

TO COUNTER-COLONISE BRAZILIAN HISTORY INSTEAD OF DECOLONISING IT: ON THE PROBLEMATICS AROUND DECOLONISATION IN MUSEOLOGICAL EXHIBITIONS

Arantxa Ciafrino and Pedro Marco Gonçalves

Arantxa Ciafrino is a PhD Candidate in Sociomuseology at the Universidade Lusófona.

Pedro Marco Gonçalves is a Museology Student at Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro - UNIRIO

Abstract

An observation from the perspective of Social and Experimental Museology on the interventions carried out in the long-term exhibitions at the Museu Histórico Nacional in Rio de Janeiro as part of the project "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories." This article analyses the agents involved in the project, the history and context in which the national museum is situated, and introduces Nêgo Bispo's concept of 'Counter-colonisation' to highlight museological processes as tools for questioning the past and experimenting in the present.

Keywords: Museology; Brazilian History; Decolonialism; Experimental-Museology; Counter-Colonisation

There is a complex web of relationships between violence and Brazilian museums, with each institution bearing its own traces of bloodshed. This article aims to explore the power dynamics involved in representing decolonial perspectives in museums, focusing on the exhibition "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" at the Museu Histórico Nacional. How are Brazilian national museums responding to contemporary demands for decolonisation? How is colonial history being addressed, and which entities are involved in historical revisions within these museums? Who funds these projects? How can the path to decolonizing museums be forged in a country with such intricate entanglements of violence and profound social inequities? Drawing on the concept of 'counter-colonisation' by Nêgo Bispo and introducing experimental museology, this article seeks to broaden the discussion of decolonisation in museological exhibitions.

Colonialism in Brazilian Museological Thinking

Brazilian traditional museums are profoundly influenced and shaped by European Modernity, Enlightenment and Eurocentric perspectives. Like the British Museum and the Louvre, these institutions were established as mechanisms of modern states to validate their history by publicly showcasing heritage. Following the French Revolution, these spaces created modern fictions about the notion of a 'classic past,' thereby inventing a collective heritage and an 'Ancestral Past.' Museums represent a historical past, whether real or not, as continuous in the present (Brulon Soares, 2023).

By inventing an 'Ancestral Past,' these modern states used museums as pedagogical and disciplinary instruments. As Dominique Poulot states, the 19th-century museum symbolised the nation, serving to satisfy a desire for collective memory by presenting authentic objects within a positivist and rational narrative. This narrative was essentially arbitrary and exerted control over the modern subject (Poulot, 2013).

Even though European Modern Museums constructed their histories through the exhibition of cultural heritage, they could not have existed without the presence of colonies as sources for their objects of study. The construction of 'true, rational, and neutral knowledge' directly depended on the colonised lands and the bodies of colonised people. The imperial logic of political and material domination transformed colonies into suppliers of collections, driven by the concept of difference, or Otherness. As Brulon (2020) states, the first museum in Brazil materialised the Other in the colonial sense, as an institution deeply connected to colonial times and Cartesian epistemological thinking.

Museums, as Western modern institutions, wield power over the objects they display, giving material form to abstract ideologies. In this context, a European perception of history, aesthetics, and citizenship is presented as a symbol of modernity, disregarding other cosmologies and establishing a rational and scientific format for representations of reality. By showcasing 'Others,' museums prompt the public to reflect on their sense of identity and, more significantly, on who they are not (Karp, 1991: 15).

It is important to emphasise that Brazil was the first, largest, and most enduring slave-based society in the Americas, and the repercussions of this historical violence are still very much present today, both inside and outside Brazilian museums. As stated by Cunha (2008), in the universe of Brazilian museums, national culture, strongly shaped by 19th-century values, has achieved the utopia of whiteness through the selection of 'superior and civilised values.' This process leads to a portrayal of the 'Other' that decontextualises objects in both historical and cultural senses. Cunha affirms that this approach perpetuates the idea that the African diaspora is 'lost in time' or 'anachronic.'

Museums are institutions still rooted in European modernity and consequently shaped by the culturally specific notion of 'civilisation.' According to Brulon (2023), the prevailing notion of the modern museum is to serve the nation's goal of educating people about its history. Thus, the modern museum aims to transform the public into citizens by scientifically exhibiting their history, adhering to the values of Enlightenment knowledge. In territories marked by colonial history, ontological structures endure long after formal colonialism has ended, persisting as political structures of domination in the social imagination and methods of knowledge production. The coloniality that influences

museums and their modes of operation is described as a 'colonial order of power' (Quijano, 1990) or 'colonial matrix of power' (Mignolo, 1990). This social structure impacts not only the categorisation of knowledge but also the categorisation of people within postcolonial society. Decolonial theory asserts that the effects of coloniality do not cease when a territory gains independence from the colonising state; rather, the mindset of colonialism/modernity persists beyond territorial domination. Coloniality is thus a form of epistemological, cultural, and symbolic domination that operates through and within museums. This is of utmost importance when considering museums in Brazil.

National Western museums, such as the Museu Histórico Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, articulate narratives that have historically defined a discourse over the collective experience. This article addresses how the interventions in the permanent exhibition of the Museu Histórico Nacional, 'Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories,' attempt to confront the museum's narrative from a decolonial perspective. This effort challenges historical museum approaches to colonial history and practices of portraying 'others.' The analysis of this experiment reveals the complexities of constructing these narratives and how the confrontation with coloniality can be expressed in museological exhibitions.

'Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories' and decolonial intentions in museums The National Historical Museum, the Museu Histórico Nacional, is the oldest museological community in Latin America. According to Sá (2007), the museum served as a laboratory for practical and theoretical museological experience as one of the first Schools of Museology in the world. In the 1920s and 1930s, Brazilian museums reached a social position due to a new wave of nationalism that took advantage of museums as direct cultural symbols of this 'new' country, a country now industrialised and integrated with the world economy. The 'Museum Course' was announced with the opening of the museum but only founded 10 years later, in 1932, and it is the basis of Brazilian museological thinking.

The Museu Histórico Nacional, founded in 1922 in the context of the 100th anniversary of Brazilian Independence, had as its first main mission the preservation of the nation's history. The museum was initially directed by Gustavo Barroso (1888-1959) for more than 30 years (1922-1930 and 1932-1959). During this period, the museum exhibitions celebrated white heroes, primarily men affiliated with the State or military power, while relegating people of colour to a marginalised secondary position. Indigenous and black communities were limited to a representation of themselves as passive 'presences', reinforcing the victorious project of colonisation (Magalhães, 2022). As Magalhães notes, the museum has undergone significant narrative changes since the late 1980s, with a focus on revising its discourse and representation of racialised communities. Since 2015, it

has collaborated with members of black resistance movements and Afro-Brazilian religious communities to further this effort.

The project 'Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories' involves a series of transformations in the long-term exhibitions of the Museu Histórico Nacional. Through 19 interventions, the project aimed to shed light on how the museum can reinterpret its exhibitions and collection pieces from a decolonial perspective. The project is the result of a collaboration between the Museu Histórico Nacional and the project ECHOES - European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities. For this exhibition specifically, the Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (Unirio), and the Center for Social Studies at the Universidade de Coimbra (Portugal) worked together within one of its six work packages, which aims to delve into the linkages between Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon, a relationship strongly marked by colonialism.

'ECHOES is a research project [...] that debates the European colonial heritage in Europe and other continents. Conceiving heritage as a legacy and also as a presence, we seek to understand how multiple reflections on this legacy have been silenced in contemporary societies.' (Cordis, 2017)

Funded by the European Union as part of the European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities project. Initiated in February 2018 and concluded in July 2021, it involved universities such as Aarhus Universitet in Denmark, Universiteit van Amsterdam in the Netherlands, Uniwersytet Warszawski in Poland, Centro de Estudos Sociais in Portugal, and Université Rennes II in France, organised by the University of Hull in England. This project received 2,461,890.00 euros to operate in various museums and organisations internationally. The Amsterdam Museum and the Museum of Warsaw were also beneficiaries of the project.

Sharing these numbers and the list of institutions involved in financing the project 'Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories' is of great importance for reflecting on how agencies structure new power dynamics in projects that are self-titled and self-judged as 'decolonial' today. It is crucial to note that the project is funded by the European Union, including institutions such as universities, which, like museums, have been pillars of knowledge rooted in the Enlightenment, thus legitimising the colonial order and modernity. It is interesting to observe how the decolonial discourse unfolds and who are the enunciators of decoloniality. Where does it originate? Where does it radiate to, and who, throughout the process of decolonisation, will have the final say on how it should be carried out?

Among the interventions, there are changes in the wall texts, alongside indications of how certain pieces, displayed for decades, were inaccurately presented. The notable lack of thorough research conducted on the museum's collection points to a significant change from traditional museum practices. Historically, museums have portrayed themselves as unwavering authorities of truth, without room for self-doubt or the acknowledgement of mistakes. Throughout the four long-term exhibitions of the Museu Histórico Nacional it is possible to detect the power dynamics in hegemonic museums in Brazil, as indicated before.

Firstly, it is important to underline how the project understands the concept of decolonisation. As states in the curatorial text, "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" defines the verb "decolonize" as "to understand different meanings conferred by historically silenced subjects"; "creating ways for multiple stories to exist and confront each other"; "to move, to travel"; "to endure discomfort"; "to provoke people"; "making the past, present"; and "to recognise subjects where previously only objects were seen" (ECHOES, 2022).

The term "decolonisation" is a polysemic term, but in this museological context it can be synthesised as narrative reparation. Decolonisation is defined as narrative reparation in the exhibition by recognising oppressed subjects and instigating new readings of their collection.

For Mignolo and Vázquez, decoloniality represents an opening to overcoming modernity/coloniality (Mignolo & Vázquez, 2019, p. 2). According to ICOM Brazil, "decolonial" was one of the 20 concepts chosen by the Brazilian museological community in the 2022 Museum Definition. Decoloniality is seen as a stance and practice against material, symbolic, racial, and gender colonial oppression (ICOM Brasil, n.d.). Wash understands decoloniality as a praxis and a consciousness aimed at constructing other social realities (Wash, 2021). For Maldonado-Torres, the "decolonial turn" is a theoretical, practical, political, and epistemological resistance movement against modernity/coloniality, subverting Western modes of exploitation (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 130).

The interventions of "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" challenge the museum's responsibility towards its collection, and in doing so, a number of complexities very easily arise. This is especially true for museums and collections with a long and intertwined history of colonialism and the formation of national identity through cultural policies. Although the objects and texts are now viewed through the lens of oppressed communities, the extent to which decolonisation can progress while still being tied to the

concept of Brazil as a Nation-State remains uncertain. Can a traditional museum truly offer participation and horizontality while maintaining the nation as a central figure?

Intervention's analyses

One of the interventions of the project is related to the artwork 'Maria Cambinda' showcased in the window that opens the exhibition module 'Portugueses pelo Mundo' (Portuguese around the World) (See Image 1). The artwork in question was acquired by the museum in 1928 and for decades was displayed as an object representing African culture. The caption accompanying the artwork simply indicated 'Sculpture made of Wood/ Africa/19th century'. Indeed, the artwork dates back to the 19th century, but after a review of its documentation, it was discovered that it was produced in Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais, a region of Brazil, and was used by members of the 'Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos'. It has not been produced in Africa, nor has it ever even been in the African continent.

As the name indicates, the history of Ouro Preto (Black Gold) is intricately linked to the history of gold and mineral extraction in the region. The mining activity in this region generated so much profit for the crown that thousands of enslaved people were brought to the region to work in the mines. The presence of a diasporic community in the region is once again intertwined with the history of colonialism. The sculpture of 'Maria Cambinda' allows the history of the people related to the piece to be presented in context. However, presenting it as 'African Artwork' allows an understanding of the previous lack of interest museums had in properly studying the heritage originating from Brazilian diasporic communities.

'More than an allegory to the African continent, Maria Cambinda is a vestige of the history of resistance to slavery, solidarity, and sociability of the Black people of Ouro Preto, who were active in the 'Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos'. [Author's translation] (Magalhães et al, 2022: 15)

The process of re-signifying the object is as important as the fact that the museum acknowledges its own fault in documenting and exhibiting it, within a process of museological decolonisation.

In the same display case, alongside 'Maria Cambinada', there is another sculpture, in white marble: the statue of the Indian Jupira, by Honório Peçanha. It did not receive the same attention and research regarding its documentation as the wooden sculpture. However, it

serves as an element for reflection on the transformation processes in the MHN exhibition. Indian Jupira, like 'Maria Cambinada', is located at the beginning of the exhibition 'Portuguese around the world', which aims to tell the history of the country from the arrival of the Portuguese and the colonisation of the territory now known as Brazil. The sculpture of the Indian exemplifies a set of literary, pictorial, sculptural, etc. works that instrumentalised the figure of the Brazilian native Indigenous Communities through the lens of colonisation.



Image 1: View of museum display in the exhibition 'Portugueses pelo Mundo' (Portuguese around the World) in Museu Histórico Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Courtesy of Museu Histórico Nacional. Photo by Pedro Marco Gonçalves.

Utilising two racialised female figures as allegories to the Portuguese 'world conquest' represents how the museum once saw its role of narrating the nation's history and how the museological ideologies constructed align with social systems of oppression. The 'utopia of whiteness' created by museums Cunha (2008) stated, reinforces the urgency to exercise a narrative revision and the societal role that the museum plays in contemporary times.

Following a sequence of exhibition rooms dedicated to the State as a colonial and imperial construct, displaying different artefacts from the former Royal Family. Another intervention

was made in the text addressing slavery in Brazil. The old curatorial text is crossed out on the panel, with edits made immediately afterward, presenting the narrative corrections as a direct comparison to the misleading word choices of the previous text. The title "Wealth and Slavery" now has "Wealth and" crossed out, leaving "Slavery" as the text's title. Additionally, "heritage" has been replaced with "structure," changing "this colonial heritage" to "this colonial structure."

This textual interventions are displayed in a room with a wall of different torture instruments utilised against enslaved people throughout the almost 400 years of slavery in Brazil. Displayed against a red background, 16 torture devices of the MHN collection are exhibited next to a TV projector that shows newspaper articles about contemporary police brutality, refugees in Brazil and racism today. (See Image 2) It is important to emphasise the complexity of exhibiting 19th-century torture devices in a museological context. The legacy of a slave-based society is still present in Brazilian social spaces, politics, land distribution, and, of course, museums. This sensitive topic is presented to the public in half of one room, while the other half displays a collection of china from the museum's holdings. By replacing the words of the previous text with more critical language, the intervention clearly shows the corrections made. The text also allows the public to gauge the symbolic significance of these word choices and how they impact the intended narrative. Changing the words and representing past decisions as crossed out facilitates a clear understanding of how museological meanings are part of a social revision process.



Image 2: View of the exhibition 'Riqueza e Escravidão' in Museu Histórico Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Courtesy of Museu Histórico Nacional. Photo by Pedro Marco Gonçalves.

Another text intervention addresses Duque de Caxias, the patron of the Brazilian army. Right behind the marble bust of Duque de Caxias, the text informs the public of his ties to slavery. Duque de Caxias (1803-1880) was a slave owner, and at the time of his death, he owned 12 enslaved people. The text reveals that the MHN collection includes his inventory list, where enslaved people are catalogued alongside his other material possessions, such as cars and animals. While the original document states the monetary value of each enslaved person, the curatorial intervention lists their names without revealing their cost, as a way to honour them and respect their memories. This intervention is important to complicate the public's perception of these "national heroes" and the significance of their legacies. Duque de Caxias is still the patron of the Brazilian army, with statues honouring him in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, and cities bearing his name. The intervention by the museum underscores how much of Brazilian social memory is directly tied to violence and, above all, how the MHN critically understands its own collection.

However, it is also important to recognise that these interventions are still limited and somewhat sporadic. The project "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" addresses parts of the MHN's exhibited collection but does not deconstruct the overall museological narrative. The central focus remains a historical perspective that heavily emphasises the Portuguese legacy and the Portuguese Noble Family. The self-awareness of the project coexists with a structure that reinforces the nation's history through traditional viewpoints, particularly emphasising D. Pedro I and D. Pedro II, the two Emperors of Brazil in the 19th century. Additionally, the project overlooks Brazil's two dictatorial periods, Getulio Vargas's Estado Novo (1937-1945) and the Brazilian Military Dictatorship (1964-1985), failing to connect them to their own colonial roots.

As shown, the project "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" primarily focuses on historical revision through documents. Although this is a fundamental process, decolonisation also requires the presence of diverse people, active participation, and alternative forms of knowledge. Only through collective experience can we re-imagine the possibilities of what a museum can achieve with public heritage. While "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" emphasises textual reinterpretation to acknowledge the museum's role in its past and its social responsibility, addressing the museum's role in contemporary society goes beyond the narrative realm. It is vital to give communities an active voice.

Counter-Colonisation and Experimental Museology

Antônio Bispo Santo, famously known as Nêgo Bispo (1959 - 2023), was a quilombola leader and one of the most important contemporary voices against colonial violence in Brazil. Bispo proposes a new perspective on colonisation and delves into the idea of counter-colonisation as resistance efforts that have always been articulated by collective action. Counter-colonisation, according to Bispo, is a process distinct from the theoretical concepts of the decolonial school of thought, such as those put forth by Walter Dignolo or Anibal Quijano. It is an ancestral practice of Afro-diasporic and indigenous communities dating back centuries. Independently from the geographic territory where a culture finds itself, Bispo believes on the importance of understanding all processes of invasion, expropriation, genocide, and subjugation of a culture by another, in order to comprehend the different processes of resistance and fight against settlers within colonisation. (Santos, 2015: 26).

Bispo illustrated various forms of resistance by African Diaspora groups in Brazil, manifested through their ways of life, their relationship with the land, and their participation in cultural expressions. 'Mucambos', 'Quilombos', and 'Retiros', are examples of communities that confronted colonial settlers, remaining important symbols and experiences of resistance to colonialism. However, these groups were often criminalised and subjected to strong violence by governmental institutions, being repressed by force but also being represented as allegories of Otherness in museums. Instead of decolonizing, Nêgo Bispo advocates for counter-colonising. To stand against colonial violence and 'counter' colonisation means affirming the ways of living of communities. It involves interacting with the environment and maintaining continuity with historical experiences of resistance. Counter-colonising is a defence, not an attack.

Experimental museology involves transforming museums into institutions that recognise and engage with social frictions and pluralities as reflections of social life. This engagement with social friction can act as a creative force, leading to a new museum process where reality is shaped by incorporating diverse perspectives and addressing their conflicts. In this way, museums become mediators in transforming social reality. As coloniality extends beyond the museum walls, the institution evolves into a platform for social participation, encounters, and responses to societal needs.

The importance of Nêgo Bispo's thought in the context of Brazilian museums, particularly in analysing interventions in the long-term exhibition at the Museu Histórico Nacional, lies in its demonstration that counter-colonisation, unlike 'decolonisation,' occurs outside

academia. It is carried out by agents who have historically been portrayed as the "other" in traditional museums. Through experiences in Experimental Museology, we observe an alignment with the concept of counter-colonisation.

In this sense, it can be suggested a parallel between decolonisation and the project "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" and counter-colonisation as the experiences within Experimental Museology such as the Museu das Remoções, Museu Memorial Iyá Davina Ilê Omolu Oxum, Museu em Movimento LGBTI+, Museu da Maré, and Museu de Favela do Cantagalo e Pavão-Pavãozinho (all located in Rio de Janeiro, like the Museu Histórico Nacional). These are examples of experimental museology that operate from the perspective of the agents represented in the exhibition narratives. Bispo's thought is highly relevant for addressing issues related to perspective and positioning within the context of national museums.

The Museu Histórico Nacional, as described at the beginning of this article, originates from a nationalist mindset that, since its inception, has aimed to represent the nation in a totalising and inevitably generalising manner. Traditional museums that attempt to portray the nation and its citizens face the challenging task of constant revision and persistent misalignment with their goals.

As Nêgo Bispo suggests, counter-colonisation is achieved through collective action. It involves affirming the livelihoods of communities that have long resisted colonial violence. In the museological context, counter-colonisation presents an opportunity to reframe narrative procedures by embracing a plurality of voices and sharing authority over heritage. This approach ensures that the meanings of objects remain open to interpretation and interaction. It fosters a constant dialogue with local communities and other museums, decentralising the power of institutions such as the Museu Histórico Nacional by redistributing it. This transformation aims to turn the museum into a democratic and open arena for self-representation, transcending modernist frameworks and providing a platform for the subaltern to speak. Counter-colonisation thus creates a new museum experience, independent of Western traditions.

Experimental museology - possible to exist in any format of museums - is both an empiric method and a possibility of relation without objectification or exclusion. A museological exercise that constitutes a continuous critical revision and in friction re-creates museums, a collective practice in the making of the museum a democratic pursuit (Brulon, 2022: 55).

The perspective of how other cosmologies, especially counter-coloniser communities such as Quilombos, address their heritage might offer new frames of reference for understanding the role of museums today. This ongoing process of change, revision and critique renders the museum a democratic and shared cultural tool. As museums judge, interpret and create realities, Experimental Museology emerges as an effort to perceive friction as a catalyst for revising established social values.

Through Experimental Museology, counter-colonisation offers a chance to democratise museums as public spaces. Analysing museological exhibitions through the lens of counter-colonisation involves redistributing authority by expanding the debate to promote the inclusion of civic participation in the museum's narrative. Inspired by Bispo's concept of counter-colonisation and the fights for freedom and justice of quilombolas and other aforementioned groups, promotes a continuously evolving interpretation of social reality.

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