Huaraz, leaving a death toll of 5,000 victims and an important part of the city buried to the ground. As the occurrence of this type of event still occupies a crucial place in the collective memory shaping the region's history, the fight against foreign bodies threatening the ice to collapse turns into an existential impulse.

The risks above speak of a complicated relationship between people in the Callejón de Huaylas and ice – a relationship that is also shaped by the historical role that mountains have played in the region's history. Snowed peaks (*rajukuna* in Quecha) and lakes (*qolcakuna*) are not simply geographical formations; they are truly entities that shape the existence of people in the Andes. These *tirakuna*, or earth beings in Quechua (De la Cadena, 2015), are sentient agents and active community members that have the capacity to sustain life but also to take it away. *Tirakuna*,

according to Marisol de la Cadena (2015: 129–130), are entities making sense of the Earth's temporalities by embodying the stories of the places where they belong – a temporal role conducted by more-than-human actors in other contexts as well (Bashford et al., 2023; Bobbette, 2023). Ice, in this sense, remains an uncanny element, an ambiguous viscosity characterised by its 'slippery yet sticky, eternal yet ephemeral, aseptic yet animated' materiality (Simonetti, 2022: 112). Its unexpected behaviour turns it into both a reservoir and a threat to life. It is a fragile form of ensuring future habitability that, when treated in the wrong terms, can be a dreadful matter for those living in its shadows (Carey, 2010).

In this chapter, we delve into the conflict surrounding the Huascarán Mountain case to reflect on the evocations and correspondences elicited by ice as a form of archive and trace, 'a material reminder that embeds affective circulations' (Napolitano, 2015: 52). Following Laura Ogden (2021), by 'correspondence' we mean the heterogeneous yet controlled ways in which traces create reliable forms of predictability that connect them with major stories in past, present and future terms. As an archive containing traces of history, ice speaks of ancient pasts cryospherically preserved that can be used to know how the world was, while shedding some light on what to expect from an accelerated climatic transformation. Its fragile, but dangerous, materiality also condenses another set of stories, those of colonial violence and political economies of territorial exploitation. The chapter explores how the growing interest in ice as an earthly archive clashes with other forms of cryospheric evocations that intersect with conflicts around land sovereignty and alternative, non-Western world arrangements. As Julia Cruikshank (2005: 8) rightfully affirms, ice bodies are active elements telling stories of the environments they are immersed in, *'merg[ing]* natural histories of landscape with social histories … in a local human ecology' (emphasis in original). Thus, by examining ice as a device containing pieces of 'frozen time', we reflect on how ice operates as a container of geostory – that collective narration of the past in which all the terrestrial entities become active writers (Latour, 2017) – while exploring the conflicting temporalities shaped by colonial heritage, extractivism and land reclamations.

Ice as a temporal device

Ice has become a pivotal reference to measure and call upon in the climate emergency into which we are globally immersed. As Stephan Harrison (2008: 76) remarks, ice bodies like glaciers have been turned into climate

change's 'canary in the coal mine', a physical manifestation of the effects of rising temperatures over the planet. The ongoing exposure to images, audiovisual material and graphic outcomes about glacial loss has created an almost religious discourse of environmental loss (Crosgrove, 2008; Levene, 2013), a teleological pulsation about an unequivocal direction towards which humanity is heading. Ice is commonly interpreted through the lens of deep time, as the historical expression of the *long durée* evokes: thousands of years of accumulation compressed under the weight of those frozen bodies. Despite their millennial existence, the consequences of ice retreat speak of a harrowing sign of contemporary demise, a loss for those lives relying on the water contained by these hydrological storage systems, and a loss for those scientific efforts trying to understand how life was in the past. Ice is a temporal device because its existence helps us to make sense of time, a true archive in which the past is preserved and through which the future is evoked – connecting the local conditions from which it emerges with the global trends of a major geostory.

As Katrina Dean (2008) suggests, conceiving ice cores as Earth archives is not a new metaphor in the scientific realm. Already in the eighteenth century, the Earth's crust was seen as isochronous layers of rock and soil containing traces of past geological events (Toepfer, 2019). Elizabeth Povinelli (2016) directly relates this invention to the early extractive capitalism of coalfields in England, revealing large, stratified fossil beds used as the first indicators for modern geology. Although less exploitive relationships with geological formations were created elsewhere (Bashford et al., 2023; Bobbette, 2023), scientific knowledge sustained by colonial regimes was an all-too-common form of engaging with inert nature. Ice cores, in this sense, were taken by this scientific tradition both as an archive and as a trace: a materiality that needed to be unearthed, excavated and drilled, from which a body of evidence, mostly in the form of ice cores, could be extracted to mark the traces of physical changes throughout time (Toepfer, 2019). Ice, in this sense, was turned into a device able to speak of ancient pasts in modern terms – an effort to universalise the history of the world through its strata and layering.

According to Alessandro Antonello and Mark Carey (2017), ice cores are central elements in the construction of current apocalyptic narratives because they are fundamental producers of temporalities in the contemporary world. In the words of the authors, 'ice core discussions have helped transform the understanding of what we refer to as *Earth time, human time, and future time*' (Antonello and Carey, 2017: 184; emphasis in original), revealing turbulent and unpredictable moments of

the Earth's ancient history, the influence of humans on the atmosphere, and operating as layers of history that can be used as predictors of possible – usually catastrophic – futures. Indeed, since the inauguration of modern ice core drilling technology by the US Army Corps of Engineers in the 1950s (Langway, 2008), ice samples extracted from different parts of the planet have been crucial for the reconstruction of past Earth stages dating back 800,000 years (Jouzel et al., 2007), enabling the identification of rhythms, cycles and (a)synchronies of planetary continuities and disruptions.

So rich is the data that can be found in these 'time machines' (Alley, 2002) that they have been proposed as Global Stratotype Section and Points (GSSP), or 'golden spikes', to delimit the boundaries defining the shifts of geological epochs. Stratigraphic changes dated almost 12,000 years old, found at a depth of 1.5 kilometres in the ice core explored by the Northern Greenland Ice Core Project (NGRIP), have been considered, together with other auxiliary stratotypes, the formal marker for the Pleistocene–Holocene boundary (Walker et al., 2009). These changes are related to the first warming processes experienced on Earth after the Pleistocene, the most recent period of ongoing glaciation. More recently, stratographic data found several metres down in Antarctica Law Dome's ice core were proposed as evidence for defining the golden spikes delimiting two of the possible beginnings of the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stroemer, 2000): the first evidenced by changes in the atmospheric CO_2 levels as a consequence of the imperial invasion and colonisation of the American continent by European potencies in 1610, known as the 'orbit spike'; the second a peak record of carbon-14 due to nuclear testing in 1964 (Lewis and Maslin, 2015). Recently, a drilling of 2.8 kilometres at the Little Dome C in Antarctica led by the Alfred Wegener Institute has allowed the extraction of more than 1.2 million years of geostory. The data conserved within is 'the only archive where old air is trapped', affirms Frank Wilhelms,[1] one of the leading researchers of the project. In recent years, ice cores have even been used as a proxy for exploring the virological scenario of past millennia and how climate change and glacier melting can lead to new risks of pathogen outbreaks (Zhong et al., 2021; Varghese et al., 2023). Colonial encounters, genocides, biotic changes, nuclear tests and carbon emissions; all accumulate in the fragile durability of this longlasting matter.

The archival nature of ice is not only given by the biological particles and molecular material it stores (see Figure 5.1). Becoming a trace of time, ice needs to be reached, explored and extracted. The scientific manipulation of ice cores is based on a complex set of practices,

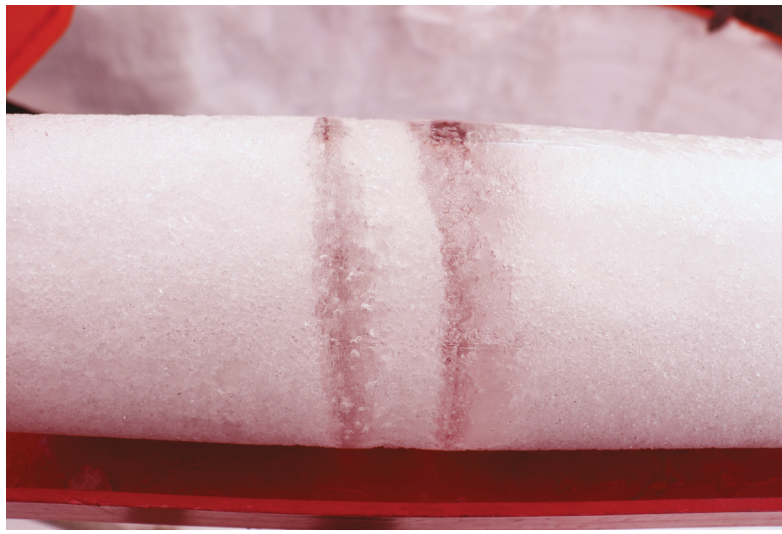

Figure 5.1 An ice core sample from Huascarán showing layers of strata. © Wilmer Sánchez 2019. Courtesy of the author.

materialities and relations capable of activating such a temporal condition, one that involves its extraction from the places where it accumulated over millennia and later translation for storage. Places like the US National Ice Core Laboratories (NICL) possess ice samples from places like Greenland, Siberia and Antarctica, together with the diverse geographies those samples contain. In the words of Heather Frazer (2008: 40), 'inside the columnar cube [of ice samples] rests a core that might hold atmospherically transported Saharan dust, tropical methane, and pollen spores from all over the planet'. It is in this process of extraction and further stocking that the archival condition of ice emerges (Toepfer, 2019), a materiality condensing atmospheric traces that allow the reconstruction of geoclimatic realities of past millennia. This extraction, however, is not innocuous, and it can lead to different reactions, raising, as we will see, questions about who owns the ice, who can have access to it and who has the right to its manipulation and storage.

'Ice archives give us the *longue durée* of historical geographies into which we must map our precarious life, in relation to, and with responsibility for, others', argues Kathrin Yusoff (2008: 123). These layers of the Earth's geostory vividly illustrate how fragile memory is amid the drastic environmental transformation we are experiencing. Yet, they also show the limitations of such a linear understanding of memory. 'Within the archival earth, the traces of colonialism are buried deep in the strata,

archiving a past that is behind us', remarks Laura Ogden (2021: 50) while questioning current impulses trying to relegate colonial violence to an event belonging to previous times. How do practices of ice extraction and storage speak of forms of producing time and recovering ancient stories while suppressing others? What is meant to be (un)covered when unearthing ice?

Glacial expeditions: ice correspondences and territorial conflicts

Ice core explorations have been a fundamental part of Peru's scientific history. Since the 1940s, a great number of expeditions in different Andean areas of Peru have aimed to understand the until-then unpredictable and scarcely known behaviour of glaciers and its consequences. Such studies have been of fundamental importance in regions like the Callejón de Huaylas in the Ancash Department, where the presence of these ice bodies, together with the already-then noticeable impacts of climatic fluctuations, have led to the occurrence of glacial lake outburst floods.

As Mark Carey and others (Carey, 2010; Carey et al., 2016) suggest, the joint efforts of scientists and mountaineers were not only key for expanding the knowledge of local glaciers and the threats they entailed for the population downstream but also for the development of a nascent field of glaciology worldwide – endeavours that, as the author remarks elsewhere, also 'enhanced imperial power, exacerbated postcolonial inequalities, and facilitated nation-building projects that simultaneously eroded local authority' (Carey, 2012: 108). Scientists from all over the world have visited the imposing peaks of the Cordillera Blanca, the mountain range with the highest concentration of tropical glaciers in the world (Vuille et al., 2008), in an effort to develop foundational theories on glacial formation, behaviour and reduction. From this long list of glaciologists, both Peruvian and from abroad, two figures have particularly stood out in the last 50 years: Lonnie Thompson and Ellen Mosley-Thompson, a US couple of paleoclimatologists and the main researchers from the Byrd Polar and Climate Research Centre (BPCRC) of Ohio University.

The relationship of Ellen Mosley-Thompson and Lonnie Thompson with the Peruvian Andes is one that extends several decades. They started drilling the ice core of the Quelccaya ice cap in the tropical highlands of southern Peru in the 1970s, at a time when ice core research was mostly focused on the North Atlantic region comprising Greenland,

North America and Europe. Their studies of ice cores in the region were motivated in great part by the lack of historical records that could provide reliable information for reconstructing climate fluctuations from the past thousand years, an exercise that is considered fundamental to assess timescales and climate change amplitudes. Since 'long historical records are geographically restricted to the Orient and West Europe … in the Southern Hemisphere, and especially in South America, the reconstruction of global climate change depend [sic] almost entirely upon proxy records such as ice cores, tree rings, and lake sediments', Thompson and Mosley-Thompson (1987: 99) affirmed at the time. Ice cores, in this sense, were seen as fundamental devices for building the history of world regions 'lacking one'.

The research that Lonnie Thompson and Ellen Mosley-Thompson had been conducting in cores like the Quelccaya ice cap was not only fundamental for placing those regions within history but also for the development of glaciological trends. With their analysis of seasonal cycles in microparticle concentration, dust layers, conductivity and oxygen isotope ratios (Thompson et al., 1979; Thompson et al., 1985), Thompson, Mosley-Thompson and their team were able to challenge the ultimate assumption of ice cores behaving as synchronised bodies with similar growth and ablation rates by showing that asynchronicity between tropical glaciers and polar ice sheets was the norm rather than the exception. This theory, known as tropical asynchrony, put into question the climatic events in the Pleistocene and, in the words of Antonello and Carey (2017: 189), the unity of climate history. 'By synchronising the records of the northern and southern hemispheres', the authors suggest, 'the ice cores have stood as pillars of contemporary visions of a truly global environment, and a global environment not simply of scientific description, but one for political action'. Thompson, Mosley-Thompson and their team's research came to contest such synchronicity by affirming that the advance and retreat of glaciers in low, tropical latitudes was the result of local transitory drivers such as precipitation rates and variations in atmospheric moisture, rather than due to global-scale cooling processes during the Last Glacial Stage (LGS) (Thompson et al., 2005).[2] The dream of a fully synchronised, bipolar climate system was suddenly contested by tropical variabilities.

Thompson and Mosley-Thompson's first approach to the Nevado Huascarán probably took place in 1980, when they visited the peak to drill the core from the surface to a depth of 10 metres, cut it, sampled it, and contrasted the surface values of microparticle concentrations and oxygen isotopes with those collected in Quelccaya some years before

(Thompson et al., 1984). The findings of that comparison allowed them to contrast for the first time different paleoclimatic records from those latitudes, confirming the prevalent conditions of a large part of the tropical Andes and the hypothesis of the team about the strong connections between that region and the Amazon Basin through an annual cycle of large-scale circulation of moisture (Thompson et al., 1984: 4642). This correspondence between the Huascarán and Quelccaya ice cores, a practice they would repeat with other samples worldwide, allowed them to start giving shape to a major narrative of a cryogenic geostory.

Despite being considered less favourable than Quelccaya for obtaining a tropical ice core record, Thompson and Mosley-Thompson organised a second, more ambitious expedition in the Huascarán in 1993 to complement the missing records of LGS conditions and the LGS–Holocene transition in the tropics[3] – a decision driven by its well-preserved records of oxygen isotopes due to Huascarán's location at almost 7,000 metres above sea level (Thompson et al., 2021; Weber et al., 2023). During that expedition, they and other researchers from the BPCRC of Ohio University and Peruvian colleagues visited Huascarán Mountain to drill two ice cores to bedrock of more than 160 metres each. The analysis of the cores at the time allowed Thompson, Mosley-Thompson and their team to analyse the paleoclimate history of 19,000 years, including information about the LGS, the Holocene and the Little Ice Age (Thompson et al., 1995).[4] Paleoclimatic records obtained from this expedition threw a surprising result: while the ice layers on the top of the Huascarán survived the warmest period of the Holocene between 9,000 and 6,000 years ago, the records found did not extend to the last interglacial cycle. Just like in other tropical mountains, such as the Sajama in Bolivia, these findings suggested that the top was free from ice during a time when global temperatures were colder than today. For Thompson, Mosley-Thompson and their team the reason for this result was evident: it was the lack of precipitation during glacial and interglacial periods, confirming the hypothesis of local drivers being fundamental to explaining tropical asynchronicity (Thompson et al., 2005: 728).

Twenty years later in 2019, Lonnie Thompson and his team – this time without Ellen Mosley-Thompson – decided to go back to the Huascarán to conduct a new drilling expedition together with Peruvian peers from INAIGEM – driven this time by the urgent necessity of accessing those paleoclimatic records before their disappearance due to the accelerated retreat of the tropical ice surface. Whereas 'precipitation may have controlled glacier variations in the past, leading to asynchronous changes', affirm Thompson and his team (2005: 731), 'enhanced

greenhouse gas-related warming may presently be the dominant driver, thereby resulting in possibly unprecedented synchronous changes'. Another form of synchronicity was starting to be identified: planetary warming trends shaped by the overarching rhythms of late industrialism.

Urgency was not the only driver to fulfil such an enterprise. The new cores promised to provide valuable data on carbon concentration and other microparticles already explored in previous records and also on atmospheric gases such as methane originating from the Amazon Basin, considered one of the world's primary sources of this greenhouse gas. It was envisioned as a mission that could give unique paleobiological parameters, unearthing new insights into microorganic life and the exchanges of pollen, viruses and bacteria throughout these regions of the past millennia. Huascarán's environmental conditions are considered by Thompson and his team as 'essential for the recovery of what may be the only records of methane concentrations, microbes, and organic species since the Last Glacial Stage from a tropical ice core' (Thompson et al., 2023: 43). The expedition, in this sense, was determined to keep exploring the entangled connections between the Tropical Andes and the Amazon Rainforest and see how the environmental and ecosystem conditions in both regions have varied over time before the ongoing loss of ice material could compromise and eventually delete 'most of the non-polar, ice core-derived climate histories' of this region (Thompson et al., 2023: 32).

After four years of organising all the details for the enterprise, including gathering and testing the right drilling equipment and developing the scientific agreements with Peruvian colleagues and authorities, the project received a green light. A group of nine international scientists, three Peruvian peers, including the glaciologist Wilmer Sánchez, and a dozen local carriers and mountain guides, including Félix Vicencio, Thompson's old friend with whom he had been climbing summits in the regions for decades, were ready to go. In July 2019, the whole research team gathered in Mancos, a town near the Huascarán's foothills where the expedition was staged. There, they had further meetings with authorities, including the former Peruvian president Martín Vizcarra, to explain the details and the whole procedure of the project. Finally, on the 7th of that month, they began moving to the Alpine Hut, from where they started to climb to the places from where the drilling would take place: the Col (the flat glacier area between Huascarán's two peaks) and the South Peak summit, both located more than 6,000 metres above sea level (see Figure 5.2).

The whole enterprise initially progressed without any complications. The drilling began on 31 July; by 2 August, they had already

Figure 5.2 The expedition drilling Huascarán's ice core and collecting samples. © Wilmer Sánchez 2019. Courtesy of the author.

touched the bedrock of the first core, which was achieved for the second core a day later. After packing the drilled ice in 480 tubes and collecting them in a larger snow pit for their preservation, they began the operations to move the samples to the Alpine Hut, from where a helicopter would take them to freezer trucks waiting in the lands below.

However, the easy pace of the enterprise was interrupted at some point. During an advanced stage of the expedition, Thompson would later affirm in an interview, some rumours were starting to be heard about people in Musho, a small village located over the highlands of Mancos and one of the last settlements at Huascarán's foothills, who were against the drilling (Arenschield, 2019). The reason: the use of foreign technology for wicked intentions – primarily associated with mining activities and the search for gold in the Huascarán. Soon, rumours turned into action, with a group from Musho deciding to block the expedition and expel the team.

Thompson and his team describe the situation as one that could have jeopardised the whole programme and put its participants at severe risk, forcing the foreign members of the team to evacuate the area immediately. As Lonnie Thompson would later explain:

> They were very upset. The fact that we were drilling ice cores, they thought we were looking for gold, that we were working for mining

> companies. They were upset because the president of Peru came to visit us in a helicopter and had not bothered to stop in their village. They were upset for a number of reasons, but their arguments against us were that what we were doing was polluting their glacier and their water supply. (Arenschield, 2019)

The inhabitants from Musho gave the team 12 hours to take their equipment off the mountain, a timespan extended to two days after the expedition members told them that it was impossible for them to leave at such short notice. 'But still *our ice* and our equipment were up there' (own emphasis), Thompson later affirmed in the same interview. After a meeting with about 200 people in the town hall of Musho, an agreement between leaders of nearby villages and representatives of the scientific team, Thompson included, was achieved, allowing the mountaineers and porters to remove the ice cores and equipment from the Huascarán by 18 August. After being transported in a helicopter, the samples were placed in freezer trucks waiting in Mancos to transport them to Lima and then to the US. The mission, despite all the inconveniences, was a successful one, after all.

It is important to remark that this is not the first case in the Callejón de Huaylas when local inhabitants attacked scientific projects. In his book *In the Shadow of the Melting Glaciers*, Mark Carey (2010) describes how a group from Shilla, a village in Carhuaz Province, destroyed a pluviometric station next to Lake Auquiscocha and violently expelled the scientist behind the project in 1996. Later, in 2016, a group of comuneros (members of farming communities) destroyed several monitoring stations installed next to Lake 513, also in Carhuaz Province, to inform people downstream about a possible outburst flood coming their way (Usón, 2021). In both cases, the reasons given for the attacks were similar: the machines were scaring away the rain and, thus, were the ultimate explanation for a drought taking place during those years. After the destruction of the early warning system in 2016, it started raining again, confirming the hypothesis raised by comuneros at the time: rather than instruments for making the unstable conditions of the environment something noticeable, scientific devices were a threat to the land's stability.

Conceiving of scientific devices seen as threatening machines is an issue that escapes straightforward accounts. Rather, stories behind these attacks give ambiguous explanations that are politically and historically mediated. While some local voices refer to these attacks as politically driven by local leaders who use these situations as a way of gaining popularity among their communities, other versions emphasise the strong

connection that these actions have with strategies aiming to maintain the relationship with entities like *rajukuna* (snow peaks in the local Quechua) and *qolkakuna* (lakes) in good terms (Usón, 2021). Rather than lifeless elements of the landscape, *rajukuna and qolkakuna* are traditionally conceived as entities that can react in different ways to human presence. Mountains can be protective and caring when humans approach them respectfully, yet violent and aggressive when their limits are trespassed without consent. In a similar way, water bodies like lakes can hide all sorts of treasures that they show in the reflection of their water to visitors, only to then attack and swallow them once they approach to take those riches. Lakes can be vengeful but also compassionate when treated with respect and care. Attacking scientific devices installed close to their presence, in this sense, is also a form of avoiding waking up the anger of the snowed peaks and the consequences that such anger might have for communities living in their foothills. Landslides, avalanches or even scenarios of water scarcity and drought are possible consequences of daring and disrespectful attitudes towards Earth entities.

Yet, scientific devices are also deeply connected with ancient stories of land dispossession and robbery, a pivotal threat throughout the history of the Peruvian Andes. White-looking foreigners, or *gringos*, and mining companies are common protagonists in stories about colonial encounters and capitalist extractivism. As Mirosław Mąka and Elżbieta Jodłowska (2019) suggest, the figure of the *gringo* has been historically related to the figure of the *pishtaco*, a devil, foreign-looking entity that was believed to steal the fat of people to make the best bells for Europe's cathedrals. It is a story that speaks to the cruellest forms of extractivism that colonialism installed in the Andes, one in which lands and bodies were equally exploited on behalf of an emergent international capitalist system. Here, the close relation between extractivist practices and geoscience stressed by Elizabeth Povinelli (2016) is clearly exemplified, suggesting that the fears of local communities about mining activities putting the stability of Huascarán's glaciers at risk were not that unreasonable, after all.

It is in these figures that the attack against scientists deserves an explanation that goes beyond a pure form of 'savagery' and superstition. Whereas Lonnie Thompson and his team were hoping to collect samples that would allow them to keep expanding the correspondences that ice cores can have on a planetary scale, the presence of this foreign team also led to another form of correspondence, one that created a direct connection of those scientists to centuries of extractivism and land conflicts. The unearthing of the ice from the Huascarán, the main *rajukuna* in the region, not only revealed millennia of bioclimatic information condensed

in the depths of frozen time. It was also an action that triggered and activated historical figures of exploitation, those same figures that woke people from Musho to the urgent necessity of defending their land.

Ice, traces, ethics

The story about Thompson's expedition, just like any other attack on scientific projects in the region, is a complex one. It cannot be simply classified as the result of alleged ignorance and savage behaviour – 'another example of the long distance that separates the scientific world from the rural world in Peru', as public opinion tried to catalogue local responses to the presence of the scientists (La República, 2019). Stories of local communities assaulting scientific equipment and expeditions relate more to actions against what they consider a threat to their lands, influenced by the consequences of centuries of colonial and extractivist regimes. But neither is it a story of environmental robbery and stark extractivism.

It would be unfair to say that Thompson and his team did not try to communicate and explain as much as possible the purposes of their expeditions. They offered press conferences in Mancos and other localities next to the Huascarán. They visited schools to raise awareness among children about the importance of glaciers. They met authorities, even the president, to explain the relevance of the mission (Thompson et al., 2023). However, all those efforts were not enough to create a strong bond of trust. 'We are sorry that we didn't stop in Musho at the beginning to explain to you exactly what we were doing', Thompson would later express in front of the angry group of people (Arenschield, 2019) as a way of recognising that things could have been done better.

Certainly, the disconnection between scientists conducting research and the local population is something to be aware of, an issue that is neither new nor surprising. As Aqqaluk Lynge (2008: 101), president of Greenland's Inuit Circumpolar Council, suggests in this regard, 'many of the scientists who come to the Arctic, conducting research for their own purposes, do not view the people of the Arctic [or elsewhere, for this matter] as worthy collaborators or participants'. They are limited to asking for permission, if any, to enter community lands and glacial peaks without building what Max Liboiron (2021: 43) defines as good relations with the Land, with a capital letter: the existential relations 'between the material aspects some people might think of as landscapes – water, soil,

air, plants, stars – and histories, spirits, events, kinships, accountabilities, and other people that aren't human'.

The main conflict in this story might go beyond a lack of a strategy to communicate the expedition's purposes properly. Perhaps it relies on the type of narrations and temporalities that are built around ice as a trace of 'geostorical memory'. As Julie Cruikshank (2005) rightfully suggests, glaciers raise the difficult task of comparing forms of knowledge that, in many cases, are almost impossible to put into dialogue. When understood as a sample, ice acts as a materiality that is dislocated from place and time – a movement that Kathrin Yusoff (2018: 16) connects to 'a mythology of disassociation in the formation of matter independent of its languages of description and the historical constitution of its social relations'. This dislocation from place is what allows scholars like Lonnie Thompson and Ellen Mosley-Thompson to use ice cores as a fundamental geostorical piece in the reconstruction of the past of places *without history*, elements that speak more about the geostory of the planet and its unique asynchronicities. As Martín Fonck (2024) suggests, ice traces help in dealing with the absence left by the temporal discontinuities of deep time through visible features that are cryogenically stored in them. However, anything that escapes from that *major* exchange of data trends and patterns are excluded.

But ice can be much more than bioclimatic data. As an element that freezes and condenses the possibilities of life towards the future, local communities understand that any disruption of ice in the snowed peaks where it is located can entail dramatic consequences for life in the Andes – for the scarcity of water it can generate in the future but also due to the excess that ice and water, as an uncontrollable flow, can represent. This fragile condition relates to future possibilities as fragile as the ice threatened by climate change. It is no surprise, then, that any possible threat to the stability of ice bodies in the Cordillera Blanca is received with discontent by people living in its vicinity. The glaciologists' efforts of unearthing a lost history frozen in the ice cores of the Huascarán is precisely what, for people in Musho, might lead to the destruction of their future.

'The goal of ice coring is not necessarily to create human history, but these discussions clearly insert human time into the ice core equation—with nationalist, triumphalist, and environmentalist historical narratives', Alessandro Antonello and Mark Carey (2017: 191) remark. The strident impetus for creating history in those places where history seems to be non-existent is exactly what recognising the multiple stories hidden

within ice archives may help to contest. As Laura Ogden affirms, archives are more than a collection of facts, data, texts, visual material, or any other format containing traces of the past. They are, above all, sites structured around the logic defining how the world is (and can be) known while setting the proper terms in which the past should be encountered. 'Not everything gets in, only things that matter', the author suggests (Ogden, 2021: 12). But what matters and how is never an innocent definition; it is shaped by concrete forms of understanding the world and its particularities – so is who is in the position of defining those particularities. When working with ice as a source to access the planet's history, especially in those regions 'lacking an ancient history', scholars like Lonnie Thompson and Ellen Mosley-Thompson are shaping what counts as part of the glacial archive. They are, in other words, implicitly defining which elements and stories become part of history and which ones are to be sifted out of the ice.

Yet, archives can – and should – be more. Archives are arrangements that are reinterpreted over and over again with every new question that is being posed to them. Archives are fragmentary and incomplete, but as the French historian Alain Corbin (2001) has shown, even 'the life of an unknown' can be recovered from archives with the help of wider contexts and the imagination. Thus, archives might also have the capacity to integrate stories and lives that escape the most immediate impulses of scientific enterprises. Ice is a form of archive that incorporates the conflicts associated with the climate crisis that, in a way, its own fragility evokes. These conflicting temporalities that ice arouses demand a revision of the sources, explanations, consequences and actors involved in those ongoing conflicts.

Rather than restricting the extraction of ice cores from glaciers, perhaps wider ethical considerations would involve expanding the type of stories that ice as an archive can contain and preserve, beyond its glaciological or climate scientific purposes. Stories of climatic transformation might then converge with stories of extractivism and land robbery, and also stories of territorial defence and security claims amid ongoing hydrological crises and environmental uncertainties. Such an ethical expansion might allow the fragile existence of ice to be re-earthed – as a threatened geological trace and as an entity that gives and takes life away – while expanding the role that science fulfils in recognising the earthly condition of ice and all the multiplicities it carries. As Lonnie Thompson recognises in the interview conducted some months after the incident, 'it doesn't matter if you are in Bolivia, in New Guinea or the Tibet, glaciers are sacred places where the gods live'. What, then, do those gods have to say about the geostory of ice?

Notes

1. Excerpt from an interview conducted by the German TV news programme *Tagesschau* on 9 January 2025. Accessed 15 January 2025. Available at: https://www.tagesschau.de/multimedia/sendung/tagesschau_20_uhr/ts-68918.html.
2. Also known as the Last Glacial Cycle, LGS is the period spanning from the end of the Last Interglacial period 115,000 years ago to the beginning of the Holocene 11,700 years ago. Part of a larger sequence of glacial and interglacial periods of more than 2.5 million years known as the Quaternary glaciation, LGS is considered the last major moment of planetary cooling and glacier advance – despite the strong regional differences that the tropical asynchrony theory promoted by Ellen Mosley Thompson and Lonnie Thompson suggests. See Ellen C. Corrick et al. (2020) for a synchronous analysis of climate transformations during the LGS.
3. The transition between the LGS and the Holocene, the official current geological epoch, took place 11,700 years ago. The Holocene is defined as an ongoing interglacial stage within the glacial cycles of the Quaternary period. Due to its much more stable climatic conditions, the Holocene is considered a fundamental period for the proliferation of human life on Earth. The scientific community is still divided on whether the Holocene is still the current geological epoch or whether there is sufficient evidence to set the Anthropocene as the current epoch. See Phillip Gibbard et al. (2022) for a careful review of the debate – and a possible alternative to an epochal view of the Anthropocene.
4. A late period of regional cooling spanning from 1,300 to ca. 1,850 CE. Despite the increased glaciation in diverse regions during this period, including Europe, North America and Patagonia in South America, it is considered mostly a modest period of anomalous cold taking place mainly in the northern hemisphere and without a globally synchronous increased glaciation. See Raymond S. Bradley (1999).

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Part II
Occlusions

6
Medical wax moulages and regimes of looking and overlooking

Órla O'Donovan and Róisín O'Gorman[1]

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the predominant technology for learning how to look for and at diseases on the skin were expertly crafted and mass-produced medical wax moulages. Moulages played a critical role in establishing the authority of dermatology, venereology and pathology, and moulding their scientific imaginaries of diseases, especially syphilis. These emerging medical specialisations relied heavily on an ocular epistemology and on very particular ways of looking. They depended on visual evidence in their detection, diagnosis and treatment of the disease. Thus, in educational textbooks, atlases and medical models, accurately reproducing the visible signposts of syphilis – the colour, texture and patterns of primary chancres or secondary rashes – was of preeminent importance (Pierce, 2020: 116). These are what medical professionals were trained to look for in moulages in their disciplinary 'arts of noticing' (Tsing, 2010).

But to only look at the advancement of new medical disciplines misses the complexity of what these remnants archive. Considering material histories of moulage collections and the acts of looking they record allows us to bring looking itself into focus – that is, to make visible inherited processes that Mirzoeff (2011: 476) calls the 'complex of visuality' which operates through 'classifying, separating, and aestheticising'. These practices and frameworks of knowledge production persist in contemporary medical, military and socio-political spheres to the point of what Achille Mbembe (in conversation with Goldberg, 2018) calls 'separation mania' and where surveillance society pervades all aspects of contemporary life, ever more normalised, with those marked 'other' subjected to ever more relentless and ruthless surveillance (Beaumont, 2024).

Crafted using techniques that included making plaster casts directly on lesions on the diseased skin of living people, many of whom were poor and incarcerated, moulages were used globally in medical education prior to the wide availability of colour clinical photography. Although we approach them as troubling institutional inheritances (King et al., 2021; O'Donovan, 2021), a prevailing understanding of moulages is that they are 'medical gems from bygone days' (Worm et al., 2018: 570). A 2008 article in *Nature* celebrates the 'hidden treasures' in the Museum of Wax Moulages in Zurich and describes how 'the powerfully realistic models of diseases' continue to be used in medical education in Switzerland. It outlines how medical students enjoy learning to look at moulages and 'practising their red-spot recognition skills in the museum' where they find moulages superior to photographs when learning how to assess subtle differences in the manifestation of diseases. The article notes that many of the casts in the Zurich collection show symptoms of venereal diseases, including moulages of 'facial deformities of women infected with syphilis, who were locked into wards during treatment' (Abbott, 2008: 172).

Many collections internationally include moulages crafted using the bodies of women suffering from venereal diseases who were incarcerated in 'lock hospitals', patriarchal and classed institutions of public health disease regimes of care-as-violence. For example, and as discussed later, the British 1864, 1866 and 1869 Contagious Diseases Acts made provision for the confinement of women with venereal diseases in such 'hospitals'. Black Studies scholar Christina Sharpe (2018: 174) reminds us that the concept of care is 'freighted with all kinds of raced, gendered, and colonial histories'. She calls on us to distinguish care from state-imposed regimes of violence and surveillance, noting that in our financialised present 'saving and killing often look a lot the same as far as black people are concerned'. Many women whose bodies were used to produce moulages were effectively 'prisoners of war' (Janke, 2006) in what was imagined as a war on venereal disease that necessitated the incarceration of women who were deemed to be dangerous, expendable and reducible to scientific things. As we elaborate in this chapter, wax moulage collections archive medical ways of looking, but also the vampiric relations of military medicine and its sexually transmitted disease regimes in which the vitality of men in the military fed on women's, especially sex workers', demise (Benjamin, 2018).

Internationally, many moulage collections are now being unearthed. Some are being digitally archived, others are being re-exhibited, but many languish in the limbo of university and museum storage facilities. For example, Eva Åhrén and Sabina Cararro (2022) have written

about efforts in Stockholm to 'revive' the forgotten moulage collection in the storage facility of the now-disused Medical History Museum, the largest moulage collection in Nordic countries. These moves to unearth and revive moulage collections are provoking questions about the ethics of care, preservation, display of moulages and also about looking at and researching them. Åhrén and Cararro (2022: 144) argue that moulages are

> remarkable documents of the past that need to be preserved for the future. There is a lot to be learned from moulages, not just about physicians, treatments, wax modelling techniques and the materials involved, moulage makers, and exhibition practices of the past, but also about patients' lives and experiences.

In this chapter, we argue that moulages can also teach us much about the 'percepticidal' regimes of looking and overlooking within which they were crafted and used and that continue to haunt the present. As theorised by the performance studies scholar Diane Taylor (1997), percepticide refers to maiming and killing of and through the senses. While her analysis of the politics of looking relates to the very different context of the Argentinian Dirty War (1976–83) and its 'disappearing acts', we find the concept insightful as it reminds us of how power can be exercised in looking and of the potentially lethal consequences of certain acts of looking and looking away. It attunes us to how universities and museums are inheritors not only of heritage moulage collections but also of violent epistemic habits of looking and overlooking, arts of noticing and disappearing, that were co-produced with them.

Like Taylor, the goal of our work with moulages 'is to make visible again, not the invisible or imagined, but that which is clearly *there* but not allowed to be seen' (Taylor, 1997: 27; emphasis in original). The performance of the modern scientific look as neutral or objective is part of current as well as past social imaginaries and has long been critiqued by feminists as the impossible 'god trick of seeing everything from nowhere' (Haraway, 1988: 581). We bring attention to what is unseen, erased and disappeared in inherited ways of looking at moulages, to that which is moved to the background so that something else can take centre stage.

Using archival fragments, we offer three historical scenes that allow us to look at ways of looking in the particular contexts surrounding the production in France and use of wax moulages in nineteenth-century Ireland. These are scenes of medical military venereal disease control, state-imposed regimes of violence, looking and overlooking. Alongside

these scenes, we consider several ethical challenges of looking at moulage heritage collections.

Can we look at moulages in ways that do not reproduce the violent regimes of looking and overlooking within which they were crafted and used? Can we learn to look in ways that reject the objectifying and ostensibly objective ways of looking they were used to teach? How might we learn more careful modes of looking that see beyond what medical moulages were originally intended to show? Focusing mainly on the nineteenth-century collection at University College Cork, we begin by tracing the regimes of looking entangled in moulages and then turn to these questions about ethical ways of looking that they provoke.

Instead of approaching this as a 'to look or not to look' debate, we offer ways of looking at ourselves looking at moulages. This requires attending to the physicality of our gaze and acknowledging our own embodiment and vulnerability in the face of disease. Crucially, it also requires attending to how we are inheritors of extractive and violent epistemic habits and ways of looking that are sedimented into contemporary academic disciplines.

In this chapter, we focus on how we might learn to look differently when working with moulages and related archival material. How might we learn new visual rhetorics that see beyond habitual ways of looking? Just as moulages are both works of art and science, we are attempting to develop methodologies that surpass the either/or of academic and artistic, reason and emotion, and which are both discursive and sensual, generating thinking and feeling.

Disrupting the traditional privileging and understanding of textual archival evidence, we join those other bands of scholars researching archival 'traces' (e.g. Douglas, 2022). This requires new ways of looking at archival matter. The methodology we imagine looks out for 'lively' fragments but allows for the unknown and unknowability of the lives of those whose traces are found in the archive and who are not retrievable from it. Learning from Saidiya Hartman (2008), we exercise 'narrative restraint', refusing to fill in the gaps and provide closure. But it is a methodology that notices what usually goes unnoticed, that which is relegated to the background and deemed to be of no significance. It searches for traces that encourage speculation not only about what happened in the past but what else might have happened, 'unrealised yet fully realisable past futures' (Laird, 2018: 2). Additionally, as a reassembling tactic/method (Agostinho, 2019: 145), tracing brings together that which has been deemed unrelated or disparate.

Rejecting aims of closure and reconciliation, which motivate what Tuck and Yang (2012: 35) refer to as 'moves to innocence', our work with the Cork moulage collection cannot be comprehensive and there are no expectations of resolution. But we are making a start in unsettling prevailing modes of looking at and looking away from moulage collections, a deschooling of conventional ways of looking and understanding, a 'meta curriculum of unlearning' (Snyder et al., 2019). We are searching for ways of looking that will help us to learn to live well with moulage collections and see their histories and legacies differently.

The wax moulage collection at University College Cork

Conventional histories of medical wax moulages tell a story of the pantheon of great men who pushed forward the sciences of dermatology, venereology and pathology, and of the gentle handicraft artisans who crafted moulages with care (Loser et al., 2013). The collection at University College Cork was crafted by the premier mouleur Jules Baretta between 1867 and 1887 at the Saint Louis Hospital in Paris, then a centre of moulage production. Allegedly, Baretta would calm the person during the painful casting process with soothing piano playing and the gentleness of a mother (Roger-Miles, 1891; King et al., 2021). Unlike the University of Zurich, but like many other universities internationally, the Cork collection is no longer exhibited and most of the moulages are now in plastic boxes in the university's heritage storage facilities, in the company of many other supposedly useless and obsolete research and pedagogical artefacts from the past.

Evidence of nineteenth-century scientific separation mania, the collection is made up of 147 moulages of disassembled body parts including hands, feet, genitals, faces, cervixes, legs, backs and breasts. Elsewhere (King et al., 2021) we have considered the materiality of the moulages, and the queer matter of wax itself. They are not stable things, ontologically or perceptually; rather, they are 'lively assemblage in process' (O'Donovan, 2021: 234). Many were cast using the bodies of people with ulcerated flesh, making them archives of agony that continue to trigger a range of affective responses that includes but is not limited to revulsion, sympathy and awe.

It isn't possible to consider the entire collection in this chapter. It is troubling to reproduce an image of a moulage; we do so here in order to ask: how can we look otherwise?

An image of a tongue that was crafted by Baretta in 1868 from the University College Cork heritage collection inventory is reproduced in Figure 6.1. Notice how you look at it. Do you want to linger or look away? What catches your eye? This is one of the eight moulages of tongues, a body part we will return to later.

The inventory tells us that it is a replication and describes it as follows: 'Cast of lower face and tongue mounted on black-painted board. With the original label in French and the typewritten label with translation in English. Board possibly repainted.' Further archival details are available from the Université Paris Cité, which has a digital archive of

Figure 6.1 Wax moulage of the lower part of a face with open mouth and disease shown on tongue. Photo: Margaret Lantry, University Curator, Heritage Services, Buildings and Estates, University College Cork.

moulages crafted and replicated by Baretta. That source tells us the moulage is of 'syphilitic plaques of the tongue' and was crafted using the face and tongue of a 49-year-old woman who worked as a domestic servant. The art historian Mary Hunter (2008: 47) argues that many moulages are 'evidence that casting was an invasive and uncomfortable process as it demanded that wet plaster be applied to open sores, rash-covered skin, and the body's most sensitive openings'. We can only speculate about how the woman experienced the process, possibly gagging from the wet plaster in her mouth and breathing through straws up her nose.

Included in the Cork collection are some 'before' and 'after' moulages that were likely to have been produced and used in medical research. The collection exhibited in Zurich also includes 'before' and 'after' moulages, and the archives there tell us this research included experiments involving the deliberate infection of women and children incarcerated in locked hospitals and orphanages (Abbott, 2008).

To date, the archives at University College Cork have remained largely silent about the procurement and history of use of the moulages. Highly fragile, many in the collection are in good condition, but others are cracked and broken, probably due to improper storage. Most of the moulages, 140 of them, are in the storage facilities of the university's Heritage Services. The remaining seven are no longer used but reside in the Pathology Museum, where their companion specimens include 'wet specimens' of body parts purchased in the nineteenth century from a military hospital in Malta. Nineteen of the moulages are discoloured and listed in the inventory as 'damaged, dirty'. It is possible they were blackened from prolonged use in rooms heated by coal fires. Like many other moulage collections internationally, syphilis is the disease represented most frequently in the collection. These include casts of the ulcerated genitals of both women and men.

Originally for men students only and called Queen's College Cork, University College Cork was established in 1845, when the British colonial strategy of submission through famine was at its height (McVeigh and Rolston, 2021). In Ireland, during *An Gorta Mór* or the Great Famine between 1845 and 1852, more than a million people died from starvation and related diseases, and another million emigrated. Referred to as 'Black 47', 1847 witnessed a peak in the colonial-contrived catastrophe designed to cleanse the land of surplus populations. For us, the moulage collections are traces of the university's historical entanglement with the global institutional networks of British colonial-militaristic-patriarchy. They offer us cryptic fragments from the past that we are unable to decipher but we read them through weaving historical records with speculative embodied reimaginings (see King et al., 2021).

Working with moulages as troubling institutional inheritances

Moulages are not static but lively assemblages, always in process (King et al., 2021; O'Donovan, 2021). They are enduring and agential material traces of painful entanglements between people, institutions and materials and intersecting regimes of health, class, gender, race and colonialism that prevailed in nineteenth-century Europe. They bear mixed traces of human suffering but also of creativity, hope and survival.

Moulages are troubling inheritances in at least three respects. Firstly, they are troubling because they were often crafted in exploitative and painful processes. Many collections are archives of colonial and patriarchal military medicine, reverberating records of violent encounters with power (Hartman, 2008). Secondly, moulages are also troubling because of their ontological ambiguity that unsettles prevailing distinctions between past and present, human remains and artefacts, and art and science. There are striking differences between moulages and anatomical wax models and their idealised representations of the human body in which 'every sign of disease, death, and decay' (Schnalke, 2004: 213) was banned. They differ not only because they depict pathologies but also due to the immediate material relation between them and the bodies of those from whom they were cast. Thirdly, these startling entities that have 'the unsettling arousals of the freak show, but also the ineffable tremor of possibility' (Werry, 2022: 166) probe us to consider a series of ethical questions about looking at and researching moulages and their contemporary use and exhibition.

We have already listed some of the questions they persist in probing us to consider. Other questions can be added, including whether they should be unearthed, archived and exhibited. How can we relate to them beyond the 'complex of visuality' (Mirzoeff, 2011) and the urge to stare and inspect? Can they be exhibited in ways that avoid telling what Eve Tuck (2018) refers to as 'pain stories', the staple of so much research in the humanities and social sciences in which the subaltern can speak but only about their pain. How can they be exhibited to do more than recount the violence that deposited them in university archives (Hartman, 2008)? We have speculated about if and how the moulages might be put to queer use, to borrow Sara Ahmed's (2019) term that refers to how entities can be used in ways that were not originally intended or by those for whom they were not intended. How might they put pressure on what is publicly allowed to speak to or for those rendered absent by the archives of

powerful institutions, and how can we listen to that speech (King et al., 2021)? In the terminology of Derridean hauntology, how might we learn to see and listen to the ghosts that haunt moulage collections (Henriksen, 2024)? We have speculated about if and how we can care for and craft kinship (Benjamin, 2018) with moulage collections and the dead whose bodies were used to make them.

Together with a University College Cork-based research group, the Living Well with the Dead Research Collective, we have experimented with working with the moulages in ways that strive to go beyond the ocularcentrism of Western epistemologies (Alvarez Astacio et al., 2021) and use sensory registers relegated to lower rungs on the tree of knowledge. As a response to archival silences, we have already begun prefiguring how we might cultivate ways of listening that reach beyond habitual hearing and become attuned to registers of sound that cannot be grasped easily, where what is missing comes to matter.

Tracing scenes of percepticidal looking and overlooking

Collections of moulages are traces of the sorting and separation mania that Achille Mbembe (in conversation with Goldberg 2018: 206) argues has been crucial to the history of capitalism:

> the compulsion to put things in order as a precondition for extracting their inner value. It is the compulsion to categorise, to separate, to measure and to name, to classify and to establish equivalences between things and between things and persons, persons and animals, animals and the so-called natural, mineral, and organic world.

Fundamental to the economic and epistemic logics of capitalism is the compulsion to separate what is useful from waste. The mutating yet enduring patriarchal variant of this is the separation of the pure from the impure. For Mbembe, a challenge facing the ongoing histories of slavery is the question 'of how to retrieve the human from a history of waste'. The history of medicine is entangled in this history of waste. Researching a restaged collection of wax moulages in Lisbon, Cristiana Bastos (2017) emphasises the uncertainties surrounding how women came to submit to the painful casting process. She notes that the 'Magdalene' infirmary at the hospital where they were produced was regarded as more of a 'dumping ground' than hospital, raising questions about the classification of

the women as patients. Adding complexity to the compulsion to separate what is useful from waste, her work suggests that the women were regarded as human waste that could be unearthed and repurposed to become useful things. In that very unsettling and affecting exhibition (that one of the authors has visited), moulages made using the bodies of people suffering from venereal diseases are displayed together with 'patient' notes. Crafted in 1939, one moulage is of the vulva of a named 26-year-old woman who was six months pregnant. The moulage points to a venereal disease regime in which some women's bodies were subjected to intense public surveillance and their 'privates' made very public (Kapsalis, 1997). This woman is not retrievable from this history of waste, and the harm done to her cannot be undone. However, attending to the percepticidal harms enmeshed in the moulage offers us ways of learning to look differently.

Let us now turn to our research of archival traces in which we bring together the Cork collection of moulages with fragments of textual archival materials, feminist speculation and alternative archives of histories of hurt. Predictably, the full lives of the named and celebrated great men of science and public health, who we are encouraged to look up to, feature prominently in historical accounts and archival records. They play the lead roles in the archival scenes we offer below, which provide glimpses into their various ways of looking and overlooking. Following Line Henriksen's (2024) work, these scenes can also be regarded as fragments of ghost stories that notice the erasure of vampiric processes of rendering human waste.

Archival scene 1: a doctor's practice in Paris

Alfred Fournier was an internationally renowned nineteenth-century specialist in syphilis and one of the physicians in the Saint Louis Hospital under whose direction the Cork collection of moulages was produced. Before going to the Saint Louis Hospital in 1880, he was 'chef de service' at the women's hospital at Lourcine, where he specialised in treating women suffering from syphilis. A professor of medicine at the University of Paris, Fournier's research relied on the accumulation of case histories. He recorded case histories that involved looking at 842 people suffering from syphilis (Harsin, 1989). Fournier has been described as 'the Voltaire of pelvic literature – a sceptic as to the morality of the race in general, who would have submitted Diana to treatment with his mineral specifics and ordered a course of blue pills to the vestal virgins' (cited in Waugh,

1974: 232). Fournier's rabid compulsion to look and his belief that every cervix is suspect is depicted in a 1908 caricature of him as a speculum-slinging enthusiast.[2]

Historian Jill Harsin (1989) has traced Fournier's significance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century history of syphilis in France and its gendered and classed disease regime. During this period, the registration and regular examination of women sex workers was extended to all of France, resulting in 'the subjection of thousands of prostitutes to harsh and frequently arbitrary regulation' (Harsin, 1989: 72). In contrast, 'respectable middle-class women in France who did become ill were likely to be inadequately treated, if treated at all'. Although life-threatening to bourgeois women, it was a disease regime in which 'it was not considered appropriate for respectable women to know about the disease, or to speak of it if they knew' (Harsin, 1989: 73). Deemed to be blameless sufferers, their suffering nonetheless remained unexamined, and many of them were sacrificed. While reputedly sympathetic to the plight of these women, many died by being overlooked, ignored and their condition unseen. Symptoms of syphilis were there, but in the case of these women, they were not allowed to be seen.

Policing, militarism and medicine were closely entangled in this brutal regime of state violence and rape in the name of public health. Hospital staff frequently reported women to the police, as venereal disease was regarded as evidence of prostitution. In an 1873 publication, Fournier includes a note about an unregistered prostitute who was held responsible for infecting several officers at a military garrison in Paris. He describes how, in the presence of a large number of students (cited in Harsin, 1989: 82), the woman was forced to submit to a complete and lengthy examination of the cervix. This punishing form of looking is at the other extreme of overlooking, looking forcibly and publicly, enacted on women who were made responsible for the spread of syphilis.

Women found to be suffering from venereal disease were subjected to forcible confinement and social death. Incarceration was combined with conversion to the status of a dehumanised scientific thing (Roque, 2014). Fournier's assertion that 'a wealth of teaching material was to be found in the Lock hospitals' (cited in Harsin, 1989) testifies to the location of these women at the interface of the human and the object. This is the femicidal disease regime within which the moulages in the Cork collection of the bodies of women suffering from syphilis were crafted, a regime that is impressed upon the troubling inheritance.

Archival scene 2: public health in practice in Ireland

Just as the moulage collection at University College Cork travelled from France to Ireland, the French disease regime impressed upon them also moved across national borders. Enforced in pre-independence Ireland, the nineteenth-century British Contagious Diseases Acts – which ultimately met with significant public opposition – were modelled on the French system of regulation of prostitution. The legislation made provision for compulsory medical examination of women suspected of engaging in prostitution in specified militarised districts, one of which was Cork.

Giving evidence to the British House of Commons Select Committee on the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1881, Henry Reed, chaplain to the Cork Lock Hospital, reported that between 1872 and 1881, 693 women were admitted to the Cork Lock Hospital, eight of whom were under 16 years of age. Recognising the violence of the examination, as a supporter of the legislation he asserted that the 'horror' of the compulsory examinations could serve as a deterrent to young women from embarking upon an 'immoral life' (Select Committee on the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1881: 279).

Medical preoccupation with sorting and separation extended beyond venereal diseases and their stages to categories of infected women. Rawton MacNamara, senior surgeon of the Westmoreland Lock Hospital in Dublin, also gave evidence to the Select Committee. He argued that 'there should be an effort at classification' (Select Committee on the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1881: 297). In particular, he advocated the segregation of those who were to be pitied rather than censured (such as women infected by their husbands) from 'absolute prostitutes' and 'trollops from the quays'. Class disdain and physical repulsion infused the surgeon's evidence about this 'class of prostitutes'. Explaining the hospital's insistence that these women get a bath on admission, he said that otherwise 'we could not bear to go and examine them; they stink so'. A combination of dirt and disease caused the 'stink from them [that] is so offensive that it would make your stomach sick'. The archives provide many traces that help us speculate about the physicality of the doctors' sorting ways of looking at the women they were examining and their grimaces of disgust and revulsion.

A final question put to Rawton MacNamara by a member of the Select Committee was if women in private practice were examined the same way as those subjected to the compulsory examinations under the Contagious Diseases Acts. Equating modesty with submission, he

replied: 'I must say that the more modest the woman is the more willing she is to submit herself to the examination; it is the old habitueés who make the most fuss about it' (Select Committee on the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1881: 294). Histories of the moulage-making process (Schnalke, 2004) tell us that a moulage could not be crafted using the body of a person 'making a fuss', unless they were restrained, as the process requires remaining still in order for the plaster cast to dry. Rather than being evidence of the gifting of the use of their bodies to medicine, to use contemporary parlance, moulages are possibly evidence of the submission, stilling or coercion of severely ill people who endured the painful casting process.

Archival scene 3: disorder at the Cork Lock Hospital

But there are archival traces of resistance to the venereal disease regimes and their violent ways of looking and overlooking that many moulages materialise. The chaplain to the Cork Lock Hospital was asked if there were any 'disorderly scenes' at the hospital where women were forced to submit to vaginal examinations. He replied that 'bad language might sometimes be used by these women under the influence of drink; they might use offensive language or get into some kind of scold' (Select Committee on the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1881: 282).

Drawing on the tradition of feminist speculation, we speculate about these 'positively revolting' women (to use Mary Daly's (1979) term) that the chaplain witnessed getting into a 'scold'. This was once a legal term for a loud and quarrelsome woman. Although illegal, 'scolds' bridles', iron masks used to hurt and humiliate and suppress the tongues of unruly women, were employed by local magistrates in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were also used on the enslaved in America. However, 'scold' has its origins in the Scandinavian word *skāld*, meaning poet. Although colonial suppression of the Irish language had been largely successful by the end of the nineteenth century, we imagine these women involved in the disorderly scenes at the Cork Lock Hospital 'looking back' and uttering a string of angry curses in their mother tongue or *as Gaeilge*. We imagine it as a lament in the tradition of the *caoineadh* or cry, an Irish tradition of women's oral poetry (Bourke, 1988), but one that combines lamenting with yearning, evoking pasts and futures. Sounding the archive in this way for 'sympathetic vibrations' (King et al., 2021) is to hear beyond the major notes to the sounds in other registers and here we extend that to consider the acts of looking, to see how we see.

A taste for looking

There is much work on looking and seeing, including on the medical gaze that we won't rehearse here (Foucault, 1973; Haraway, 1988; Sontag, 2004; Berger, 2008; Mirzoeff, 2011; Campt, 2017). Instead, we pull focus to the materiality and physical score of looking, for example, who has to lower their gaze and who gets to stare at leisure? What are the epistemic habits of looking naturalised in our research practices? We need to look at looking; that is, we need to look at how we look.

Let's consider a partial index of ways of looking:

A glance – quick or sideways
A stare (in a range of modes: furtive, longing, deadly)
A glare
A gawk
Ogle
Eyeball
Peep
Linger
Glimpse
Peek
Peruse
Gawp

A long look, a longing look, a loving look, a lusty look, a look that separates, keeps apart, a haptic look that would touch, linger.

Looks have a physical embodiment, and many have a time register ranging from quick to slow and range on a scale from direct to indirect, moving or stilling. The physicality of looking is crucial to understanding the politics of looking. As in the scenes outlined above, looks can kill. Looks also have a social value (good-looking). Looks communicate emotions (love, hate, disgust, apathy, pity). And looks are part of social norms (think, for example, of eye contact as a normative, trust-building practice in neurotypical culture).

Moulages activate strong visual responses, and our eyes pore over the contours, or we look away. We gawk, stare, are drawn in, and at the same time, can't really look, can't really stay with the staring. The root of 'to stare' is to become rigid. We remember from disabilities studies scholar Garland Thomson that 'Staring shows us how we look at and look at each other. … In other words, things happen when people stare' (2009: 4). Though her focus is on live encounters and the struggle between *starer* and *staree*, here we consider how the spaces of staring at

the dead (or those dominated) and their effects (such as the moulage of the face and tongue in Figure 6.1), are open season for the starer.

Garland Thomson's attention to the processes and practices of starer and staree remind us that not only are moulages an account of seeing in a particular way, but they also alert us to the storytelling of the starers – the ones who get to look and select, to sort, to decide who and what is in which category and stabilise a value system. (Although she adds (Thomson, 2009: 7) that 'Staring encounters nonetheless draft *starees* into a story of the starer's making, whatever that story might be, whether they like it or not'.) As starers we are drafting the moulages into other stories, whether they like it or not. However, we are not only staring at the rendered-down human; we also stare at the processes of rendering and the disease and looking regimes within which they took and continue to take place.

Another way of looking/back

Alongside the image of the moulage of the tongue in the Cork collection, we offer a different one, from the Irish artist Alice Maher, who has created alternative archives of the histories of hurt of bodies mythic and particular in the Irish landscape and history (see Figure 6.2). Her exhilarating, surreal and simultaneously visceral work screams through a stare that would silence any looker. Notice how you look at it. Do you want to linger or look away? What catches your eye?

She holds our gaze even as we also take in the grotesque necklace that is potent, vile and provocative beyond language, which cannot bear this suffering, this violence, this gaze. Through the evocation of poise, pose and legacies of portraiture she uses the frame to hold against the impossible tensions of the violence represented in the 'grisly trophies' (Dunne, 2001) of ripped-out lambs' tongues repurposed to adorn the neck of this figure – queen or captive, we don't know. We are caught in the stilling, gaping at the impossibility of this image, the quivering violence distilled into a feral regime. The artist's stare could be many things, but we evoke it here as the rebuke of the skald, the poesis of making out of pain – her stare speaks to and of the unspeakable.

In David Lloyd's (2012) commentary on Alice Maher's purely visual artwork that uses animal body parts, he argues that the shadow of tactility is ever present, making it impossible for the looker not to imagine the slick feel of the collar of tongues. A necklace of tongues that features in other work by Maher tells, but departs from conventional tellings of, the story of Cassandra in Greek tragedy, the princess of Troy who was cursed

Figure 6.2 *Necklace*, Alice Maher, 2003. © Alice Maher, 2003.

by Apollo for refusing his advances with a gift of prophecy and the burden of never being believed. For Lloyd, that image

> seems at once to allude with casual cruelty to that terrifying tongue that has taken on an unbiddable life of its own and to its helpless futility, prophesying frantically to ears that will not hear. And yet Cassandra's apparently comfortable familiarity with this organic adornment and the enigmatic smile that crosses her face as she faces us, betray a different knowledge, an older one born of stone and flesh, one that draws from our initial shock a baffled desire to comprehend. (Lloyd, 2012: n.p.)

We have noticed how Lloyd's description of looking – the evocation of tactile registers and the trajectories from shock to a desire to understand – resonates with how we have experienced looking at the moulage collection. It is impossible not to begin to imagine the experience and

feel of the making of moulage on our own skins (plaster heating up and drying on open sores). The shock of seeing painful conditions recorded in wax confronts us with unimaginable suffering – both of infection and of the moulage-making process.

This is just one example of the potential to disrupt the scopic regimes that catalogue us into very narrow confines of institutional corridors. Imaginary acts, though incomplete, open up looking to include what is not seen but that yet persists: the shadows of tactile, affective, embodied, unspeakable experiential hauntings from the past. Yet, as Mbembe reminds us, the acts of repair are continuous; there's not one way to meet the stare of the de-tongued skald. We grapple with histories of hurt, not just to evoke pain stories that repeat harm and shock but to address the structures, practices and perceptions that allow these harms to be repeated in many different guises. In tracing collections, then, we attend to the ways in which we are trained to look and overlook what is naturalised or accepted.

This approach to moulages and related archival traces is not about the compulsion to categorise and separate what is useful from waste, as theorised by Mbembe, or to digitise them so they are rendered ready for inspection by all. We imagine different ethics and politics of unearthing that lead to new forms of looking, thinking and relating to the residual materialities left by the colonial capitalist compulsion to categorise, separate, measure and name, classify and establish equivalences to enable extraction. The ways of looking we propose ask: Who gets to look at whom? Who is rendered the agent, and who is the object? What do the traces of the bioarchive open up in the spaces between over and under looking?

Notes

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2. Caricature of Alfred Fournier. Accessed 22 May 2025. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caricature_of_Alfred_Fournier_Wellcome_L0009960.jpg.

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7

A ‘rare and invaluable’ gift: Indigenous bodies, academic prestige and anthropological practice

Diego Ballestero

On 7 January 1908, the German physician Hans Virchow (1852–1940), professor at the Anatomisches Institut of the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin and son of the famous German physician Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902), looked at the package he had been waiting months for. Anxiously, he untied the knots of the wrapping and could see with his eyes what he described as a ‘rare and invaluable’ gift: the head of Kryygi, a young Aché girl from Paraguay (Virchow, 1908a). It was sent from Argentina by anthropologist Robert Lehmann-Nitsche (1872–1938), head of the anthropological section of the Museo de La Plata. This type of ‘gift-giving’ between anthropologists was a regular and globally widespread practice, encapsulating the epistemic violence embedded in anthropology’s knowledge matrix and exemplifying the coloniality of knowledge in action (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel, 2007).

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, a key epistemological imperative in anthropological practice had been the demand for extensive osteological collections, particularly skulls. Their apparent material immutability and resistance to deterioration endowed them with an aura of permanence, which seemed to allow the anthropologists of that time to capture the supposed racial hierarchies they had conceived. Under this physical-racialist paradigm, it was assumed possible to establish, by standardised calculations and measurements on cranial series, the distinctive features of the typical skull of each human group classified as a ‘race’. These ideal types would then be confronted with each other in comparative grids that sought to taxonomically define the supposed hierarchies and differences underlying human diversity.

Thus, nineteenth-century physical anthropology turned the skull into a racialising fetish, denying the historicity of peoples to naturalise them as static biological-cultural segments susceptible to immutable hierarchies (Ballestero, 2014). According to Rudolf Virchow, anthropological collections constituted a neutral archive that scholars could investigate and contrast with data provided by written records (Virchow, 1875).

Contrary to Virchow's assertion, it must be recognised that anthropological collections are not impartial archives (Stoler, 2002; Dibley, 2005; Roque, 2011; Turnbull, 2017; Martin, 2021). They are material entanglements conceived to produce an effect of timelessness that allows us to investigate the economic geopolitics of anthropological knowledge construction processes. Likewise, the objects in the collections, especially human remains, hold within them the indelible traces of the violent and asymmetrical power dynamics that characterised the spaces of coloniality in which they were acquired (Ballestero, 2021). Thus, anthropological collections constitute what I would like to call archives of coloniality. These are not simply limited to written documents or material objects but also encompass the set of practices and discourses instrumentalised to legitimise, standardise and perpetuate Western epistemological hegemony (Foucault, 1969; Mignolo, 2014).

Kryygi's trajectory, inscribed in the interstices of the archives of coloniality, compels us to rethink these repositories. To what extent are these archives necropolitical technologies that perpetuate the inscription of social power over racialised bodies? How can we unravel, in the silences of these archives, the voices, histories and memories obliterated by the social taxidermy of fin-de-siècle anthropology?

The tangible traces of Kryygi's mortuary journey – bureaucratic records, measurement protocols, correspondence between anthropologists – reveal an institutional thanatopolitics on a transnational scale that transmuted bodies into objects of exchange for the accumulation of symbolic capital and genealogies into osteological series. How can we dismantle this archival machinery that, under the veil of scientific objectivity, naturalised racial hierarchies and legitimised territorial dispossession?

The Kryygi case prompts us to ask: what ethical protocols should we implement to transform anthropological archives and collections – once instruments of colonial necropolitics – into spaces of historical reparation and platforms for making silenced histories, knowledge and memories visible? How can we challenge the morality of these archives, whose epistemological authority is built on the suspension of ethics? How can we subvert this archival necropolitics so that these very spaces become

places where Indigenous Peoples can reclaim their dead, rewrite their genealogies and exercise their right to a death inscribed within their own frameworks of meaning and dignity?

'Living members of the Stone Age'

In 1895, a French upper-class amateur anthropologist Charles de la Hitte (1856–1927) published an article in an Argentine newspaper that included his observations on the Aché people in the eastern jungles of Paraguay. According to De la Hitte, the aim of this extensive piece was to give an account of the 'character and customs of the primitive savage', a condition that should 'especially attract the attention of the curious and the ethnologist' (De la Hitte, 1895: 4). According to Lehmann-Nitsche (1899b), this article was one of the first scientific studies on the Aché and therefore of great relevance for the anthropology of the 'primitive' Indigenous Peoples of Abya Yala.[1] This was reinforced on the international scene by the German physician Karl von den Steinen (1855–1929), who, in a review, stressed the need to carry out in situ studies on the Aché in order to construct an ethnological map of Abya Yala (Von den Steinen, 1895).

At that time, a corpus of anthropometric and linguistic data had been collected by military personnel, medical professionals, diplomats and Catholic missionaries. However, anthropologists regarded these individuals as lacking formal training in anthropological observation, which led to the data being considered inaccurate and unreliable (Sardi and Ballestero, 2017). In this sense, Lehmann-Nitsche stated that the Aché were a 'poorly known primitive tribe' whose relevance for anthropological studies was their status as 'living members of the Stone Age' (Lehmann-Nitsche, 1889a: 567–568).

The imposed condition of anachronistic existence, sustained by the hegemonic cultural chronocracy established by Western European societies in the sixteenth century,[2] constructed Aché bodies as essential nodal points of information for understanding the genesis and linear continuity of Western history. Such chronocracy emerged as a response to the epistemic crisis caused by the colonial encounter with the peoples of Abya Yala. Their presence, unpredictable in the noeistic triad (Shem-Asia, Ham-Africa, Japheth-Europe), threatened to destabilise the theological-political order that sustained Western supremacy. In this sense, chronocracy is a core device of the colonial matrix of power that operates as an epistemic-political technology to entrench the hegemony of the West in

the configuration of the modern/colonial world order. Through the coloniality of time – one of the least visible but most effective dimensions of the colonial pattern of domination – this device rearticulated cultural difference in terms of temporal distance, produced a unilinear and teleological narrative of historical becoming that subordinated native peoples as the 'natural ontological roots' of the West, and positioned the latter as the apex of human progress (Hall, 1992; Dussel, 1994; Mignolo, 2003; Taladoire, 2017). As we will see, this created a highly competitive market marked by violent practices of acquiring data, cultural artefacts and, most notably, the bodies of the Aché people – stripping them of their identity, agency and life.

Field expeditions, slaughter and kidnappings

In November 1895, De la Hitte was appointed assistant of the anthropological section of the Museo de La Plata, which at that time was under the direction of the Dutch anthropologist Herman ten Kate Jr. (1858–1931). Between December 1896 and January 1897, both carried out an anthropological expedition to Paraguay. During their journey, they took photographs, recorded linguistic data, collected anthropometric measurements, gathered material culture artefacts and acquired the mortal remains of the Aché in the key sites of their displacement: ecclesiastical institutions, diplomatic offices, estancias and foreign colonies. These sites constituted a vast interconnected network of sovereignty instrumentalised to control the existence of the Aché, who, stripped of their status as subjects, were reduced to domestic servitude during their lifetime or became part of anthropological collections after their death (Mbembe, 2019). This shows the imperative of analysing these sites as spaces where the discourses of the archives of coloniality were materially inscribed, or, as Foucault has demonstrated, where the material consequences of discursive practices are manifestly evident (Foucault, 1971).

The first research project by ten Kate and De la Hitte took place in an area delimited by the old Jesuit missions of Santísima Trinidad del Paraná and Jesús de Tavarangüé. It was chosen following the report of some settlers of the Sandoa colony. According to them, a group of Aché had killed and torn apart a horse. The owner of the horse, together with his three sons, decided to take revenge. After two days, they found a camp with 18 individuals and started shooting. The result of the retaliation was two dead men and a wounded woman who was killed with

machetes. The woman's daughter, Kryygi, was kidnapped and baptised as 'Damiana', according to the saints' calendar of the day.

De la Hitte and ten Kate searched for the bodies, finding only the body of the woman and some objects such as bows, arrows, baskets and body ornaments. Considering these results as scarcely satisfactory, they made anthropometric observations and photographs of 'Damiana' and three other young Aché captured at different times by the settlers: 'Mauricio Podesley', who served in the house of the Paraguayan Archbishop Juan Bogarín (1863–1949); 'Antonio Arzamendi', who had been handed over to Eligio Zarza, commissioner of the district of Trinidad; and an unidentified young man (De la Hitte and ten Kate, 1897).

Far from being an exception, the use of these spaces as sites of anthropological fieldwork was a practice that was maintained over time, demonstrating the close ties with the institutional infrastructure of colonial power. In 1898, the German botanist Rudolf Endlich (?–1915) acquired the skull and other skeletal remains of an Aché child in the Caaguazú colony, which he sent to the Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig (Germany). A year later, the German diplomat Wilhelm von Weickmann (1872–1949) attacked an Aché camp and kidnapped four children that he 'gave' to German families living in Paraguay along with 55 ethnological objects that he sent to the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin. In 1902, the German missionary Frederick Vogt (1867–1931) took photographs of 'Mariana', 'Francisco', 'Carlitos' and 'Sophie', who were kidnapped in punitive expeditions and served in the house of the Argentine Vice Consul Carlos Baumeister (Sardi and Ballestero, 2017).

These dynamics of colonial violence can be traced in museum inventories and the private correspondence associated with them. Behind the apparent bureaucratic neutrality of these records, the tangible and devastating consequences that the discursive regime of coloniality had on the bodies and lives of Indigenous Peoples persist (Roque and Wagner, 2012). Thus, we can read in the inventories of the Museo de La Plata how the Frenchman Adolphe de Bourgoing acquired in 1887 the skull of an Aché that someone had murdered and, without burying the body, sent it to the aforementioned museum. The following entry of the inventory specifies 'Guayaquí Indian, dead in the yerbales of Tavaí. Death was caused by axe blows to the right side of the head' (Sardi and Ballestero, 2017: 44).

The anthropological obsession with 'objectivity', which promulgated a meticulous and compulsive recording of the processes of formation of the collections, allows us to reconstruct the traces of colonial violence contained in the anthropological collections. These traces are

both the material testimony of the epistemic and physical violence perpetrated against the peoples of the Global South, as well as the material elements from which to contest the ongoing legacy of this colonial pattern of power. This ambivalence of the traces present in anthropological collections opens a space from which to gestate a decolonial reparation that evidences the technologies of death on which the colonial/modern anthropological venture was founded. However, these traces compel us to a hermeneutic vigilance that, far from reproducing the colonial dynamics of objectification and subalternisation of the Other, reinscribes them in the local frameworks of meaning, in the memories and in the geographies of re-existence of the subjugated subjects. It is imperative to decolonise the very notion of 'trace' so that it no longer operates as an instrument of a panoptic gaze on the colonised, but becomes a living mark of their presence, of their agency, of their own place of enunciation. Moreover, this critical re-inscription allows us to demonstrate the consequences for the Aché of their construction as vestiges of an archaic humanity already surpassed by the march of Western modernity and condemned to extinction. In this context, it mattered little to accelerate their definitive disappearance through genocide, territorial dispossession or enslavement.

'For the sole love of art'

In 1899, based on Endlich's recommendations, Lehmann-Nitsche contacted the Swiss physician Emil Hassler (1864–1937), a resident of the Swiss-German colony of San Bernardino. There, an Aché girl was being held captive and had been given the name 'Miguela'.[3] Hassler sent Lehmann-Nitsche brief linguistic data, which the latter used together with photographs of 'Miguela' and comparative tables of Endlich's measurements of skulls and skeletons for the publication of a short paper that was well received by the German academy (Ballestero, 2014).

According to Lehmann-Nitsche, the value of his publication consisted in contributing to international discussions with data resulting from the study of materials that were difficult to access or absent in the collections of European anthropological institutions (Lehmann-Nitsche, 1889b). Thus, Lehmann-Nitsche gave an account of the access to human and material resources that guaranteed him access to data, objects and especially Indigenous bodies that were difficult to obtain or absent in the collections of European institutions.

Within the economic logic inherent to anthropological practices, Lehmann-Nitsche sought to position himself as a necessary intermediary in the circuits of commodification and trafficking of Aché bodies, which he used as an asset in the transaction of favours, the accumulation of academic capital and prestige. Far from being an exceptional case, the use of Aché mortal remains as a sign of gratitude among scholars of the time was extremely frequent. One of the Aché skulls belonging to the collections of the Museo de La Plata was a gift from Federico Codas, rector of the Universidad Nacional de Asunción del Paraguay, to Francisco Moreno (1852–1919), director of the aforementioned museum, 'in gratitude for the interesting publications' given to the Paraguayan university (Sardi and Ballestero, 2017: 44).

In other cases, the Aché mortal remains were directly commercialised. Thus, the Italian painter Guido Boggiani (1861–1902) contacted Lehmann-Nitsche to inform him of the discovery of several Aché graves, offering him the exclusive possibility of buying the skeletons for 600 pesos national currency each. In a clever marketing strategy, Boggiani also asked him to suggest European museums that might be interested in taking advantage of such a convenient offer. As Boggiani reminded him at the end of his letter, such ventures were costly both in time and money and he was not able to undertake them 'for the sole love of art' (Boggiani, 1900). The purchase did not materialise and the destination of the skeletons Boggiani sought to sell is unknown.

The instrumentalisation of Indigenous Peoples' bodies as fungible assets for the acquisition of favours, exchanges and retribution was not a mere pragmatic exercise. Rather, it constituted the necropolitical culmination of the process of ontological dispossession through which the discursive regime of coloniality reified Indigenous Peoples and reduced them to mere objects of study (Foucault, 2004; Mbembe, 2019). This objectification signified their forced inscription in the temporality of museum collections, which confined them to a perpetual pre-modern anteriority in inventories, vitrines and museological protocols. This colonisation of life embodies what Achille Mbembe conceptualised as the ultimate expression of modern sovereignty: the exercise of the power of death over racialised bodies (Mbembe, 2019). Anthropological archives, far from their universalist desire to catalogue humanity, are erected as a palimpsest of traces and vestiges that are never complete or definitive. It is in this inherent paradox that repatriation emerges as a decolonial project of repair and healing. Traces no longer operate as racialising inscriptions or as necropolitical technologies of anthropological practice. On the contrary, by being reimmersed in the symbolic universes of Indigenous

Peoples, these traces become living archives and instituting agents that defy Eurocentric temporal linearity. In their decolonial resignification, the mortal remains become restorative justice that overturns the ontological and epistemological premises on which the colonial anthropological enterprise was founded.

Servitude, psychiatric hospitals and the commercialisation of bodies

In 1902, Kryygi was transferred from Villa Encarnación to the Argentine city of San Vicente to serve as a maid for the mother of the Argentine physician Alejandro Korn (1860–1936), the son of German migrants with close ties to the German-speaking community. In 1907, when she was about 14 years old, Kryygi was admitted to the Neuropsychiatric Hospital of Melchor Romero, which was run by Korn. According to Lehmann-Nitsche (1908: 92) this was because:

> The sexual libido manifested itself in such an alarming manner that all education and all admonition on the part of the family proved ineffective … She regarded sexual acts as the most natural thing in the world and indulged in satisfying her desires with the instinctive spontaneity of a naive being.

Far from being a specific punishment, this sanction was part of a whole series of policies aimed at the psychiatrisation of those behaviours considered disruptive of the established social order, particularly in relation to the control and regulation of sexuality (Foucault, 1976). For Korn, consistent with the archetypal positivist thinking of the late nineteenth century and his focus on social hygiene, the punishment of bodies was a futile but necessary attempt to transform the nature of human behaviour. According to Korn, Kryygi could not be blamed, since she acted on primordial impulses that lay beyond her body. However, her sexuality had to be tamed by the technologies of the flesh and her drives had to be strictly hierarchised and codified. The archival regimes of the colonial enterprise were not limited to the strictly material, but also included the epistemic obliteration of its cultural constructions around eroticism, affections and emotions as a constitutive part of the devices of racialisation of Otherness (Arondekar, 2009, 2015; Stoler, 2009).

Thanks to the network of interpersonal relationships within the German community, Lehmann-Nitsche was able to gain access to the

psychiatric hospital to study Kryygi. The investigations included taking anthropometric measurements and photographs of Kryygi, who was suffering from pneumonia and was forced to pose naked in the wintry weather. Lehmann-Nitsche also made inferences regarding Kryygi's personality, behaviour, intellect and sexuality. According to him, her ability to speak Spanish and German belied her primitive status, but the shape of her breasts reflected an untamed sexuality that escaped the civilised norms of Western society (Lehmann-Nitsche, 1908).

The pathologisation of her body as sexually hyperactive was part of a scientific regime of ontological dispossession that reduced her to a condition of absolute Otherness. In the nineteenth-century anthropological narrative, her alleged 'promiscuity' inscribed her in a primordial segment of human evolution. This denial of contemporaneity confined her to a remote past inhabited by individuals whose sexuality had to be domesticated by enlightened reason. Two months after this study, Kryygi died of tuberculosis and her body was immediately dissected and offered by Lehmann-Nitsche to various scholars. As mentioned in the introduction, Kryygi's head was sent to Hans Virchow. Once there, it was part of another dissection process in which the scalp, the tongue, the tongue muscles and the submandibular gland were separated. This process of fragmentation of Indigenous Peoples' bodies for their incorporation into anthropological collections was part of the selective operations that the Museo de La Plata, like other museums, implemented to organise facts, produce specific narratives (Trouillot, 2015) and create 'an illusion of totality and continuity' (Mbembe, 2002: 21).

In the official classification protocols, the violent processes that marked Kryygi's biography were omitted, leaving only traces in the private correspondence between Lehmann-Nitsche and Virchow. Thus, the latter thanked the former for the details about the place and the way Kryygi was dissected, specifying that he had spent the last days 'breaking my head thinking how one can break a head' (Virchow, 1908a). The omission of these facts in the protocols was an inherent act of any institutional archive. It was aimed at creating active silences (Trouillot, 2015) that determined the conditions under which Kryygi became an object susceptible to be studied and commercialised. In doing so, the institutional archive participated in what Segato (2018) conceptualises as a 'pedagogy of cruelty',[4] a symbolic economy that racialises and subalternises certain bodies marked as obscene and available for colonial plunder. This ethic of objectification implied not only a material expropriation but an ontological outrage that denied Kryygi her status as an ethical and political subject, turning her into an abstract entity susceptible to dissection and commodification.

Seeking to further enhance Lehmann-Nitsche's access to Aché bodies, Virchow consulted him about the possibility of obtaining the skull of a child between six and ten years old and that of an adult to establish comparisons (Virchow, 1908a). Only a few days after receiving the Kryygi remains, Virchow presented the results of his research to the Berliner Anthropologische Gesellschaft, stressing the importance of having such rare elements in Europe as the skull and brain of this 'strange tribe … that even today (have) a stone-age culture' (Virchow, 1908b: 117). Virchow published works on Kryygi until 1924 and their remains remained in the collections of the Anatomischen Institut. This prolonged trajectory of Kryygi's remains as objects of collection evidence how the archive, far from being a neutral repository of knowledge, reveals itself as a palimpsest of multiple ethic-temporal regimes. On the one hand, it embodies the extractivist ethic that made Kryygi an object available for colonial appropriation. But on the other hand, its remains persist as disturbing testimonies that question the universalising pretensions of that expropriating ethic and demand a pending historical justice (Mbembe, 2002; Dibley, 2005).

Repatriation and the body as archives of re-existence

In 2005, the Argentinian newspaper *Pagina 12* published Kryygi's story, bringing it to public attention. As a result, the Museo de La Plata initiated a thorough review to locate, record and document the Aché mortal remains in its collections. In 2007, the Paraguayan group LINAJE (Liga Nativa por la Autonomía, Justicia y Ética – Native League for Autonomy, Justice and Ethics) formally requested the repatriation of all Aché mortal remains, which included Kryygi, the skeleton of an elderly woman and the skull of an adult. The repatriation was approved by the Honourable Academic Council of the Facultad de Ciencias Naturales y Museo in 2009 and reaffirmed a year later by the Superior Council of the Universidad Nacional de La Plata (Sardi and Ballestero, 2017).

On 10 June 2010, the repatriation of the remains held in Argentina took place, and two years later, those based in Berlin. Before this process took place, the Aché community gave 'Damiana' her new identity as Kryygi. This constituted an act of re-existence and cultural reinsurgence in the face of the epistemic violence that stripped her of her community networks of meaning by imposing the name of 'Damiana'. Proper names are not mere arbitrary signifiers but rather embody dense semantic and cosmological threads within each culture. Thus, her new name subverts the inherited coloniality of naming and implies the restitution of her

ontological belonging to a world of life and a network of significations of her own.

The arrival of Kryygi's remains in Paraguay gave rise to an act of remembrance and symbolic reparation with deep political resonances. First of all, the Museum of Memories, a former clandestine detention centre of the Stronist dictatorship, was visited. This inscribed the repatriation in a wider genealogy of struggles for truth, justice and dignity. After this homage, a public ceremony was held and then Kryygi's remains were buried in a wooded area whose location was kept secret.

This act reveals the deeper meaning of repatriation. It signifies not only the physical return of Kryygi to her ancestral territory but also the affirmation of an identity that has always been present. Repatriation breaks the silence of the archives of coloniality, activating and affirming the voices, genealogies and collective memories of the Aché underlying these archives (Trouillot, 2015). Thus, the bodies or mortal remains housed in collections worldwide can be seen as archives of re-existence. They embody traces, memories, knowledge, practices and corporealities that have endured, enabling a challenge to the epistemic, chronopolitical and ontological violence of archives and museums.

Anthropological collections serve as both an epistemic construct and a tangible symbol of the global mobility inherent to the apogee of colonialism. The objects they contain are enduring traces that offer insights into the economic and geopolitical dynamics shaping the creation of anthropological knowledge. Kryygi's story reveals the complex dynamics and processes of coloniality at the global level, and it is impossible to analyse it without understanding it as the result of an entanglement of global colonial histories (Quijano, 2000; Escobar, 2018). Kryygi appears as a trace of the colonial entanglements that turned it into an object of material and epistemic violence. As Mbembe has pointed out, the traces and ruins that persist in the landscape are not mere fossil remains of a past that has been overcome but are fractures through which that which was denied and subjugated by the modern/colonial world order and its Eurocentric regime of truth resists and re-enters the present (Mbembe, 2002). In this sense, the story of Kryygi is not an isolated case but condenses the systematic processes of ontological dispossession to which Indigenous Peoples were subjected.

These traces, often dispersed or forgotten, exhibit the constitutive paradox of the archives of coloniality. On the one hand, these archives are the product of the violent process of objectification and ontological negation to which Kryygi was subjected. On the other hand, in this effort to classify and archive pluridiversity under its own protocols of legibility,

the archives ended up inscribing, in a fragmentary and incomplete way, the traces of the very subject it sought to subalternise and deny. The fragments of Kryygi history that survive in the collections become traces that challenge the protocols of legibility, taxonomies and temporalities imposed by the archives of coloniality. Estancias, foreign colonies, diplomatic residences, houses of the local bourgeoisie and psychiatric hospitals were spaces where the systematic ontological dispossession of the Aché people and their obliteration as objects of anthropological study was consummated.

The looting of tombs, assassinations, the kidnapping of children and the reduction of individuals to servitude were strategic practices that contributed to the formation of anthropological knowledge and its utopian vision of creating a global archive of 'Otherness'. In the context of a fiercely competitive market, the procurement of Aché mortal remains was marked by prevalent and troubling practices. In 1903, the American physician Albert Ashmead (1850–1911) wrote in denunciation: 'The Leipzig authorities in collecting specimens even killed a Guayaquis Indian in South America to obtain his skull!' (Ashmead, 1903: 383). Both practices and contexts of violence can be reconstructed from the analysis of institutional archives, private correspondence, protocols for the collection of bodies and inventories. These documentary collections, once used as a form of control, validation and scientific authority, now serve as invaluable resources for tracing coloniality and its forms of violence.

The genealogy of coloniality emerges as a space of epistemological dispute where the devices of anthropological knowledge are disarticulated and reconstructed. Inspired by the intellectual legacies of Frantz Fanon, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Antonio Bispo dos Santos, this contribution aims to transform traditional places of enunciation. The production of anthropological knowledge can no longer be sustained from the illusion of an external and neutral gaze. It is necessary to develop a perspective that recognises the researcher's own inscription in the devices of power, that assumes the radical historicity of all scientific practice and that transforms research into an exercise of permanent deconstruction. In this sense, a decolonial history of anthropology requires dismantling not only the objects but also the very devices of knowledge production. Every archive, every museum, every academic text is revealed as a contested place where the boundaries between the visible and the invisible, between the enunciable and the silenced, are settled.

Concluding remarks

Throughout the twentieth century, the history of symbolic, epistemological and material violence suffered by the Aché people was systematically denied. Racial objectification and ontological denial of their existence stripped them of their status as historical subjects, relegating them to being objects of anthropological study and to remain in museum exhibits as 'missing links' of human evolution. The nineteenth-century anthropological chronopolitics depended in a fundamental way on the denial of the Other's being, on their complete detachment from their temporal frameworks and their material dispossession. In other words, the negation of their status as humanity and as subjects with a dignified, ethically and politically valuable existence. From this it was possible to objectify and musealise their bodies, their memories and their cultural heritage as elements of a primordial stage of humanity. Far from being neutral repositories of knowledge, anthropological archives operated as permanent reservoirs of this violent process of ontological and epistemological dispossession. This deliberate omission not only witnesses the continuity of colonial oppression but also reveals the persistence of the colonial episteme entrenched in current anthropological praxis.

Today, Kryygi's mortal remains allow us to reverse the current logics of coloniality. Her repatriation repairs the injustice embodied in her body, restores her humanity denied by the racialising devices of nineteenth-century anthropology, and returns her to her place in the collective memory and the existential framework of the Aché people. Thus, repatriation emerges as a fundamental act in the process of decolonisation of anthropological practice. In its essence, it goes beyond the mere physical return of mortal remains or objects, as it implies a profound reflection on the complex intersections of the historical, scientific, political, economic and identity dimensions that configured the asymmetrical relations between the anthropological locus of enunciation and its subalternised objects of study.

Repatriation is an indispensable ethical-political act to begin to heal the wounds opened by colonial violence, which ontologically and materially stripped Indigenous Peoples of their relational weavings of community life. It represents a profound challenge to the narratives of Eurocentric modernity that have dominated anthropological discourse. In this sense, it forces us to rethink our relationship with the traces that survive in archives and collections. We can no longer conceive of them as inert markers of a closed past, but as living inscriptions of histories of

dispossession and dehumanisation, as well as insurgencies that overflow the regimes of truth established by colonial reason.

Repatriation enables a different ethic of traces, where they are no longer objects of study for museums but rather places of remembrance, historical responsibility and reparation to the original communities from which they were taken. It opens the possibility of resuming ancestral links and inscribing them in temporalities that defy the linearity of modernity and coloniality. In response to the ontological dispossession perpetrated by the anthropological archive, this process allows for the reterritorialisation of these traces within communal entanglements, helping to reconstruct severed genealogies. Repatriation urges us to rethink anthropological praxis, its chronopolitics and regimes of vision, and actively engage in the construction of a pluriverse where we are all equal in our differences.

Repatriation, like the concept of re-earthing proposed in this collection, is intertwined in a horizon of meaning that seeks to heal the wounds opened by coloniality and rejects the reification of other memories and knowledge. In these practices, land, objects and individuals are not mere resources to be exploited from the aseptic distance of Western science, but living entities with which we can weave new relationships of respect and reciprocity.

Repatriation and re-earthing, in their rejection of purity and transcendence, present themselves as rifts in modernity/coloniality, opening up spaces for the emergence of border epistemologies that challenge the hegemony of Western thought. These practices call us to an epistemic detachment, to abandon the pretension of control over the traces of the past and to recognise our own partiality and situationality in the production of knowledge.

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Notes

1. Abya Yala is a concept from the language of the Kuna people, originally from what is now Panama and Colombia, used to refer to America. Its most approximate translation would be 'land in full maturity' or 'land of vitality'. Although this concept emerged in the context of the Kuna people, it is not limited to their specific cultural horizon. On the contrary, the term has been adopted and resignified by Indigenous movements and decolonial scholars throughout what the modern/colonial project called 'America'. Its use constitutes a political-epistemic gesture that seeks to reinstate an autochthonous and shared territorial identity, in opposition to the colonial baptism imposed by European hegemony. In this sense, its choice is not a mere lexical substitution, but an onto-epistemic option consonant with the struggle of Indigenous People to recover not only their mortal remains but also their memories, their languages, their territories and their ways of being and knowing silenced by modernity.
2. For Kirtsoglou and Simpson (2020: 173), chronocracy includes 'the discursive and practical ways in which temporal regimes are used in order to deny coevalness and thereby create deeply asymmetrical relationships of exclusion and domination'.
3. She was the sister of the child whose remains Endlich had sent to the Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig.
4. According to Segato (2018: 11), pedagogies of cruelty are 'all acts and practices that teach, habituate and program subjects to transmute the living and its vitality into things'.

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8

Reimagining the habitat diorama for the Anthropocene

Susanne Kass

Re-earthing historical habitat dioramas

For the past two decades, Australian photo media artist Anne Zahalka has used photography and digital image manipulation to reimagine and disrupt historical habitat dioramas in light of pressing concerns about how human activity is impacting the habitats and species they depict. These works ask us to consider the diorama displays that remain in natural history museum collections as archives in their own right, rich with traces of scientific and colonial practices. As historical artefacts, they document interdisciplinary encounters between science and art which have shaped ways of seeing nature, but also hold the largely forgotten histories of the naturalists, preparators and artists who created them.

Zahalka unlocks this apparently closed, 'timeless', durable and idealised form of museum display to disrupt and make visible certain hidden and forgotten material legacies and agencies. She brings the subjunctive and playful tactics of contemporary art into dialogue with the careful and considered representation of scientific knowledge conveyed through the museum display employing a common aesthetic language that habitat displays share with the visual arts.

Zahalka's digital reimaginings show how the visually complex and fragile material and visual constructions of dioramas can be reframed to communicate a contemporary perspective of entangled human–nature relations. Her artistic interventions use the Anthropocene as a conceptual lens to resituate humans ecologically and ethically (Gibson et al., 2015: i–vii) with humour and hope, but also with grief and concern for what is already threatened and lost. Her work also responds to a series

of losses caused by human activity that can now only be seen through the archive – lost species, lost ecosystems, lost habitat dioramas and lost skills of museum display.

The resulting reimagined scenes confront chosen historical habitat dioramas with present-day concerns, with references to the effects of climate change, pollution and habitat loss on the environment and featured species (many of which are now even more threatened than when they were created). In alignment with the messy, but also hopeful, ethics of care which underpin practices of re-earthing, Zahalka takes advantage of digital image technologies and AI to visualise both alarming and sanguine hypothetical ecological scenarios using photo-realistic precision, which stimulates us to exercise the conceptual freedom to imagine alternative pasts, presents and futures.

Spectacles of nature

Historical habitat dioramas are groups of taxidermy animals that use the illusory effect of trompe-l'œil painting and tricks of light to create a sensually rich and immersive viewing experience. This immersive and didactic spectacle was a popular type of display in natural history museums of the early twentieth century, designed to show urban publics how the organic and inorganic elements that constitute an ecosystem are connected in reciprocal relationships (Wonders, 1993).

Historical habitat dioramas epitomise both artistic and ideological legacies of museum display and constitute an important chapter within the modern chronicle of representing nature in the museum. Artistic skills and techniques were used to produce an affective and illusory ecological theatre with characteristics of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, synthesising several visual languages to develop a cohesive and comprehensive worldview that was both romantic and utopian (Roberts, 2011: 7). They appealed to the public to support conserving natural environments but did so by presenting them as beautiful and undisturbed, adhering to the assumption that nature and culture were separate. In omitting any visual reference to human presence or culture, historical habitat dioramas make claims of objectivity by recreating an ecosystem as realistic and true to nature. Such attempts to objectively depict nature are imbued with epistemic virtues (Daston and Galison, 2007: 40) or internalised norms of what objectivity looks like. As a form of knowledge production, historical habitat dioramas also embody the human tendency to look towards nature for establishing ideal moral orders (Daston, 2019: 6). Using analogy,

they link animal and human behaviour to assert the authority of specific natures – inborn and uncultivated – and legitimise human ideals such as the nuclear family by portraying them as naturally occurring norms (Haraway, 2004: 155).

Like photography, habitat displays can bring remote and significant ecosystems indoors for viewing at close range, without the need for travel (Morris, 2015: 33). However, in contrast to wildlife photography and film, which can only frame and capture singular instances, the three-dimensional habitat diorama can be composed and condensed to include several aspects of an ecosystem in a single scene (Marandino et al., 2015: 254), making it a useful educational tool. This has seen a resurgence of interest in the medium (see Tunnicliffe and Scheersoi, 2015; Scheersoi and Tunnicliffe, 2019), and some museums are now again attempting to create habitat dioramas that incorporate new media technologies to digitally enhance the experience of viewing habitat groups (Loveland et al., 2015: 87).

Zahalka's fascination with how this early form of 'virtual reality' imitates and stages a moment of artificial life is shared by several other contemporary artists. Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs show how the camera can make the taxidermy specimens and painted backdrops look real; Alexis Rockman augments the habitat diorama's pristine visual language with human and imaginary elements; and Mark Dion's installations borrow the organising methodologies and architectures of the museum display case. Artists working in a contemporary art context and those who apply their skills in the service of science share the same toolbox of visual technologies and aesthetic principles. However, as Dion points out, 'there are a lot of tools that the artist has the scientist doesn't have – humour, irony, metaphor …' (Dion, 2007). These playful approaches can be used to question how ideas about nature are preserved in the museum display since they are also interesting historical artefacts that reveal how ideas about nature have changed over time.

Zahalka has regularly used postmodern techniques of collage and pastiche in her photo media practice to appropriate and question idealised narratives and explore how photographs can be more than a surface for memory (Foster, 2024). She has reworked familiar imagery to visually interrogate buzzwords and cultural myths in staged portraits, often with a painted backdrop, as well as documenting mass tourist culture and sublime landscapes to comment on the visual culture of spectacle (Campbell, 2023). Her distinctive postmodern approach disrupts the atemporal logic of the habitat diorama to address environmental concerns of the present day.

Nature frozen in time

Dioramas of human culture are dated and contextualised in the *chronos* of linear, historical time, while habitat dioramas invoke the untimely and sublime temporality of *kairos* (Leston, 2013), a fitting and well-timed action or intervention in a situation. They give the impression that a critical moment within the evolutionary narrative of the depicted species has been caught, but they avoid using dates to place that moment on the timeline of human history. This implies that while human culture progresses and is always on the move, nature humbly evolves at a pace so slow it appears frozen in comparison to the constant ticking of calendar time.

A well-made habitat diorama is an uncanny imitation of life composed so meticulously that it creates an impression of temporal stability and endurance. When the impression holds successfully, it produces a vivid memory that can be revisited as a reliable and comforting constant, a temporal unity (Husserl, 2011: 22). This *atemporal* image of nature is disconnected from the rapidly moving historical time outside the display case. The rational glue that holds this atemporal image together is, however, a fiction, or as Rancière puts it, a *fictional rationality* which links subjects, things and situations in a common but fictional world to produce a sense of reality (Rancière, 2022: 16).

Zahalka was initially drawn to visit the dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York after reading about them in J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. In the novel, the iconic collection of dioramas in the AMNH provides a steadfast yardstick by which the protagonist Holden Caulfield can experience change within himself on class trips to the museum growing up in New York:

> The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred thousand times … Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be you …

Yet he also longs for the feeling of permanence the dioramas evoke:

> Certain things, they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone. I know that's impossible, but it's too bad anyway.

Habitat dioramas float in an ambiguous tense somewhere between *is* and *was*, the product of a distributed period *of* time, yet not representative of any clear moment *in* time.

On encountering the AMNH habitat dioramas herself in the early 1980s, Zahalka was fascinated both by the idealised visual language and their illusory ability to create the impression that the incessant marches of time and progress have been paused:

> My first experience of seeing these 'windows on the world' was physical and vertiginous. It was like being pulled through an aperture and transported through time to places and countries I'd never seen before, to pristine landscapes untouched by humans, where animals roamed unimpeded and unthreatened. A perfect, albeit artificial world meticulously constructed by artists and scientists to duplicate the wonder of 'nature'. Time has been stopped – birds soar in suspended animation, creatures are locked into an instant, and everything is frozen. (Zahalka, 2018)

Initially, she did no more than shoot them with her camera and develop the film; the negatives lay in her archive for two decades before she scanned them and began experimenting with the new affordances of digital image manipulation (Foster, 2024). The project began as a postmodern visual deconstruction of the immersive and uncanny displays, linking their visual language to cultural and tourist practices which frame nature as a spectacle (MacCannell, 2013). She began creating photographs and installations reimagined to foreground the impact of human activities on the species and environments depicted, inserting human figures, objects and infrastructures unbefitting the pristine visual paradigm of an objective atlas of nature, devoid of references to the human culture that produced it.

Visualising the Anthropocene

Zahalka's project is one of many speculative attempts by artists to develop a visual language for the Anthropocene, a term originated in geology (Crutzen, 2002) which has quickly been adopted as a boundary concept to unify debates across disciplines in the sciences and humanities (Giacometti and Giardullo, 2024). The ethical, practical and aesthetic implications of human agency conceptualised as a planetary force have also been widely debated within the arts and humanities as a

new paradigm of human–nature relations (see Davis and Turpin, 2015; Demos, 2017). The Anthropocene cannot be *seen* as such but only *visualised* (Mirzoeff, 2014), and consequently in visual culture, the term is more politicised, and it presents distinct challenges for representation:

> a central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political interventions, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time? (Nixon, 2011: 3)

Although visualisations have played a key role in discussions and development of the Anthropocene as a concept, these visualisations tend to be created with the machinic infrastructure of operational images (Parikka, 2023: vii) rather than conventional representational visual systems framed by a human eye (Demos, 2017: 11–16).

Zahalka looks back to historical habitat dioramas as representations of nature, created at a time when the Anthropocene had not yet been articulated, and tries to imagine what they might look like in view of this novel perspective. She asks 'what if' these displays also showed the impacts of human activities, both harmful and restorative, on the locations they were modelled on.

A second 'what if' that emerges when traces of humans are introduced is a temporal one. Cultural artefacts are also produced and situated in history, and the inclusion of human artefacts challenges the impression of atemporality and the assumption that nature and history are separate (Chakrabarty, 2008).

Zahalka visualises the Anthropocene in a common and relatable visual language drawn from the media and public discourse around sustainability and environmental conservation, as well as academic studies and consultation with experts. When an image addresses a specific environmental problem, it is explained and contextualised on wall panels or in the exhibition catalogue. Her interventions are metonyms of common, pressing environmental issues imaginatively reframed in a way that is both disturbing and truthful. At times deadly serious and sometimes playful, she holds up a mirror to lay bare problematic human behaviours, pervasive technologies and polluting industrial products that have come to mark our planet.

In the series *Wild Life in the Age of the Anthropocene* (2018), Zahalka reimagines the pristine constructed environments of the habitat dioramas of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya in Mumbai, re-earthed for the Anthropocene by introducing traces of human activities. Her interventions are based on research into local and species-specific environmental issues and are seamlessly integrated into the image without disrupting the harmony of the composition. She intervenes in all three visual strata – the background, the taxidermy figures and the foreground – explicitly linking environmental problems to everyday behaviours, such as littering or mass tourism, as well as to large-scale processes that negatively impact ecosystems and cause habitat destruction, such as the encroachment of urban sprawl or industrial pollution.

In the image *Falling Angels* (2018) (see Figure 8.1), Zahalka reimagines a habitat diorama depicting the Indian vulture, *Gyps indicus*. In India, the vulture is a keystone species that is deeply entangled in the lives of humans due to the vitally important role it plays in maintaining a balance within human and non-human ecologies, and also in urban settings (Van Dooren, 2011). This species has become critically endangered due to the presence of the drug diclofenac in the cattle carcasses they feed on. In her reimagining, Zahalka has included a vial of the drug with waste materials collected on the nesting site and a poisoned vulture

Figure 8.1 *Falling Angels*, 2018. Pigment ink on canvas 100 cm × 150 cm. © Anne Zahalka, 2018. Courtesy of the artist. Original dioramas photographed in Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai.

lying collapsed on the cliff edge. The original mountainous vista has been replaced with a bustling cityscape, a skyline of modern high-rise buildings obscuring the horizon.

Items commonly discarded as waste are 'out of place' in the conventional visual language of the historical habitat diorama, which has traditionally excluded references to the economic, political and social apparatuses of culture. These signifiers of the Anthropocene bring the ideas that make the *World* and the material conditions that constitute the *Earth* into dialogue. Cultural artefacts are signs of the *World* which produced them, but these objects also have material implications for the *Earth*. The images offer a stereoscopic view (Normand, 2015) that encompasses both perspectives, as the ideologies that build the *World* cannot be uncoupled from the material forces which shape the conditions of the *Earth*.

The Anthropocene and the collapsed frame of natural and cultural history

History assumes that the past, present and future are connected through the continuity of human experience, and crises such as climate change, which occur on a planetary scale, have created a disconnect between understanding the past and the ability to imagine a future (Chakrabarty, 2008). Naming our current geological era 'the Anthropocene' is a contested attempt to assign a descriptor to troubling environmental changes, such as rising average temparatures, which signal a definitive shift in human–nature relations. Although it is widely accepted that there are measurable impacts on the Earth because of human activity, there is less consensus about what this means for the practice of doing and narrating natural and social history.

Narratives are performative and, since they influence human actions, they also impact the becoming of the Earth. Christophe Bonneuil (2015) has outlined four dominant narratives that have emerged in response to the insights articulated in the concept of the Anthropocene – the naturalist narrative that humans evolved into a global geological force, a condition which science has disclosed to us; the post-nature narrative, a heterogeneous and postmodern narrative that sees the Anthropocene as the 'end' of nature or at least the modernist paradigm, within which nature and culture were seen as distinct and separate; the eco-catastrophist narrative, in which the boundaries of the Earth's finite resources are transgressed and life as we know it can no longer be sustained; and the eco-Marxist narrative, an unsustainable metabolism resulting from the capitalist

system's exploitation of the Earth system, hence the suggestion of the term 'Capitalocene' as an alternative name for this era.

Zahalka's visualisation of the Anthropocene does not fit neatly into any of these four narratives but maintains an open and critical attitude to images of nature as cultural constructions, offering an unresolved view of several key Anthropocene problems as they are still unfolding. She uses photography to revisit and alter images of habitat displays in an indeterminate subjunctive aesthetics (Fornoff, 2024), challenging us to question the narratives we are presented with through images. The hypothesised scenarios are illustrative and never occurred as such but are nonetheless fact based and representative of true events, providing a mirror image of how human activities are impacting habitats and species in real time. The view she offers is situated and partial but, in contrast to the total view that objectivity strives for, creates a ground where a way out of the current crisis becomes thinkable.

As an artistic strategy, subjunctive narratives create space to speculate on the possiblity that there are always alternatives, other potential endings and perspectives lurking outside the scope of the given frame. This in turn compels us to hope that it is still possible to change course and move towards another, yet-undetermined, future, beyond the paradigm of Anthropocentrism.

Habitat dioramas in Australian museums

More recently, Zahalka has started reimagining habitat displays in her home country of Australia, addressing pressing issues of climate change and species loss that are tangibly and disturbingly close to home. Since most of these dioramas are no longer on display, she has also turned to the archive to unearth traces of them from documentation, or, where possible, to work from physical fragments held in the collection storage facilities.

The first natural history museums in Australia were established under a British colonial model to study and preserve a record of the unique flora and fauna of this vast continent. Museum staff were seldom able to visit other institutions abroad to get new ideas. However, Charles Hedley, an assistant curator at the Australian Museum, received funding to tour US museums in 1913 and was exposed to more modern styles of display that focused on aesthetic quality rather than quantity (O'Reilly, 2013: 150). Some years later, during his time as Keeper of the Collections at the museum, some of the earliest large-scale habitat dioramas in Australia were created, led by Allan McCulloch and installed in 1923.

By 1937, the desire to modernise displays to attract and educate audiences had caught on, and museum directors in Australia and New Zealand invited a leading American habitat diorama expert, Frank Tose, to tour Australia and New Zealand with support from the Carnegie Foundation. He gave lectures and held workshops on the modern art of the habitat diorama and its potential to educate and entertain. In his opinion:

> Australian museums are years behind the times. Lighting systems spoil exhibits and ruin them for educational and scientific purposes. Collections are good, but badly displayed, and do not tell a story. They are morgues instead of show windows for science. (O'Reilly, 2013: 162)

In Tose's view, the museum should be welcoming to the public. He shared his expertise on how to create visually intriguing displays to salvage a record of ecology for future generations and inspire public interest in its conservation (O'Reilly, 2013: 159–160).

The production of new habitat dioramas was a big-budget affair involving extensive fieldwork, which often required securing private funding. Three types of artistic skill and craftmanship were involved in recreating the three-dimensional habitats – foreground artists arranged and coloured genuine plant specimens and modelled artificial vegetation, rocks and terrain; taxidermists prepared and posed animal specimens; and painters used trompe-l'œil techniques to bring illusory depth to two-dimensional background scenery. Artists and scientists worked together to ensure that dioramas were both aesthetically composed to please the eye and scientifically accurate to cultivate the mind (Quinn, 2006).

Practitioners with different skills and sensibilities worked together side by side, in the field and later in the studio, recording ecosystems on-site with the camera and in sketchbooks, observing and cataloguing species and habitats which were changing in front of their eyes and lenses (Rasmussen, 2018: 265). Fieldwork confronted practitioners with evidence that the ecologies they were documenting were fragile and needed to be protected from the impact of human activity; nature untouched by humans was already in the past.

Reimagining habitat dioramas through the archive

Nature conservation and education were primary motivations for building collections, preparing lectures and creating habitat displays. Today,

only two original early habitat dioramas remain on display in Australian museums: the Admiralty Islets diorama (1923) in the Australian Museum in Sydney, and the Woodward Diorama of Wetlands Flora and Fauna (1903) in the Western Australian Museum in Perth. Most were destroyed to make way for other exhibits (O'Reilly, 2013) or put in storage. Even if the majority of dioramas survive only as archival photographs, they can still be used as source material for novel artistic renderings. Zahalka has tried to locate and gain access to the remaining fragments and traces of these displays in Australian museum archives and collections to use in her art practice, critically reframing these remnants of a lost art, giving them a novel form and context, and a new audience.

Zahalka began working with archive material of Australian dioramas for the series *Wild Life Australia* (2019) to reimagine how the ecologies depicted may be transformed by the effects of climate change and included references to Indigenous knowledge and heritage. In two exhibitions, *Lost Landscapes* (2020) and *Future Past Present Tense* (2024), Zahalka has expanded the scope to include the stories of the people involved in crafting these scenes, foregrounding the labour and dedication of the scientists, taxidermists, artists and preparators. In collaboration with museum curators and archivists, Zahalka has worked directly with still-existing habitat dioramas and archive photographs to re-earth largely forgotten histories and narratives.

For the exhibition *Lost Landscapes*, a collaboration with the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston, Tasmania, Zahalka was invited to bring the museum's dioramas out of storage and revive and recontextualise them in a contemporary art exhibition. Together with museum staff, Zahalka reassembled the archived dioramas to be photographed and digitally reimagined in the light of present environmental conditions and concerns, and the reimagined photographs were exhibited alongside the recovered habitat dioramas.

The ecologies depicted have changed significantly since they were created in the 1970s, and the reimaginings introduced themes of climate change and contemporary practices and architectures for viewing the landscape. Preparation of the exhibition involved actively consulting and collaborating with scientists, conservationists, curators and historians, as well as exploring the activities of archiving and displaying collections to revive their agency (Galati, 2024). In an interdisciplinary setting such as a temporary art exhibition, art and museum practices may come together to experiment and exchange ideas, build hybrid strategies and confront past and present challenges by including indexical markers of human activities that impact nature.

These reimaginings are no longer a spectator view from the outside looking in; instead, they involve going behind the scenes into the storage facilities and exploring the archive together with museum staff, learning about practices of museum display and sharing their knowledge about Australian ecosystems and species. In this iteration, the project is no longer solely a view from outside that critiques visual representation; it also involves intimate interactions with the fragile materiality of taxidermised bodies, painted backgrounds and artificial and organic foreground materials. Digitally reimagined photographs are still the focus of the work; however, behind each reimagined image lies an extensive network of relationships needed to piece together the history of the diorama and its creators, and sometimes also contact and negotiation with other photographers or their descendants to secure consent for the use of these images in her reimaginings.

As her work with dioramas has become more entangled with the museum workers past and present, the discourse around conservation and the role of scientific fieldwork in studying, protecting and restoring ecosystems has become a recurring theme within the reimagined dioramas. Early photographic archives have proved a valuable source of material as they hold both the likenesses and stories of the men and women who worked on building dioramas (de Courcy and Finney, 2019). For the series *Present Past Future Tense*, Zahalka has worked with the archives of the Australian Museum in Sydney and photographers who documented lost environments and species of Australia. She has toned and hand-coloured black-and-white documentary images of dioramas under construction which show the preparators and artists at work, a technique that was also regularly used in museums to prepare slides for popular 'lantern lectures' (de Courcy and Finney, 2019).

Reimagining the *Admiralty Islets Group*

Each habitat diorama and the specimens within it have a story, and three habitat dioramas created for the Australian Museum in Sydney depicting Lord Howe Island entangle the history of the island itself and the skills of the preparators and naturalists who created them. Today only traces of the original dioramas remain within the museum collections and archives.

Lord Howe Island is a volcanic remnant located in the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand. Today, it is a UNESCO World

Heritage Site. The island is remote enough to host many endemic plant and bird species, with some populations threatened with extinction due to invasive species introduced with colonisation of the island group. Allan McCulloch, a talented artist and naturalist, had a strong personal connection to the island and led the work on these dioramas (Atkins, 2022). McCulloch visited the island frequently on research trips and hoped to alert the public to the unfolding crisis on the island, which was being decimated due to a plague of rats unleashed as the result of the shipwreck of the SS *Makambo* in 1918 (McCulloch, 1921), as well as to salvage a record of the rich and unique animal and plant life.

McCulloch and his team of preparators began work on three large-scale habitat dioramas: the *Boatswain Bird Group* from 1922, the *Coral Group* and the *Admiralty Islets Group* from 1923. The latter is the largest at five metres in length and two metres high. They were very popular with the public and considered as world-leading examples. However, the *Coral Group* was dismantled in 1960 to make way for another display. Only a few hand-coloured photographs remain, and the other two dioramas were scheduled for dismantling in conjunction with a new permanent exhibition in 1989. Only an intervention by concerned staff saved the *Admiralty Islets Group* from destruction. In a compromise, a screen was set up with peepholes to look through at the diorama. Only after its restoration in 2016 was the screen removed to reveal the historic display once again (Atkins, 2022: 34–35).

In *Cast Adrift* (2023) (see Figure 8.2), Zahalka worked with a documentary image of the preparators posing in front of the *Admiralty Islets Group*. The staged image shows two preparators at work in the foreground and artist Phyllis Clarke, who took part in the research trip to Lord Howe Island, at work in the background. It was not uncommon for women to be employed as scientific illustrators and artists at the museum, and Clarke was tasked to make paintings of the view from the nesting site and capture the atmosphere (Egan, 2011).

The image shows the habitat diorama with the original backdrop, but another version with a calmer sea painted by Mary Soady in the late 1930s is the one currently on display (Atkins, 2022: 34). In the reimagined image, a bouquet of brightly coloured balloons floats across the sky, in reference to the impact of waste from decorative balloons on bird populations that ingest them because the burst balloons resemble edible sea life. Zahalka submitted a proposal to the Australian Museum to update the display with a specimen of a bird that had died as a result of ingesting plastics, but the project was not realised.

Figure 8.2 *Cast Adrift*, 2023. Solvent ink on rag paper, 100 cm × 142 cm. © Anne Zahalka, 2023. Courtesy of the artist. Original image sources: Australian Museum Archives and Lord Howe Island Museum.

Reimagining as a lament for loss

Zahalka's artistic practice of reimagining historical dioramas intervenes in the visual and cultural legacy of the habitat display to reflect on the troubling environmental changes affecting life on Earth. She confronts these timeless 'show windows for science' with human-induced problems, making reference to common themes within the discourse of the Anthropocene.

Strategies from contemporary art provoke a rethinking of the traditional narratives and methods of documenting natural history, which developed out of the desire to salvage evidence of these species and their habitats before they were lost. Although museum practices have changed since then, the urgency to conserve is even more pressing as extinction looms and ecosystems collapse under environmental catastrophes wrought by humans.

The digitally reimagined worlds created by the artist visualise the Anthropocene both as real and unreal. Photography, painting, taxidermy and sculpture meld in a trompe-l'œil illusion to confront us with powerful truths that are hard to grasp. It is unsettling to comprehend the impact of

plastics on sea life in rising oceans where islands, habitats and homes will be submerged, or that wildfires and floods will be an increasingly severe threat in many regions of Australia.

The few extant habitat dioramas that remain in Australian museum collections are replete with memories, histories and practices, an uncanny form of museum display that has all but vanished. Zahalka opens up these 'old dusty' museum dioramas to uncover the complex 'after life' (Stark, 2018) of taxidermised animals. She investigates the back story behind the displays and the dedicated artists and naturalists who created them. 'They were incredibly beautiful things, and my work is a lament for both the lost landscapes, lost creatures and also a lost art' (Horton, 2024). Her reimaginings offer a way to visualise and emotionally connect to Nature and the radical changes to ecosystems while encouraging us to question and rethink our relationship with the Earth.

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Part III
Crystallisations

9

Miners' film workshop: opening the archive of Ateliers Varan

Miguel Errazu, Miguel Hilari and Isabel Seguí

Between September and December 1983, the mining town of Telamayu (Bolivia) held a remarkable experience of radical film pedagogy and media proletarianisation: the 'Taller de Cine Minero' (TCM – Miners' Film Workshop). Devised as a 'transference of media' pilot project that would pave the way for a permanent film production unit for the Trade Union Federation of Bolivian Mineworkers (FSTMB), the TCM sought to build a cinema made by and for workers.[1] To that end, 16 young people, sons and daughters of miners from across the country, were trained in documentary filmmaking in collaboration with the French film training school Association Varan.[2] The 13 finished documentary short films provided unprecedented cinematic representations of Bolivian peasant and working-class populations in their daily lives. As such, the TCM enabled the creative appropriation of the audiovisual production tools by subaltern sectors, functioning as a mechanism of democratisation, mutual recognition, social participation and occupation of spaces for communication (Aimaretti, 2020: 161–162). However, the project's continuity gradually faded. Caught between the poles of exhaustion and apathy – both shaped by red tape and the violent consequences of the neoliberal structural adjustment policies that ravaged Latin America throughout the 1980s – the possibility of a union miners' cinema was interrupted. From 1985, as the Bolivian government dismantled state mining and miners had to relocate (Marston, 2024: 65).

This chapter is the result of ongoing collective research on the TCM. In Bolivia, films stopped circulating before the end of the 1980s and were considered lost for decades. The TCM became a kind of a spectral cinematic event, the lost archive of a thriving working-class culture in a process

of transformation. Its memories were passed orally among displaced mining families and rarely documented by film scholars (Mesa, 1985; Schiwy, 2009; Quiroga San Martín, 2014; Aimaretti, 2020). For two years, the three of us have followed scattered traces left by this workshop, usually in parallel to our main duties and concerns as film scholars and filmmakers. Hilari found three of these films on Varan's webpage and shared them on his Facebook personal page.[3] Seguí contacted Varan, who granted us access to low-resolution digital files of 12 films. Afterwards, she wrote a small piece on the workshop for *ZINE* (Seguí, 2023), the journal of the Elías Querejeta Zine Eskola (EQZE – Elías Querejeta Film School), which showed an immediate interest in this experience. In June 2023, Errazu visited the offices of Varan in Paris and found the documentation of the TCM in their vaults.[4] Since then, we have been working on the development of a comprehensive research, preservation and restitution project. In October 2023, we started a formal collaboration with EQZE, led by Errazu, to conduct a research project with the aid of a team of MA students.[5] Months later, we signed an agreement with Varan to work with the TCM materials at EQZE's headquarters in San Sebastián (Basque Country). This agreement is helping us to undertake the digitisation of the administrative documents found in the offices of Varan and the complete collection of original films that were kept in custody at the French Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA – Audiovisual National Institute).[6]

The ultimate aim of this project is to restitute and reactivate these materials in Bolivia while critically exploring the complexity of the material determinations, entangled memories and ambiguous cultural legacies of the Miners' Film Workshop. As such, it is our goal to confront the spectral quality of this archive and the acute sense of wonder that narratives of discovery and 'unearthing' might elicit. Indeed, the materials constituting this collection of films and paper documentation have, to a certain extent, emerged from the underground: papers were stored in Varan's office basement and films were preserved at INA's vaults. Moreover, as obvious as it might seem, the gesture of opening these fragile materials and making them available again replicates the extraction of ore from the Bolivian mines – a gesture which, in turn, is consistently represented in the films and embodied *as* the material film objects themselves. Counteracting these narratives of discovery, we follow the suggestive proposal of the editors of this volume and face the *unearthing* of this collection as a proper *re-earthing* of its scattered traces. In this manner, we seek to recompose the convoluted infrastructural, affective and material networks that were segmented and cleansed in the form of forgotten documents, decontextualised films, idealised memories and reified narratives.

The restitution and activation of these materials is not an isolated endeavour. On the contrary, it is part of a much broader set of contemporary research initiatives that rescue the often neglected experiences of film and popular communication that flourished in Latin America in the late 1970s and 1980s.[7] As such, questions around decoloniality arise naturally, even if the TCM, as was the case of other initiatives, was itself conceived as a decolonial – or at least anti-colonial – gesture born out of the loopholes of developmentalist practices. For us, this film collection and documentation can be better understood as a particular case of diasporic cinema – one originated not in war conflicts or direct colonial subjugation, but rather in the unequal technological exchange and the effects of neoliberal rule over national policies in Latin America. Moreover, the material configurations of developmentalist networks and infrastructures shaped the TCM's logics of implementation and the dispersion of its material traces. For this reason, and in line with other projects that deal with the reactivation of exile or diasporic cinemas from the region (Palacios, 2022), we do not prioritise the physical repatriation of the films but advocate for a sustainable workflow of digital returns that focus on the 'right to the story' rather than on the 'right to the object'.[8] In this manner, we move beyond national film heritage frameworks to enable a space for a post-custodial collaborative model for archival practices (Fargion, 2019). Accordingly, we are partnering with four Bolivian institutions: the Sistema de Información y Documentación Sindical (FSTMB-SiDIS – Information and Documentation System of the FSTMB), the Bolivian Cinematheque, and two universities, the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA) in La Paz and the Universidad Nacional Siglo XX (UNSXX), a higher education institution founded by the FSTMB in Llallagua in the mining territory. As we will show, this is a preliminary way of designing a research project that takes up the mantle of some of the unresolved questions posed by the TCM, explicitly addressing the ethical and epistemic implications of its own positionality as a north–south film archival project of restitution.

In the following pages, we will first outline the historical background and converging trajectories leading to the TCM. In the second part, we present the work we are currently developing and the central ideas that are guiding us in the design and development of this project.

I

The Telamayu mining complex (see Figure 9.1), located in the municipality of Atocha, Sud Chichas province, Potosí department, is on one of

Figure 9.1 35 mm still photograph of Telamayu, Bolivia, 1983. Unidentified author. With the kind permission of Ateliers Varan.

the branches of the Antofagasta–Bolivia railway line, in the south of the country. Telamayu occupied a prominent place among the centres of the Bolivian Mining Corporation (COMIBOL), a state-owned company that had managed the Bolivian mines since their nationalisation following the National Revolution of 1952. Despite having a modest population, this mine was an important industrial and cultural hub from the 1960s to the mid-1980s. With deposits of zinc, silver and bismuth, COMIBOL modernised the infrastructure inherited from the former private owners and controlled several mines in the area. Along with the new industrial mineral processing plants, hospitals, schools, sports facilities and cultural centres were built in the vicinity.

Just as in other mining centres, culture played a prominent role in Telamayu. The FSTMB had long promoted folk theatre, visual arts, popular music and media communications. Remarkably, the union network of radio stations was a pioneering case of media run by popular organisations. Established in the late 1940s throughout the country, these radio stations had played an essential role in the structuring of class identity, guaranteeing an alternative space for resistance and counter-informative communication after General Hugo Bánzer's coup in 1971 (Gumucio and Cajías, 1989). Another priority for mining unions was the promotion of film clubs. Bolivian mining centres enjoyed a robust film culture that was not limited to film reception but also encompassed active participation

in film production. Notoriously, the mining union of Siglo XX, a mining complex located in Llallagua, had collaborated in the most emblematic film of 1970s Bolivian political cinema, *The Courage of the People* (Grupo Ukamau, 1971), which circulated throughout the network of mining film clubs in the country after the democratic restoration in 1978.[9]

The cultural policy of the FSTMB was historically convened at the various congresses of the Confederación Obrera Boliviana (COB – Bolivian Workers Central).[10] At their 5th Congress, held in La Paz in May 1979, the COB approved a cultural plan that laid the foundations for what would become the TCM four years later. This cultural plan underlined the associative power of the proletariat and the need to counteract the processes of acculturation by strengthening its associative culture. For the first time, cinema and audiovisual media were given a dedicated place among other cultural expressions. 'Thanks to the development of technology', the resolution stated, 'it is necessary and unpostponable to forcefully proceed to recover all the audiovisual and film media to put them at the service of the culture and art of the workers'. For the COB, cinema was a powerful weapon of the dominant ideology that needed to be put in the hands of the people 'that does not want to be oppressed or exploited' (COB, 1979: 28). As such, cinema was conceived as a privileged tool for the construction of solidarity and class identity.

Cinema had burst into the union plans thanks to the joint action of two key figures in the history of the TCM, Líber Forti and Alfonso Gumucio Dagron. Both men acted as cultural advisors to the COB during that period. Líber Forti – an Argentine-born anarchist, playwright, intellectual and Secretary of Culture of the FSTMB – had promoted the counter-information work of radio stations, film clubs and proletarian theatre since the mid-1960s. Gumucio – a multifaceted Bolivian journalist, filmmaker, poet and historian – had returned in 1978 from his exile in Paris, where he had collaborated with French militant filmmakers and promoters and was trained in film production at the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (IDHEC – Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies). Back in Bolivia, Gumucio actively participated in a variety of projects to promote the implementation of Super 8 production centres in popular and grassroots organisations (Burton, 1986).[11] It was thanks to his friendship with Forti that he was invited to participate in various COB meetings on proletarian culture, and was able to convince the union to undertake this project. COB's resolutions in 1979 reflect Gumucio's and Forti's ideas on the feasibility of setting up film production units run by the union in mining centres.

However, political instability put this project on hold. Following Luis García Meza's coup d'état, Gumucio went into exile in Mexico in the

summer of 1980, followed shortly by Líber Forti, who was exiled in Paris. It was in the French capital that Forti reunited with his old friend Jacques d'Arthuys, a French ex-diplomat and journalist with Bolivian blood – his mother was Bolivian – who was head of the Centre de Recherche et de Formation au Cinéma Direct (Training and Researching Centre in Direct Cinema) – a film training centre run by the Association Varan. From that moment on, around early 1982, negotiations between Forti and d'Arthuys speeded up, and the agreement between Varan and the FSTMB was finally signed by the end of that year to collaborate in the development of a Super 8 film workshop.

Formally established in 1981, Varan was an unorthodox film training centre – and one that did not go unnoticed within French film cultures. Although d'Arthuys, the director, was an almost unknown character in those circuits, Varan had been promoted and founded by the famous French filmmaker and ethnographer Jean Rouch. Both men had met in Porto by the mid-1970s, at a time in which the ex-diplomat was appointed in Portugal by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As their current website describes, Varan's mission was to 'enable young directors in developing countries to learn how to read and write with images and sounds', so they could 'escape the invasion of mainstream cultural standards' and encourage the creation of 'archives on popular or ethnic memories'.[12] If the origins of Varan can be understood as the personal vision of both men, their conditions of possibility are better explained as a conjunction of interests in the fields of cultural diplomacy, political militancy and visual anthropology.

Rouch's ideas on visual anthropology shaped the project in its methodological design. From his audiovisual production laboratory at what was then the University of Paris-X (now Paris Nanterre), Rouch worked on the development of short film training programmes for social scientists during the 1970s (Marcorelles, 1974). His training methods used lightweight media – especially Super 8 – to encourage direct cinema techniques, following the principles of a 'shared anthropology' that he had refined throughout his career as a visual ethnographer.[13] For Rouch, training anthropologists was an urgent priority, given the seeming disappearance of native cultures throughout the world. These ideas, already stated in his 1973 *Resolution on Audiovisual Anthropology*, were openly based on a long-held colonial wish to preserve audiovisual records of 'vanishing' cultures. In this well-known manifesto, Rouch recommended the creation of an interconnected network of training, production, archiving and dissemination centres to be set primarily in so-called underdeveloped countries. In addition, he demanded that native people

should also get audiovisual training to ensure their participation and self-representation (Rouch and Hockings, 2003: 533–534). Years after, these recommendations became the main goals in Varan's mission: to 'train future filmmakers in real situations', 'register the cultural and social life of populations with their direct participation', 'disseminate film materials', 'create audiovisual archives at a time of accelerated change', and 'encourage the use of handheld cameras in communication processes, as part of development projects' (Varan, 1983: 3).

On his part, d'Arthuys assured the financial feasibility of the project – thanks to his privileged connections with French diplomatic networks – and added a militant drive that was lacking in Rouch's more scientific approach.[14] D'Arthuys was a left-wing cultural diplomat who had gained experience at the French embassy of Chile during the Popular Union government of Salvador Allende. After moving to Portugal during the Carnation Revolution of 1974, he was appointed cultural attaché in Maputo, Mozambique, where he collaborated with the new revolutionary government of the FRELIMO after their independence from Portuguese colonial rule. Despite being a journalist and diplomat, his interests in cinema were made evident during this period.[15] His meeting with Rouch in Porto only strengthened his will to promote cinema as a tool for social and political change.

It was after Rouch visited Mozambique in 1977 that d'Arthuys managed to secure financial aid from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Their first workshop was conducted in Mozambique in the summer of 1978 in collaboration with the University of Maputo and the Mozambican Research Institute, and with the technical assistance of Paris-X filmmakers, as well as visual anthropologists from the Comité du Film Ethnographique (Ethnographic Film Committee) (Wanono, 2016). They trained a small group of students that managed to make 16 Super 8 films, based on the principle that 'we didn't want to make "militant" or "technical" films, but a work that reflected as simply as possible the social reality or realities of the country we were going to' (Alencar et al., 1978: 3). The Mozambican workshop, widely discussed and analysed at the time, laid the methodological foundations and the cooperation scheme for further training programmes that were to be developed in countries such as Mexico, Kenya, Philippines, Egypt and Brazil before arriving in Bolivia (Varan, 1983).

Rouch didn't participate in the Mozambican workshop nor in any of those that followed. Nevertheless, the filmmaker not only inspired the methods and techniques but also encouraged the formal creation of Varan in 1981, of which he was the president until its dissolution in

1988. In fact, his tutelage was crucial, as he helped establish the connections between d'Arthuys and a team of filmmakers and technicians at the University of Paris-X and the Comité du Film Ethnographique that would end up working for Varan.

The convergence of interests between the FSTMB and Varan speaks of the complex position of the TCM and the resulting films produced in Telamayu in the spring of 1983. For the Bolivian union, moving towards a mining production unit opened up the possibility of breaking with the tutelage of filmmakers and other left-wing middle-class cultural allies.[16] Considered as a transference of media project, it belonged to a series of initiatives that opened up spaces for participation by the working classes. As such, they broadened the construction and transmission of a popular and counter-hegemonic memory.

At the same time, and paradoxically, self-representation increased the exchange value of audiovisual works produced by local populations. When organisations such as UNESCO started promoting the use of Super 8 and lightweight technologies in the context of so-called underdeveloped countries (Gunter, 1976; Gutelman, 1979), films and audiovisual documents recorded and scripted by students from Indigenous communities fed into the programmatic lines of a myriad of rural development, communication, education and ethnographic projects. Despite the pedagogical and emancipatory dimension of these methodologies, the images obtained were considered valuable resources in the metropoles, with NGOs proving the usefulness of states or international organisations funding programmes, as well as television channels buying and broadcasting these film materials. At the same time, many of these projects – and the TCM itself – would die before their consolidation due to multiple logistical and methodological shortcomings inherent to the epistemological framework of 'planning' for development (Escobar, 1995). Indeed, from the late 1970s to the 1980s, a good amount of research in the areas of communication and media cast informed doubts on the emancipatory drive of transference of media projects, usually inflected by Marxist analytical frameworks such as world-systems theory and dependency theories (Mignot-Lefebvre, 1979).

However, this sort of informed pessimism could not fully explain the complexity of the TCM, which successfully managed to produce 13 films. At first sight, these films can be seen as an example of what economic anthropologists Stephen Gudeman and Alberto Rivera called 'the dialectic of the popular voice and the centric text' (in Escobar, 1995: 99) – that is, the encounter between a local set of interests and, for our purposes, the diffusion of a cinematic worldview codified in a set of technological

choices, ethical premises, axioms, and learning methods that, packed under the neutral rubric of 'direct cinema', Varan promoted with proselytising zeal throughout the world. However, the cooperation scheme of Varan lent ample space for local intervention. In fact, Varan's agreement with the FSTMB was closer to the union's radical film policy than to their own broader goals. The union's ideas on cinema were, in addition, clearly traversed by international trends in filmmaking, such as the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial third-world cinemas of the 1960s and especially the influence of the Bolivian Grupo Ukamau. Moreover, and at a more practical level, the films could not comply with either Varan's methods or the union's agenda. On the contrary, they relied heavily on local trainers with their own backgrounds and purposes, as well as interests and capabilities of the students themselves.

In this regard, the composition of the core group of trainers that worked at the TCM helps us understand crucial aspects of these interlocking dimensions. The group was composed of four people. Two were the French monitors, Jacques d'Arthuys himself and a film director and cameraman, André Van In. The other two were hired as local assistants of the French, to guarantee better communication with the students and solve language barriers (d'Arthuys spoke Spanish, but Van In could hardly understand it). The selected Bolivian trainers, María Luisa Mercado and Gabriela Ávila, were both students in communication sciences at the university in La Paz, and they were already participating in the Bolivian film circles before they were selected to assist the French. Notably, they had participated in two crucial film workshops held in La Paz in 1979 and 1980. Conducted by a plethora of filmmakers, university professors, political activists and cultural agents, those workshops bridged the old generation of militant filmmakers with a new generation of socially engaged film and video-makers. Before the start of the TCM, Mercado was recruited by Alfonso Gumucio as a media production assistant at the Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado (CIPCA – Centre of Peasant Research and Promotion). Ávila, in turn, had joined the department of video production of Ukamau Ltda.

In Telamayu, from September to December 1983, it was Mercado and Ávila who eventually took responsibility for the everyday workings of the TCM. As such, they put into practice a mixture of Varan's ideas and what they had already learned in their formative years.[17] For their part, d'Arthuys emerged as a father figure who had a strong emotional impact among trainees, while Van In helped with the technical aspects of production. While the methodology of Varan defined the framework in terms of budget, equipment, duration and scope of the workshop, the

Bolivian trainers were also in charge of important aspects of the training programme. Finally, it was the 16 students – all between 18 and 25 years old, many unemployed, most of them with secondary education and with no union responsibilities – who had the last word.

This setup led to the production of 13 films. All films were the result of the students' choices and desires in terms of themes, characters and locations. At the same time, a certain stylistic framework, born out of the material determinations of the workshops and the systematisation of the principles of Rouch's 'shared anthropology', can be appreciated as well. Many films focus on female subjects. In *Being a Miner's Wife and Waiting*, Victor Poita reflects on the anguish of the women outside the mine, praying daily for the earth to give them back their husbands. Jacinto Rodriguez portrays the widow of a miner and mother of three young children in *A Sacrificial Lady*. Willy Mamani accompanies another recent widow to the cemetery in the film *All Saints' Day*. Two films, *Doña Elena, Palliri*, by César Alarcón, and *On the Back of the Sleeping Elephant* by Alfredo Siles, show the daily activities of *palliris* – women who hold the most strenuous role in the working chain, gleaning through the mining waste in search of remaining minerals.

Magdaleno Nina follows Don Valentín, a Quechua shepherd enduring a drought. The result of the rapport between the young miner and the old peasant are the two shorts, *Sad Year* I and II. In *Tenants*, David Martínez portrays the activities of a group of unemployed men who decide to work in an abandoned mine. Another short, *Juancito, the Black-footed Tenant*, focuses on this topic. However, the mother of Juan, the main subject, passes away while filming, and the film crew accompanies him to conduct the final rites. In *Gold and Boredom* (called *The Idle*, *los vagos* in Spanish), Freddy Medina follows young unemployed men who are fed up looking for a job without success, drinking in bars and dreaming of becoming gold miners. Ricardo Chiri, in *Shelter for Don Tomás*, roams through town with a miner, Don Tomás, who leads a hard-fought campaign with the authorities to ensure that he and his fellow miners will finally have decent housing. In *Testimonio*, a young man recounts the torture and amputation he suffered during the unleashing of García Meza's coup.

René Hurtado's short *Uncle from Bolivia* has as the main character *El Tío*, the devil. He was believed to have destroyed the first film about the sacrifice [*cha'lla*] that the miners of Ánimas made at the beginning of the TCM, which led to the making of this second film to show the harshness of underground work and the deep devotion the miners have for the Uncle. Finally, a collective production of all the students that completes

this collection is *Carreras* (freewheeling car races), the portrayal of the annual Soap Box Derby race, a very popular sports event.

A Varan report (n.d.) on the films stated that each student shot and edited their own films. However, due to the complexity of the infrastructures and logistics of the workshop, it is likely that the final edit was done in Paris for most of the films. Nevertheless, we are still far from knowing to what extent French technicians intervened in the editing process. Interviews with participants and trainers show divergent versions. Élisabeth Kapnist, French editor and Varan team member in the 1980s, recalls editing several films from raw footage, following telephone instructions from Jacques d'Arthuys.[18] Her version is consistent with the fact that the original films remained in France after the TCM ended. This was probably the case because the last shipment of Super 8 cassettes to Paris, where the films had to be sent to be processed, arrived in the French capital almost at the end of the workshop. On the contrary, René Hurtado, one of the students, states that all films were edited in Telamayu.[19] What is clear from photographic evidence is that some students worked in the editing room with their own rushes.

II

The TCM is a paradigmatic case of how the imperial dimension of technology shaped not only the visual records produced by subaltern communities but also the material history of the documents that today make up the collection we work with. The 13 original Super 8 films were kept by Varan in Paris. Between 1984 and 1985, they made several Super 8 copies and transferred them to analogue videos for each film in order to disseminate them at film festivals and on television channels. Almost all of these films were screened at festivals and broadcast on French and other European channels (Varan, 1988).

The history of the films in Bolivia is quite different. Some Super 8 and video copies returned to Bolivia in 1984 to begin a dissemination plan that was as strenuous as it was meagre.[20] The films had later been dispersed and became inaccessible in Bolivia for years. However, we recently had access to new digital copies of eight films in Super 8 that had been preserved at the SiDIS in La Paz. These digital copies were made by Juan Álvarez-Durán using a straightforward process (projecting the film footage and recording the screen with a digital camera). Although these files do not have sound, many of these films start with the image of a custom version of the TCM logo. In handwritten words drawn inside and around a

miner's helmet and a Super 8 camera, it reads: '1er Taller de Cine. FSTMB 1983' (1st Film Workshop, FSTMB 1983). This image is absent in the French versions, in which no textual traces can be found about the role played by the FSTMB in the workshop.

In France, the 13 original Super 8 films were preserved in Varan's basements until 2008. In that year, Varan signed an agreement with the INA for the preservation of its audiovisual collection, and the magnetic video copies were digitised and made available on-site as digital access copies.[21] These copies reveal, in the form of layers, material traces of the transfers between formats and the different uses of the footage, producing 'palimpsestic digital copies' (Tadeo and Keldjian, 2016: 74): the voices dubbed into French; the electronic subtitles, or the captions of the television programmes in which they participated, that were added and superimposed on the horizontal marks of the video; the vertical lines that indicate the passage of celluloid through a film projector; the dirt captured by the telecine or the changes in the aspect ratio of the image. The result is an accumulation of indexical traces that complements the stories told by the images registered at Telamayu.

The complete collection of materials is not limited to the corpus of films. As said, Varan kept three boxes of paper documentation and a folder with more than 200 photographic negatives of the Bolivian project. These materials clearly express the nature of the TCM, the bureaucratic framework and the affective networks that made it possible. Along with personal correspondence, we found project dossiers, press kits, film lists, budgets, breakdowns of film material and formal communications between institutions and collaborating organisations. Moreover, there is a set of documents that offer a level of detail that we would never have expected, from proof of expenses (invoices, receipts and purchase tickets that describe the most minute activities, such as buying a box of aspirin, doing the laundry or processing photographs in local stores) to dozens of telegrams sent between La Paz, Telamayu and Paris which give a detailed account of the logistics activated for the workshop, allowing for the reconstruction of its bureaucratic and operational work on an almost daily basis.

For decades, the TCM was a kind of ghostly experience based mostly on oral memories, both from the French (Van In, 2020) and the Bolivian (Aimaretti, 2020) sides. These were remembrances of a practice of recording (and thus preserving) the past lives of the mining communities. However, after locating this archive, the documents open up the possibility of a micro-historical approach to the practical setting of the workshop. Both approaches are almost incommensurable, though.

At this stage, the memories of the TCM we've had access to are diffuse, intense and experiential. The documentation is rich in bureaucratic and forensic details but tells us almost nothing about what the TCM students discussed, thought about or filmed. There is no information about the class programme, the movies they watched or their work on their own projects. In this sense, they remain silent.

Together with the paper documentation, the original film materials were sent to the EQZE school in San Sebastián. Errazu and the project's research assistants are currently working with the 13 original Super 8 films, various Super 8 analogue video copies and the rest of Varan's materials related to the workshop, namely the photographs and the paper documentation. We understand this phase as a step towards the restitution and reactivation of the materials in Bolivia. This research group has now created a database that identifies each record and allows us to complete some basic metadata that will facilitate the subsequent cataloguing work (names, creation dates, location in the archive). However, this is the bare minimum for preservation purposes. Further cataloguing tasks, the management of metadata and the design of strategies for preservation, restoration and curating access to these materials should be a collective process carried out in collaboration with our Bolivian stakeholders mentioned above, alongside mining communities, researchers and filmmakers.

Since the news emerged that the TCM films were not lost but in Paris, a fierce desire and urgency to recover these images was unleashed in Bolivia. They have already been publicly screened on different occasions, generating intense debates. It is worth highlighting the three screening sessions organised by Miguel Hilari in parallel with the XI Congress of the Bolivian Studies Association held in Sucre in 2023. The expectation of watching the films on the part of researchers and members of the displaced mining communities, as well as political representatives, filmmakers and people from all walks of life, was very high. The subsequent discussions demonstrated the diversity of interests in the restitution of these images to the Bolivian people and the number of uses that can be given to them. They are the only existing moving images from that period and place, so they can serve as a source of research for various disciplines. Furthermore, they hold great emotional and identity value for the diasporic mining community.

Along these lines, a group of young students from Telamayu led by Nohelia Claure got in touch with us after reading Seguí's (2023) article on the TCM. These students use audiovisual media to recover the memory of their places of origin, although none of them live in the mining territories

anymore, which demonstrates that the mining families were successful in transmitting their unique and treasured history and memories intergenerationally. The younger generations, born after the closure and forced relocation of the state mines, are eager to access visual records of historical times often recounted by their elders. Their interest in retrieving the thought-to-be-lost images has not only to do with a will to restore cultural memory but also to showcase the agency, creativity and prosperity of the mining communities before they were forced to relocate – with the aim of strengthening their identity in the current changing and challenging environment. Since Bolivia is still essentially a mining country, this goal remains topical.

Thanks to the active presence of these youngsters on social media, we were able to contact René Hurtado, one of the participants in the workshop and former miner, merchant and accountant, now retired. Hurtado was one of the most enthusiastic TCM students. Together with César Alarcón and Magdaleno Nina, they tried to replicate new iterations of the TCM in Bolivia, and constituted a formal Miner's Cinema Workshop Association. Their relationship with Varan lasted years, and they even travelled to Paris to receive further training in 16 mm.[22] Hurtado remains in touch with former TCM trainees and is actively searching for additional support for our restitution project among the local authorities. In this manner, new stakeholders may join the project in the near future. The preservation process of the TCM collection of films and documents poses a fundamental question: How can we make collective, meaningful interventions in the present by engaging with contested archives? This, in turn, leads us to at least two methodological questions: How can we constitute an archive that reflects the frictions of transnational projects of cooperation and media transference? And how can we design and enact a process of restitution and activation that accounts for how different social actors intervene in the production, loss, reassessment and circulation of audiovisual memories?

To tackle these questions, the authors of this chapter, in March 2025, started a restitution process that is allowing us to retrace the history of the TCM by attending to its material, social and discursive aspects. In this manner, we aim to map, gather and analyse the affective, organisational and infrastructural networks deployed for the TCM in France and Bolivia. Moreover, we are in the process of restituting the material and intangible traces of the TCM by organising a series of encounters through which Bolivian individuals, communities and institutions are participating in the process of knowledge and memory-making. Accordingly, we are developing an ethnographic approach to unravel how

people relate to the traces of the TCM at multiple levels and examine how newly situated forms of historical knowledge and memory practices emerge in this process.

To activate the archive, we plan to enact the digital returning of the traces of the TCM. Conceived as an act of counter-memory, the material and intangible traces of the TCM (films, documents, oral histories) will be made accessible in a digital online platform under an open-access licence. Moreover, we aim to produce new research and public engagement outputs based on the analysis of archival materials and oral histories made available. In this sense, we conceive this research project as a collaborative effort aimed at the successful restitution and activation of the TCM archive. All stakeholders, including the Bolivian diasporic mining communities, will participate in the execution, monitoring and evaluation of this project. These communities are not passive research subjects but active and politicised entities with a clear agenda and strong self-awareness.

At any rate, we are still in the early stages of this archival preservation, restitution and activation process. As a team, we are happy to contribute to the return of these unparalleled images to their owners and filled with hope about their potential to unleash emancipatory forces. However, we are also haunted by doubts about how to proceed without replicating the same old colonial dynamics that brought us here in the first place. But paths are made by walking, and embodying paradoxes is a key part of the human experience.

Notes

1. 'Transference of media' refers to projects of media acquisition and capacity building directed at disenfranchised populations in Third World countries, usually conceived by Western NGOs and funded by governmental offices. Their emergence in the late 1970s, during the crisis of the 'development era' (Escobar, 1995), coincided with increasing availability of lighter and cheaper technologies of film and video and calls for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). Working against developmentalist credos of growth, technological fetishisation and the pervasive processes of acculturation, these projects were conceived – however problematically – as decolonising efforts to restore representational sovereignty and rebalance the unequal informational and cultural exchange between Western and Third World populations (MacBride, 1980; Badenes, 2020).
2. As a legal entity, the Association Varan runs the Centre de Formation et de Recherche en Cinéma Direct (Training and Researching Centre in Direct Cinema). In 1988, the former legal association was dissolved, and a new association, Ateliers Varan – composed of the majority of trainers and workers of the Association Varan – took up the mantle and continued with the training workshops until today. For the purpose of clarity, we will use the word 'Varan' for all instances, unless indicated otherwise.
3. www.ateliersvaran.com/en/dans-le-monde-atelier/workshop-bolivia (accessed 20 May 2025).
4. This research visit, a fundamental step in this project, benefited from the support of a Short-Term Scientific Mission granted by the COST Action *Traces as Research Agenda for Climate Change, Technology Studies and Social Justice* (TRACTS, CA20134).

5. The 2023/24 EQZE students were Marga Almirall, Laura Gabay, Andoni Imaz, Júlia Izaguirre and Andrea de la Torre. In 2024/25 Laura Dávila, Jorge Fernández, Amina Ferley, Alejandra Larrea, Evelyn Ruiz and María Vaughan participated. We are deeply grateful for their time and dedication to this project.
6. See https://www.zine-eskola.eus/en/proyectos-de-investigacion/0025-strange-objects (accessed 25 May 2025). We want to thank Pablo La Parra, former head of EQZE's research department, for all the support and faith in this project.
7. See, for example, the panel discussions and projects presented at the Radical Film Network biannual conference, *Archives of Radical Cinema*, that took place in Madrid in June 2024 (RFN, 2024).
8. We are quoting the words by Jesse Gerard Mpango in the panel 'Transnational Archival Practice as Necessity: Fabulations Beyond National Film Heritage', part of the *Cinema of the Commoning* symposium organised in Berlin (Mpango et al., 2024).
9. This was not an isolated case. The FSTMB and mining Housewives Committees had also collaborated in films such as *Domitila, la mujer y la organización* (Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, 1980), *Warmi* (Danielle Caillet, 1980), *Las banderas del amanecer* (Grupo Ukamau, 1983) and *Pan y libertad* (Nicobis, 1983), to name a few.
10. Founded in 1952 after the National Revolution, the COB was composed of all the industrial, mining and agricultural unions of Bolivia. However, the FSTMB was its most powerful affiliate, and its historic leader Juan Lechín was also head of the COB from 1952 to 1987.
11. He was part of the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés' film workshop in 1978 and ran the audiovisual section of the Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado (CIPCA – Peasant Research and Promotion Centre) (Aimaretti, 2020: 163–196).
12. See www.ateliersvaran.com (accessed 22 May 2025).
13. Very briefly, Rouch's filmic approach involved specific production methodologies as well as aesthetic and technical choices, such as the preference for individual or small film crews, the use of handheld lightweight cameras and wide-angle fixed lenses, the preference of natural light – to encourage body proximity between camera and the subjects filmed – and the encouragement of feedback loops and participatory editing in the post-production process (Rouch, 2003). All these traits, together with the recording of synchronic sound while shooting, were part of the techniques and style of 'direct cinema'.
14. D'Arthuys was a close friend of the renowned French intellectual Régis Debray. A former guerrilla fighter involved in Che's 1967 campaign in Bolivia, by 1983 Debray was the personal advisor of the French President François Mitterrand at the Ministry of Presidency, and was instrumental in securing the funds for the TCM.
15. In Portugal, d'Arthuys had collaborated with Thomas Harlan in the making of his famous film *Torre Bela* (1975). In Maputo, he made a film with Rouch during the ethnographers' first visit to the country in 1977, *Makwayela* (Rouch and d'Arthuys, 1977).
16. The FSTMB–Varan agreement described the following goals: '1. The quest for a cinema that establishes the access of the general population to the means of film production. 2. The demystification of the technological, economic and artistic aspects of film production, in order to return to the people the means of expression and communication that Bolivian cinema should be, as an instrument of liberation outside the elites. 3. To break away from the alienation of the image of the Bolivian people created by so-called specialists, by which means we seek to allow them to reclaim their own authentic image.' (Film cooperation agreement, 1983).
17. Zoom interview with Gabriela Ávila by Miguel Errazu, 26 July 2024.
18. Zoom interview with Élisabeth Kapnist by Miguel Errazu and Paloma Polo, 23 July 2024.
19. Telephone interview with René Hurtado by Miguel Hilari, Isabel Seguí and Miguel Errazu, 12 June 2024.
20. After being screened in La Paz at the FSTMB headquarters, documentation at Ateliers Varan shows that some films were screened in mining towns and in La Paz. Two of them – *El Tío* and *Un abrigo para Don Tomás* – participated in national festivals and meetings. There were also efforts to broadcast them in the University Television Integrated System, although traces of these efforts are hardly perceptible.
21. Access copies are usually digital objects that have been scaled down from a high-quality original to a lower-quality to facilitate streaming or internet diffusion.
22. In Paris they made a collective film in 16 mm, *Les baguettes sont cuites* (1984), that registered the daily work of a baker.

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10

Decolonising museums in East-Central Europe: case studies of Poland, Czechia, Slovenia and Croatia

Tina Palaić, Anna Remešová, Magdalena Zych and Marija Živković

This chapter is a reflection on tracing complex collection histories, drawing on the work of four scholars and curators from Central and Eastern Europe,[1] a region that has been marked by both a post-Austro-Hungarian and a post-socialist legacy. Focusing on the ethnographic museums that house global collections in Poland, Czechia, Slovenia and Croatia, we examine the similarities and differences in the context of collecting and exhibiting ethnographic collections from other continents. The chapter seeks to explore how these countries were implicated in colonial relations and how this involvement is reflected in contemporary discussions on decolonisation in the given contexts. We address the ambiguities and ethical dilemmas that arise from the semi-periphery's historical duality – being both subject to imperial domination and participating in the colonial projects – and the enduring legacies of this position.

Through case studies from museums in Poland, Czechia, Slovenia and Croatia, we explore decolonisation efforts in the region, with a focus on decolonial critique in permanent and temporary exhibitions. Through the perspective of curators working for the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana (Slovenia), Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum in Krakow (Poland) and the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb (Croatia), as well as a researcher investigating the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures in Prague (Czechia), we aim to demonstrate how these institutions, between different 'posts' – post-socialist, post-colonial, post-imperial, post-totalitarian (Chari and Verdery, 2009) – trace and

confront these complex historical legacies. By shedding light on the multiple layers of knowledge production and the inflections of historical particularity (Gopal, 2021: 887) in the respective museums, we trace the process of Othering in these institutions, as well as its inscription in a variety of political and social contexts. In doing so, the chapter engages with recent critical debates on the risks of uncritically adopting the 'decolonial bandwagon' and the inherently multifaceted, context-dependent and historically specific nature of decolonisation (Moosavi, 2020; Gopal, 2021).

Problems of decolonisation in the semi-periphery

Decolonisation efforts in museums today can be seen as a continuation of long-standing anti-colonial struggles that have sought to challenge and dismantle systems of oppression since the inception of colonialism (Gopal, 2021: 889). Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, anti-colonial activists and fighters fought for political sovereignty and the return of land to its original inhabitants, as well as breaking economic, epistemic and cultural dependence on colonial empires (Elam, 2017). These efforts also encompassed the repatriation of cultural artefacts taken to European research and heritage institutions during colonial rule, as well as critiques of ahistorical and racialised representations of peoples from other continents (see Wolf, 1982; Trouillot, 2003; Wynter, 2003). These discussions remain highly relevant today. Ethnographic museums across Europe continue to grapple with the legacies of past violence, the types of knowledge they produce, and the question of whom their collections truly serve (Modest, 2019). Their initiatives include critically examining the histories of collecting and exhibiting practices within broader colonial contexts, collaborating with communities to retell their own histories and worldviews, and taking steps towards the repatriation of heritage.

Discussions on decolonisation have only recently emerged in the East-Central European countries, largely driven by the initiatives of engaged academics and activists (Tóth, 2015; Lüthi et al., 2016; Kušić et al., 2019; Ginelli, 2020; Rampley, 2021; Huigen and Kołodziejczyk, 2023) and much less by museum professionals (see Sretenović, 2004; Sladojević, 2014; Crhák, 2023a; Palaić, 2023, 2024a; Zych, 2024), who recognise the importance of these discussions for the region. In the 1990s, scholars from the region began applying postcolonial theory to explain its ambivalent position within Europe. For instance,

Bulgarian-American historian Maria Todorova (1994, 1997) analysed how the Balkans were imagined in Western discourse, while Serbian scholar Milica Bakić-Hayden (1995) examined cultural policies during the breakup of Yugoslavia. Simultaneously, some scholars pointed to the risks stemming from framing these dependencies through nationalist frameworks (Bukowiecki et al., 2020).

While research on East-Central Europe's colonial experiences has gained momentum, the region's direct involvement in colonial projects and their consequences remains largely absent from both academic and public discourse (Csilla and Wróblewska, 2022). East-Central Europe has long been characterised by claims of *colonial innocence*, rooted in the notion that these countries did not possess overseas colonies comparable to those of Western European powers. Additionally, the region has often been framed as historically subordinate to major empires such as Austria, Russia and the Ottoman Empire – reinforcing its perception as a political and cultural periphery (Lüthi et al., 2016; Rampley, 2021).

This chapter challenges that perspective by arguing that East-Central European countries must be understood in relation to their participation in global historical processes, including imperialism and coloniality. It examines both how these global developments shaped the region and how the region, in turn, influenced them. We acknowledge the significance of *inter-imperiality*, which highlights the interactions and mutual influences between simultaneous or successive empires and political entities that have shaped the region. This approach moves beyond the traditional core–periphery dichotomy, offering a more nuanced understanding of East-Central Europe's historical entanglements (Doyle, 2014; Parvulescu and Boatcă, 2022).

This also includes a reflection on the region's role in the colonial project, as well as the question of how colonial structures and power relations shaped political, scientific and public discourses in the countries in question and how they continue to do so today. The concepts of *colonialism without colonies* (Lüthi et al., 2016: 4–6), *colonial complicity* (Vuorela, 2009) and *colonialism at the margins* (Loftsdóttir, 2012) allow us to consider how East-Central Europe was involved in colonialism and benefitted from colonial practices, not only through the production and dissemination of colonial knowledge and the construction of racial hierarchies, but also through direct participation in European colonisation, with the provision of personnel to explore, occupy, administer and police colonial empires (Lüthi et al., 2016; Kołodziejczyk and Huigen, 2023: 3).

Austrian historian Walter Sauer (2012) from the University of Vienna has long addressed the involvement of Austria-Hungary in the

colonial project. While the attempts in the mid-nineteenth century to establish Austro-Hungarian rule on the island of Socotra (today's Yemen), the Nicobar Islands, Ethiopia or in the footsteps of the Jesuits in Sudan all failed, the Habsburg monarchy maintained an important position within Europe itself. As Sauer (2012) demonstrates, Austria-Hungary was present at the signing of key international agreements, including those resulting from the Berlin Conference of 1884–5, during the height of the 'Scramble for Africa'. Although Austria-Hungary did not gain any overseas territory,[2] its signature provided a significant legitimising endorsement. Furthermore, Austria-Hungary's military occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878 and its annexation in 1908 have been characterised by many scholars as internal colonialism or 'colonialism without colonies' (Verdery, 1979; Telesko, 2015; Ruthner, 2018).[3] This aspect of Austria-Hungary's history is often overlooked both in Austrian historiography and in contemporary discussions on decolonisation in the region. However, an analysis of the representations of Bosnians clearly shows a construction of the 'Other', indicative of a colonialist perspective, albeit shaped by regional particularities (see Gingrich, 1998; Baskar, 2011; Rampley, 2021; Bartulović, 2022; Krivec, 2023, 2024).

To understand the East-Central European region's involvement in colonialism, we must focus on the role played by individual actors, such as missionaries, tradesmen, explorers, settlers and mercenaries in the colonial project (Lüthi et al., 2016: 2–3). Sauer (2012) examines the forms of Austrian overseas trade and travels by Austrian, Hungarian, Czech, Polish and Croatian (as well as Slovene) missionaries (see also Frelih, 2009; Lemmen, 2018), travellers (see also Šmitek, 1986, 1995; Živković, 2018), naval officers (see also Marinac, 2017; Živković, 2017), scientists and diplomats to non-European countries. These individuals either participated directly in European colonisation (see also Frelih, 2007; Lopasic, 2013; Grzechnik, 2019) or contributed to the ideological support of European colonisation through their scientific or popularising work.

While the popular and scientific interests of travellers and collectors might seem to reflect private affairs or philanthropic efforts, it is important to recognise that their activities were often financially supported by Austro-Hungarian institutions. These individuals often acted as representatives of these institutions and their imperial strategies, taking into account religious, commercial, military, socio-cultural and political interests (Frelih, 2009; Čeplak Mencin, 2012). In addition to individual efforts, institutions such as Catholic missions, various associations and museums from the region were also engaged in the export of

cultural artefacts from non-European countries. These artefacts, along with the photographs and narratives created around them, contributed to the creation of knowledge and images about the 'Other' (see Motoh, 2020; Demski and Czarnecka, 2021; Křížová and Malečková, 2022).

Debates surrounding decolonisation in the region are further complicated because of the legacy of the post-World War II era. The period between 1947 and 1991 is characterised by the geopolitical tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, along with their respective allies. This bipolar struggle between the capitalist Western Bloc and socialist Eastern Bloc was fought primarily on political, economic and propaganda fronts in Europe, but also extended to the Global South. Both blocs sought to establish their own version of modernisation in developing countries, promoting these efforts through the ideology of developmentalism and, in some cases, messianism (Jakovina, 2011: 24–25).

Exchanges and cooperation between the Eastern Bloc countries and the Global South in areas such as the economy, education and culture led to increased contact with diverse populations. These interactions occurred not only in the countries where Eastern European modernisation projects were implemented but also within local European contexts. For example, young people came to study or participate in cultural events and ethnological exhibitions hosted by Eastern Bloc countries and Yugoslavia as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (Rogelj Škafar, 2017; Stejskalová, 2017; Stanek, 2020; Mark and Betts, 2022).

Poland and Czechia were part of the Eastern Bloc, while Slovenia and Croatia, along with the other four republics, formed the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia which was excluded from the socialist bloc in 1948. Yugoslavia then developed its own independent foreign policy and became one of the founding countries of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which was formally launched at the summit in Belgrade in September 1961. NAM united many newly independent countries from Asia, Africa and Latin America that had gained freedom from colonial powers, providing a platform for political, economic, scientific and cultural connections and dialogue (Jakovina, 2011; Stubbs, 2023).

Both the Eastern Bloc and socialist Yugoslavia advocated the anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggle, emphasising the principles of solidarity and friendship with the countries of the Global South (Mark and Betts, 2022; Stubbs, 2023). The nationalist discourses of the countries in question at the time included specific expressions of empathy or comparisons with colonised populations, especially when the national liberation struggle for freedom was foregrounded (see Holečková, 2022; Kołodziejczyk and Huigen, 2023; Palaić, 2023, 2024b). Following the

collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991, this period became taboo for many years. The focus shifted towards the goal of joining the European Union, with the aspiration to bring these states into the 'European family'. This reorientation and 'nostalgia for Europe' highlighted anti-communist sentiment and intellectual and cultural alignment with ideas of Europe (Boym in Kołodziejczyk and Huigen, 2023: 4–5). As a result, the links and solidarity with the Global South were largely erased from political agendas and public memory.

The importance of the idea of drawing a clear line between the European 'us' and 'them' manifested itself not just in the rejection of migrants, especially those with a Muslim background, but also in the racialisation of the domestic Other, among them the Roma (Sardelić, 2015; Vezjak, 2016; Rampley, 2021; Sowa, 2021). In this period of transition, Central and Eastern European countries found themselves caught between a double negation: one is that of the anti-colonial solidarity of the 1950s and 1960s, defined by the spirit of 'socialist friendship'; the other is the refusal to bear the consequences of integration into the West, as well as to acknowledge the advantages that Europe (including its Central-Eastern part) gained from centuries of direct and indirect domination over non-European populations (Barša, 2020).

It seems challenging to think in parallel about both being the space that was and still is filled with imagined representations and attributions of Otherness by the West (Wolff, 1994; Todorova, 1997) and having been involved in the global formation of concepts of race and whiteness. These categories, translated through different social hierarchies, took different localised forms in Eastern and Central European societies (Baker, 2018; Kalmar, 2022). The challenge of addressing these complex realities is particularly evident in the case of ethnographic museums in the region, where discussions about the region's involvement in colonialism and its legacies are still rare. However, museums, with their collections of material culture and the discourses of Otherness they have produced, provide an excellent resource for such reflections.

In the following sections, we provide a historical overview of the museums in question, along with a brief summary of their decolonial efforts. We also highlight key aspects of the decolonisation process within East-Central European museums, drawing on case studies from these institutions. We argue that the task of museums in the region is not only to recognise and illuminate the region's participation in the colonial project, but also to create new knowledge and narratives including multiple perspectives, from researchers, activists, artists and particularly implicated or source communities. Those practices of 're-earthing'

could enable not only new museological approaches but also alternative futures based on inclusiveness and social justice.

Ethnographic museums staging the ideas of nation and Otherness

The ethnographic museums under consideration were established in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.[4] This period coincided with the formation of national consciousness in Slovenia, Croatia, Poland and Czechia within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This process included the mobilisation of various types of museums for nation-building purposes (see Berger, 2014), including ethnographic collections. Historian Stefan Berger notes that the museums established by non-German speakers within the Habsburg Empire often occupied a hybrid position between regional and national institutions, based on the Habsburg idea of 'sub-national entities finding their unity in the imperial state structures' (Berger, 2014: 22).

The new museums were tasked with acquiring material evidence to support narratives about the origins and identities of the respective populations, with a primary focus on rural material culture, agricultural traditions and crafts. In addition to local material culture, these museums collected non-European artefacts in order to show the world's diversity and to educate and inspire locals, as well as to emphasise the contrast between local populations and the rest of the world (Jezernik, 2013; Remešová, 2022). With both local and global collections, the museums under consideration pursued two objectives. Their primary intention was to establish and strengthen their own national identity that set them apart from the Habsburg imperial power (Jezernik, 2013; Berger, 2014). Similar to the international exhibitions held in Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Neuburger, 2010), both national and global collections were used to demonstrate not only the authenticity of those nations but also their belonging to the developed, modern West. Their 'desire to belong' (Vuorela, 2009) to the Western project of modernity (and economically profit from it) was also expressed through the formation of the image of the Other. This image functioned as a tool to assert cultural proximity to the West while reinforcing a sense of distance from peoples of other continents, all while combating the accusation of lacking modernity or being delayed in achieving it (see Boatcă, 2007).

The ideas described above can be found in the argumentation for the establishment of the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures in Prague. Its founder, Vojtěch Náprstek,[5] saw economic prosperity as the primary way to emancipate Czechs from Austrian dominance, which was influenced by the idea of economic liberalism developed and promoted by Náprstek himself and other patriots who were members of the Industrial Union. Náprstek established a private museum in Prague that displayed industrial products, machinery innovation and craft objects from all over the world. The artefacts came from two main sources: the Great International Exhibitions (agricultural, industrial or general from London, Paris, Hamburg, Bremen or Amsterdam) and travellers financially supported by Náprstek, who himself was collecting ethnographic material from the First Nations in the United States. The collections were first introduced to the public in 1874, in the form of short-term exhibitions organised by type of craft, material, processing or use. At this time, non-European ethnographic objects were displayed alongside European industrial products to educate and inspire Czech craftsmen and small businessmen, as well as people interested in the art industry. It was not until the late 1890s that separate sections within the permanent exhibition were devoted to ethnographic collections from Africa, America, Asia and Australia, alongside sections with so-called Slavic folk art.

The establishment of the Ethnographic Museum in Cracow (MEK) also emerged out of a private initiative that doubled as a nation-building project. Seweryn Udziela (1857–1937), the MEK's first director and its driving force, was a teacher inspired by the emerging new field of ethnography. Assembled during the nineteenth century, when Cracow was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the province known as Western Galicia, these collections were curated by Polish elites committed to the idea of national independence. Seweryn Udziela considered the role of ethnographic museums as a means 'to recreate folk life as it is in daily life as well as on special occasions, in moments of joy and in moments of sorrow' (Udziela, 1916: 11). For him, the 'folk' category included smallholding farmers and peasants with various ethnic and religious backgrounds. These collections sought to showcase the ethnic diversity of Polish lands, with a particular emphasis on rural material culture, and included artefacts gathered by Polish travellers and the diaspora.

It is important to note, however, that ethnographic collections in Galicia also served as a colonial tool of domination on the local level. The largest Ukrainian ethnographic collection housed at the Cracow museum originates from this period (Jełowicki, 2014, 2017). The museum also

holds hundreds of Belarusian and Lithuanian objects within its inventory. During this time, the Polish noble class and landowners held dominion over peasants who identified with nationalities other than Polish. The colonial dynamics in the process of nation-building in both Polish and Ukrainian societies during this period have played a significant role in contemporary reflections on the history of Galicia (Davies, 2023; Joyce, 2024). Throughout the interwar period, the portrayal of the 'folk' in exhibitions and folk-art competitions served to reinforce the Polish nation-building project.

The ethnographic museums in Ljubljana and Zagreb also followed the paths of the national projects alongside colonial complicity. Similar to the Polish case, the aim of both museums was to represent the everyday lives and material culture of the rural 'folk'. Both local and global collections were initially acquired by the national museums: in Slovenia, the Carniola Regional Museum,[6] which was renamed the National Museum in 1921, and in Croatia, the National Museum in Zagreb. After the foundation of the ethnographic museums in question, ethnographic collections, both local and from other continents, were transferred there. Global collections stemmed from miscellaneous individuals involved in colonial and imperial projects, including sailors who served in the Austro-Hungarian Navy, consular officials, merchants, missionaries and travellers. Within colonial frameworks, the non-European objects at the time were regarded as belonging to 'semi-cultured' and 'primitive' peoples (Tkalčić, 1930: 139). As collectors were involved in the civilising mission, objects often came to the museum through missionary acquisitions (Frelih, 2009, 2010) or collaboration in colonial expeditions (Frelih, 2007). One of the most famous donors to the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, Dragutin Lerman, joined Henry Morton Stanley's scientific expedition to the present-day DR Congo in 1882. He was in the service of the Congo Free State until 1896 and brought to Zagreb a collection of almost 500 objects (Lazarević, 1989; Lopasic, 2013). Similarly, the Slovene Ethnographic Museum houses the collection of the Ljubljana-based Anton Codelli, who worked for the German Empire in Togoland in Africa between 1911 and 1914. His case will be presented in more detail later. The stories of these individuals clearly demonstrate the region's involvement in colonial practices and epistemic frameworks.

Although the museums followed similar trajectories during the post-Austro-Hungarian nation-building projects, their paths diverged after World War II. While Czech and Polish institutions became integrated into the Eastern Bloc, Yugoslavia co-founded the NAM. In 1945, following World War II, the MEK in Cracow was nationalised and became

part of the new narrative about the 'folk' and the nation, emphasising the alliance of the working and rural classes in the Polish People's Republic. After 1948, with the advent of the communist regime and the integration of Czechoslovakia into the Soviet bloc, there was an increased emphasis on the political-ideological framing of exhibitions around the development of non-European societies towards decolonisation and socialist revolution. In practice, the Náprstek Museum continued to profile itself as a centre for travel and travellers, reinscribing colonial tropes of exploration and suffering from a semi-amateurish museological approach (Gecko, 2023).

In contrast, post-war socialist Yugoslavia developed divergent museum practices through intensive global contacts during the NAM. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, due to the favourable political climate, the Yugoslav museums in question focused more on presenting non-European cultures and countries. Between 1964 and 1988, the Slovene Ethnographic Museum (SEM) in Ljubljana organised almost 90 exhibitions, more than a third of them as a result of international cooperation (Palaić, 2023, 2024b). In the Ethnographic Museum (EM) in Zagreb, global collections were systematically worked on between the mid-1960s and the late 1980s. Collections in both museums were used as a starting point for collaboration with developing countries; yet, despite Yugoslavia's advocacy of anti-colonial policies, the museums' perspective on the colonial past and its attitude towards colonial heritage remained unchanged. While colonialism was condemned, the non-European collections were paradoxically not seen as a product of the nineteenth-century European colonisation (Lazarević and Radauš-Ribarić, 1972; Palaić, 2023, 2024b).

The above brief history of these museums demonstrates that the key aspect of a Central and East European museum is the amateur acquisition of global collections, which are frequently the result of individual initiative rather than organised research or collecting trips, and even less so systematic museum collection policies. The museum interpretations and discourses of Othering are frequently shaped by nationalist frameworks, myths of colonial innocence and romanticised views of collectors as heroic figures. Additionally, there remains a consistent failure to recognise the region's own involvement in global colonial dynamics. Many of these collectors are positioned alongside Western explorers to assert that these nations too belong to the 'civilised' world. For the decolonisation of museums in the region to move forward, addressing these foundational issues is essential.

Decolonial efforts in museums in the region

In the four museums studied in this chapter, the discussion on decolonisation has only gained traction in recent years, despite many scholars in the region engaging with topics such as the history of slavery, racism, or settler colonialism through the lens of postcolonial and decolonial theory (see Křížová, 2013; Gržinić and Tatlić, 2014; Lánský, 2014; Barša, 2015; Kołodziejczyk, 2017). The momentum for these discussions has often been driven by criticism from outside the institution,[7] involvement in international projects focused on such topics,[8] or by initiatives of individual curators who recognise the importance of the decolonisation perspective for their work.[9] This shift marks a growing recognition among museums of the need to confront their colonial histories through curatorial practice.

In recent years, all four museums have hosted exhibitions aimed at revising the role of national experts, travellers and scientists in the imperial and colonial processes, both in non-European and European contexts. These exhibitions demonstrate that participation in the colonial project did not necessarily mean only military involvement but also participation in the destabilisation of society and territory, most often in the form of extractivism, whether it was the export of natural resources or cultural heritage. Illuminating these actions has also raised questions about provenance and methods of acquiring the collected objects. These exhibitions shed light on the construction of the Other and how these processes helped to strengthen the national image and bring the nations in question closer to the 'imaginary' Western Europe. To this end, museums, as well as media and public discourses, have often used narratives of heroic white European protagonists to represent collectors and researchers. In contrast, the communities among whom they worked and collected objects often remained an anonymous mass of people whose perspectives and experiences were not represented by museums (see Warsame, 2018: 83–84). The following section reflects on a selection of projects that engage with the decolonial challenge faced by museums in the region.

Museum collections as a result of involvement with the colonial project

Curator and archivist of the Náprstek Museum in Prague, Ondřej Crhák, together with art historian Tomáš Winter, created the exhibition *Emil*

Holub,[10] offering a new perspective on the figure of the renowned Czech traveller. Holub is celebrated in Czech national memory as a heroic figure, his story often bordering on mythologisation. His name is widely known across Czechia, partly due to its popular representation in films and advertisements. It is therefore fitting that one of the first major exhibitions in Czechia to critically examine the country's nineteenth-century colonial ties focuses on Holub. In the 1870s and 1880s, Holub made two trips to South Africa with the aim of crossing the entire continent from south to north. Although he never achieved this goal, he managed to collect 31,000 objects, including ethnographic and natural history artefacts, which he later exhibited in Vienna and Prague. As shown in the exhibition, Holub himself saw his activities as scientific and educational, but the discursive level of his exhibitions and lectures, which helped to spread the ideas of colonialism, imperial politics, Otherness and cultural superiority in the Czech environment, cannot be overlooked. For the first time, the exhibition challenges the methods by which some objects were acquired during his expeditions, such as engravings from the South African San people. Holub had literally cut these from rock, believing he was 'saving' them by bringing them to Europe (Crhák, 2023b) (see Figure 10.1).

Figure 10.1 *Emil Holub* exhibition, April 2023–April 2025.
© Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures in Prague.

While criticism of colonialism and European supremacy is not a new topic in the art gallery environment and is, in principle, positively received,[11] the exhibition on Emil Holub has sparked a heated debate that reflects the current discourse in Czech museology. Some of the critics missed the exhibition's sharper political definition of Holub's work in Africa (Šima, 2023), while others, particularly conservatives, contended that the exhibition's creators applied 'today's values and opinions' to the past (Zídek, 2023). Of course, it depends on the context and the particular institution or medium, but currently, the debate on the decolonisation of museums and museum exhibitions is polarised between the following two positions: a left-progressive perspective pushing for revisions in educational and cultural programmes, and a conservative-traditionalist viewpoint that advocates for maintaining the status quo of denialist discourse. Cultural anthropologist Ema Hrešanová provides a detailed description of how the post-communist discourse influences the strategies to cope with the reality of 'colonialism without colonies'. Hrešanová (2023: 420) argues that:

> detailed reflection is called for here, given the Czechs' 'colonial exceptionalism', which consisted of their being both inscribed into and erased from the colonial order of power. The veiling of the Czech colonial past and its complexity partly explains the poor state of the decoloniality debate in Czech anthropology and ethnology.

This reveals that Czech museums and politics showed a visible ideological affinity with the colonial project, and that the reflections on the concrete activities and involvement of Czechs in the colonial matrix among humanities scholars have only been slowly emerging during the last two years. In addition, discussions about new permanent exhibitions at the Náprstek Museum stalled due to the lack of financial resources. Interestingly, the National Museum director Michal Lukeš recently revealed plans to acquire a new museum building for the 'Museum of the World'.[12]

A similar resistance to acknowledging involvement in the colonial project is also present in Croatia. Some Croatian ethnologists, such as Sklevicky (1977), engaged with postcolonial critique early on, but overall, the non-European collections did not receive much attention from the scientific community. The exhibition in the Ethnographic Museum Zagreb that aimed to contextualise collectors' lives and endeavours in this light was *The Seljan Brothers in Wilderness and Desert*, designed by Marija Živković in 2018.[13] The exhibition told the story of Mirko (1871–1913)

and Stevo (1875–1936) Seljan, two brothers born in Karlovac, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the late nineteenth century, they embarked on what they presented as an adventurous journey, with concerts and lectures raising funds for their expeditions. Their travels took them to Ethiopia, where they served Emperor Menelik II for two and a half years, working to consolidate his empire in the south.

After relocating to South America in 1903, the Seljan brothers were employed by the newly independent nations. For the first two years, the Brazilian government hired the Seljan brothers to explore the river network and the possibility of constructing trade routes in the East–West direction. In the following years, they organised numerous expeditions from Chile to the Amazon Delta. In 1911, the Seljans agreed with the Peruvian government to design and construct a trade route to facilitate the transport of goods between the Pacific and the Atlantic Ocean, which ended with the death of Mirko Seljan. The Seljan brothers donated to the Ethnographic Museum Zagreb objects from Ethiopia and South America, along with diaries, books, articles, letters, photographs and hand-drawn geographical maps.

In the Croatian press, the brothers were often depicted as heroic figures who promoted the Croatian name around the world and contributed to their country's collective history. When addressing the exhibition audience, it was important to highlight the historical context of the Seljans' actions, particularly their ambition to exploit natural resources. The exhibition also delved into the political situation in Ethiopia during their time there, problematised the romanticised view of researchers during the Age of Imperialism, depicted the plight of the black population in the Boer wars, and revealed the Seljan brothers' stance on these issues. Artefacts on display, such as ivory items, were used to illustrate the tax imposed on conquered peoples, which the Seljan brothers collected and delivered to Menelik II. The exhibition also explained how Native American objects were acquired for European and American museums, using an excerpt from the film *Mato Grosso* (1931, Penn Museum) to provide context. In 2017, a year before the exhibition's opening, the museum made all the material related to the Seljan brothers publicly accessible on its website. In addition to the Croatian audience, the museum also aimed at attracting foreign experts seeking valuable resources for studying local history.[14]

The exhibition *White Gold: Stories of Cotton*,[15] designed at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum as part of the EU-funded project *Taking Care. Ethnographic and World Cultures Museums as Spaces of Care* also aimed to make public the ambiguous histories of collecting practices of

Slovene collectors and their involvement in colonial processes. It showcased museum collections from Togo and India acquired at the beginning of the twentieth century which depict the production and processing of cotton, as well as the clothing culture in both locations (see Figure 10.2).

With the Togo collection, the exhibition shed light on the work of Ljubljana-based Austro-Hungarian Anton Codelli, who worked for the German Empire in Togo between 1911 and 1914. At the invitation of German engineers, Codelli helped to build a radiotelegraph station in the village of Kamina near the city of Atakpamé to wirelessly connect Germany with its colonies in Africa. There, he met the German cinematographer Hans Schomburgk and helped him with the production of two films.[16] The documentary film *In the German Sudan* (76 minutes), which was filmed in several places in Togo in 1914, features long scenes showing the various crafts in the entire process from obtaining raw materials to the finished product.[17] One of them presents the cultivation of cotton on plantations, the weaving and sewing of clothes and the sale of the final products in the open market (Frelih, 2023: 76–78).

The documentary is an important source for understanding the construction of knowledge about the native population, who are shown through various activities. Without the right context, these video sequences could be viewed in the romantic sense of preserving traditional

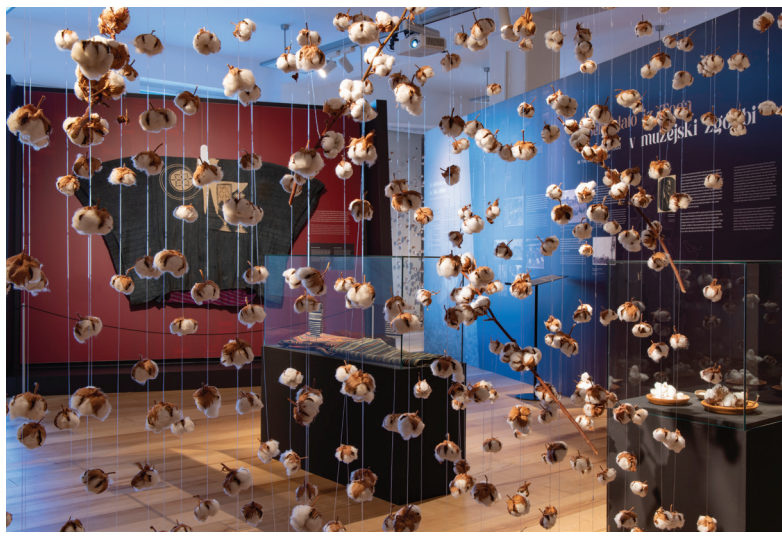

Figure 10.2 *White Gold. Stories of Cotton* exhibition, Slovene Ethnographic Museum, January–August 2023. © Blaž Verbič / © Tina Palaić, Anna Remešová, Magdalena Zych and Marija Živković.

artisanal techniques. However, as the title of one of the sequences tells, the locals were forced to pay taxes to the Germans for their Togo 'development' project with raw cotton. The tax duty was used as a coercive measure to force the locals into cotton cultivation, which was crucial for the growing German textile industry (Laumann, 2003; Zimmerman, 2005). The cotton cultivation was additionally presented with textiles and photographs taken by Leo Poljanec, who joined Codelli in 1912 to manage the construction site in Kamina (see Frelih, 2007, 2023). Poljanec's images show the packing of raw cotton into sacks, spinning, loom weaving and a local clothing culture. After returning home, Poljanec toured around Slovenia with selected objects and slides to share his experience with his fellow compatriots. Exploring his archive reveals how his narrative was shaped by his limited experience and the incomplete information he was able to obtain.

The exhibition *White Gold* also used the collection acquired by the Jesuits at the end of the 1920s and during the 1930s in West Bengal, India.[18] Missionaries contributed significantly to the Slovenian public's knowledge of faraway places and people in the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, not only by publishing books and reports in Slovene Catholic newspapers but also through exhibitions organised by missionary societies (Motoh, 2020). The exhibition showcased selected sarees and prints collected by missionaries at bazaars in Calcutta, with the majority of them showing women with different backgrounds and attires. This part of the exhibition discussed the Jesuits' paternalism towards the locals and the propaganda and moralising purpose of their writing (Palaić and Čeplak Mencin, 2023: 43–45), as well as raising questions about the social context in which the missionaries found themselves in West Bengal, including the Indian independence movement (see also Gupta, 2022). The exhibition was complemented by an insight into the current challenges encountered by cotton farmers in Togo and India, with the goal of giving them the opportunity to share their own narratives in contrast to those told by Slovene collectors through museum collections.[19]

The MEK Museum in Krakow has recently adopted a critical approach to its Siberian collection, aiming to reframe the representation of this material culture beyond the prevalent Siberian martyrdom myth in Polish culture. The donors of the Siberian collection were mainly exiles who were sent to remote regions of Russia due to political dissent after the January Uprising in 1863. During this time, they came into contact with the Indigenous inhabitants of those regions: the Nenets, Selkups, Evens, Evenks, Koryaks, Chukchi and Aleuts. The MEK collection includes items from Benedykt Dybowski, Konstanty Podhorski, Izydor

Sobański, Cecylia Chrzanowska, Maria Kulczykowska, Jan Żurawski and Kazimierz Machniewicz. Upon their return, these exiles contributed to the collection, which now comprises 350 items, including sleighs, boats, tools, unique clothing and ritual objects made from delicate materials. The Siberian contact zone (Pratt, 1991; Clifford, 1997) resulted in the mingling of biographies and natural discoveries but also the material documentation of local life.

The *Siberia: Voices from the North* exhibition (2020–1) and research project highlighted the connections among Polish exiles and communities under the power of the Russian Empire.[20] It presented new insights into the lives of people living in Siberia, a region often depicted as 'empty'. The aim of that research and collaboration was to collect perspectives from source and local communities and exchange knowledge about the existing museum collection. The project's *fieldwork museology approach* traced interpersonal relationships formed between the people of Uelen in Chukotka, Petropavlovsk in Kamchatka, and Cracow. Similar to the exhibitions previously discussed, the project highlighted the inherent ambiguity of collection practice. It included objects brought back from exile and those acquired by those who went to the region voluntarily to explore, extract and get rich. The collection was reinterpreted as complex traces of imperialism, colonial practices and gazes, but also sources of personal encounters from the past and present (Dybczak, 2024).

The ongoing decolonial efforts in these museums highlight a growing, though uneven, commitment to critically reassessing their collections, exhibition narratives and institutional legacies. While projects such as *Emil Holub* or *The Seljan Brothers in Wilderness and Desert* have confronted the roles of national figures in colonial and imperial networks, the responses to these exhibitions reflect a polarised public discourse. As the *White Gold* and *Siberia: Voices from the North* exhibitions demonstrate, the inclusion of perspectives from affected communities, such as the contemporary narratives of cotton farmers in Togo and India or Indigenous voices from Siberia, marks an important step towards a more nuanced understanding of colonial entanglements. It also foregrounds cooperation and the co-creation of museum content with the heritage bearers or the descendants of the communities whose objects are kept in museums. However, structural challenges – including limited funding, political pressures and ingrained national mythologies – continue to slow decolonial efforts. Moving forward, the success of these initiatives will depend on sustained institutional commitment, broader public engagement and a willingness to address not only colonial histories but also their lasting impacts.

Conclusion

Decolonising ethnographic museums in Central and Eastern Europe is an urgent imperative. In this chapter, the authors have traced the complex ways in which these institutions, shaped by their semi-peripheral histories, grapple with their colonial legacies. As this chapter has demonstrated, museums in Cracow, Prague, Zagreb and Ljubljana share a common heritage tied to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and post-World War II state socialism. These collections now stand as a material reminder of the involvement of Central and Eastern European countries in global colonial projects. The post-World War II era offered a new framework for engagements within the Global South, shaped by an anti-colonial narrative and a politics of solidarity. Yet, even within this progressive context, many socialist countries in the Global South were still seen through a Western lens as lagging behind, a gaze that was internalised by Central and Eastern Europe itself (Kołodziejczyk and Huigen, 2023: 4).

In this context, Central and Eastern European ethnographic museums face both discursive and material obstacles in their efforts to engage with decolonial critique. A significant barrier lies in the public, but sometimes also professional, glorification of collectors and travellers, whose research and collection activities are often romanticised and placed on a par with those of Western explorers. From the Seljan brothers' artefacts from South America and Ethiopia to Emil Holub's collection from South Africa, Slovenian missionaries' objects from India, Anton Codelli's artefacts from Togo and Polish exile collections from Siberia, each collection represents distinct histories and geographies. What unites them is their function as national symbols, repurposed at different historical moments to serve emancipatory or ideological ends. To truly decolonise museums in the region, it is essential to first confront the entrenched myths and reassess the historical ambiguities that have shaped the collections in the region. This is especially important today, in a context of rising nationalism and conservatism, as these collections risk being further instrumentalised rather than critically reassessed.

Another key discursive barrier is that the national narratives of victimhood and liberation efforts – especially their separation from Austria-Hungary – obscure their colonial legacies. As Polish political scientist Jan Sowa, a participant in the international research project *Perverse Decolonization?*, has pointed out, the politics of victimhood have become an effective tool for conservative and nationalist right-wing parties in Eastern Europe. These groups deny the need for a decolonial re-evaluation of national historiography, using it to discredit opposition,

garner support and even 'disguise the turn to illiberal democracy as the politics of decolonisation' (Sowa, 2021; Kołodziejczyk and Huigen, 2023: 16). Consequently, efforts to promote decolonisation and provenance research in Central and Eastern European ethnographic museums find themselves navigating a complex political landscape.

The path towards decolonisation is also fraught with material obstacles. Financial and structural limitations significantly hinder progress, as many museums in the region struggle with inadequate funding, understaffing and lack of staff diversity, and missing institutional support for research. Decolonising initiatives require a significant increase in the budget to support the necessary research, as well as systemic institutional reform, long-term commitments to provenance research and well-supported, sustained engagement with the communities whose cultural heritage remains housed in these institutions.[21]

To overcome these challenges, it is not enough to simply uncover the colonial roots and legacies of museums in Central and Eastern Europe. The task lies in harnessing this knowledge to make bold curatorial decisions that reimagine collections and shape a future for them in ethically grounded ways. As the introduction to this volume suggests, re-earthing demands confronting uncomfortable, forgotten histories and allowing them to become transformative. This process requires a public reckoning with the region's complex positionality, moving beyond rigid national frameworks to engage with the layered, sedimented histories embedded within collections.

By recognising that 're-earthing is a refusal of purity and transcendence – an act of getting one's hands dirty to make a difference in the world', curators are tasked with questioning dogmas and being prepared to recompose collections. This includes co-creating knowledge and narratives alongside heritage bearers, allowing traces to resurface in ways that challenge conventional museum practices in the region. Re-earthing fundamentally challenges the notion of traces as passive 'artefacts', underlining a more nuanced interpretation of collections and the imagining of alternative futures. By opening space for the voices, knowledge and expertise of both source and implicated communities, we can cultivate new modes of engagement that do not simply curate the past but allow it to take root, grow and reshape the very foundations of ethnographic museums in the region.

Notes

1. We want to point to the interconnectedness of the selected countries given by a shared history under one empire, Austria-Hungary, which largely determined the shape of state institutions, such as schools and museums (for museums see Rampley et al., 2020).

2. According to Walter Sauer (2012), the country's waning political and military influence in Europe was to blame for its lack of interest in colonial expansion.
3. Jürgen Osterhammel defines colonialism without colonies as a process occurring within a nation-state or regionally integrated land empires, whereas the use of the term in this chapter denotes persistence of colonial technologies and structures in countries not labelled as colonial in a classical sense (see Lüthi et al., 2016: 2, 5).
4. The Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures in Prague, which is the biggest ethnographic museum in the Czech Republic with more than 40,000 objects from Africa, America, Australia and Oceania, was founded by traveller and Czech patriot Vojtěch Náprstek in 1873. The Ethnographic Museum in Cracow (MEK), the oldest ethnographic collection in Poland, which consists of more than 90,000 objects, was founded in 1911 by the Ethnographic Museum Society. The Ethnographic Museum Zagreb – which holds more than 80,000 objects, of which around 3,500 are from other continents, the majority of them from Africa – was established in 1919. The artefacts that were collected during the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century were given to the Ethnographic Museum by the National Museum in Zagreb. The Slovene Ethnographic Museum – the principal museum of ethnology in Slovenia with approximately 30,000 objects from Slovene territory and approximately 10,000 from other continents – was separated from the National Museum in 1923, taking over its Slovene and non-European ethnographic collections.
5. When Vojtěch Náprstek was in exile (after the defeat of Prague's 1848 revolution) in the United States during the years 1848–58, he became acquainted with the idea of economic liberalism, which significantly influenced his actions in the homeland. When he returned to Czechia, he joined the Royal Czech Museum Society and, in 1862, the Union for Promoting Industry in Bohemia, which was established to educate and empower Czech industry and craft (for more on this see Remešová, 2022).
6. The Carniola Regional Museum was established by the Carniola Regional Estates in 1821. Carniola was a historical land that occupied the central part of today's Slovenia until the fall of Austria-Hungary in 1918.
7. In mid-September 2020, the *Czech Decolonisation Initiative*, made up mostly of humanities students, presented its manifesto, calling for a change in the syllabus and the inclusion of non-European scholarship in theoretical and historical teaching. At the same time, the management of the Náprstek Museum responded to the criticism of the museum's role in colonial relations by holding five discussion evenings. For the first time, the museum decided to publicly discuss issues of provenance research and the creation of new permanent exhibitions. Obstacles to the implementation of these activities are the lack of finances, museum staff and also political support, as a conservative right-wing government is currently in power in the Czech Republic. In Poland, in the academic year 2016/2017, university researchers Erica Lehrer and Roma Sendyka established an activist initiative with the participation of MEK curator Magdalena Zych, which led to a pop-up exhibition on 27 June 2017. It inspired adjustments to the permanent display in MEK in 2020 to increase ethnic, class and cultural diversity (Lehrer and Sendyka, 2023). Another initiative was the conference *Decolonizing Museum Cultures and Collections: Mapping Theory and Practice in East-Central Europe*, which took place in Warsaw/online from 21–24 October 2020, as part of the ECHOES – *European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities* project. Another example is Erica Lehrer's museum network, *Thinking Through the Museum: A Partnership Approach to Curating Difficult Knowledge in the Public*, which includes Polish curators.
8. SEM began to deal more intensively with these issues as a partner in two European projects, namely SWICH – *Sharing a World of Inclusion, Creativity and Heritage* (2014–18) and *Taking Care. Ethnographic and World Cultures Museums as Spaces of Care* (2019–23), which brought together European ethnographic museums with global collections. Participation in both projects stimulated the SEM curators to reflect on the museum positioning within global colonialism and to explore different approaches to dealing with global collections.
9. At the Ethnographic Museum Zagreb, Marija Živković opened a new long-term exhibition *Travellers* in November 2024. The exhibition is intended to shed light on practices of collecting and representing the Other, focusing on the role Croats played in the colonial project and as members of the NAM.
10. Náprstek Ethnographic Museum, 28 April 2023–31 May 2024.
11. Examples include the exhibition *Tap the Tip of an Egg: Columbus Then and Now* at the Gallery of Modern Art in Hradec Králové, curated by Vjera Borozan, 7 October 2022–12 March 2023,

or the second edition of the Biennale *Matter of Art* that took place from 21 July–23 October 2022 at the Prague City Gallery (curated by Rado Ištok, Renan Laru-an, Piotr Sikora and Tereza Stejskalová).

12. The 'Museum of the World' is to be built on a newly developed site next to the main railway station in Prague. The development project is planned by a private investor, Penta Real Estate, a company often criticised for its insensitive development of the city centre.
13. Ethnographic Museum Zagreb, 3 May–18 November 2018.
14. For example, Larissa R. V. de Arruda, the scientist from the University of Sao Paulo who published the book about the conflicts in Mato Grosso, had never come across photos from that time, and the Seljan brothers had about 20 of them. Additionally, the Seljan brothers' diary entries offered her a new perspective on the circumstances in which the president of that Brazilian state was killed. In Asunción, the Seljan brothers' photos are useful for studying the city history and the Guaraní architecture, so Silvio Rios Cabrera, the professor from the Faculty of Architecture, included them in his monograph.
15. Slovene Ethnographic Museum, 19 January–20 August 2023; the authors were Tina Palaić, Marko Frelih and Ralf Čeplak Mencin, with external collaborators Ana Reberc and Kanika Gupta.
16. The feature film *The White Goddess of Wangora*, starring the German actress Meg Gehrts, shot in Togo, was screened in London in 1914 and then disappeared.
17. The film is kept at the German National Library of Science and Technology in Hanover.
18. At the time, Slovene territory was first part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and from 1929 the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which existed until 1945. The missionary work in West Bengal was based on an agreement between the then Belgian province and the leader of the Yugoslav province.
19. Dr Kanika Gupta, an art historian, and PhD student Ana Reberc undertook the research, which also included familiarising locals with museum collections, but their efforts were limited due to time and financial constraints.
20. The exhibition (16 October 2020–31 December 2022) curated by Andrzej Dybczak, Jacek Kukuczka, Anna Zabdyrska and Magdalena Zych stemmed from a project titled *An anthropological reinterpretation of the Siberian collection from the Ethnographic Museum in Cracow donated by Polish researchers of Siberia of the 19th century* (2016–19) funded by national funds. The methods used included fieldwork museology, archival research, enquiries at other museums, conservation consultations and, most importantly, ethnographic multi-sited research in the regions of origin of the selected objects (Zych, 2021). The collection is now available in a digital repository with audio and video materials obtained in the field and in archives.
21. Austria provides an inspiring model for dealing with the colonial past. Following years of research by Austrian historians, an expert committee was established in January 2022 to develop a strategy for examining the colonial context of artefacts in federal collections and museums. Austria's strategy not only includes provenance research but also emphasises international cooperation and education on the country's colonial past. *Recommendations of the Advisory Committee for Guidelines for Collections in Austrian Federal Museums from Colonial Contexts* can be found here: https://www.bmkoes.gv.at/kunst-und-kultur/Neuigkeiten/Museen-im-kolonialen-Kontext/pk-empfehlungen-zu-objekten-aus-kolonialen-kontexten0.html (accessed 27 July 2024).

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11

Collecting your own past: bottom-up museums and the moral economy of collections

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One of the most recurring critiques of museums over the last 30 years is based on their colonial origins and the underlying violence behind their creation.[1] Whether museums are related to ethnography, the history of art or archaeology, few Western museums are able to distance themselves from their past. Even those that may have no direct link to the colonial project have used colonial techniques of extractivism and construction of 'the others', as other chapters in this book show.[2] In view of the above, the need for an ethical review of collections and exhibition practices has been put forward in a decolonising process – the aim is to make museums more inclusive spaces, critical of their own inheritance and capable of providing a reading into the past and away from the national interests through which they were born (Onciul, 2015; Mirzoeff, 2017; Wali and Collins, 2023).

In recent years, many museums have begun to reflect on their colonial past and practices, leading to the implementation of policies that seek to make that past and practices explicit. The creation of ICOM's Working Group on Decolonisation in 2023 has served as a spur for this practice to spread further. Nevertheless, maritime museums appear to have eluded these processes of ethical evaluation. We have only been able to find a handful of examples that have taken the concept of reviewing their links to colonial processes seriously while providing a reading into the necessary relationship between the evolution of the naval world in modern times and the conquest and colonisation of America, Asia and Africa. The

Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam is a good example of how a major European museum – with a significant part of its collection dedicated to naval history – can begin a process of critical reflection on its colonial past, thanks to exhibitions such as *Afterlives of Slavery* and installations such as *Blood Sugar*, with its navy featuring in a special role (Van Huis, 2019; Ariese, 2020). Nevertheless, this is something that is not seen at other maritime museums, where the way they contribute to the national image and identity takes priority over other matters (Sutherland, 2022: 382). Hence, all too often we see how smaller museums which try to reflect on their colonial past confine that reflection to a small space within the exhibition or a brief mention in their catalogues, while the main part of the exposition continues to focus on the contribution of the maritime sector, and the navy in particular, to the construction of the nation.

On the other hand, many of these museums are still trapped in what we could refer to as a 'ship fetish', which places the presence and care of historical ships at the heart of their exhibitions. Historian and writer Dick Sullivan underscored the close relationship between both items in his classic book *Old Ships, Boats and Maritime Museums*: 'Counting everything from coracles to ships-of-the-line, Britain has over 300 old craft more or less open to the public. On top of this there are over 130 museums either fully or partly maritime. More museums are planned, other boats will come along' (Sullivan, 1978: 7). Robert Hicks also points out this close connection, which makes maritime museums inevitably identified with the ships and boats they display: 'The *sine qua non* of each maritime museum is its collection of ships and boats' (Hicks, 2001: 162).

Whatever the cause, the truth is that to date maritime museums have not been inclined to reflect on the origins of their artefacts, their chosen exhibition strategies or their educational programmes. As Hicks highlights yet again, 'literature produced by or about maritime museums reveals almost no introspection about their ideology as revealed through exhibit practices and educational programmes' (Hicks, 2001: 159). That opinion is confirmed in the most recent work by Melcher Ruhkopf on the German Port Museum, in which we read: 'propositions that pick up on contemporary decolonial debates are rarely echoed in the discourse on and praxis of Hamburg's maritime heritage so far' (Ruhkopf, 2021: 126). That lack of critical introspection, as qualified by Hicks, prevents not only a reflection on their role in colonisation processes but also, more broadly, a contemporary reading capable of representing the sea in the Anthropocene, in line with the extractive practices surrounding the current use of oceans. If other museums, such as natural history or anthropology museums (Koster, 2016; Robin et al., 2016; Isager et al., 2021),

are doing this, what prevents most maritime museums from participating in this challenge? Perhaps what is necessary here is a change in thematic approach, with more emphasis on the sea and less on the nation.

This chapter provides a discussion around the challenges and possibilities of decolonising maritime museums. To do so, we put forward the idea of the 'moral economy' as a possible lens to enable this introspective examination. This concept, which is extracted from work by Lorraine Daston (1995), can help us to systemise our reflection on what Hicks calls the 'ideology' of museums. We shall then relate this concept with 'eco-social drama', a slight variation on Victor Turner's proposal of 'social drama', as an attempt to reach the ultimate core of more or less unspoken social agreements that prop up a community. Following that, we will analyse the Museo del Mar in San Pedro del Pinatar in Spain, whose main feature is that it is directly financed by the Cofradía de Pescadores, an old form of a fishermen's union or guild. In other words, it is a museum that was built bottom up.[3] To achieve this, we will place it in its nearest context: the coastline of the Region of Murcia and the province of Alicante, directly comparing it to two other museums, namely the Ocean Race Museum in Alicante and the Sea Museum in Santa Pola. This will help us better understand its distinctive features as a museum and to clarify some of the features of its 'moral economy'. In short, we will illustrate how an unconventional museum provides a much more interesting reading of our relationship with the sea in the Anthropocene than other, more standardised, proposals.

The moral economy of experience

The term 'moral economy' was coined by E. P. Thompson and James C. Scott in the 1970s when referring to the set of values and standards shared by groups (English peasants in the case of Thompson, South-Eastern Asian peasants in the case of Scott) (Thompson, 1971; Scott, 1977). This concept has been widely employed in different fields of knowledge, and it has also been the subject of ongoing debates in recent years (Götz, 2015; Siméant, 2015; Carrier, 2018). Our use of the concept is taken from the text by Lorraine Daston (1995), 'The Moral Economy of Science', in which she tries to express how science 'depends in essential ways upon highly specific constellations of emotions and values' (Daston, 1995: 2). Daston clearly defines in detail what 'moral economy' is for her: 'A web of affect-saturated values that stand and function in well-defined relationship to one another', in which the term 'moral' refers

to 'the psychological and the normative', that is, to the process by means of which we imbue objects and actions (i.e. practices) with emotions. On the other hand, by using the word 'economy', we refer to a regulated system that is 'explicable, but not always predictable':

> A moral economy is a balanced system of emotional forms, with equilibrium points and constraints. Although it is a contingent, malleable thing of no necessity, a moral economy has a certain logic to its composition and operations. Not all conceivable combinations of affects and values are in fact possible. (Daston, 1995: 4)

Understanding that 'moral economies are historically created, modified, and destroyed; enforced by culture rather than nature and therefore both mutable and violable; and integral to … ways of knowledge' (Daston, 1995: 7) is crucial to our task. There are two very interesting aspects to Daston's proposal. The first is that it is not only limited to science: our entire world experience depends on constellations of emotions and values, but – and this is the second interesting aspect – they are not the same for everyone.

Similarly, moral economies are local and are situated in time, and what applies to one cannot be simply applied to others. Our proposal here is to apply the moral economy concept to museums, so that we are able to study factors such as the underlying ideology, morality, science and emotions behind their exhibition proposals. This moral economy of museums should reflect the moral economy of the community where the museum is located to a certain extent, whether that is at a national or local level, and it could contain aspirational identity aspects (Ruhkopf, 2021).

Each museum has its own moral economy, which, in the form of a network, would include local and global factors; emotional and ideological elements; insights from the past but also into the future; memories, wishes and hopes. Many of those elements are explicit. They are written in the museum mission and vision statements, but also in the leaflets for visitors and in museum exhibition projects. Others, on the other hand, are tacit (Mareis, 2012). They are hidden in what some authors have referred to as the 'hidden curriculum' or *currículo oculto* (Greenhill, 1992: 3), to borrow the term from educational studies. It refers to a curriculum that is built on museological decisions inherited from previous projects that are not questioned; business models imposed by financiers; the nature and origin of the collection which hinders decision-making or facilitates making others; on the architectural layout of the exhibition space itself, and so on.

The moral economy of the museum also includes, inevitably, the ethical commitments made by both the museum and its curators (which do not necessarily coincide), based on the codes of ethics of the profession, on the various international guides to ethical museum management (ICOM, Museum Association) or derived from the missions and values of each museum.

Another feature of the moral economy of museums is that it is largely unnoticed as such. Once it has been established, it becomes a black box (Latour, 1987) which appears to work independently, although it is in fact sustained by everyone who takes part in maintaining it. That is why it is so hard to see and follow the connections between the moral economy and the wider social environment of the museum. Critical work is required, but it mostly fails to find justification. We usually open the 'black box' within the context of controversies, whether at the time the museological plan is created, when it is renewed due to external factors, such as the case of decolonising processes promoted by the International Council of Museums – ICOM (Brulon Soares and Witcomb, 2022), or in times of what we have referred to in this article as 'eco-social drama'.

Eco-social drama and the role of museums in the Anthropocene

We take the idea of eco-social drama from the proposal of social drama by the anthropologist Victor Turner. In Turner's opinion, social drama starts with a rupture from the norm, which will ultimately lead the group where the rupture takes place into a crisis that, if not resolved quickly, can lead to the forming of factions and, ultimately, the breaking up of the group itself. In order to avoid this, measures need to be taken to repair the damage or to otherwise compensate the aggrieved party. The drama is always an opportunity, a time when the group can reflect on its functioning and how the rules relate to its sets of values (Turner, 1980, 1982, 1987).

By including the prefix 'eco' in 'eco-social drama', we question the limits of what has traditionally been identified as 'social'. This leads us to the necessity of expanding the community that is represented by museums so that they include our links not only to other humans but also to the non-human beings around us. This is all about positioning museums, particularly maritime ones, in the Anthropocene period, expanding depictions of extractivist relations that are not restricted exclusively to colonial or neocolonial relations among nations (Yeros and Jha, 2020)

but which must also include historical and contemporary exploitation of nature and its impact on our societies. As Dipesh Chakrabarty claims: 'The climate crisis and the concept of the Anthropocene make one thing clear: natural history and human history are more intertwined than ever' (Chakrabarty, 2019: 15).

Adapting museums to the conditions of the Anthropocene does not only mean implementing measures to reduce their impact on climate change (Hayles et al., 2023) or turning them into indispensable players in the climate debate through the proposal of new activities (Hamilton and Christian Ronning, 2020; McGhie, 2020). It rather means changing the way we depict our relationship with the planet, at the same time as we are establishing it (Cameron et al., 2013). In our opinion, this could happen when we expand the community represented by and included in museums, to integrate those human and non-human agents who had traditionally been excluded from the sphere of political representation (Zaragoza, 2021).

Maritime museums in Spain's Levante region: patrimonial appropriation of oceans

Many of the maritime museums mentioned above, especially those embedded in local contexts, have been created in response to many changes in traditional uses of the sea that have occurred in recent decades. This has been spurred on by a process of privatisation and commodification, which has led to the gradual disappearance of the symbolic and material relationships of coastal communities with the sea that these museums seek to preserve (Allegret and Carbonell, 2012: 7). The coastline of Murcia and Alicante is no exception. There, we can find several museums and information centres that focus on one or several aspects of our relationship with the sea. All of them were founded with the top-down patrimony appropriation philosophy towards the sea which seeks to showcase some of the traditional bonds and links with the sea that are now disappearing. In what follows, we want to argue that, unlike these examples, the proposal made by the Museo del Mar in San Pedro is an exception which, although not devoid of problems, does provide clear opportunities to explore these relationships in other ways and, in many cases, brings new links to the surface that would not be possible in a more 'official' museum. In order to make the Museo del Mar's uniqueness more visible, we propose in this section a brief description of two museums in nearby towns, namely the Museo del Mar in Santa Pola and the Ocean Race Museum in the Port of Alicante.

The Museo del Mar de Santa Pola in Alicante province was founded in 2000. It is located in a former fortress built in the sixteenth century as part of a coastal fortification network to defend the coastline from frequent attacks by pirates. The building served many functions over a long period of time: courtroom, town hall, hospital and even a bullring. Although the Museo del Mar spreads across several venues, including a former curing factory dating back to Roman times and a fishing boat converted to an exhibition space, the main exhibits are in the fortress. It is a municipal museum managed by the City Hall with a clear mission of information sharing and education. The aims of the museum are clearly stated: to promote respect for the marine environment and to conserve the heritage and the history of sailing and fishing (Museo del Mar de Santa Pola, 2024).

Through the thick-walled, vaulted halls hewn in Cyclopean masonry, a succession of display cases features models, instruments and objects related to fishing and sailing – items that finally acquire an ethnographic character in several dioramas depicting scenes of sailors' lives, interspersed with other works by recent artists which hang from the stone walls. As Ruhkopf, once again, points out, nostalgic staging of historical objects leads to a revisionist narrative in which 'an aesthetic experience of a pre- or early industrial era … is almost entirely stripped of its colonial dimension' (Ruhkopf, 2021: 126). The Museo del Mar de Santa Pola is a clear museological example in which the sea is used to reinforce the local identity, linking it to the activity that formed the main part of the economic and social life of the city in days gone by. The exhibits and museum techniques used, as in other comparable museums, range from the requisite display of nautical instruments to the reconstruction of a traditional fisherman's living room with elements of everyday life.

The Ocean Race Museum in the Port of Alicante, on the other hand, provides an 'immersive experience' of one of the most demanding sailing regattas in the world. The Ocean Race is a yacht round-the-world competition divided into several stages. Notably, this regatta is strongly committed to some ocean conservation agencies and institutions. The yachts sail through remote, uncharted areas of the oceans (even below latitude 50) and are fitted with data collection instruments. According to the organisation, the compiled data are later published on the event's website. Through an agreement with 11th Hour Racing, a non-profit organisation promoting sustainability and marine conservation in sailing races, the Ocean Race encourages more sustainable practices in sailing and its related industry while supporting projects that tackle the environmental challenges that oceans are currently facing. Whereas the

museum provides information on those initiatives, it must be stressed that access to the 'millions of compiled data' are only available to the scientific partners of the project. However, a scientific report containing the main findings and results is available on the Ocean Race website (The Ocean Race, 2024).

The Ocean Race generates profits for multiple stakeholders, including the organisers, teams, host cities, sponsors and other commercial partners. Those stakeholders can make a direct or indirect profit through their participation in the event, and it is an initiative that moves huge amounts of money albeit to a lesser degree than other sporting events. In this sense, the museum is a showcase to promote the event, proposing different experiences inspired, in one way or another, by interactive science museums, including a – not particularly compelling or convincing – simulator that aims to provide visitors with the experience of sailing in a yacht in extreme weather conditions. Besides some school visits and the curious general public, the Ocean Race Museum mainly targets sailing enthusiasts. The ultimate aim of the museum is to promote a sports business project.

In addition, the museum tries to show the link between the early days of yacht racing, when boats were built for adventure and ocean crossing, as well as for competition, and the modern style of racing. Today's yachts are high-tech and expensive, requiring professional crews. This has made the sport very costly, which has caused a lot of debate in the sailing community because most people can't afford it. It seems more like a case of symbolic appropriation and exploitation of nature through new methods, with more and more complex technology at the heart of it, than of a continuity with past forms of navigation.

We have explored the emergence of maritime museums as a response to the changing relationship between coastal communities and the sea, driven by privatisation and commodification. We observed two different approaches: the Museo del Mar de Santa Pola, which focuses on preserving local maritime traditions and identity, and the Ocean Race Museum in Alicante, which celebrates technological advances and the spirit of adventure associated with the sea. We have realised that traditional museums like the one in Santa Pola, while trying to preserve a disappearing maritime heritage, may not fully capture the evolving dynamics of coastal communities. On the other hand, the Ocean Race Museum represents a more modern and global perspective of maritime activities, but it seems to reduce our experience to a highly technical process that sees the sea only as a frontier where we seek adventure.

With this in mind, we will see that the Museo del Mar in San Pedro del Pinatar functions as a kind of communal cabinet of curiosities that instils a sense of wonder in its visitors (Arnold, 2017). It presents a very clear narrative (that the members of the Cofradía are the best guardians of the sea) through a motley collection that is constantly growing thanks to the constant donations by these fishermen and their families. It is this wild character of the museum, this constant incorporation of new objects, accompanied by a perpetual reorganisation of the spaces, that makes the Museo del Mar an exceptional place to capture not only the traces of the various crises that have occurred in its immediate context but also of broader issues that appear unexpectedly in its collection.

The Museo del Mar: a bottom-up approach

The Museo del Mar is located in San Pedro del Pinatar. The town is flanked by the coasts of the Mar Menor and the Mediterranean, two main water bodies that are the main contributing factors of the place's idiosyncrasy. As is the case in many other villages in the Spanish Levante region,[4] San Pedro's economic, social and urbanistic makeup has undergone a huge change in recent decades, mainly due to the mass tourism boom starting in the 1960s (Vallejo Pousada, 2002). One of those changes is the relationship between the local community and the sea. This is something that is all too obvious in the local marinas, where both deep-sea and coastal fishing vessels have been deprived of their space, particularly after the 1980s, and replaced by 'the increasing presence of yachts used for sailing, sport and recreational fishing' (Rubio-Ardanaz, 2012: 99). Considered a source of conflict (Cerchiello, 2018), these changes expose not only an economic model transformation but also a profound change in the lifestyle of the local fishermen community, where fishing has become a secondary, partial business activity (Siches I Cuadra, 1990) and an almost extinguished way of life.[5]

The Mar Menor is the biggest saltwater lagoon in Europe, connected to the Mediterranean Sea by some narrow and shallow channels (called 'golas'), and is home to a unique ecosystem. This paradisiacal site has been subjected to pressure over the last 50 years, mainly due to excessive urban expansion of the coastal area for tourism and also the strong growth of intensive farming in the hydrographic basin. All this pressure led to the proliferation of algae in 2016 – which became known as the 'green soup' – and to a major environmental catastrophe in October

2019,[6] when over four and a half tonnes of dead fish, crabs, crustaceans, seahorses and other marine life were cleaned up from the coast as a consequence of anoxia. This process took place during a period of political turmoil when the regional government was presided over by the conservative People's Party (PP), which was governing in a minority government for the first time in 25 years, with a president immersed in accusations of corruption and who was forced to resign the following year (2017).

As a result of that catastrophe, a citizens' movement was set up claiming legal status to be designated to the lagoon. The movement presented a popular legislative initiative to the Spanish parliament in the middle of the pandemic, with over 639,000 signatures from all over the country. This was 28 per cent more than the number of signatures required by law. This movement was headed up by the so-called *grupo promotor*, although the core of the group consisted of numerous activists who travelled the country to get signatures. On the back of the success of this initiative, which was approved by Parliament in September 2022 and converted the Mar Menor into the first European ecosystem with its own legal status, the group established an association named AMARME: Alianza Mar Menor.

The authors' visit to the Museo del Mar in San Pedro del Pinatar for the first time in April 2023 did not exactly get off to a good start. After parking our car next to the museum, we went through the first door following a sign that said access to the 'Fisherman's House'. To our surprise, instead of finding a museum, we found ourselves in a restaurant where there was an overwhelming smell of griddled and stewed fish. On noticing our bewilderment, one of the waiters asked us if we had reserved a table. Obviously, we hadn't. Nor were we going to. But we did want to see the Museo del Mar. The waiter sighed. This was obviously not the first time.

The waiter pointed to the other side of the room where, after going down a short flight of stairs to a landing, we found a doorway which we later discovered was the main entrance to the museum. Far from a grandiose public institution, the museum stands out for its modest appearance and humbleness. The door is made from anodised aluminium profiles, on which there is a barely legible sign informing us that it is in fact the Museo del Mar. After climbing a new staircase, we arrived at the hall leading directly to the first exhibition hall where the curator, Benito Pérez, personally welcomes visitors to a hall with walls finished with a sea blue stucco, which he confessed he had painted himself.

The museum was founded in 1980 on the first floor of a building belonging to San Pedro's Cofradía de Pescadores. The two-storey building

follows 1990s popular architectonical styles in Spain, with a rather ordinary design in its facades and layout. The building is part of a medium-sized block, adjoined with two other buildings of different heights where the restaurant is housed and whose dining room takes up the first floor of both buildings. From the outside, the ensemble looks disorderly and dishevelled, far removed from the imposing fortress housing the Santa Pola museum and a far cry from the prefabricated Ocean Race Museum with its metal structure.

The Museo del Mar was founded as a 'place of memory', a space where fishermen donate some of the 'wonders' that they found in the sea while also exhibiting models of traditional fishing craft often made by retired fishermen. Founded by the *Patrón Mayor*, Lázaro Escudero – elected representative of the members of the Cofradía – the museum has been cared for by the same family of fishermen since its origin: first the father, then the mother and now the son, Benito Pérez. In the meantime, the space was remodelled by another *Patrón Mayor*, Jesús Antonio Gómez Escudero, who has been particularly crucial for the protection and maintenance of the space. He remodelled the museum and produced different reports on the fishermen's culture – especially in response to the environmental catastrophe that the Mar Menor suffered in recent years.

Even though it is a place that is open to the public, the building fails to meet many of the standards required in regulations for cultural establishments of this kind. It has no restrooms adapted for visitors with limited mobility and no fire extinguishing system that can be spotted at first glance. In addition, the space shows a blatant disregard for energy saving established in the Technical Building Code. Concerning these matters, the museum appears to be an exception that manages to remain outside of the regulations. We should emphasise, though, that those shortcomings are more of a sign of the museum's exceptional nature rather than a failure. The Museo del Mar is maintained with very few financial resources: its curator's enthusiasm, the support of the Cofradía who own the space, and the contribution by donors of artefacts and pieces which comprise its heterogenous collection have turned it into a living museum that is in constant growth.

The museum's curator Benito Pérez is a man in his early sixties. With grey hair, on the day of our visit he had a goatee and several days' worth of stubble. Framed behind his spectacles were brown, inquisitive, lively eyes, overshadowed by bushy eyebrows but very expressive nonetheless. His attire was very casual: a hoodie, jeans and a polo shirt, and on his desk were a drill and some papers, which he pushed aside. Despite his leading role in that space, Benito does not look like a typical museum

curator. He has spent most of his life fishing and farming, and only took over the management of the museum after his early retirement. He was drawn to fishing mainly by family tradition, but also by curiosity about, as he says, 'everything' about the sea. Although, as he also says:

> I didn't really like fishing. I didn't like it because I had a very bad time. I was always seasick on the ship. We would leave very early in the morning at five or six o'clock and I couldn't even have breakfast. If we left in the afternoon I couldn't eat and I couldn't have dinner. I had a very bad time. But I was very curious. (Personal interview, 02:32)

We would argue that this is a bottom-up museum with significant community involvement, based on the fact that the museum is financed entirely by the Cofradía's own resources, as well as the emotional attachment to the museum that is demonstrated by the constant donation of elements for the exhibition. However, it is hard to understand the museum without taking Benito – the fisherman suffering from seasickness – and his curiosity, his passionate work and his family's link to that space into account. Benito's work, on the other hand, is not without its critics, and there are regular disputes with other members of the Cofradía. It is often unclear, however, whether the criticism is directed at a specific element of the exhibition or based on old disputes between fishing families.

The museum has three exhibition halls where the different collections are on display. The first contains fishing tackle (mostly characteristic of the region) (see Figure 11.1). The second is home to most of the boat models and the figureheads of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (the patron saint of sailors) and photographs of the Guild Elders. The third exhibition hall features a surprising collection of models of warships (donated to the museum by a retired navy officer) and even a large-screen television, which was showing a film on sea battles during our visit. Most of the exhibits have been donated by individual donors, whether they were objects or animals caught in the fishing nets (such as two enormous turtles on display at the entrance) or purchased on trips to other latitudes. 'These', says Benito on one of our visits while pointing to some coral displayed in a case, 'were brought by the wife of one of the guild members from the Caribbean. And that is why we call it the Museo del Mar (Sea Museum) and not the Museo del Mar Menor (Mar Menor Museum).'

Other objects have a closer and more institutional origin, such as the images of former Guild Elders or the banners with the image of the Virgen del Carmen. Both groups serve as a link to the community. The

Figure 11.1 View of room 1 of Museo del Mar. © Juan Manuel Zaragoza.

photographs of the old fishermen make it possible to establish relations of continuity with those who preceded the current fishermen in their work. Many of them are also their grandparents or great-grandparents. The importance of the Virgen del Carmen flags, however, has more to do with their use in the July pilgrimage than with their religious invocation. 'I think that since I was in my mother's womb, I have felt this pilgrimage', Benito tells us, and then describes it with great passion:

> I used to go on pilgrimage from here in the village to Lo Pagan … and then all the fishermen would take their boats out. All of them. We were lucky enough to buy the Elvira the first year, because the Guild, the year you buy a new boat or another boat, you get, let's put it this way, you get to carry the image. And this year it was our turn to take the Elvira.[7] And it was a day … [visibly moved, he can't finish the sentence]. (Personal interview, 11:52)

When we asked Benito again about the importance of the Virgin and her widespread presence in the museum, he insisted that it was not a matter of religious fervour, but pointed out the protective character that all the fishermen attribute to the image of the Virgen del Carmen:

> She is very dear to us, although not religiously. No, we do not pray to her every day that we go to mass, but we always have her present and it is rare that a boat does not have an image or a holy card of the Virgen del Carmen. And when the weather is bad, you pray to her: 'Mother, take me home. Mother, take me home'. (Personal interview, 12:33)

The museum follows a linear route, and, as the curator pointed out, the first hall is the most important one, since it is there that fishing practices are displayed, with emphasis on sustainability and respect for fish life. According to Benito, 'the aim of the first hall is to explain to people that we don't kill fish, as I always say, which for children is as if they were murdered' (Personal interview, 23:22).

The fact is that the different fishing crafts used in the Mar Menor catch fish alive, unlike other methods, such as trawling, where any unwanted fish are always dead fish and thrown back. Benito points out this fact to us several times. 'The fish that we can't sell are returned to the sea alive.' Later on, he emphasises this point again, and at his own initiative he employs the term 'sustainable':

> Since *paranza* is a sustainable method of fishing,[8] even if small fishes come in, the fishermen return them to the water while still alive. Before, we used to catch everything, but they now know that it's not right and you can be fined, you can't sell the fish. (Personal interview, 31:42)

There is another element in the room that speaks to the fishermen's relationship with the environment, and that concerns a species that is emblematic of the Mar Menor: the seahorse. The seahorse is the species that was chosen as the banner for the defence of the Mar Menor movement, and the loss of this species, in addition to the different anoxia processes, is attributed to human action: more specifically, their capture and sale as souvenirs.

Seahorses, as could not be otherwise, are widely represented at the Museo del Mar, but in a rather unusual way: dried, hanging by threads from the ceiling (as they were traditionally dried to preserve them), thus creating a rather sinister 'school' apparently floating over visitors' heads. On the wall in the background there is a photograph of fishermen on the Mar Menor, who founded this museum in the 1980s. They are offloading a box full of seahorses, ready for sale (see Figure 11.2). This spectral presence – in Mark Fisher's (2022) sense of the term – of the seahorses

Figure 11.2 Mar Menor fishermen transporting seahorses. © Juan Manuel Zaragoza.

that, like ghosts, haunt the museum's visitors and, above all, the members of the Cofradía, serves as traces of an earlier ecological tragedy. This time, however, the tragedy has less to do with the environmental degradation of the Mar Menor than with the transformation of the sea into a commodity, which we have already discussed.

We understand, aligning with Napolitano (2015), that a trace is both a mark and a track of the past and the future that can be found and followed in the present. Our stuffed seahorse allows us to follow a hidden counter-history waiting to be heard or, in this case, seen: a story that undoes the narrative that the rest of the museum repeats, hammer and tongs, about the relationship between fishermen and the sea. The seahorse hanging on its rope reminds us that the fathers of the current members of the Cofradía, the ones who founded the museum as a place of remembrance, depleted the seahorses and almost drove them to extinction.

But more than that, it reminds all of us who have spent summers on the beaches of the Mar Menor that we too are guilty. If we recognise the method of drying the seahorse by hanging it on a string, it is because we, or our parents or grandparents, drained them in the past.

Community engagement is what makes this museum and its collection such an unusual place: a space created and managed by fishermen who make the museum a 'collective memory for the community'

defending itself against the institutional attempts to 'appropriate it', and precisely because of that, it is an immediate reflection of the changes taking place around it. That is what has happened in the different eco-social dramas that have taken place in the Mar Menor in recent years.

The 'pea soup' of 2016 was the first chapter in a wider eco-social drama that led the entire region to rethink its relationship with the lagoon, a process that was intensified by the anoxia events of 2019 and 2021. That is how a process began in which different groups from the area around the lagoon asked themselves about their links with it, how it affected their self-awareness as a group (and as individuals) and, from 2019 onwards, what influence they had had on the deterioration of the lagoon (to put it in another way, to what extent they are responsible for it). In other words, they began to question, in line with Lorraine Daston, what we have termed their 'moral economy'.

This was also the case with the Cofradía, which led to the aforementioned reform of the museum and the request for various reports on the history of the Fishermen's Guild and its relationship with the Mar Menor. Nowadays, the museum ceases to be a simple 'place of remembrance' and tries to convey a clear idea: the best guardians of the lagoon are the fishermen. And they are the ones most affected by its degradation.

We have been witnessing a '*mise-en-scène*' of an eco-social drama in the Mar Menor since 2016, which has exposed the connections between humans and non-humans, leaving them subject to public scrutiny. The internal logic of the moral economy of Murcia's society was therefore laid bare and open to question and, stemming from this, different agents began a process of reconfiguring their place and connections with their environment that is still ongoing today.

The reconfiguration process of the collective groups' different moral economies, which took place as a result of the eco-social drama, does not respond to a logic of recovery but of composition. It is not about recovering the original situation but rather forming new links and bonds and establishing new networks, since the former ones had become obsolete after the dramatic *irruption* of the Mar Menor. Among the groups who in one way or another embarked on this process, the group of fishermen of the Mar Menor was perhaps one of the most active. Hence, there is an ongoing negotiation between Benito and the items in his collection, which vary from one day to another while forming new, unexpected connections. Unlike traditional naval museums where the exhibits are always at the centre of the museum's discourse, at Museo del Mar, as we have already seen, most of the exhibits are interchangeable and taken into and brought out of the storage room almost on a daily basis at the

whim of the curator. The important thing for Benito, and we believe for the Cofradía too, is not so much exhibiting items as such but rather the discourse that almost naturally relates them to the sea. The cosmopolitan agreements necessary to achieve this discourse require composition work that Benito carries out intuitively, yet effectively, by selecting, rearranging and changing the collection without altering its heterogeneous nature, but rather playing with it. He knows that it is precisely there that the singularity of the museum is to be found.

But this work of composition depends on the work of concealment. This became clear to us a few days later when we visited the Lonja de Pescado (fish market). Due to its unique geographical location, the Cofradía has two harbours: one on the Mar Menor, where we were, and the other on the Mediterranean. In the first, we could see the boats dedicated to small-scale fishing, using the fishing techniques we saw in the museum. In the second, which we visited a few hours later, we could see, on the one hand, the boats that serve a nearby fish farm and, above all, several boats dedicated to trawling. This type of fishing, as Benito told us, is non-selective and catches all kinds of marine life in its nets. Many of them, as we have already seen, end up in his museum.

Conclusions

From our point of view, what makes the San Pedro Museo del Mar different from other museums in our research is the bond it has with the community from which it arose (i.e. the Cofradía de Pescadores) to the point that it has become an extension of that community. Nevertheless, how does such a profound identity arise in a local community with a collection made up of remnants, disparate gifts from different sources, such as a collection of metopes, craft-made warship models and marine animal species from all over the planet? Our view is that what the museum tries to reflect is the connection of those fishermen with a broader community, which consists of those who inhabit the sea, without differentiating too much between humans and non-humans. And in this community, they, the fishermen, play the role of custodians.

Returning to a more local context, compared to studied top-down museums with a more professionalised approach and institutional support, there is a break in the bond between representation and what is actually represented because the exhibition is 'complete'. There is no need to make changes because what needs to be said has already been said. In the Museo del Mar's case, an amateur museum management

keeps those bonds alive, transferring not only consensus regarding the museum but also the many disputes the curator has with other fishermen (for whom it is also 'their' museum) or the consequences of maintaining a common institution such as this one in a context of sectoral crisis. The playfulness with which Benito arranges the disposition of the exhibition elements (with entrances and exits, rearrangements of the works, impromptu reforms of the installations, etc.) seems to reflect the ever-changing reality of the sea that it attempts to contain.

It is precisely that constant insertion in the life of the expanded *maritime community* that makes the museum something more than just a space for exhibits. We believe that it meets a dual purpose. Firstly, the museum is a representation device, an ambassador of the sea. Just as the Spanish Embassy in Berlin is part of the national territory of Spain, the Museo del Mar in San Pedro is *part of the sea*. We use the term 'representation' in this sense. Its location in the centre of the city, rather than on the coast, only reinforces this idea. It creates a unique maritime space within an urban setting, where some problems are explicitly identified and discussed (all visitors ask about the condition of the lagoon, the disappearance of seahorses, the sea, the pea soup, the anoxia, etc.), whereas others (the disagreements among fishermen, the offensive by institutions to appropriate the space, the presence of trawlers in the fleet of the Cofradía, etc.), are underlying, in the background. Like all museums, this one is also sustained by the interplay between what is hidden and what is shown. And this is also linked to the composition of its moral economy.

Secondly, the museum also meets an 'assembling' mission, mediating in recomposing the collective, including, albeit in a rather peculiar way, non-human agents – because 'the sea' that the museum is trying to contain is not a given element but a composition that has to be *held* each time the museum opens its doors. We can see that function in the way the museum's discourse focuses on exhibiting how the community of fishermen relate to their environment, in line with values that have become stronger after the eco-social crisis. The emphasis on releasing smaller fish, for example, which do not suffer due to the traditional fishing methods (and concealing the use of other less selective techniques), illustrates this point.

But this official narrative is overwhelmed by the almost infinite presence of disparate elements and specimens hanging from the ceiling, displayed in hardwood showcases or on unprotected shelves. Model ships, a diorama of a wooden boat-building workshop, a statue made of salt (sea salt, of course), not one but two sea turtles, deep-sea crabs (like the turtles, caught in trawling nets), next to (native) crabs from the Mar

Menor, next to (invading) blue crabs, next to a Caribbean crab brought by a lady, next to another piece of coral surrounded by seashells from Africa. All this juxtaposition of elements only speaks to us of the sense of wonder that is also the result of this mission of assemblage: a sense of wonder that will not be exhausted however many years the oceans are fished.

Notes

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2. The works of Tina Palaić, Anna Remešová, Magdalena Zych and Marija Živković were found to be of particular interest.
3. We draw on Orna-Ornstein's (2015) distinction between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' museums, the former being 'established or supported top-down by an authority of some sort … were a statement of identity and confidence, and often seen as a means to educate the population', whereas the latter would be 'established not by authorities, but by individuals or groups passionate about a specific thing – a place, a type of object, a person'. We cannot ignore the fact that the bottom-up concept can and must be problematised. We should start by asking who comprises part of that so-called 'bottom' and who does not. Nevertheless, we believe that it is a problem that goes way beyond the bounds and goals of this chapter.
4. The Spanish Levante region boasts a rich historical tapestry, shaped by centuries of diverse cultural influences. Its strategic coastal location fostered trade and cultural exchange, leaving a legacy of vibrant traditions. The Levante is known for its strong sense of community, deeply rooted traditions and a lively festive spirit.
5. This contrasts with the global increase in fishing production, which has increased from live catches of 20 million tonnes in the 1950s to almost 200 million tonnes in 2022. It is no less relevant then that the growth of fishing in open waters has stagnated since the 1980s, when it reached its peak of around 80 million tonnes, whereas fish farming has increased enormously to reach production of 130.9 million tonnes in 2022 (FAO, 2024: 15–16).
6. There was a second, less significant anoxic crisis in August 2021.
7. Elvira was the name of the first boat Benito's father bought, on a date he cannot remember. The purchase of the boat meant a big change for the family, as his father, who had been a sailor, became a shipowner, with Benito and his older brother as his crew. This is reflected in the way Benito talks about the boat: 'He bought it from a nephew of Paco Rabal in Águilas, second hand. And for that time, it was a big, good, sturdy wooden boat' (Personal interview, 00:10). Paco Rabal was a Spanish actor who was very popular during the Franco regime. A regular collaborator of Luis Buñuel, he was born in Águilas, another fishing village in Murcia, on the border with Almería.
8. A 'paranza' is a kind of fish trap made from canes which fish can swim into but are unable to swim out of.

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Afterword: re-earthing the past

Pratik Chakrabarti

In March 2023, the Manchester Museum displayed its Egyptology collection in the Golden Mummies of Egypt exhibition. It included eight mummies brought to Britain by Petri. While preparing for the exhibition, the museum made the decision not to include any X-ray or CT scans of the human remains below the wrapping of the mummies. The curator at the Manchester Museum, Campbell Price, made the point that the main intention of mummies was not to preserve the dead but to transform them into gods. He said, 'We're stepping back from this desire to unwrap.' In doing so, they hoped to 'flip the narrative' by refocusing the attention 'from the inside – what we expect we have the right to see – on to the outside – what the ancient Egyptians expected people to see.'[1]

By 'flipping the narrative', the exhibition sought to respect the ancient Egyptians' intentions and redirect viewers' focus to the aesthetics, symbolism and dignity of the mummified body, rather than the intrusive and extractive scrutiny of its interior. It illustrates a broader cultural reckoning within the museum world – one that involves interrogating the ethics of display, respecting the integrity of human remains and actively resisting the lingering colonial gaze.

Unearthing Collections is positioned within the current moment of critical reckoning across museums, academia and political activism – a moment defined by the search for new epistemologies and visualities through which to engage the past from within a decolonial present. It is an invitation and a call to reimagine how we relate to the past and its many afterlives. Across exhibitions, archives and landscapes, the essays gathered here reveal repatriation and decolonisation as complex, entangled praxes. They reject the notion of a pristine return or tidy resolution. Instead, they embrace the layered, sometimes fractured, process of re-earthing: a practice grounded in care, accountability and the possibility of ethical renewal.

Repatriation operates on two interdependent planes: the material and the intellectual. The physical return of cultural artefacts must be accompanied by a reclamation of the narratives that contextualise and give meaning to those objects. This dual imperative extends beyond conventional boundaries, raising a critical question: if museums are to return cultural artefacts, should they not also reconsider the status of geological specimens – rocks, fossils and other so-called natural materials – that have long been displayed alongside these artefacts? Grappling with this question necessitates a re-evaluation of the artificial divide between nature and culture, a dichotomy that undergirds much of Western museum practices and scientific thought.

Within a decolonial framework, it becomes clear that objects classified as scientific or natural are not ontologically distinct from those deemed historical or cultural. Both categories are entangled in colonial histories of extraction, display and domination. As Kathryn Yusoff argues, geology must be understood not merely as a scientific discipline but as an extractive apparatus historically implicated in the racialised logics of empire. Her work foregrounds two interrelated themes: the inherently extractive nature of geological science and the racialisation of both resources and labour within this framework.[2]

This stratified mode of thought – separating the organic from the inorganic, the vital from the inert – not only underpins geological science but also mirrors broader hierarchies of race and power. In this light, repatriation must confront more than the return of objects; it must interrogate the epistemological foundations that enabled their extraction in the first place. It demands a reckoning with the racialised geographies of science and a reimagining of geology itself – not as a neutral study of the earth but as a historically situated and politically charged discipline.

Decolonisation is also a pressing praxis: the underlying premise is that modern science and medicine are inherently tied to imperial epistemologies, necessitating the development of new scientific practices and historiographical approaches. Decolonisation aims to establish an alternative methodology for conducting science and writing its history, which is essential for reviving the core principles of progressive and revolutionary thought.

This book presents re-earthing as a praxis that rejects the fantasy of pristine recovery. Instead, it insists on the messy, layered realities that trace realities shaped by histories of displacement, extraction and survival. It demands that we attend not only to what has been preserved but to what has been lost, hidden or rendered invisible. And crucially, it asks us to rethink the ethics of care: not as preservation for its own sake but

as a living, future-oriented engagement with traces and the worlds they inhabit.

The chapters explore complex modes of repatriation and decolonisation through diverse institutional and geographical contexts. Madrid's Reina Sofía Museum engages with Latin American political art by preserving its ephemeral traces while sustaining its activist ethos, foregrounding the tension between institutional conservation and revolutionary intent. Tibetan and Himalayan ritual objects, when approached through Buddhist temporalities, invite alternative modes of care that resist museological fixity. The ice archives of the Huascarán Mountains, where scientific expeditions intersect with colonial and extractivist histories, reveal glaciers as both climate records and contested sites of Indigenous resistance. The historical wax moulage collections underscore the necessity of ethically reckoning with the colonial violence embedded in scientific visual cultures. Indigenous human remains in South American museum collections, long inscribed within colonial frameworks, call for repatriation and the cultivation of reciprocal, restorative relationships. Efforts to decolonise ethnographic museums in Central and Eastern Europe emphasise collaborative re-narration and the re-grounding of institutional memory. The Sea Museum in San Pedro del Pinatar, established by a local fishermen's guild, exemplifies grassroots, living approaches to maritime heritage, embodying decolonial stewardship through community-driven curatorial practice.

Unearthing Collections unfolds as a tapestry of interwoven narratives, of modes conserving and repatriating nature, memory, livelihoods and culture – restoring not only the earth beneath our feet but the stories, practices and sovereignties that surround us. Re-earthing is therefore an act of restoration: of land and lineage, of ecosystems and ancestral ties, where preservation becomes an ethical reclamation, and restitution breathes new life into what colonial systems once sought to erase. This book stands, then, as a call for continued action, to reimagine the terms by which the past lives on.

Notes

1. Williams, H. 2023. 'Have We Got Ancient Egypt's Mummies All Wrong?' *BBC*. Accessed 30 April 2025. https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20230320-the-great-debate-about-mummies-should-we-unwrap-them.
2. Kathryn Yusoff, *Geologic Life: Inhuman Intimacies and the Geophysics of Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024).

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Page numbers in *italic* refer to figures in the text

Unearthing Collections invites readers to reconsider the ethics of collections and archives through the lens of temporality. Drawing on case studies that range from community protests over glacial sampling to the ethical dilemmas of housing human remains in museum collections and acquiring ephemeral political art, the authors interrogate the urgent challenges of collecting, displaying and preserving traces.

The book is framed around the concept of 'unearthing', the process of revealing hidden truths, excavating layers of history and uncovering the unknown. It explores how the pursuit of knowledge often comes at the cost of displacement, exploitation, commodification and the enduring legacies of imperialism and colonialism.

Alongside critique of the extractive practices that shaped many collections and archives, the book proposes a shift towards 're-earthing', a practice that reconfigures how we understand and engage with knowledge about traces. As a critical approach, re-earthing acknowledges the messy, entangled nature of traces of the past, rejecting attempts to purify or control them in collections and archives, so they may evolve into new forms of knowledge. This innovative perspective challenges scholars, archivists, artists and collection practitioners to rethink their approach to time and trace, urging them to disrupt dominant chronologies and cultivate new ethical approaches for working with collections and archives.

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