Challenging the impossible:

How Dutch museums negotiate the calls for decolonisation

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Abstract

In recent years, many museums in the Netherlands have engaged with their colonial pasts and their collections, particularly through exhibitions that centre their own complicity in ongoing colonial systems of oppression. This has been driven by social movements like Black Lives Matter, which, amongst other things, demanded public institutions to decolonise. However, also within the museum sector, decolonisation has become a central topic, as the Decolonial Working Group by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) that was created in 2023 illustrates. Since this is still a work in progress, most museums are practising decolonisation without clear operational guidelines or policies. Therefore, this thesis explores the question: How do Dutch museums negotiate the calls to decolonise amidst external and internal institutional pressures? By building on postcolonial and decolonial theory – especially on the concepts of coloniality of power, of knowledge and of being – as well as existing literature on museum history and critique, the research examines how institutions navigate the complexity of decolonisation processes.

Drawing on seven semi-structured expert interviews with curators, educators, programmers and policy employees across varying Dutch museums, I conducted a thematic analysis to map decolonial practices in the areas of institutional structure, curatorial and research practices and participatory programmes. By not examining one department or museum type in isolation, the holistic approach revealed the intersection of hiring policies, the structural organisation, collection management and community engagement.

The research provides an understanding of the possibilities and limitations of institutional change by introducing common approaches. It also revealed that museum professionals are passionate about making a difference in the field by committing to more inclusive and self-reflective practices, yet they are often constrained by the fixed structures and hierarchies of their institutions. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive frameworks for decolonial strategies that is still prevalent causes tensions between the mission or goal and the concrete actions.

By centring a holistic exploration of decolonial museum practice in the Netherlands, this thesis adds to the ongoing conversation about what it means to decolonise museums. It offers insight into how Dutch museum professionals are interpreting and operationalising decolonial goals in their daily work and how these efforts are shaped – and sometimes limited – by questions of institutional identity, legacy, and public accountability. It underscores the need for an ongoing and reflexive dialogue about decolonial theory and its adaptation to museum practice with diverse participants to further drive change.

KEYWORDS: *decolonisation, postcolonialism, museum practice, institutional change, practising decoloniality*

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1 Introduction

In the strategic plan for 2022–2028 the International Council of Museums (ICOM) specifically highlights the topic of decolonisation as a central area of change for museums worldwide. The document states, "ICOM leads a global forum to clarify the issues and identify best practice on decolonising museums. … ICOM proactively addresses decolonisation and the role that museums have played in the colonising process" (ICOM, 2022, p. 14). This followed the global rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020 after George Floyd's murder[1], which increasingly demanded public institutions like universities and museums to decolonise and to confront their own histories (Silverstein, 2021). In the Netherlands museums reacted to this by showing exhibitions like *Black in Rembrandt's Time* (Museum Rembrandthuis, 2020)*, Slavery* (Rijksmuseum, 2021 in Amsterdam, 2023 in New York) and *Afterlives of Slavery* (Zeeuws Museum, 2024), amongst others. Thus, one can observe that museums are starting to confront their own complicity in ongoing colonial structures of oppression. By explicitly centring decolonisation in the ICOM plan and by establishing a "Working Group on Decolonisation", the council officially acknowledges its importance and the need for a proactive operationalisation of the issue.

This is relevant because the theoretical discourse on postcolonialism and decolonisation is highly theoretical as opposed to practical. Since the 1970s postcolonial scholarship has grown into a complex interdisciplinary dialogue that cannot be universally defined by one approach or focus (Gandhi, 1998, p. 3). Scholars analysed – amongst other things – how a Western superiority has been constructed (Said, 2003, p. 42), how colonial oppression also relates to Marxism and feminist theory (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 49, 163), that the history of colonised countries has to be told through more perspectives than that of the ruling class (Venn, 2025, p. 40), and that there is no after colonialism, but rather a continuity of the colonial present (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 231). Especially the last aspect is related to decolonial theory, which centres the persisting coloniality in every aspect of the globalised world (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 533). Scholars like Quijano and Ennis (2000, pp. 544–546) illustrate how global capitalism and modernity are linked and inherently colonial and that a complete upheaval of the entire system by collective action is necessary to decolonise (Fanon, 2001, pp. 27–28; Walsh, 2007, p. 232). The concepts of the coloniality of

[1] BLM was founded in the US in 2013 as a response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman, and advocates for justice and equity for Black people globally (BLM, 2024). Throughout the entire 2010s it grew and gained popularity, but in 2020, #BlackLivesMatter truly became a global movement (Ray, 2022).

power, of knowledge and of being, which play a central role in decolonial theory as well as in this thesis, explain the different spheres in which coloniality persists. They provide a framework for the holistic analysis of power structures, the hierarchisation of systems of knowledge and the implications for the lived realities of people that are members of marginalised groups.

As already hinted at, the theoretic and complex nature of decolonial discourses poses a challenge for museum practice[2], as it does not offer any tangible strategies for decolonial action. The ICOM working group aims to develop language, methodologies and an action plan for institutional approaches to decolonisation, but it is still in the process of it (ICOM, 2023, p. 1). Therefore, an analysis of existing strategies is helpful to understand how museums are currently negotiating the calls for decolonisation without these official guidelines. Many books have been written on this topic (Ariese & Wróblewska, 2022, p. 14); however, they often focus either on one type of museum (Modest & Augustat, 2023b) or on a specific aspect of decolonial museum work (Modest & Lelijveld, 2018, 2020). This is why this thesis aims to gain a holistic understanding of the decolonisation strategies that museums in the Netherlands employ by asking the research question: How do Dutch museums negotiate the calls to decolonise amidst external and internal institutional pressures?

Through the method of a qualitative thematic analysis of seven expert interviews, the research centres on the perspectives on and practices of decolonisation from different museum professionals. Instead of only focusing on one type of museum or one specific department or strategy, the objective of the research is to mirror the variety of museum types, departments and programmes in the Netherlands. This allowed for deeper insight into institutional structures and how DEI policies and a repositioning of the museum itself can help to diversify and decolonise the staff, as well as into curatorial and research practices, which play a crucial role in recontextualising the colonial history of the collections and museums. Finally, participatory practices, which aspire to democratise the institution and to increase collaboration with communities, were also analysed. Bringing together the different levels on which decolonial museum practices can be implemented revealed that the tensions that are inherent in this undertaking are connected and strategies have an impact beyond the boundaries of the individual programme or department.

[2] By museum practice or work, I am referring to the departments of education/programming, curating/research and management (which includes policy making) in this thesis, as these are typically found in every museum – with slight variations depending on the size (Tanga, 2021, p. 3).

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Postcolonial theory

As already touched upon, much has been written under the rubric of postcolonialism, but there is no consistent methodology or uniform theory, which makes it impossible to simply define it (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 298). Even when it comes to terminology, there are disagreements whether one should use "post-colonialism" or "postcolonialism"; in this thesis, however, "postcolonialism" is used to highlight that there is no after colonialism but rather an ongoing period of colonial consequences (Gandhi, 1998, p. 3). This understanding of continuous coloniality is in line with the discourse around decolonisation, which in part defines itself through a critique of postcolonialism (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, pp. 330–334; Grosfoguel, 2007, pp. 211–212). Furthermore, "postcolonialism" means the theory, while the condition it addresses is "postcoloniality" (Gandhi, 1998, p. 4). To make postcolonialism, but also other related theories, tangible, it is useful to explain the most prominent positions to get an idea of the many facets that the discipline is characterised by. Therefore, the historical development of postcolonial scholarship to more decolonial approaches today is traced, as it illustrates the shift from a historical analysis of colonialism to a focus on enduring colonial legacies. This is also relevant when talking about the role of the museum in this discourse, especially because it illustrates that post- and decolonial critique are not new phenomena.

Postcolonialism originated in the Middle East and South Asia and is closely linked to those locations and the respective colonial histories (Bhambra, 2014, p. 115). Its foundation was laid by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (Gandhi, 1998, pp. 64–66). In it he examines how the "Orient"[3] has been constructed by the West as "Other" in order to keep dominant power structures and the superiority of the West intact (Gandhi, 1998, pp. 76–77). When speaking about the "West" in this paper, the colonising nations – that profited from colonialism – like France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands – are referred to, since they constructed the narrative of the superior West "over the positional inferiority of the East" (Gandhi, 1998, p. 77). Said draws from poststructuralist theory and especially Foucault's understanding of discourse, which he uses to explain how stereotypes about this "Other" have been created by the imperialist

[3] Orientalism as an academic discipline encompasses Arabic regions in the north of Africa and the Middle East but also India and other South Asian countries and therefore a vast variety of languages, cultures and histories (Said, 2003, p. 50). It is therefore important to note that the "Orient" as a homogenous geographical or cultural entity does not exist.

nations through speaking for the so-called “Orient” to assert dominance (Gandhi, 1998, pp. 25, 77). They were not seen but “analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or … taken over” (Said, 2003, p. 207). According to Said (2003, p. 42), “the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority”. This supremacy is based on knowledge (generated by means of the new emerging sciences of ethnology, history and philology) that gives “us” – by which he means the West – power and authority over “it” – the “Oriental” country – to categorise, judge, represent and ultimately to “create” (Said, 2003, p. 32, 40). Especially the idea of “creating” the Orient by writing about it, researching it and reinforcing its Otherness is central, as it uncovers how the whole idea of Orientalism is ultimately a Western fiction. Calling it made up, however, does not mean that this construction of a superior Occident ruling over an inferior Orient does not have real and lasting consequences (Said, 2003, p. 44). The binary opposition and hierarchisation of the two were or are presented as objectively true since it is validated by its academic nature that associates it with traditional learning, public institutions and “generically determined writing” (Said, 2003, pp. 202–205). Here the rationalisation and, at the same time, institutionalisation of Western supremacy are identified as one of the key elements of Orientalism by Said. Especially the latter is relevant when talking about museums negotiating the calls for decolonisation, as the construction of Western supremacy is deeply embedded in public institutions. His work has been very influential but also criticised, especially because of his homogenous portrayal of both the “Orient” and the “Occident” and his construction of a strict opposition between both, which leaves no room for more nuanced perspectives (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 114). Furthermore, critics have pointed out that he has treated French and British colonialism as identical while completely disregarding other contexts like the Algerian one or German Orientalism that would negate or at least destabilise his theory (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, pp. 114–117). This criticism points to the necessity of a more holistic discussion.

Another dimension of postcolonial studies is subaltern studies, which succeeded a collective founded in the early 1980s named the Subaltern Studies Group, which academically discussed subaltern themes in South Asia (Gandhi, 1998, p. 1). They have, for example, analysed how Indian history must be told from multiple perspectives and not only through the eyes of the ruling class (Venn, 2025, p. 40). A key figure in the subaltern studies is Gayatri C. Spivak, whose famous essay *Can the subaltern speak?* is considered central for postcolonial theory, just as Said’s already mentioned *Orientalism* (Castro Varela & Dhawan,

2020, p. 162). She was deeply influenced by Derrida, who was a leading voice in deconstructivism (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 49). He examined how binary oppositions are hierarchised and how they are essential in Western philosophy and how they sometimes contradict each other. According to him, these contradictions must be uncovered to thus also make the constructed nature of power structures – and the imbalances that they create – visible (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025). By exposing this, a deconstruction of said binaries becomes possible as they are no longer seen as natural. Furthermore, Spivak's work was also shaped by the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s, which arose in many Western countries and was intended to reduce gender-based discrimination (Alexander, 2020; Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 49). Marxist theory that examines how the ruling class exploits the working class in capitalist systems has influenced Spivak as well (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 163; Marx et al., 1972, pp. 172–173). These different influences on her work show how factors like race and gender but also class can intersect[4]. This needs to be discussed together when it comes to people or groups facing multiple forms of marginalisation. Spivak shows how postcolonial theory has to be combined with a nuanced perspective on multiple forms of discrimination and oppression since they are all connected and cannot be examined as isolated phenomena. Also in the context of museum decolonisation, this approach is still highly relevant. Furthermore, her mission is to educate oppressed people to ignite a passion for social issues and give them the language to speak and ultimately fight for themselves (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 162). She has been criticised, however, for writing too academically so her ideas are inaccessible for the "voiceless" (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, pp. 224–225). To this she answers that the complex reality of (post)colonial structures cannot be explained in simple language and advocates instead for an ethical and political education of subaltern as well as privileged people (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, pp. 222–224). In general, however, she remains at a purely theoretical level and offers no suggestions as to how this education could be implemented or promoted by means of political strategies (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 225).

[4] The term "intersectionality" was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991, pp. 1242–1245) in her essay *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color* in which she mainly talks about the intersection of race and gender to explain how Black women are facing both racism and sexism but also specific marginalisation that only Black women experience. She also lists a number of other factors like class and sexuality but does not discuss them in detail.

Another aspect of postcolonial theory that is relevant for the discussion of decolonising museums is Homi K. Bhabha's position. He too has been deeply influenced by poststructuralists like Foucault and Derrida but also by psychoanalytical ideas like Freud's theories (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 230). In his early works he argues against Said that the colonised did have agency and that there has never been a "total domination" by the colonisers and goes on to say that the constructed identities of coloniser versus colonised are fragile. They are not opposing binaries but instead tend to be more complex (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, pp. 231–232). This shows that scholars in this field are disagreeing with each other and that a nuanced discussion of the different positions is necessary for navigating the discourse today. Understanding Orientalism and its context is important, but it needs to be further developed and critically examined. Bhabha later analyses especially the cultural effects of neocolonialism and establishes that there has not been a moment where colonialism ended and post-coloniality[5] began, but that there rather is a continuity of the colonial present (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 231). This already touches on decolonial thought, which further develops the idea of enduring coloniality. Bhabha also introduces the concepts of mimicry, hybridity and third spaces: mimicry is the adaptation to the coloniser's culture by the colonised, but it is neither violent assimilation nor blind imitation; it rather means imitating language, culture, behaviour and ideas in an exaggerated manner (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 240). According to his theory, it shows the unstable nature of racist stereotypes, as the colonised are able to mimic the coloniser and thus become like him, a fact that ultimately leads to the realisation that colonialism cannot be justified (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 243). Hybridity – his second concept – is a form of resistance that produces new structures of authority through reinterpretation, and third spaces are an in-between space where new identities and cultural symbols can be (re-)interpreted (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, pp. 259–260). Even though his ideas have been very influential, Bhabha has faced a lot of criticism for his concept of hybridity, for example, because it trivialises the fight between colonised and coloniser and does not accurately represent the dynamics in this fight, according to Benita Parry (2004, pp. 91, 99–101). It is therefore important to analyse the impacts of colonial oppression today in a way that does not disregard power imbalances while at the same time not reproducing binary oppositions that ignore the multilayeredness of (post)colonial dynamics. This also applies to specific contexts in which colonial structures

[5] The hyphenated spelling is used here intentionally to contrast the idea of an "after" colonialism with its enduring presence.

persist, like in the museum. Furthermore, Bhabha has been criticised because he bases his postcolonial theory only on the works of Western philosophers and scholars. Therefore, his work is labelled as Eurocentric (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 280). Spivak has faced similar critiques, to which she replied that it would be problematic to assume that the ideas of European thinkers did not have an impact on the theories of subaltern philosophers because of colonialism (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 212).

Just by introducing the three main theorists in the field of postcolonial studies and by explaining their various (European) influences, it becomes apparent how postcolonialism is an interdisciplinary dialogue that is too complex for one uniform approach, definition of the content or the scope (Gandhi, 1998, p. 3). One thing that the scholars have in common, however, is that they are largely basing their theories – in which they analyse and criticise colonial structures – on European philosophers. This raises the question of whether they can adequately critique said systems while using the same framework that has been used to justify their oppression. This dilemma has also been discussed by Audre Lorde (2007) in her famous speech *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House,* in which she asks to what extent it is possible to achieve a sustainable change and abolition of colonial power relations if liberation takes place in the same context as oppression. This question is especially relevant for museums that have to navigate this dilemma when facing calls for decolonisation, as they are deeply rooted in Western systems of knowledge and power.

2.2 Decolonial theory

These criticisms of postcolonialism regarding the academic nature of the discourse that heavily draws from European thinkers and the implication that there is an "after colonialism" that still lingers even if one uses the unbroken term "postcolonialism" are deflected by Latin American scholarship, which talks about "decoloniality". A central concept in the Latin American discourse is "coloniality", which was coined by Aníbal Quijano. In comparison to colonialism, which is a direct political and economic relationship of domination by one nation over another, coloniality refers to the enduring oppressive structures of power, knowledge and being that were established by colonialism – "thus, coloniality survives colonialism" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). In their article *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America* Quijano and Ennis (2000, pp. 535, 540) explain how the development of world capitalism as "a new global model of labor control" with Europe as the centre of power has led to "the control of subjectivity, culture,

and especially knowledge and the production of knowledge". This means that globalisation started with the establishment of the colonial and Eurocentric capitalist system, which is rooted in the hierarchical binary of conqueror and conquered, which in turn was constructed on the basis of the social classification based on the idea of race (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, pp. 533–534). This racist justification for the domination of the "inferior" people up until today builds the foundation of the structure of global capitalism, where people are dominated and exploited based on their race (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, pp. 534–537). This devaluation, however, is also legitimised by applying gendered hierarchies that feminise – and therefore devalue – men of colour, which was "needed" as justification because colonial oppression was established by means of eliminating and enslaving subjects but also by rape, which Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 247) calls "the non-ethics of war" that were normalised by coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 247, 255). This aspect makes especially visible how race, femininity and sexuality are connected. They are categories that are deliberately used to legitimise but also – through devaluation – to execute the colonial project. According to Quijano (2007, p. 169), this colonial domination is still persistent – even though political colonialism does no longer exist – as it goes beyond external oppression because of what he calls the "colonization of the imagination" or "coloniality of knowledge": Indigenous[6] knowledge and knowledge production were systematically repressed while the "rulers' own patterns of expression, and of their beliefs and images" were imposed as a tool for exercising control (Quijano, 2007, p. 169). Both types of coloniality, however, have an impact on the lived experience of colonisation, especially through language:

> "Science" (knowledge and wisdom) cannot be detached from language; languages are not just "cultural" phenomena in which people find their "identity"; they are also the location where knowledge is inscribed. And, since languages are not something human beings have but rather something of what humans [sic] beings are, coloniality of power and of knowledge engendered the coloniality of being [colonialidad del ser]. (Mignolo, 2003, as cited in Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 242)

By exercising this coloniality of power – which means economic and political control that is intertwined with capitalism and Eurocentrism – in this way, other extensions of coloniality that shape the life of everyone on the planet were created: the coloniality of knowledge but also the coloniality of being (Mignolo, 2007, p. 451; Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 545). Following this analysis of the status quo, he concludes that epistemological decolonisation, as decoloniality, is necessary to create new forms of communication that are

[6] "Indigenous" is used here to describe explicitly non-European knowledge and cultures – in this case, Latin American indigenous knowledge.

not rooted in those concepts (Quijano, 2007, p. 177). Building on that, Walter Mignolo (2011, p. 45) introduces the idea of "delinking", by which he means epistemic disobedience that leads to a different "beginning", as it is not possible to break from the coloniality of power within Western categories of thought. This means that only by delinking, deconstructing and ultimately destroying the coloniality of power – and thus Eurocentrism and capitalism that are inextricably linked to it – can everyone be liberated. These observations are relevant for museums navigating the calls for decolonisation insofar as the systemic critique posed by decolonial scholars challenges the institution of the museum at its core. They also highlight how systems of power and knowledge are inherently colonial but also linked, which urges people working in the field of museums to gain a holistic understanding of systems of oppression when thinking about decolonisation strategies.

Catherine Walsh (2007, p. 232) – another key figure in decolonial theory – points out that a collective praxis is needed to expose and challenge "the colonial-racist structures, systems, and institutions of society". By collective action she has an intellectual production in mind that, firstly, is not an individual effort but a shared one, which is not confined by an institution. Secondly, it arises from the collective lived experience as a racialised "Other" and aims to liberate the oppressed socially, politically and in terms of existence from their "non-existence" and dehumanisation (Walsh, 2007, pp. 231–232). She draws on the ideas of critical theory to show how theory can be more than "pure thought" and instead be connected to social justice and become "a tool of struggle" (Walsh, 2007, p. 227).

Even though theory is connected to action in decolonial discourses, it still mainly takes place in a historical and abstract way that analyses the mechanisms of coloniality and its lasting impacts but that does not offer more concrete propositions as to what true decoloniality can look like and how a total delinking from colonial structures (like capitalism but also Western epistemologies) can be achieved. Frantz Fanon, "the anti-colonial Algerian revolutionary", reflected on the impact of colonialism but also on how decolonisation can be achieved in his manifesto *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 2001; Gandhi, 1998, p. 18). At the beginning of it, he states that decolonisation can only happen through violence because it "sets out to change the order of the world, [and] is, obviously a programme of complete disorder" (Fanon, 2001, p. 27). For him, decolonisation means a process in which a new humanity is created (Fanon, 2001, p. 28). This focus on creating something new is central as he makes clear that it is not about going back to nature but instead to "combine our muscles and brains in a new direction. Let us try to create the whole man, whom Europe has been

incapable of bringing to triumphant birth" (Fanon, 2001, pp. 252–253). However, before white (European) readers even get to Fanon's text that is not addressed to them but to the oppressed around the world, Jean-Paul Sartre – who wrote the preface in the 1961 edition – addresses Fanon's belief in the necessity of violence for decolonisation and reminds the reader: "even your non-violent ideas, are conditioned by a thousand-year-old oppression" (Fanon, 2001, p. 21). For Quijano and Ennis (2000, p. 568), "democratization would have implied, and should imply before anything else, the process of decolonizing social, political, and cultural relations that maintain and reproduce racial social classification", but when being in line with Fanon, this would mean a violent and complete upheaval of the entire system. No matter if one agrees with Fanon and believes that violence is the only way to destroy the coloniality of power, decolonial scholarship shows that not only the political sphere but all dimensions of life are impacted by these structures. This means that a holistic analysis of persisting forms of coloniality – of power, of knowledge and of being – especially in European institutions like museums, is necessary when engaging with calls for decolonisation. Only by acknowledging the grand scale of the consequences of colonialism does it become possible to come up with critical and nuanced responses to the calls for decolonisation, as more targeted programmes to deal with specific issues like the hierarchisation of knowledge within the academic museum practice become possible.

2.3 Decolonising museums?

One example of an institution that is deeply embedded in said colonial structures and illustrates all of the postcolonial and decolonial discourse is the museum. Even though the history of the museum dates back to ancient Mesopotamia, in this paper only the developments since the start of the European colonial expansion are analysed, as they are highly relevant for the topic and still characterise Western museums today (Pryke, 2019). In the 19th century cabinets of curiosity became more popular[7] and nation-state museums were established to show the grandness and progress of the nation as well as its superiority over colonised peoples (Bennett, 1995, p. 187). During this time the museum was constructed as "one of the fundamental institutions of the modern [nation] state" (Bazin, 1967, as cited in Bennett, 1995, p. 76). By going beyond the temporal horizon of the Greek and Roman

[7] Even before the 19th century, cabinets of curiosity existed, but they were usually private collections as symbols of power of an elite. In the 19th century, however, they became more open and accessible to a broader public (Bennett, 1995, pp. 92–93). Therefore, the thesis focuses on this development, as from then on, an ideological and educational mission was tied to the cabinets of curiosity.

antiquity and excavating objects of ancient civilisations like Egypt and Mesopotamia, a universal history of civilisation was constructed (Bennett, 1995, p. 76). This, however, was framed by imperialist ideology, which created a separation of Western nations and others to establish an "uninterrupted continuity in the order of peoples and races" and fabricate stories that justified colonialism (Bennett, 1995, p. 77; Yusoff, 2023, p. 79). With this ideological background the museum became a space of representation that clearly distinguishes between "we" and "them", which are hierarchised and staged as scientifically true (Bennett, 1995, pp. 77–79). Like Said (2003, p. 32, 40) has pointed out, the superiority of the West was established by new emerging sciences that classified and simultaneously devalued everything non-Western, which is also reflected in the systems of organisation that categorised objects and people into "civilised" or "savage" (Procter, 2021, p. 75). Museums were, furthermore, presented as neutral spaces even though they showcase a created narrative and reflect the collectors – who are white men (Procter, 2021, pp. 23–26). Today, this idea of neutrality persists most prominently in the "white cube" that is filled with meaning, while the places are still financed and therefore shaped by "industrialists who have profited in the wake of colonialism, with wealth that has continued to benefit those from nations that were former colonial powers" (Procter, 2021, pp. 190–191). The whole idea of the traditional museum is to showcase the past in a specific light that separates it from the present while it is created, interpreted and understood through present practices and ideas (Bennett, 1995, p. 130). Moreover, these stories that collections and museums are telling aim to fulfil an educational mission, but depending on the type of museum, this can be more or less explicit: Science museums, design museums and museums of natural history are the primary examples of didactic purpose, while traditional art museums mainly display objects (Procter, 2021, pp. 73, 77). Nonetheless, whatever the primary focus, museums were – and still are – "an extremely racialized, [and] gendered space" in which all objects are categorised and therefore hierarchised (Procter, 2021, pp. 75, 78). This, however, is often invisible to visitors, as most do not look beyond what is displayed to investigate how it is presented. But this question of how objects are exhibited also has a political significance and is deeply linked to the training of curators and the structures of museum control and management (Bennett, 1995, pp. 126–127).

These mechanisms that characterise museum organisations and practices illustrate how deep colonial structures are embedded in the institutions (Mitchell, A., 2023, p. 59): The binary opposition that is central in Said's works as well as Spivak's intersectional focus on

education and the added complexity by Bhabha all illustrate the interconnectedness of museums and coloniality. Furthermore, decolonial discourse – especially the concepts of coloniality of power, of knowledge and of being – helps to understand how decolonising the museum means an all-encompassing and thorough process. It is about translating and adapting the academic discussions that are held on a grand scale to museum practice and analysing, questioning and changing the general institutional structure, the categories of organisation and hierarchisation, the representational frameworks, as well as the mission of the museum, to come up with more tangible solutions for change. To showcase how some modern museums are already changing their mission Alice Procter (2021, pp. 140–146) introduces a "type" of museum that she names "the memorial". She characterises it as a space for commemoration, grief, reflection, empathy and emotions that "holds those with a smaller legacy" (Procter, 2021, p. 142). Her way of classifying centres the objective and not the actual type of the museum to illustrate that everything from the presentation of historic and often colonial artefacts to modern artistic interventions can be tools to commemorate, mourn and simultaneously celebrate survival. This is also reflected in the idea that museums, and especially ethnographic museums, can become spaces of care where curators not only take care of the objects themselves – which has always been part of traditional museum practice – but also care for humans by amending historical injustices and confronting the colonial past through global networks of stakeholders and working with Indigenous communities around the world and with post-migrant citizens within Europe (Modest & Augustat, 2023a, pp. 12, 14–15; Morse, 2020, p. 175). This calls for the development of new inclusive and collaborative but also transparent practices and for an active effort to decolonise, which also means being a part of broader justice movements (Lee & O'Brien, 2023, p. 131; Modest & Augustat, 2023a, p. 15). Similar to Fanon's (2001, pp. 252–253) suggestion that decolonisation means a creative imagining of a new future, Ticktin (2023, p. 27) advocates for imagination to become part of (decolonial) museum practice. She argues that it is important to make racist and colonial violence visible and, in that, to take collective responsibility, which then makes it possible "to collaboratively imagine other, better, more caring worlds" (Ticktin, 2023, p. 33). Closely linked to this is restitution, as it can be understood as a "compensatory act for the past, and care for the present, but, also, as a creative project for the future" (Baucom, 2023, p. 49). Repatriation – another decolonial strategy which is often employed – follows a similar objective. According to Bruno Soares (2021, pp. 243–244), however, this primary focus on redistribution is problematic as it does

not prioritise the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of the underlying systems of knowledge – that reproduce coloniality. Therefore, it can only be understood as a decolonial strategy if it is accompanied by a prioritisation of non-Western values and cultural understandings (Danaparamita, 2020, p. 57).

As these positions already emphasise and suggest, museums need to become more open and collaborate with members of different communities, which was already demanded in the 1980s and has become more popular in recent years (Morse, 2020, pp. 29, 31–32). The goal is to radically transform the museum and its existing power structures by democratising and pluralising it (Morse, 2020, p. 29). Traditionally, however, the museum is not a place that is open for everyone, especially since it is a civic institution that is inevitably formed by "money, politics, power, [and] the intentions of its trustees and governors", which needs to be considered when introducing participatory practices (Procter, 2021, p. 201). Furthermore, "participation" can be used to mean almost anything that involves people, which is why it is important to take a closer look at the intentions, the way in which the practices are introduced, who gets to participate and the museum teams that are involved (Morse, 2020, p. 30). By recognising these different levels and actors in participatory practices, specific issues can be identified more easily, like, for example, the fact that museum spaces are not equally accessible to everyone – physically or socially – which has a direct impact on the participating individuals (Procter, 2021, p. 207). This examination is also important to expose the underlying power dynamics of these collaborations, as it is possible that the sole purpose of the participation is an improvement of the museum, which again reproduces an exploitative and one-sided relationship (Morse, 2020, p. 31). The consequence is that in order to successfully collaborate with outside partners, museums have to become just one element of a broader network of organisations, people, objects and ideas, which does not centre the museum but instead embraces multiple centres and relations (Morse, 2020, p. 160). A part of this collaboration is the exchange of resources and knowledge between museums, for which ICOM is the most prominent example. But also regarding specific topics, like decolonisation, multiple initiatives have been formed, for example, the ICOM'S Decolonial Working Group (ICOM, 2023) or the Dutch Colonial Collections Consortium (Colonial Collections Consortium, n.d.). Both these examples show that museum professionals are engaging with the discourse around decolonisation by either dedicating a working group for developing an institutional strategy for decolonisation or by building a network of support for matters like provenance research. However, arguing with decolonial scholarship, decolonising the

museum means dismantling Eurocentric and exclusionary practices, which are deeply embedded not only in the collections themselves but also in the institutional structure as already established. Following this reasoning, inter-museum networks are a starting point for guidelines, but only lasting, meaningful and respectful partnerships between museums and communities that have historically been excluded from the space can bring change (Soares, Bruno Brulon, 2024, p. 68). This also means, however, that museums have to hand over control and be open for ongoing projects that might even challenge their authority and role as a whole (Procter, 2021, p. 212).

All these developments are illustrated by the debates around the definition of the museum by the ICOM that can be understood as a professional and strategic tool for museum professionals as well as other cultural institutions and governmental entities or as inspiration of what the museum can be (Bonilla-Merchav & Soares, 2022, p. 138). The definition had said since 1974:

> A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of the society and its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment. (Lehmannová, 2020, p. 2)

Over the years, minor adjustments were made to include intangible heritage as well, but in 2019 a completely new proposal was put forth that started with the words:

> Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. (Lehmannová, 2020, p. 3)

It also included that they are "participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities" and that they want to commit to social justice, equality and planetary wellbeing (Lehmannová, 2020, p. 3). This revolutionary proposition, however, was not approved by the council, which led to the current definition in 2022 after a long process of researching and discussing (Bonilla-Merchav & Soares, 2022, pp. 139–140):

> A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing. (ICOM, n.d.)

The internal discussions that led to the current definition illustrate how complex the role of the museum is and how important it is to make room for an exchange of multiple

perspectives. This applies to conversations within the field by diverse professionals from around the world about the role and future of the museum, as well as to the importance of listening to external critique and proposals. The fact that the highly political and very open suggestion was not approved in 2019 illustrates the challenge of finding a global consensus when it comes to defining what the museum is about. Nonetheless, the new rationale urges museums to become more open, transparent, diverse and sustainable, which is not an explicitly decolonial goal yet, but it covers some aspects of decolonial museum work and it will be followed by the strategies developed by the Decolonial Working Group. By continuing on this path of collaboration and democratisation as well as by acknowledging the ever-changing nature of museums in current society, museums can embrace the uncertainty that decolonial action brings with it. Restitution and repatriation are one way to address the immediate visible ties to coloniality in museums, but as the academic discussion on decoloniality illustrates, coloniality persists in power structures, knowledge production and in every aspect that constitutes life. Museums can therefore never be completely stripped of their colonial past, but they are acknowledging more and more that they need to face their past to contribute to a more just present and future. Because of the highly abstract nature of the academic discourse on decolonisation, amongst other things, very few guidelines for decolonial work exist, but scholars like Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska (2022) and Modest and Augustat (2023b) introduce approaches based on case studies and the project TAKING CARE[8]. Furthermore, the Wereldmuseum has published three books in their Work in Progress series, which is an ongoing project that centres on new and self-critical methods to rethink museum practice and share the findings with other museums (Lelijveld, 2018, p. 10). Moreover, the Amsterdam Museum has published a guide for co-creation called *Collecting the City. Co-creation: A work in progress* (Amsterdam Museum, 2023a). As the titles of these publications suggests however, there is no uniform method or framework for decolonising museums; instead, it is a work in progress that leaves it up to the respective institution to determine its priorities and focus points. In order to gain a better understanding of the different approaches and the reasoning behind them, this thesis aims to holistically analyse the various responses to the calls for decolonisation.

[8] This project is the basis for the publication *Spaces of care – confronting colonial afterlives in European ethnographic museums* (Modest & Augustat, 2023b).

3 Methods

3.1 Research design

This thesis explores how Dutch museums negotiate the calls to decolonise amidst external and internal institutional pressures. The objective is to demonstrate that decolonisation in museums is a complex and wide-ranging endeavour that is being approached by the different departments with distinct strategies, which will be explored. By conducting research into why and how museum professionals decide to implement structural changes and introduce new programmes, it shines light on the intersection of the three museum areas of institutional structure, curatorial and research practice, as well as programming and education in decolonial strategies.

I used a qualitative research method based on the objective of understanding meaning-making processes, rather than finding patterns, which is done by measuring or testing hypotheses quantitatively (Payne & Payne, 2004, p. 176). Since the question focuses on a museum context, semi-structured in-depth expert interviews with museum professionals from different departments provided insights into their perspectives and that of the institutions they work for (Mills & Birks, 2014, p. 37). This allowed access to specific "insider" knowledge on, for example, decision-making and resource allocation, which can only be obtained by someone who is part of the institution (Bogner et al., 2018, p. 655). In contrast to surveys, this design allows for a deep and context-sensitive exploration of individual and institutional rationales, as well as challenges and limitations (Marvasti, 2004, p. 20; Wengraf, 2001, p. 60). At the same time, the semi-structured interview format allows for comparable findings by defining the theoretical framework beforehand and organising the interview guide in a way that covers the central topics (Appendix A). A fully structured method was not suitable for this research, as the interviewees' different areas of expertise demand slight adaptations to the interview guide. Furthermore, heavily structured interviews would have entailed the risk of disregarding the nuances of museum practice since the different departments are working together and the three areas, which informed the interview guide[9], intersect, which is why it is not possible to examine one aspect in isolation (Marvasti, 2004, p. 20). Therefore, the qualitative method of semi-structured expert interviews facilitated a holistic understanding of decolonial museum practices in Dutch museums that includes ethnographic, history and art museums as well as curators, policy employees and educators.

[9] See 3.3 Operationalisation for a detailed description and explanation of the three areas.

3.2 Sample and data collection

I have intentionally combined criterion sampling with snowball sampling to identify museum professionals in Dutch institutions whose work directly engages with decolonisation (Mitchell, M. et al., 2012, tbl. 2.1). For this I established clear inclusion criteria:

Firstly, institutional funding, which only includes museums that receive subsidies from the government or the municipality. I deliberately excluded private institutions, as the sample is very heterogeneous, and the criterion of funding ensures a common base on which the museums operate. By that I am referring to the principles that each organisation applying for subsidies needs to base their policy plans on. The Dutch Ministry of Culture, for example, highlights, amongst other things, the topics "social significance" and "accessibility" as foundations for the allocation of the funds and the municipality of Rotterdam requires tailored programmes that centre the three Is (inclusivity, innovation and interconnectivity) (Bruins, 2024, p. 3; Gemeente Rotterdam, 2024, art. 8.2.g).

The second criterion is institutional type and size. It includes a variety of museum types – history, ethnographic, science and art – ranging from small to large, which have a clear connection or intervention strategies in relation to addressing colonial histories. Rather than prioritising only one type like, for example, ethnographic museums, which are often discussed separately in publications on decolonising museums (Ariese & Wróblewska, 2022, p. 14; Modest & Augustat, 2023b) or "grand" institutions like the Rijksmuseum, I selected the sample precisely because museums are facing calls to decolonise regardless of institutional size or type (van Broekhoven, 2019, pp. 1–2). As the research aims to offer a holistic analysis of decolonial discourses in *the* museum as an organisation, it was necessary to include museums of different types and sizes to ensure that various strategies and challenges are covered.

The third criterion defines the interviewees' departments. It is purposefully broad to include museum professionals like curators, educators, programmers and policy employees who are negotiating the calls for decolonisation. This can be through collection research, exhibition design, community outreach or policy development. By adding this criterion, another dimension of a holistic discussion of decolonisation strategies could be covered, as it is common in the existing literature on decolonising museums to focus only on one area of work, which is not the objective of this thesis (Ariese & Wróblewska, 2022, p. 14). Furthermore, only interviewing experts ensured that each participant could speak from direct insider experience (Bogner et al., 2018, p. 655).

I initially contacted 12 institutions via email and reached out to 11 individual museum professionals on LinkedIn based on my three criteria. Because some declined due to countless requests of this kind or did not respond for – I assume – similar reasons, snowball sampling was necessary to reach more eligible people by making use of the interviewees' networks (Mitchell, M. et al., 2012, tbl. 2.1). This means that I still used my sampling criteria, but I was prepared for my concrete sample to emerge during the research process, for example, regarding the interviewees' positions (Schreier, 2018, p. 88).

Over the course of two months, I conducted seven interviews, each 45–60 minutes long, with professionals working at the Amsterdam Museum, Rijksmuseum, Museum Bronbeek, the Maritiem Museum in Rotterdam, the Wereldmuseum and Kunstinstituut Melly. Therefore, in this thesis, two history museums, one ethnographic museum, one science museum and two art museums – including a modern art museum – are represented.

Table 1

Overview interviewees' positions and institutions

pseudonym	museum	position	length (min)
Interviewee 1	Amsterdam Museum	curator	51:23
Interviewee 2	Amsterdam Museum	educator	54:29
Interviewee 3	Museum Bronbeek	director[10]	51:12
Interviewee 4	Wereldmuseum	programmer	51:24
Interviewee 5	Maritiem Museum	curator	52:33
Interviewee 6	Kunstinstituut Melly	programmer	59:27
Interviewee 7	Rijksmuseum	policy employee	45:23

By combining criterion and snowball approaches, I ensured that the sample reflects both institutional variety and professional expertise in decolonial practice. Moreover, seven expert interviews were sufficient to achieve thematic saturation in this case since new information produced little new codes in the final interviews and because I wanted to use the data to gain a broad insight into multiple dimensions of decolonial work in museums rather than a comparative analysis of museum types or departments dealing with decolonising efforts (Guest et al., 2006, pp. 74–76).

[10] Interviewee 3 gave me explicit permission to be identifiable.

The data was collected by conducting interviews in English following the steps described by Kvale (2007b). Only the interview with the policy employee was conducted remotely via a video call; the others were in-person ones. I used one interview guide (Appendix A), which covered three dimensions, which I adapted slightly depending on the interviewee's position. This allowed for a shift of the focus to the respective interviewee's area of expertise and eventually made it possible to cover multiple aspects of museum work in general. After the interview, I used TurboScribe to transcribe them and checked them against the recording to make sure that the transcript is accurate and that all names or Dutch words that were occasionally used are spelt correctly.

3.3 Operationalisation

Since postcolonial and decolonial theory is highly abstract and complex – as already established in the theoretical framework – it was important to break the academic discourse down when discussing how Dutch museums are navigating the pressures to decolonise. While the theory of Orientalism is an important base for the understanding of said discourse, the more holistic concepts of coloniality of power, of knowledge and of being that are used in decolonial discourse are the foundation for the museum dimensions that are covered in my research (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 242; Mignolo, 2007, p. 451; Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 540; Quijano, 2007, p. 169; Said, 2003). Therefore, I used these concepts as a framework for my interview guide.

Firstly, coloniality of power was operationalised by developing prompts, which cover the institutional structure. In this part of the interview, I ask questions regarding the decision-making and hierarchies, diversity and inclusion in leadership, as well as challenges in institutional change. As Quijano and Ennis (2000, p. 545) have illustrated in depth, the coloniality of power, which manifests in economic and political control, is intertwined with capitalism and Eurocentrism. This organisation of power is mirrored in Western museums, as they were established and constructed to represent the modern nation-state and the progress of the nation (Bennett, 1995, pp. 76, 187). Therefore, a deeper analysis of the institutional and internal structure aims to offer an insight into the power dynamics and the reproduction of colonial systems of oppression by asking questions like "How is your museum structured in terms of decision-making?" and "What efforts are being made to organise the institution in a more inclusive way on a structural level?"

Secondly, coloniality of knowledge was made observable in the interview guide under the name “research and exhibition concepts”. This part examines the curation process, the representation of (hi)stories and addressing colonial legacies in exhibitions. In the process of conducting the interviews, this section has been expanded to include the topic of research, as the conversation oftentimes directly led from exhibition practices to it, since the two are closely connected. Because of the colonial hierarchisation of knowledge that prioritised Western knowledge as illustrated by Quijano and Ennis (2000, p. 540), and because of the establishment of the museum as a space that categorises and presents these types of knowledges through a colonial lens, this dimension must be covered when analysing decolonial museum practices (Bennett, 1995, pp. 77–79; Procter, 2021, p. 75). Exemplary questions include “How does your museum decide which (historical) perspectives to present to visitors?”, “Are there conscious efforts to include non-Eurocentric narratives, and if so, how?” and “Has your museum undertaken any initiatives to critically reassess how colonial histories are presented?”

Finally, the concept of coloniality of being was operationalised in the section on exhibition practices. This last part covers representation, participation and – what I called – practical steps to decolonise. Here the aim is to examine to what extent the museum considers or directly involves visitors – especially those who are members of marginalised communities, as the space has traditionally not been accessible and welcoming for them (Procter, 2021, p. 207). Although exhibition concepts often blend with representational and participatory elements, I differentiated between the area that focuses on curatorial decision-making (section 2) and audience involvement (section 3) in my interview guide to distinguish whether the actions are led internally or externally. By including or even centring the lived realities of people who are not part of the museum staff in that way, the fact that coloniality also still shapes everyone’s being is acknowledged (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 242). Common strategies for this democratisation and pluralisation of the museum are, for example, participatory practices and co-creation projects (Amsterdam Museum, 2023a). These are covered by questions like “To what extent does your museum involve historically marginalised or formerly colonised communities in exhibition storytelling?”, “How do you try to reach people from minority groups?” and “Beyond content, what other steps does your institution take to make exhibitions more inclusive?”

By asking questions in the interviews that cover those three concepts, a deeper understanding of different spheres in which decolonial approaches might be implemented can

be gained. Even though the three sections are clearly separated in the interview guide, each conversation moved back and forth between the topics due to the nature of the semi-structured interview format and because they intersect. This approach ensured that all three dimensions are covered while acknowledging that they are related. It shines light on the multifaceted challenges that people in the field are facing and how they are negotiating the internal and external pressures to decolonise.

3.4 Analysis

The data collected in the interviews was analysed according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for using thematic analysis. The rationale for this choice of analytical method is the flexibility, which characterises the approach (p. 78). It allowed me to derive the codes from the data in a primarily inductive way, like in grounded theory, while still being able to employ some aspects of a more theoretical approach (pp. 83–84). The latter informed my research insofar as the three theoretical concepts of coloniality of power, of knowledge and of being – operationalised as discussed in the previous sub-chapter – were used as a guideline in the later stages of the coding process when I collated similar codes. Furthermore, unlike critical discourse analysis, which focuses more on how things are said, thematic analysis allowed me to research what is being said (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2018, tbl. 2.1). Since my research question investigates strategies to decolonise, this method was more in line with my objective. Following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 87–92), I coded the interview transcripts using atlas.ti to keep all the data in one place and to be able to structure it well. This was especially helpful in the later phases when I reviewed the nearly 280 codes and merged or clustered them. In my initial round of coding, I used what Braun and Clarke (2013, pp. 206–207) call "complete coding" as opposed to "selective coding", because I aimed to identify any information that might potentially be relevant for the answer to my research question. In this stage I did not explicitly go beyond the content of the data but used semantic codes, which reflect the language used by the interviewees (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 207).

Once I had finished the first round of coding, I had gained a better understanding of the data, which is why I went over the entire set to review and refine the codes (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 211). Based on the gained insight, I merged all codes that were similar but focused on details that were not necessary for the answer to my research question into less nuanced categories. I, for example, combined all codes that specified visitors' feedback or comparable

exchanges between the visitors and the museum into “visitor dialogue and engagement”, as this category was sufficient to describe that aspect of the museums’ strategy. By the end of this stage, I had just over 100 codes, which I gathered into nine groups: conceptual framing and discourses, DEI strategies, funding and resources, institutional structure, museum position, collection and research, curatorial practice and exhibitions, community engagement and co-creation and finally visitor experience and accessibility (Appendix D). I also colour-coded them to facilitate the process of charting the results as atlas.ti automatically labelled each quote in the respective colour. I then combined the groups into themes, which I reviewed in relation to the coded extracts and the data set, before I finalised them (Braun & Clarke, 2006, tbl. 1). The themes, which will be explained in the next chapter, are latent ones, as I connected them to the theoretical discourse on decolonisation and identified the underlying ideas and concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Finally, the thematic analysis was conducted within a constructionist paradigm, as it aims to “theorize the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts that are provided” by using the decolonial concepts of the coloniality of power, of knowledge and being as a foundation for the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85).

3.5 Ethics

All interviewees were sent the informed consent form (Appendix B), which they either signed in person before the interview started or sent via email. In addition to that, they were orally briefed before the interview that their participation is voluntary, and they are free to discontinue their participation at any time. To protect my interviewees’ privacy and identity, the descriptions of the positions are purposefully vague, except for one person who explicitly consented via email to be identifiable. This allowed me to include more critical commentary as well, while still ensuring that the museum employee will not face any consequences in their professional life (Bogner et al., 2018, pp. 663–664; Kvale, 2007a). In addition to that, three interviewees asked me to double-check with them before I quote them directly, which is why I sent them the respective statements via email before submitting the thesis so that they can confirm that I did not use their words out of context and that they still stand with what they have said in the interview. This method allowed for a natural and conversational interview atmosphere in which the museum employees could feel comfortable to speak freely.

4 Results

The themes that I identified through the thematic analysis mirror the three dimensions of museum work that also informed the interview guide. All code groups thematically belonged to one of the following aspects of museum practice: institutional structure, research and exhibition concepts or exhibition practices (Appendix C, D). I titled the themes with gerunds to highlight that decolonisation means implementing active and ongoing measures. The first two themes *reimagining and restructuring* and *researching and recontextualising* are "re-words" in order to show how decolonisation efforts require fundamentally reassessing traditional dimensions of museum work like the institutional structure, collection management, research and curatorial practices. This process means critically examining the origin of structures and processes to create new ones for the future. The final theme *democratising and opening up* is focused on new approaches that need no re-evaluation and covers community engagement and co-creation as well as accessibility.

4.1 Reimagining and restructuring

The first theme focuses on the museums' identities, as this is the basis for how internal decisions are made and how museums try to reimagine their position in a broader societal context. It also includes the organisational foundations and illustrates how institutions are trying to restructure as a way to make them more diverse and welcoming for people of different backgrounds.

4.1.1 Museum identity

In line with the new museum definition, a shift in museum practice can be observed in the way that Dutch museums are operating, exhibiting and engaging with their audiences, as they are no longer merely a place of conservation, research and education but also institutions that should be accessible, inclusive and work together with communities to exchange knowledge (ICOM; Lehmannová, 2020). This is also reflected in the criteria for subsidies from the Dutch government or, for example, the municipality of Rotterdam (Bruins, 2024, p. 3; Gemeente Rotterdam, 2024, art. 8.2.g). As already touched upon, this discourse also coincides with the BLM movement (BLM, 2024; Silverstein, 2021). The many exhibitions on the Dutch colonial past in a number of museums in the Netherlands that have been mentioned in the introduction illustrate the shift of content in museums and they suggest that the movement has played a role in this. Furthermore, the discussion around the new ICOM

museum definition and the Decolonial Working Group illustrate that professionals are willing to rethink the role of the museum and want to include more diverse perspectives (Etges & Dean, 2022; ICOM, n.d., 2023; Lehmannová, 2020, p. 3). This shows how both external and internal pressures to decolonise characterise museum work today and how they demand a revision of the role of the institutions. One interviewee especially mentioned the commission's acknowledgement "that museums are not neutral, that we have an obligation, that we need to have a role in society" as a key aspect of modern museum work and central to their institution's objective. Depending on the type of museum and its history, this mission and the feeling of responsibility are more or less explicit, but especially the case of the Wereldmuseum illustrates this new self-image, as in the past decade a lot of effort has been put into undoing the different levels of coloniality in the museum:

> We are one museum with three locations and an experimental lab. We operate as one; all our activities are based on one vision, one mission, one strategy, one goal; contributing to a more just and equitable world. As a former colonial institute, decolonisation has become much more an important element for us. We see decolonisation as a complex, ongoing, and integrated process, that requires continuous reflection and action throughout the entire museum, not just in specific projects or departments. A central learning involves identifying and actively working to *unlearn* [emphasis added by the interviewee] structural colonial ideologies and practices embedded within the museum's systems, from staffing and internal culture to collections management, documentation, and public programming. Ultimately, our plan reflects the understanding that this work is an ethical project aimed at rebalancing power, challenging Eurocentric norms, centring marginalized perspectives, to contribute to a more equitable world.

However, not only the role of the museum has shifted, as this quote illustrates. The Wereldmuseum is actively using the word "decolonisation" and operationalising it by writing a "Decolonisation Action Plan" that aims to map a concrete decolonisation strategy for the entire institution. This shows that the museum is committed to doing the internal decolonisation work and that they are actively engaging with the theoretical discourse around this topic as well. However, also the understanding of what doing decolonial work means for museums in general has developed over the years. Decolonial projects had been realised even before the rise of the BLM movement in several institutions, but they were not explicitly named like that. Whereas now – as the quote illustrates – decolonisation is understood to not only be about one project or exhibition but about the whole organisation. It connects back to the history of the museum as a national institution and how it still reproduces colonial structures in its hierarchy and staff (Bennett, 1995, p. 187). The interviewee's emphasis on unlearning structural colonial ideologies in the context of the museum reflects Quijano and

Ennis' (2000, pp. 534, 547–548) concept of coloniality of power that emphasises how the Eurocentric concept of modernity is linked to racism and colonial exploitation. The structural organisation and hierarchy in museums still reflect the global system in which whiteness is associated with high-order positions (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 537; ter Borg, 2020, pt. 2).

These recent developments in which museums are questioning their legacy and their history are also reflected in several institutions that have changed their name: the Amsterdam Historic Museum became the Amsterdam Museum to highlight that it is an institution that reacts to what is happening now and to centre a more accurate reflection of the city in general. The former Tropenmuseum, Museum voor Volkenkunde and Afrika Museum became one institution under the name Wereldmuseum. And the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art is now called Kunstinstituut Melly. This topic of name changes is especially relevant for institutions because "words matter" – as the book by the Wereldmuseum highlights (Modest & Lelijveld, 2018). The publication only talks about more inclusive object descriptions, but I argue that this also applies to the names of the institutions themselves: It communicates the museum's self-perception to the visitors, and by changing it, the power of the name and the institution's social and political responsibility are acknowledged and adapted to the respective identity. The interviewee working at Melly pointed out, "it was not just about changing the name as a symbolic gesture, but more about changing the institution." This quote shows that the name change is important and a message to the public, but it must be accompanied by structural change that extends the mission to internal matters as well. Then the symbolic gesture can be part of the process of reimagining the organisation's identity.

4.1.2 Institutional structure

Before examining restructuring efforts, however, the factors that complicate them need to be addressed, as all interviewees that I have talked to mentioned a variety of challenges when it comes to decolonising the structure and the decision-making of the respective institution. Every museum professional who I interviewed explained the hierarchies of the museum they work at, and it became evident that they are always primarily top-down, with either a single person or a board of directors making the final decision. Some interviewees named this structure as a problem, as the power only lies with a few people and individual and oftentimes innovative ideas get dismissed easily. Nonetheless, depending on the mission of the leading person, the trajectory of a museum can be changed significantly:

The interviewees from the Amsterdam Museum, Wereldmuseum, Maritiem Museum and Kunstinstituut Melly all explicitly named the director or former director as crucial in the process of breaking cycles of exclusionary museum practices. This shows that even though the hierarchies – a colonial legacy of the origin of the museum – are still very present in most institutions, change is possible. It also demonstrates that efforts are being made to dismantle them within the limits of what is feasible. A policy employee at the Rijksmuseum explained how this can look like:

> And it takes time also to change the culture or to change the way of working. That's not something you do overnight … . I mean, that requires a lot of stakeholder management, a lot of diplomacy, a lot of conversations you have your whole week with other departments also. But I think the best way to get it changed is, like I said, you need a good governance structure. So, for us, that's the steering group with head of departments, because that's really important, because then they can formulate goals, but they can also include them in their yearly plans. They are responsible for their departments and they make yearly planning and what you want, that I [do not] have to say you need to take these goals in your yearly plan, but they are aware that these goals are important for their own departments and they formulate it by themselves in their plans.

The slow pace that characterises museum work and the fixed hierarchies were named as a challenge in many of the interviews, as everyone I talked to is really motivated to make a difference in their area of expertise and their department, but they are all restricted by institutional boundaries like schedules that are imposed from stakeholders or the directors and the long and fixed operating processes. One interviewee admitted that they may be a little too "impatient" and another one expressed their frustrations more directly: "But it's the *same* people in the *same* positions, it's the *same* system, it's the *same* structure [emphasis by interviewee]." These are the concrete implications of the ICOM debate around the role of the museum: many people in the museum sector are really motivated to transform and rethink the museum but the institution "museum" itself is so rooted in colonial top-down hierarchies that it takes long to change that. This inevitably triggers tensions as there is very little room for more activist museum work (Bennett, 1995, p. 127). The research has shown that museum professionals are actively working on reimagining what the museum as an organisation can be in their respective departments, but the structure is so rigid that restructuring efforts are only slow and still on a small scale. Museums, therefore, need to intentionally and actively confront their own history in order to come up with creative solutions for alternative governing structures that are not based on hierarchical colonial systems since imagination is the only way to facilitate meaningful change and take decolonial action, which has been emphasised by Fanon (2001, pp. 252–253) and Ticktin (2023, p. 27).

But even when an institution tries to adapt the structure and implements changes that dismantle hierarchies, this can only be successful if the person at the top is open to the proposed changes and agrees to give away some of their powers. At the Kunstinstituut Melly, for example, as part of the restructuring process of the entire institution in 2018, the educational programme *Collective Learning in Practice* (CLIP) was established. It is for young people between the ages of 17 and 24 who are paid team members for six months to work together on specific institutional decision-making issues. Even though it still exists as a recurring programme and it was very successful at the beginning, the institutional changes were not implemented all the way to the top, which had an impact on the programme itself:

> And then it backfired also, because in the end, the director makes the decisions. And when you give a group of people the expectation that they can decide stuff, and then they present what they want to decide, and then… this is what actually happened. And then the director said, well, no, I have other plans. So, after *that* [emphasis added by interviewee], it went, I mean, news travels fast, no? If that happens to 20 people, they go to their friends, communities, like, this institution, blah, blah, blah. So that happened.

This example illustrates that some museums are negotiating the calls to decolonise by introducing new experimental programmes for which no framework exists at the beginning. This has a direct impact on the success of said programmes, as the structures in museums are very rigid and the Eurocentric ideas about how these institutions should operate still very much persist (Bennett, 1995, pp. 126–127). The constraints explained in the quote prove that it is not enough to introduce a new programme that wants to be decolonial and hope that this will eventually lead to change – museums have to either actively imagine new structures in general (Fanon, 2001; Ticktin, 2023) or at the very least create a clear framework for new initiatives that clearly integrates them into the overall institution. Therefore, it can be ensured that the new project can keep its experimental character by not immediately being assimilated into the existing organisational structure. This also means, however, that people in high positions need to be open to giveing away some decision-making powers, which also means risking that their authority might be questioned (Procter, 2021, p. 212). Especially that last consequence could become an example for what Walsh (2007, p. 232) calls “collective praxis”: people who have been systemically excluded from museum spaces collectively introduce new ideas and make decisions themselves, which can ultimately challenge the institutional framework itself.

4.1.3 DEI strategies

One method to change the institutional structure is the implementation of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) strategies in their policies, which aim to dismantle hierarchies and to not reproduce harmful stereotypes while at the same time giving work opportunities to members of marginalised groups who have traditionally been excluded from museums. This means that multiperspectivity can be created that breaks the binary of "us" versus "them", which is a part of decolonial practices even though diversity cannot be used synonymously with decoloniality. In the Netherlands all cultural institutions have to follow the "Diversity and Inclusion Code" in order to receive funding, and subsidy applications are centring it, but there are no sanctions for not following it (ter Borg, 2020, pt. 4; van Haeren & van Andel, 2024, sec. 3.7). This might change in 2029 in either direction, as a new culture system is currently being developed, but no final decisions have yet been made (van Haeren & van Andel, 2024, sec. 3.7). Since every institution can more or less write their own DEI policies – because they are not facing drastic consequences based on them – their dedication to working towards a more inclusive and diverse institution, both in the way they are hiring new staff and in the plan of action for an internal change of culture, is a good indicator of a broader willingness to change. DEI strategies are also an index for decolonial policies in museums, as they aim to restructure the institution in terms of gender equality and different educational backgrounds but also to make it more accessible for people of colour. Especially the latter was discussed in depth in an article titled "Dutch art museums: diversity is policy, but the director is always white (Nederlandse kunstmusea: diversiteit is beleid, maar de directeur is altijd wit)", which disclosed that in 2020 only 2.6 percent of the employed in "responsible art positions" in the 21 most famous art museums have a non-Western migration background (ter Borg, 2020, pt. 2). This directly relates to the coloniality of power, as white Europeans are the overwhelming majority of people who hold important positions in Dutch museums (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 537; ter Borg, 2020, pt. 2). Given the slow pace in museum work and the general trend to cut DEI policies and funding – which is currently especially drastic in the United States – it seems likely that this has not changed substantially in the last five years (INCMAT, 2025).

At the forefront of transforming hiring strategies is the Amsterdam Museum, which opened up the application process and actively works on diversifying the team since applicants are no longer evaluated based on a CV and cover letter. Instead, they have to answer specific questions:

> If you want change, you also need to change your methods. You cannot keep repeating doing the same thing and expecting a different outcome. Amsterdam is a very diverse city. Universities have become places with students from very diverse backgrounds. If you remain a very white institute, you need to reconsider why is that the case? What can we change, I mean, I'm not saying we're not a white institution. We still are, predominantly. But we have had good feedback from applicants who enjoyed this new way of [applying]. The thing is [diversity] is not only about ethnic background. It's also gender, or other markers of identity. (interviewee 2)

This method aims to eliminate biases based on gender, race and ethnic background but also on academic qualifications and led, for example, to the recruitment of a person who does not have a university degree but who can now help reach a new non-academic audience by drawing on their own background. As part of the major reorganisation of Kunstinstituut Melly in 2018, new positions were created, and a focus was placed on hiring more diverse staff members. This, too, aimed to break cycles of institutional elitism and to decolonise the museum by giving more opportunities to Black applicants. Again, however, this was a top-down decision that was made by the director Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, who was very passionate about making change happen. This massive restructuring process would have likely not happened at the hands of a traditional white director (ter Borg, 2020). At the Wereldmuseum and the Rijksmuseum, new policies are also being implemented to give a framework to human resources but also department managers in order to promote change. Once more, however, it is not enough to just create a new DEI plan, as it takes time for new routines to establish and for the people already working at the museum to adapt to the changes. This was especially felt by one interviewee who was hired because of these restructuring efforts at one museum:

> Of course, there was support, but at the same time, it's very hard to adapt because there were a lot of people in the institution that were intellectual, academic, you know, I was also academic, but in a different way. They were more … traditional. So for me, the first one and a half years, I did not speak the same language. … I felt very stupid because I did not write that same way. I did not speak that same way. Most of the time, I didn't even know what people were talking about. At the same time, I felt the need to become the same as everybody else instead of myself being different and bringing different things. So there's this automatic feeling of you have to be part of something.

This shows that DEI strategies need to cover the whole institution and not only the human resources department to make sure that the internal culture is also supportive of more diverse staff members and new ideas. As the policy employee at the Rijksmuseum highlighted, promoting a more diverse and inclusive culture within the institution is not something that can happen "overnight". This, however, makes it seem as if calls for diversity

and inclusion were only raised "yesterday"[11] but external pressure on institutions has existed for years already – the article on non-Western employees is just one of many covering that topic (ter Borg, 2020). One can therefore infer that in the past most museums have ignored internal DEI policies in their institutional structure and focused instead on other things. They, for example, implemented new programming and audience recruitment frameworks but did not look inwards (ter Borg, 2020, pt. 3). This also becomes evident in the statements regarding the reason for the whiteness of museums, which most often are that there are no applicants of colour and if there are, they are not trained properly (ter Borg, 2020, pt. 4). However, what determines "proper training" is defined by Eurocentric ideas about knowledge that prioritise traditional Western knowledge over other forms – the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2007, p. 451; Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 540; van Haeren & van Andel, 2024, sec. 2). This shows that different aspects of coloniality are intersecting and proves that decolonial strategies in museums must be approached from a holistic perspective that transcends the institutional boundaries of each department. It proves that even in more inclusive hiring strategies, different forms of coloniality can be reproduced, which in turn impacts the staff and therefore education, programming and curation. Currently, the final reason for not hiring more people from different backgrounds is that they must be trained "properly" in order to be valuable for the institution, but this is not possible because there is also no money to train them (ter Borg, 2020, pt. 4).

4.1.4 Resources and funding

This last reason for a lack of representation of marginalised communities in cultural institutions touches upon another major aspect of museum work: resources and funding. Since the Netherlands are part of the global capitalist system, which directly relates to the coloniality of power (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, pp. 536–540), Dutch museums also operate within this system. This means that they are dependent on external financial support, as they do not earn enough money to sustain themselves otherwise (IRAPFM, 2025). A culture change and new trajectory of museums are therefore deeply influenced by funders. This includes the hiring strategy and institutional structure in general but also the collection and research practices as well as their community engagement – which will be discussed in the

[11] I want to make very clear that this is not the fault of the policy employee; it is a structural problem because it took a long time for institutions to create dedicated positions for these issues, and it will take even longer for the new staff members to make lasting changes to the structures.

other sections of the results. Since making new exhibitions, doing research and creating programmes, as well as working on the marketing, is very expensive, museums rely on external funding by private donors and cooperations but in the Netherlands and other Western European countries they also rely on substantial government and municipal subsidies (IRAPFM, 2025). Many of the people I talked to mentioned that they have a "tight budget" because the funding has not been raised in the last decades, but the prices have increased. In addition to that, a museum professional working in Rotterdam shared: "The government we have now, the national government, is not really interested in research and in culture. Luckily, the city government here is really concerned about collections and presentations. So, we don't complain, but it's difficult." This anxiety regarding the influence of political agendas on the work that museums can or cannot do was also expressed more explicitly in another interview with a programmer:

> You know, again, we can do here all sorts of things. But if then this funding person says, who is a white man, but this is too much focused on black women. Where is the representation of us white men? For example, because this is what happens, you don't get the money because it's too exclusive. … Why do I get up out of bed and do all these things for some person to tell us: I don't feel represented? … I got a bit hope, I don't want to say hopeless or bitter. Well, bitter I am, I have become, but it's a bit, again, the same, you do the same riddles again and again and again.

The immense negative impact that governments can have on the arts and culture sector became already obvious in 2010 when historical budget cuts in the Netherlands had drastic consequences on the whole cultural sector (DutchCulture, 2010). But currently this can also be seen in the United States, where the Trump administration continues to cut funding for cultural institutions, which indirectly can even be felt in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, as it is working together with the Smithsonian Institution, amongst other museums, research centres and cooperations (Stoilas, 2025). The interviewee working at the Rijksmuseum also mentioned that especially the change in DEI policies of big corporations could also have an impact on the museum's funding, but this event is still too recent to predict the effects. He, however, explained that in the Netherlands the national institutions are protected by law, which ensures that the Dutch government cannot be as radical in the cutting as the one in the US and that the DEI policies will not be scaled back in the coming years. Currently, however, the Dutch government is implementing budget cuts in higher education as well as in civil society organisations, which are dedicated to fighting for women's rights

and equality, amongst other things[12] (Executive board Leiden University, 2025; Rutgers International, 2025). This raises the question of whether DEI policies are safe from the influence of conservative and far-right governments in the future. Furthermore, an interviewee working at the Amsterdam Museum shared that the museum is not fully subsidised and is expected to earn part of its budget, for instance through ticket sales. This in turn means that the admission prices are quite high at 20 euros for a regular ticket, which has a direct impact on the accessibility of the museum for visitors. This illustrates how one issue (like the conditions for subsidies) has negative impacts on other aspects of museum work – in this case accessibility – which again highlights the intersection of the elements that constitute (decolonial) museum practice.

Nonetheless, funders can have a positive impact on the policies, research and programming of museums as well since they determine the criteria according to which they allocate the funds at their disposal (ter Borg, 2020, pt. 3). In Rotterdam, for example, this means that when applying for subsidies from the municipality, the museums must cover the three I's: inclusion, interconnectivity and innovation (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2024, art. 8.2.g). For museums that are funded by the municipality of Amsterdam, like the Amsterdam Museum, this is similar:

> The Alderperson of Arts and Culture, Touria Meliani, considers this a very, very important topic. Between 2020 and 2024, it was mandatory, for municipal subsidised cultural organizations to have a detailed plan, how we would become more diverse and more inclusive and more accessible and more equitable. (interviewee 2)

Apart from financial limitations, museums are also facing challenges regarding a general lack of resources. This mainly means that they do not have enough time as well as enough staff members to execute all the projects they want to. A review of the permanent exhibitions but also public programmes and research projects are impacted by this. Moreover, a policy employee said that it is hard to implement mandatory internal DEI trainings, especially for the heads of departments, since they have full schedules that do not allow for extra obligations. It is not possible to expand time, but museums have to start admitting that their work has always been about prioritisation: in the 19th century the main objective for museums was to spread the imperialist ideology and justify colonialism (Bennett, 1995, p. 77; Yusoff, 2023, p. 79). Over the centuries the role of the museum has become more open and broader, which leaves a lot of room for interpretation and focus points (ICOM, n.d.;

[12] This was written before the Dutch government fell on the 3rd of June and since the development is so recent, it is not clear yet what consequences it will have on the budget cuts (Henley, 2025).

Lehmannová, 2020). Therefore, institutions must reimagine what they want to give priority to and work on restructuring their internal organisation if they want to challenge the persisting forms of coloniality and make change happen regardless of limited resources.

4.2 Researching and recontextualising

This second theme covers everything that relates to researching and recontextualising the collections, which is also directly connected to the curatorial practices. These are usually the first areas in which changes are being implemented when museums are starting to decolonise (ter Borg, 2020, pts. 4–5; van Haeren & van Andel, 2024, sec. 3.5). The reason for that is the tangible coloniality in a lot of collections – which oftentimes include colonial objects – and the public and internal pressure to retell history in a polyphonic way (van Haeren & van Andel, 2024, sec. 3.5). It directly relates to the first theme, as it follows the same objective – to face practices that are rooted in the colonial history of the museum. However, the tools to achieve that goal are related to the objects in the collection and the content of exhibitions, rather than the organisation itself. As already touched upon, the hierarchies and the general institutional structure have an impact on every other department and project, which is why the previous findings – mainly the tension between facilitating change and rigid structures – inform the topics of researching and recontextualising as well.

4.2.1 Collection and research

When it comes to decolonising the collection, a central topic that needs to be addressed is restitution, as museums often focus on redistribution – which includes restitution – as a decolonial strategy, according to Soares (2021, pp. 243–244). As the interviewees working at Museum Bronbeek and at the Wereldmuseum explained, there are national policies that provide guidelines for dealing with restitution claims. Usually, the process is that the objects are all online in the museum database, and everyone can search through it by using different filters. If one finds something, they can make a request to ask the museum staff to investigate further and find out as much as possible about said object. In the end, however, the country of origin has to approach the Netherlands if they believe that an artwork belongs to them, and only then will the official restitution claim be inspected. Seeing how this process works, it becomes evident that the system makes it hard for small communities to claim objects since they, first of all, must prove that the specific artefact really belongs to them and secondly, they as a community cannot make the claim, but the government of the

country in which they live has to officially initiate contact. This example reveals how the framework is supposed to bring justice for communities and amend past wrongs, but instead it is still centring Europe as the hegemonic power by defining the direction of restitution claims from the non-Western country to the former colonial power (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 547). This is a direct exercise of the coloniality of power because all objects belong to the colonising nation until undoubtedly proven otherwise. Since restitution claims follow national policies, museums do not have a direct influence on the processes, but this illustrates how interconnected different aspects of decolonial work are – not just between the museum departments but also between the organisations and nation-states.

This dilemma becomes especially clear in the difficult and complex case of human remains, which the interviewee who works at the Wereldmuseum elaborated more on. According to her, activists and members of the diverse communities have played a central role in placing these debates on the agenda. Now the museum is putting a lot of effort into researching the history of their collections, but also how these debates about their colonial origin can be had and what their future can be. A lot of this research is done in collaboration with artists, communities of origin as well as scholarly research. The interviewee highlighted that the museum is very open about its responsibility and centres the urgency in its work. She explained that they have a baby in their collection, that was the centre of a performance by an indigenous artist from the Surinamese Kalina Terewuyu community who called for the baby's return.[13] There are multiple layers which make it difficult to approach this complex topic: First and foremost, because of the emotional component and respect for the human, it is morally impossible to exhibit the baby, so it is currently in the museum's depot. Secondly, the museum invited village leaders from Suriname to view the baby and say if it belongs to their community. In this specific instance, however, they did not recognise all elements of the clothes the baby is dressed in and concluded that it is not certain if it is from their community. This puts the museum in a difficult position, as they cannot give the ancestor back since they do not know the community of origin. Nonetheless, everyone agrees that the museum depot is not where the baby belongs.

This example also shows that the ongoing coloniality of the collection is very complex. This applies to human or ancestral remains but also to material objects: it is more than giving back a highly sensitive artefact or human being, as they embody a lot of colonial

[13] On the website of the Wereldmuseum more information and a video about the performance by Manuwi C. Tokai can be found (Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, n.d.; Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, 2022).

violence and trauma, which must be respected – especially by Western museum professionals. In addition, the colonial expansion was so "successful" in stripping indigenous communities of their individual histories, cultures and knowledge and in trying to combine them into one homogenous population that, at least in this case, it is no longer possible to identify the specific group to which the baby belongs (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 540, 569). Furthermore, this illustrates that decolonising museums also means adapting national policies and the global legal frameworks to make restitution claims more accessible and redistribute power from the national level to communities. In the academic discussion of decolonising museums, repatriation and rematriation are intensively discussed (e.g., Danaparamita (2020), Hubert and Fforde (2005) and van Bijnen et al. (2024)), but these are not the focus of this thesis, as it aims to offer a holistic analysis of the interplay of a number of different strategies. However, the reorganisation of power structures in a state – which would be needed for a more equitable access to restitution and repatriation – is also a form of decolonisation, as the idea of the nation-state, which is rooted in colonial power relations, was imposed on, for example, Latin America (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, pp. 569–570). The final concern, which also complicates restitution, is the idea that the object can only be properly cared for in terms of climate regulation and security standards in a big Western museum. This mirrors the discussion regarding the "proper" education of museum staff covered in the previous chapter, as it hierarchises the "proper" way to take care of objects. This, too, can be connected to the coloniality of knowledge – the devaluation of indigenous knowledge and practices (Quijano, 2007, p. 169). According to the interviewee working at the Wereldmuseum, this argument is sometimes brought forth by the public, but she explains that the museum has a clear position on this topic, emphasising that objects must be given back as a form of respect.

Another big undertaking to decolonise the collection that is invisible to the visitors (for the most part) is the database, which was named by several interviewees as one of the most important current projects. They explained how the keywords that relate to the objects were mostly assigned in the 19th century, which was when a colonial, imperial and racist narrative – that was presented as "scientific" and therefore true – was particularly dominant (Procter, 2021, p. 75; Said, 2003, p. 32, 40). In the Wereldmuseum for example they had to go through the entire database and remove the N-word and instead come up with a new system of description that does not reproduce colonial oppression. They also now acknowledge that the former labels like "'curiosity', 'traditional' or 'primitive' art, described as 'magical' or a 'fetish' is not without ideological assumptions". This illustrates how powerful language is and

that the use of specific words can reproduce colonial oppression, which is the intersection of the coloniality of power, of knowledge and of being, as language manifests in all three of them (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 242; Modest & Lelijveld, 2018). But also in less obvious cases where the objects were not labelled with racist terms, the information for each piece is still extremely limited and mainly centres on white men, which makes it hard to research more diverse stories that highlight women or people of colour. The Maritiem museum, for example, started a research project to find out more about maritime women, but the interviewee explained that they do not have the capacities to conduct research on such a grand scale for every new topic, which is also the reason why they have not further investigated the colonial connections of their collection:

> We thought about decolonising our collection and I think what's important to know is that it's a really, *really* [emphasis added by interviewee] big job when you have a million objects and you want to check what collection do you have on former colonies. It's not in the descriptions. … I think in the future we will need AI to really address this job for decolonisation, because we don't have the funding and the capacity and the staff to do it right now. … there's also a language problem, because all our data is in Dutch. When we want to ask the assistance of foreign researchers, there has to be a translation and that's also challenging, but also new techniques like AI, like translation software could help us out. So, I think maybe in the future decolonising collection will be more easy. But now it's really, well, when we looked into our collection just for making clear what collection we have about women in maritime industry, that took us a year.

This quote shows multiple dimensions of researching and recontextualising the database, as the interviewee explained the traditional museum practice for conducting research: a curator from the respective museum institution dedicates a set amount of time to a specific topic and usually makes an exhibition and a publication at the end to present the results. When it comes to decolonisation, especially the second – and slightly newer – way, which is working together with external partners, it becomes relevant. These could be other museums, either in the same country or global ones, as well as researchers from, for example, universities. This kind of cooperation is happening most prominently in the Netherlands at the Colonial Collections Consortium (Colonial Collections Consortium, n.d.), which is a partnership between five Dutch organisations, but the interviewees shared other examples of smaller-scale cooperations as well. However, especially the language barrier that complicates an international exchange is felt by multiple people I talked to, as they want to include the people who are related to the themes of the exhibitions and ask them what they need from the museum. This is where new technologies come into play, as artificial intelligence (AI) can help with translations but can also help relabel the objects in the database, which makes it

easier to search for specific keywords and to reframe artefacts in the collection – the third dimension of research.

In order to continue the "decolonising the collection" project, the final step is making the data accessible so that the public can interact with it and expand their own knowledge. Especially since the latter has likely been conditioned by Eurocentric narratives that have prioritised Western knowledge for centuries (coloniality of knowledge), the process of digitising the collection and making the corresponding research available is crucial for reframing history (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 540). All interviewees who work at one of the institutions that are part of the Colonial Collections Consortium or at the Maritiem Museum – which is collaborating with colleague museums and the National Archive to develop Maritiem Digitaal – mentioned that they are in the process of connecting their individual databases to create a central platform where everything can be found and accessed openly. Particularly, when remembering the exclusionary origin of the museum that was private and only accessible for a white elite, this new development actively changes the idea of who the museum is for (Procter, 2021, p. 21). It is also the attempt of democratising knowledge, because as soon as the whole collection is available online, everyone could potentially start researching. This strategy adds to the restructuring efforts discussed in the previous chapter, as it challenges the strict separation of museum professionals and "outsiders", which also connects to the final chapter that examines further approaches for opening up and democratising the museum. For a dialogue to be meaningful, however, museums must first learn to have respectful conversations with visitors, which can happen, for example, in the exhibition-making.

4.2.2 Curatorial practice

Challenging the coloniality of knowledge can also happen in the content of the exhibitions by the means of recontextualisation. As it has already been established, the museum is not a neutral space (Procter, 2021, pp. 23–26). One person working at the Amsterdam Museum acknowledged that especially clearly:

> I know a lot of museums want to see themselves as a neutral place where we just gather information and people can think about that information however they want. But we are an institution and with the call for decolonisation, I think more and more institutions are seeing that we are in fact not a neutral place. We are very much a place that only has like one viewpoint and we are an institution. So it's hard to fight against that. And I think as a museum we've kind of understood that part and said, okay, we try

> to be as neutral space as possible but we do also want to stand up for things that we believe are important and are less visible in day-to-day life or in politics.

In order to decolonise, museums must become aware of their role and the power they have by telling or withholding certain stories. But as this quote illustrates, the way that institutions are currently operating is still very one-sided, and the centuries of traditional top-down museum work do not just disappear. Therefore, it is crucial for museums to actively position themselves politically, especially since conservative and fascist talking points have become more normal in the past decade in the Netherlands, but also in Europe in general (Barr, 2020; Moses, 2024). As the ICOM proposal of 2019 acknowledged, doing decolonising work is not only about a "critical dialogue about the pasts" but also "futures" (Lehmannová, 2020, p. 3). If museums want to work against the ongoing coloniality in their institutions, they have to continuously stand up for human rights. This identity has led, for example, the Amsterdam Museum to now display a keffiyeh in the main exhibition space. However, if historical museums like Museum Bronbeek want to include more diverse perspectives, there is one big challenge, as the interviewee who works there shared: "it's quite difficult to find a lot of perspectives from, let's say the local Indonesian farmer in the early 19th century dealing with Dutch occupation… . But we try to include these views too, as much as possible. But it's not equal. It's always unequal." A common strategy to achieve a more polyphonic and multidimensional exhibition storytelling and therefore challenge this unequal storytelling – also in the historic expositions – is the introduction of contemporary artworks, which comment on the artefacts that are already exhibited. This makes it possible to diversify the perspectives on history, as traditional collections were mainly conceptualised by rich white men who prioritised objects that showed off their importance and wealth over everyday objects or representations of other classes and racialised groups (Procter, 2021, pp. 23–26). However, in order to truly embrace multiperspectivity, it is important to make space for the voices of people that traditionally have been ignored or only been talked about. Depending on the museum, this includes different groups, but especially the old institutions[14] all have ties to the Dutch colonial past, which makes it necessary to also connect with indigenous and Black communities today to ask for their perspective, which is becoming more common. However, it is important to also develop new frameworks for these

[14] By old institutions, I mean museums that were founded in the 19th century (Rijksmuseum, Museum Bronbeek, Wereldmuseum, Maritiem Museum) and at the beginning of the 20th century (Amsterdam Museum) and that have even older collections.

collaborations. As the person working at the Wereldmuseum pointed out, respect and an acknowledgement of what has been done in the past are key in this process:

> I think that respect is very important issue and a focus on taking care, healing and restore. Because decolonisation is not only about doing justice, and an acknowledgement of what has been done in the past and the influence on today's lives. We have also have to think about how we can build a better future together.

Explicitly creating a plan for a respectful collaboration that does not simply extract knowledge is central when it comes to decolonising these practices. It directly questions the one-sided practice of exploiting colonised nations, which was mainly in the form of unpaid labour when the colonial global capitalist model was established, but it continues today in the form of using indigenous knowledge without giving anything in return (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, pp. 535–540). This is the interplay of the coloniality of power and of knowledge, and it needs to be acknowledged by all museums by putting concrete frameworks for a non-exploitative exchange in place.

Multiple interviewees shared, however, that this process is extremely complicated and takes a lot of time, which is why many museums are still making a lot of their exhibitions with in-house staff. Connecting it to the findings from the previous chapter, it becomes evident that this is another effect of insufficient funding and inadequately established operational processes that still dominate the day-to-day of museum practice (Bennett, 1995, pp. 126–127; IRAPFM, 2025). According to the people I talked to, this usually means that multidisciplinary project teams are formed that consist of a curator, an educator, sometimes an exhibition maker, a project manager and someone from the marketing department. Ideally, a method like this fosters internal exchange and brings together a diverse set of perspectives on the specific topic. However, this can only be accomplished if the in-house staff come from different backgrounds and add diverse ideas and experiences to begin with, which is still far from being achieved in most organisations (ter Borg, 2020, pt. 2). Therefore, DEI policies and especially hiring strategies have a direct impact on the content of the exhibitions. An awareness and prioritisation of restructuring the staff is necessary if the final product is supposed to challenge the status quo of still primarily traditional museum-making. This is not to say that white people cannot do decolonial work – on the contrary, they have to continuously confront their own complicity in the ongoing coloniality of societal structures and become an active part of change – but those who have a lived experience as racialised "Other" need to be the key figures in collectively changing the colonial systems (Walsh, 2007, pp. 231–232). Therefore, marginalised people have to be able to contribute to museum

work as well, which is a slow process, as the previous chapter has shown, but, nonetheless, a strategy to decolonise that is becoming more talked about by museum professionals.

The final sphere of exhibition-making is the topic of emotions and empathy. At first glance this is not directly connected to decolonial work, but when further explored the importance of talking about it becomes evident. In traditional exhibitions emotions did not have a place, as the primary mission was education (Procter, 2021, pp. 73, 77). But today more museums are becoming aware that they need to become a space for commemoration, grief, reflection, empathy and emotions (Procter, 2021, p. 142). It can be connected to the coloniality of being – that is, the lived experience of coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 242). This puts humans in the centre, and instead of rationalising colonial trauma, gives room for an honest exchange of the tangible effects of coloniality. Especially at the Wereldmuseum, which has a vast ethnographic collection, that responsibility is felt, as the interviewee shared:

> So for some people, it's really emotional to be in our museum, because it relates to a painful history, for them it is not a neutral place. We have to acknowledge the different sides and perspectives of this painful history, pay attention to the marginalized voices, the strength and creativity of the enslaved, share knowledge, and through that we will hopefully get some awareness, cultural awareness.

The museum tries to open up the space to foster an exchange also between the visitors by programmes and events that centre on emotions and feelings. In this context people from marginalised communities have space to share their experiences, and white people can reflect on their own position in society by being confronted with the lived realities of many in this country. The basis for this exchange is a dialogue, which is a direct antithesis of the one-dimensional and one-sided Eurocentric and colonial model that actively works against multiperspectivity and critical dialogues (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 261). Therefore, these conversations are another decolonial strategy, as they can foster empathy and awareness about racist and colonial oppression, which then makes it possible "to collaboratively imagine other, better, more caring worlds" (Ticktin, 2023, p. 33). It also shows that museums can be more than a space where objects are exhibited. They can become an arena of dialogues between artworks, artists, people who work at the museum and visitors all at once, which leads to the final theme.

4.3 Democratising and opening up

The final theme centres on visitors who are becoming more than just passive consumers. A lot of the strategies covered in the second theme – like open databases for collaborative research or exhibition-making with external partners – invite the public to participate. Furthermore, democratising and opening up can also be understood as a form of reimagining what the museum can be – not on the level of the self-image, but rather by actively implementing this mission in practice. It covers community engagement and co-creation – a strategy for making traditionally excluded groups part of the exhibition development or the public programming – as well as visitor experience and accessibility. It also analyses new approaches regarding visitor engagement, which ensure that the work that the museum is doing reaches the public, as this is also part of the response to the calls for a more decolonial museum practice.

4.3.1 Community engagement and co-creation

The example from the Wereldmuseum that acknowledged the importance of emotions, which was shared in the previous chapter, is the result of a performance that was made in co-creation. Co-creation, however, can take many different forms, which becomes evident in the different examples that the people who I interviewed shared. All of them mentioned an educational, curatorial or event-based use of co-creation practices that sometimes involve the invitation of guest curators or external tour guides or, in other instances, everyone who wants to can send something in for a specific project that will then be curated by the museum staff. This illustrates how vast the options are, but most institutions are still figuring out how exactly they want to include participatory practices long term. Nonetheless, the Amsterdam Museum published a concrete step-by-step guide for co-creating that the staff use as a framework for their programmes and exhibitions: “Collecting the city: Co-creation: A work in progress”. It includes a toolkit, examples and a conclusion on how the impact can be measured (Amsterdam Museum, 2023a). Because each cooperation is unique and tailored to the respective museum and the topics it wants to cover, the specific co-creation examples that my interviewees named and explained will not be introduced in detail, as it is more relevant to analyse the reasons for introducing them in the first place since they are all linked by a similar mission: to open up and democratise the museum, or in the words of the person working at the Wereldmuseum: “Not about them without them.”

According to one interviewee, this means, amongst other things, that exhibitions are realised that the curators would not have thought of themselves because they deal with a topic to which the museum professionals do not have a direct connection. Another interviewee explained that through inviting people with lived experience that relates to the topic "you're not talking about we and them, we're talking about us." Therefore, the supremacy of "us" over "them" that the West established during colonial times can be questioned and the binary broken (Said, 2003, pp. 32, 40). These examples illustrate that successful co-creation also means that the institution needs to adapt the structures in a way that gives space to those new perspectives and ideas while simultaneously using the existing institutional framework to support the external creators. A constant dialogue between the different parties is necessary to make sure that the final result is what they imagined it to be and that they feel represented by their creation.

> The hope is that people will experience empowerment throughout the process. If they have space and credit and respect for what they bring to the table, the outcome can be enhanced feelings of self-respect, or they perhaps have learned a new skill or something new about themselves, or their stories or work have become more visible, more public. So, empowerment can happen on many levels. And belonging, we hope that they feel a stronger sense of belonging within the Amsterdam Museum after their collaboration. (interviewee 2)

The sense of ownership that the creators feel because of the redistribution of power and the democratisation of museum practice is an essential goal of decolonisation work (Morse, 2020, p. 29). Especially because democratisation should always go hand in hand with decolonising social, political and cultural systems of oppression (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 568). These co-creation strategies aim to dismantle the structures that have established a power imbalance (coloniality of power), as well as the devaluation of non-Western knowledge (coloniality of knowledge) and the systematic oppression of racialised people in every aspect of their life (coloniality of being) (Mignolo, 2007, p. 451; Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 545). The quote also shows how the museum simultaneously wants to establish a connection between the co-creators and the institution, which can only be successful if the external partners feel like they belong. The interviewee working at Melly shared a similar thought, saying that a project is only successful if it becomes a reoccurring one. She also explained, however, that it is difficult to establish this lasting cooperation:

> In most institutions, it's a project and then when it's finished, it's finished. And then you include these young people and then … it's finished. You don't see those young people anymore. So, it was really a challenge to stay connected and to keep them involved. So, we tried to do that, to actually put two of these young people that were in [the] education programme in an advisory board for the name change.

> You know, things like that, that put them in positions where they normally should, where they're not invited.

Here the interviewee describes one possible strategy to keep the external collaborators engaged and connected to the museum by adapting the institutional structure in a way that gives them more agency and power. Only a restructuring process like this – if it is permanent – is really decolonial action because it questions the unequal power distribution and aims to change it to make it a little more equal. Besides the fact that it takes a very long time to reorganise the fixed structures, as already explained, one interviewee also pointed out that many of her colleagues insisted that it is "*their* programme and *their* space [emphasis by interviewee]", which shows how it is not enough to alter the power structures. The idea that only museum people should create in the space and that it belongs to them reflects the century-old understanding of the role of the museum and this is only changing slowly (ICOM, n.d.; Lehmannová, 2020). This, however, also means that not only the institutions but also the people working there must reevaluate their own position in the system and become a part of imagining a new museum. According to one programmer, the key is "about speaking a certain language that is recurring … that you repeat, that you show, okay, we have space, we make space, please come in our space, fill the space". This openness also means that museums have to accept criticism from creators if they wish to voice it, which happened, for example, in one "Queer Gaze Tour" that was made in co-creation at the Amsterdam Museum (Amsterdam Museum, 2023b, 10:59). If institutions want to decolonise by introducing participatory practices, they must give their partners enough room to tell their story (in their own words) without being silenced, even if that means that they are critiquing the very museum that they are collaborating with. This can be understood as a form of what Walter Mignolo (2011, p. 45) calls "delinking", by which he means a strategy to demolish the coloniality of power through breaking free from Western categories of thought.

Before establishing a successful partnership, however, museums need to reach out to communities, artists, activists and groups to let them know that they are open for collaborating. This always starts with questions like, "Do you need anything, or you want anything? Can we help?" (interviewee 3) or "What do you need from us?" (interviewee 2). Nonetheless, it comes with several challenges, like geographical ones that slow down exchanges between Dutch museums and, for example, Indonesian communities. It also takes time to build trust with local groups and prove that this collaboration is not a one-sided extraction of community resources in order to improve the institution (Morse, 2020, p. 31).

Since traditionally museums have not been very open to non-white, non-academic visitors – let alone contributors – it is crucial for a lasting cooperation to prove that the institution wants to change its inner workings and that the team is willing to put in the work that is needed for a more inclusive and decolonial praxis (Procter, 2021, p. 21, 75). That museums first need to earn the trust of their collaborators becomes especially evident in an example that the person working at Museum Bronbeek shared:

> We wanted to include material from Indonesia. So we contacted some of the institutions there or tried to work together with specialists. … And we ended up with the Antara photo. … And we got into contact with them. And it took about 5 or 6 years before they trusted us maybe in some case. So in the end we worked quite a lot with them. They used our material. They had free access to our storages. … And we invited them, okay, let's do an exhibition. You are curator now. You can do an exhibition here. … And they had full freedom to do so, we did not interfere with their narrative, nor choice of material.

This example shows how long it can take to establish this mutual exchange and that it is important for the collaborator to profit from it as well for it to not reproduce oppressive dynamics. To also structurally manifest a commitment to more decolonial collaborations, the museums must operationalise their approach to co-creation to ensure institutional support of, as well as respect and equal pay for their partners.

4.3.2 Visitor experience and accessibility

For all of the above-discussed strategies to work, the museum must be not only open but also accessible. This is also reflected in the official ICOM definition, which states that museums are "open to the public, accessible and inclusive" (ICOM, n.d.). Visitors, therefore, play a key role in the ongoing changes that are redefining how museums can stay relevant in the future (Ariese & Wróblewska, 2022, p. 98). When talking about accessibility, oftentimes the first thought is about the physical barriers of the space and whether it can be accessed in a wheelchair, for example. But there are multiple different areas that also need to be considered when talking about accessibility. The topic of making data available online has already been covered, but as one interviewee working at the Amsterdam Museum shared, there are more layers to calling oneself an "accessible museum":

> Because one of the things, of course, is museums can think of themselves as accessible, but for a lot of people, there are still many visible and invisible barriers. And to really feel that sense of ownership and belonging, you need to feel welcome, to recognise yourself in what is presented or in the tone of voice or the vibe or see other people like you also visiting, et cetera, et cetera. So that's a long-term thing.

Especially representation as a key factor in making the visitors feel welcome and comfortable is not the first accessibility strategy that comes to mind. Nonetheless, the invisible barrier of alienation in primarily white and elitist institutions does play a role in their accessibility for people from different backgrounds as well as regions or even cities. If a museum wants to implement decolonial practices, making especially ethnic and racial minorities – who have traditionally been excluded from the space – feel welcome is key. One method to work towards that was mentioned by multiple interviewees when I asked them what kind of other steps the institution takes to make it more inclusive and accessible: language[15]. This means, on the one hand, that the exhibition texts and the language used in guided tours needs to be less difficult and less academic. On the other hand, museums must also offer materials in multiple languages if they want to reach a more diverse audience. However, especially the theoretical context of decolonisation is difficult or impossible to explain in easy words (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 224), which is a dilemma that museums have to face since they want to be open for non-academic visitors but at the same time actively confront their own history and complicity in ongoing coloniality. Another strategy of thinking about language to improve accessibility, is what the Wereldmuseum calls "uncomfortable conversations" (ongemakkelijke gesprekken). It is a programme where they talk about different forms of discrimination, like racism, with visitors. My interviewee shared that they developed an educational method for these conversations, which they have just published as a book (Hulshoff Pol et al., 2024). This project executes accessibility on multiple levels, as it invites the public to an exchange about current social issues but also shares the tools with everyone so that it can be used as a resource by other institutions and individuals.

Another part of the definition of museums is that they are "in the service of society" (ICOM, n.d.), which is an attitude that was mentioned by many of the people I talked to. The Rijksmuseum employee especially highlighted it to illustrate that they have to represent the whole Netherlands as a national museum. This, however, can also create some tensions when the topic of an exhibition is particularly political or controversial. For example, the educator working at the Amsterdam Museum shared that they, as an institution, have completely shifted their focus from tourists being the target group to local Amsterdammers today, which has resulted in opposite reactions to certain exhibitions. She explained that they actively

[15] The importance of language in museum work is also specifically analysed in the publication *Words Matter* (Modest & Lelijveld, 2018), which is "an unfinished guide to word choices in the cultural sector".

chose to prioritise local visitors because they are the city museum and because they believe that it is not possible to create a "one size fits all" exhibition. An even more intense public reaction followed the name change of the now-called Kunstinstituut Melly:

> There has been a lot of discussion from audience members that really hate us for changing the name. Some love us for changing the name. People come for the different kind of programmes. Some people don't come no more because of the different programmes. It's really this, I would say, half-half. I mean, that was a bit tricky when we had that name change because we were also considering, you want to be more accessible. You want to be more inclusive. But if we do this change, we lose these people. But do we want these people still? Who are we? For who are we doing this? So, that was a whole discussion and I think we're not fully, we want to do it for, everything for everybody. But obviously, that is such a misconception of doing things. You cannot do things for everybody.

This quote perfectly illustrates the dilemma that museums in the Netherlands are facing today: they want to change and become more inclusive and accessible, but this also often means losing the traditional audience, which complains that museums are becoming "too woke"[16]. To that the interviewee who works at the Wereldmuseum has an answer: "We are not too woke. We are addressing things that need to be addressed." Therefore, it becomes evident that it will never be possible to make content that satisfies every possible visitor's wish, but if museums want to do more decolonial work, it is not about that. Instead, dismantling the remains of coloniality in the institution means centring those who have been oppressed and dehumanised, which makes museums a part of the liberation of those who have been categorised as "Other" (Walsh, 2007, pp. 231–232). It also means taking an active stance against fascist ideologies and maintaining it even if that means losing some visitors. Nonetheless, museums can be open to having conversations with the visitors, to fulfilling the traditional role of educators in their exhibition conception – recontextualising covered this aspect – and to providing a platform for exchange with the aim to raise awareness for the ongoing structural oppression of ethnic and racial minorities (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). Many of my interview partners emphasised the importance of dialogues with the visitors, and one even explicitly said, "you see that museums now are evolving to more like crossovers between debate centres or community centres." When I asked another person working in programming whether people are open to this exchange, she answered that she believes that they are if the conversation happens eye to eye. This observation, however, is only based on people who have come to the museum and participated in a discussion which requires them to be at least a little bit receptive. Therefore, it suggests that the discussions so

[16] This coincides with an increasingly conservative political and social climate.

far have mainly taken place among more or less like-minded people and are not as diverse as intended yet. Nonetheless, this chapter has shown that the museum professionals I talked to all work at institutions that are implementing a variety of participatory practices parallel to internal debates regarding the structure itself and the exhibition and research focuses to democratise and open up their organisations.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Summary and answer to research question

The research has investigated the question: How do Dutch museums negotiate the calls for decolonisation amidst external and internal institutional pressures? By first zooming in on the institutional structure and the inner workings of museums, on the content and knowledge that they produce, and then out to look at their collaborators and finally at their audiences, a holistic understanding of museum practice in the Netherlands today could be gained. This showed that decolonising museums means more than an exhibition on the colonial past of the country or the collection: it means implementing changes in every aspect that constitutes museum work – both on levels that are visible to the public but also internally. It is a work in progress, and even though every institution has different resources and individual challenges, the core problems are the same. Ultimately, only by talking about all levels on which colonial structures persist can they be dismantled.

This discourse is the direct adaptation of the theoretical discussion of postcolonial and decolonial studies, as both analyse how entangled the history of colonialism, modernity and capitalism are. The far-reaching effects of coloniality for everyone living on this planet today – including their impact on language, culture and knowledge – are analysed in depth by scholars from all around the world. Using especially the decolonial concept of coloniality of power, of knowledge and of being as a theoretical base for the continuous omnipresence of oppression and Western dominance, a holistic analysis of persisting coloniality in the museum as an organisation could be achieved. Interviewing people from different departments and learning about their work, it became evident that they are all impacted by the conversation about decolonisation. Even though the respective challenges and responses are individual, the bigger picture revealed a lot of similarities in the way that the institutions are operating and programming as a response to the pressures to decolonise. Every interviewee shared examples of cooperations and participatory practices that are being implemented at their institution, which shows that museums are working on becoming more open to a broader public and especially to members of marginalised groups. This can be understood as a direct answer to the internal (the recent shift in what constitutes museums according to ICOM) and external (BLM and other social movements) pressures to decolonise. Furthermore, especially in the areas of research and curatorial practice, an ongoing and fruitful development towards a less colonial way of working and exhibiting can already be recognised in cooperations between Dutch institutions as well as external partnerships with

individuals and communities. Again, these strategies are part of the process of negotiating the museums taking the responsibility to reevaluate their practices seriously. Even though those strategies are an important part of decolonising work because they aim to recontextualise the objects, as well as the history of the respective collection and the museum, the research has revealed that only a few museums have operationalised them, and new programmes are oftentimes an experiment that may or may not persist. Therefore, one can say that museums in the Netherlands are actively engaging with the calls to decolonise and are positioning themselves in the discourse in all the different ways that have been examined in this thesis. However, only in a few cases is this part of a bigger and more holistic approach to restructure the whole institution from the bottom up: traditional hierarchies are still dominant, and a shift to a more diverse staff as well as a more democratic approach to decision-making is slow. This leads to the conclusion that museums are only starting to implement changes on structural – and for the public "invisible" – level while they are more outspoken about and active in implementing decolonial practices that directly reach the visitors. In most cases these are experimental and a work in progress, as official (holistic) policy frameworks that provide clear decolonial strategies have not been developed yet.

5.2 Limitations and future research

The main limitation of the research was that only two of the interviewees were Black – both were hired because of new recruitment strategies – which again gave a lot of room to the voices of traditional (mostly white) museum staff. This is not a problem per se, as every person I talked to was very aware of their position and their role in the discourse, but I would have liked to implement more decolonial practices in the research by giving a platform and voice to the people who have been excluded from the conversation even though they are directly impacted by the colonial structures that still persist in our society. Unfortunately, due to my limited access to the sector and due to the still predominantly white and academic museum staff in general, it was not possible to get in touch with more non-white professionals who were open to talking to me. The relatively small museum sector in the Netherlands and the dominance of white professionals with traditional academic education in "responsible art positions" discussed by ter Borg (2020) is also the reason why I did not change the research focus to centre more non-white voices and stuck with my initial question. The undertaking of specifically centring museum professionals who are members of marginalised groups and analysing their perspectives, contributions and challenges when

facing the discussion of decolonising museums is a whole new topic, which is very relevant for future research. I, however, did not have the means – which mainly means access to the respective people – to conduct it, as I was lucky to find enough interviewees in the first place[17].

The second limitation is that the research only examined how museums that are already implementing decolonisation practices are negotiating the calls to decolonise. Therefore, my findings are not generalisable for all museums in the Netherlands, but they are nonetheless valuable for understanding the general strategies to decolonise museums and the need for a holistic approach that works across departments. The research has revealed that many of the issues faced by museums when implementing decolonisation strategies are intersecting, which is why it is important that future research continues to explore this by including multiple types of museums and departments when analysing decolonisation programmes or the necessity to decolonise in the first place. In order to gain a better understanding of the general status quo of museum decolonisation in the Netherlands (including museums that do not practise it) and patterns that determine it, a quantitative research method could shine light on this dimension, as it was not covered in this thesis.

Finally, a qualitative critical discourse analysis of policy documents, the respective websites and information texts in exhibitions would further add to my findings by covering the dimension of the museums' mission more explicitly, producing valuable insight into how the debate about decolonisation is held.

5.3 Discussion

My findings show how museums are facing multiple dilemmas when negotiating the calls for decolonisation. Firstly, the use of language, which was already touched upon in the chapter "Democratising and opening up" is a constant negotiation of accessibility versus complexity and nuance. The research has shown how language itself holds power and how it plays a crucial role when engaging in decolonial discourse. This became especially evident after one interviewee redacted many of their direct quotes and asked me to change some into new – far more polished – versions. They never said anything problematic in the first place, and I was not censored in the writing of this paper, but it illustrates perfectly how multilayered the issue of decolonisation is and that language plays a central role in it. It is a

[17] I actively reached out to people of colour via LinkedIn and email, but they either did not respond at all or explained that, while they would love to participate, they do not have the capacities to do so.

highly sensitive issue and shows that museums are extremely conscious of their institutional positioning. As a result, they are only engaging with the topic in a highly academic language, which is often at the cost of accessibility[18]. At the same time, it also connects back to Spivak's conviction that education is the only way forward, which puts museums into the position of either simplifying the language that they use or further developing education programmes that give visitors the tools to engage in the conversation on a more complex level.

The second dilemma that museums are facing is the theoretical discussion of what decolonisation is in the first place. As explained in the chapter on operationalisation, I chose to focus on the three dimensions of the coloniality of power, of knowledge and of being, but depending on the approach, the focus can differ. In order to decolonise museums, the institutions have to navigate the tensions between theoretic complexity (embracing multiple concepts) and strategic clarity (a clear definition that informs the operationalisation of decolonial practice). This dilemma is another dimension of the first one, as it also describes the constant evaluation of complexity versus simplicity that characterises decisions that have to be made when discussing decolonisation and strategies to decolonise.

The third dilemma relates to the stance that the museum takes. It was analysed in "Reimagining and restructuring" and showed how museums need to decide how explicitly they want to position themselves politically, as opposed to remaining as neutral as possible. As both the interviewees and the academic literature acknowledge, however, museums are never neutral, and by not taking a stance, they are reproducing the existing structures of power, which are colonial in their nature, as this thesis has highlighted. Therefore, in the results of this research, a tendency towards a more active positioning of the museum could be identified, which in some cases led to the loss of the traditional audience, as illustrated in the chapter "Democratising and opening up".

The fourth and final dilemma is perhaps the one with the biggest implications: it is connected to the fundamental question of whether colonial structures can be broken and reformed within a capitalist and still colonial Eurocentric system. The constant tension that the museum is facing is that of institutional critique of structures and processes on the one hand and the need to justify its existence and defend its relevance on the other. This pull and push of the implications of a truly decolonial approach and the reality of what it means to

[18] I acknowledge that decolonisation is a complex topic and undertaking – which the research has definitely illustrated – and that it cannot be explained in a couple of colloquial quotes only.

exist as a public institution in a European country makes it difficult for each museum to negotiate the calls for decolonisation.

These dilemmas illustrate the general problem of decolonial theory: it is a highly theoretical, complex and global discourse, which oftentimes does not offer tangible strategies to operationalise it. Therefore, there is not one single "right" way to decolonise institutions, like the museum, but instead a number of different approaches that each tackle another aspect of persisting coloniality. As they are often intersecting and connected, a continuous (holistic) exploration of decolonisation strategies and an ongoing conversation about the topic are needed to hopefully, in the future, reach a point where theory and praxis are no longer creating tensions for museums.

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Appendix A

Interview guide

Hi, my name is Stella Sundheimer, I'm 25 years old and I'm doing the master's arts culture and society at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Thank you so much for participating in this interview that is part of my thesis on how museums in the Netherlands respond to calls for decolonisation. You are not obliged to answer questions that you don't like, and you can withdraw from the study and the interview at any time. If it is okay with you, I will record the interview to transcribe it afterwards. I will make sure that you remain anonymous and will delete the recordings once the study is complete. The final thesis will only be published in the EUR thesis database. You have signed the information and consent form. Do you have any additional questions about the form?

And do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

Perfect, then I will start the recording now.

[start recording]

<u>Introduction</u>

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today. I'm Stella Sundheimer and for my master's thesis at Erasmus University Rotterdam I am researching how museums in the Netherlands respond to calls for decolonisation.

You have signed the information and consent form. I want to remind you that this interview is confidential, but that I will record our conversation. You are not obliged to answer questions that you do not like, and you are able to withdraw from the study and the interview at any time. Do you agree?

- First of all, can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
- Follow up: Can you tell me about your role at [Museum Name]?
- Follow up: How long you have been working in this field?
- Museums have been called to decolonise, make more inclusive decisions, restructure their permanent exhibitions etc.., what do you feel when you hear these statements?
- How has this influenced your views on museum practices?

<u>Institutional structure</u>

Decision-making and hierarchies:

- How is your museum structured in terms of decision-making?
- Who works in these decision-making processes?
  (for me: Is it democratic governance or not?)

Diversity and inclusion in leadership:

- How does this type of decision-making influence diversification of your exhibitions?
- Follow up: What efforts are being made to organise the institution in a more inclusive way on a structural level?
- Some museums are changing their hiring strategy by asking applicants to answer a set of questions rather than inviting people based on their CV to eliminate biases. How is the hiring strategy at [museum name]?

Challenges in institutional change:

- Have there been discussions about restructuring decision-making processes to include different perspectives especially those of marginalised communities?
- Follow up: Why have these decisions (not) been made?
- Follow up: If so, how have they been received internally?
- How can you feel tensions between "traditional" ideas of the past and the more (relatively) recent debates about alternative pasts in programming and curation?
- How do you navigate these tensions especially in relation to your audiences?
- Do you change your relationship – or do you try to – with your audiences?
- How has your experience influenced your own views on decolonisation in museums?
- (How does the museum approach the restitution of colonial artefacts?)

<u>Exhibition concepts</u>

Curation process:

- How does your institution decide on the themes and narratives of new exhibitions or updates to permanent exhibitions?
- Follow up: How diverse are the perspectives in the team(s)?
- Follow up: How often is the permanent exhibition revised?

Representation of (hi)stories:

- How does your museum decide which (historical) perspectives to present to visitors?
- Follow up: Are there conscious efforts to include non-Eurocentric narratives, and if so, how?
- Follow up: How is this received by visitors?
- Follow up: How is this received within the institution?

Addressing colonial legacies in exhibitions:

- Has your museum undertaken any initiatives to critically reassess how colonial histories are presented?
- Follow up: Could you please share some examples?
- Follow up: How have these changes been received by audiences, funders, or stakeholders?

Exhibition practices

Representation:

- Whose perspectives are considered in the storytelling of the exhibitions?
- Follow up: Have you seen shifts towards more participatory approaches in curation?

Participation:

- To what extent does your museum involve historically marginalised or formerly colonised communities in exhibition storytelling?
- Follow up: How are their perspectives incorporated into the final exhibition?

Practical steps to decolonise:

- Programming: How do you try to reach people from minority groups? (migrants, different age, non-academic background etc)
- Beyond content, what other steps does your institution take to make exhibitions more inclusive?
- Are there areas where you feel more could be done?

Closing

- Before we conclude, is there anything else you'd like to add that the interview hasn't covered?
- Thank you very much for your time and insights. I really appreciate your valuable input. If any questions come up or if you would like to receive updates on my findings, please feel free to reach out any time.

[stop recording]

Thank you again for sharing your perspective! Is it okay if I contact you via email if I have any questions?

Also do you know anyone else (a colleague maybe) who might be suited for an interview as well?

Appendix B

Consent form

Standard EUR Informed Consent Form template

M. Nariman and M. Domingus, December 2016 (incl. adjustments ESHCC)

Principal investigator = Stella Sundheimer

Project title and version = Can museums be decolonised? – An analysis of challenges, perspectives and responses of Dutch museums based on case studies

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

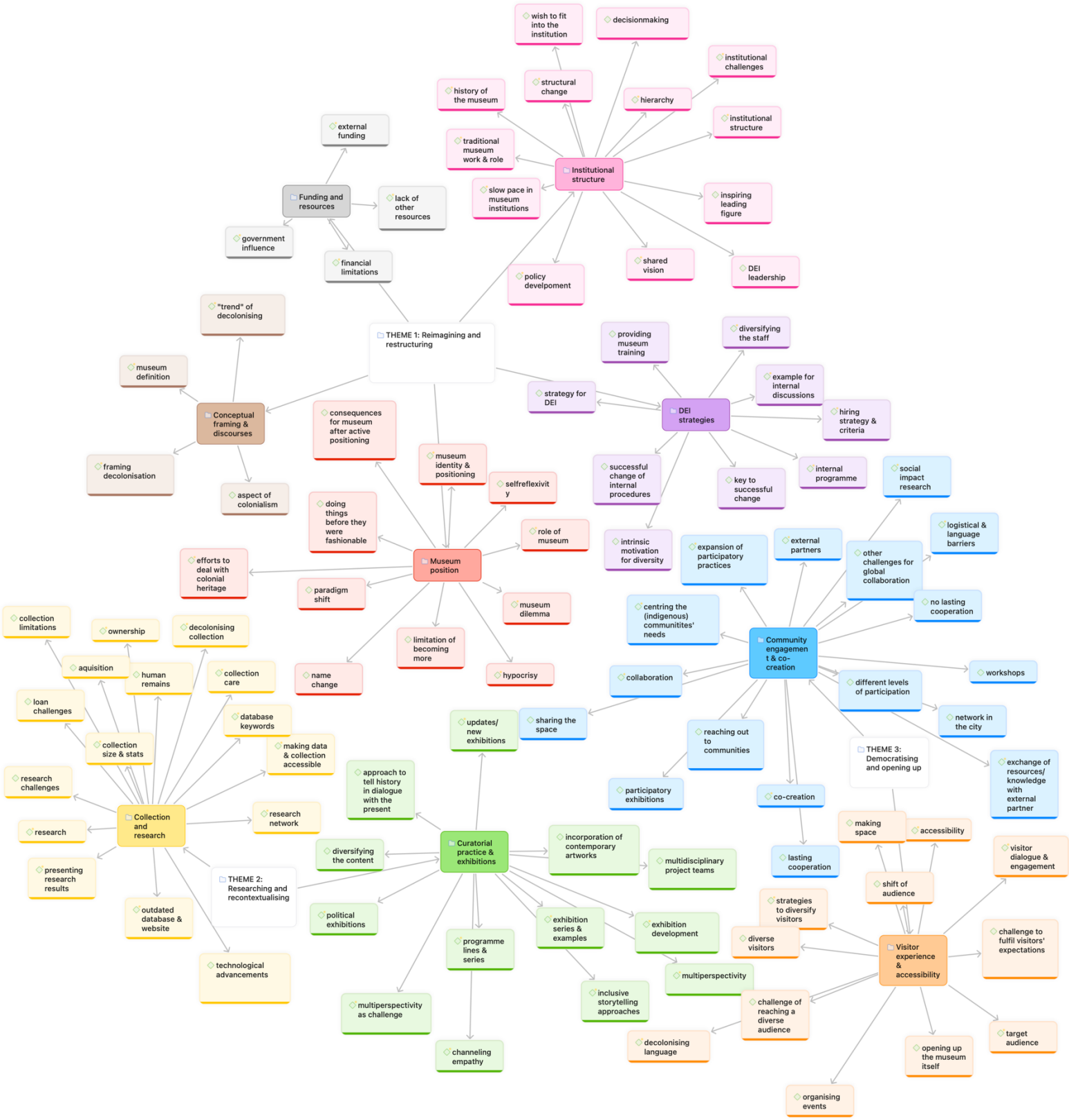
Project Title and version	Can museums be decolonised? – An analysis of challenges, perspectives and responses of Dutch museums based on case studies
Name of Principal Investigator	Stella Sundheimer
Name of Organisation	Erasmus University Rotterdam – Erasmus School of History, Culture, and Communication.
Purpose of the Study	This research is being conducted as part of my master's thesis at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I am inviting you to participate in this research project how museums in the Netherlands respond to calls for decolonisation. The purpose of this research project is to explore how museum professionals navigate the pressures and expectations related to decolonisation, how institutions conceptualise their role in this discourse, and how decolonial approaches may be reflected in institutional structures, exhibition concepts, and exhibition practices.
Procedures	You will participate in an interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. You will be asked questions about your experiences and perspectives on decolonisation within the museum context, including how decision-making structures, exhibition planning, and curatorial practices reflect (or do not reflect) decolonial approaches. Sample questions include: "How does your institution decide on the themes and narratives of new exhibitions or updates to permanent exhibitions?" and "To what extent does your museum involve historically marginalised or formerly colonised communities in exhibition storytelling?". You must be at least 18 years old and currently work (or have recently worked) in a museum in the Netherlands.
Potential and anticipated Risks and Discomforts	There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time.

Potential Benefits	Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results to you. As a result of participating, you may better understand how decolonisation is being approached within museum institutions and reflect on your own role within this process. The broader goal of this research is to contribute to the academic and professional discourse on museum decolonisation by examining institutional structures, exhibition concepts, and exhibition practices. Findings may inform future discussions and initiatives aimed at creating more inclusive and reflective museum spaces.
Sharing the results	Findings from this research will be shared in my master's thesis. It will only be published in the university thesis repository. If you would like to receive a summary of the findings, please let me know, and I will be happy to share them with you once the study is completed.
Confidentiality	Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained research staff will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, results of this study will be made available to you upon request. As indicated above, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. Transcribed segments from the audio recordings may be used in published forms (e.g., journal articles and book chapters). In the case of publication, pseudonyms will be used. The audio recordings, forms, and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location in the researchers' offices or on the researchers password-protected computers and will be destroyed within ten years of the initiation of the study.
Right to Withdraw and Questions	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalised or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the primary investigator: **Stella Sundheimer** **745005ss@student.eur.nl**

Statement of Consent	Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form. For research problems or any other question regarding the research project, please contact the coordinator of the Master Thesis Class **Laura Braden, braden@eshcc.eur.nl** If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.	
Audio recording (if applicable)	I consent to have my interview audio recorded ☐ yes ☐ no	
Secondary use (if applicable)	I consent to have the anonymised data be used for secondary analysis ☐ yes ☐ no	
Signature and Date	**NAME PARTICIPANT**	**NAME PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR**
	SIGNATURE	**SIGNATURE**
	DATE	**DATE**

Appendix C

Code-tree



Appendix D

Codebook

THEME 1: Reimagining and restructuring

- Conceptual framing & discourses
  - "trend" of decolonising
  - aspect of colonialism
  - framing decolonisation
  - museum definition
- DEI strategies
  - diversifying the staff
  - example for internal discussions
  - hiring strategy & criteria
  - internal programme
  - intrinsic motivation for diversity
  - key to successful change
  - providing museum training
  - strategy for DEI
  - successful change of internal procedures
- Funding and resources
  - external funding
  - financial limitations
  - government influence
  - lack of other resources
- Institutional structure
  - decisionmaking
  - DEI leadership
  - hierarchy
  - history of the museum
  - inspiring leading figure
  - institutional challenges
  - institutional structure
  - policy develpoment
  - shared vision
  - slow pace in museum institutions
  - structural change
  - traditional museum work & role
  - wish to fit into the institution
- Museum position
  - consequences for museum after active positioning
  - doing things before they were fashionable
  - efforts to deal with colonial heritage
  - hypocrisy
  - limitation of becoming more
  - museum dilemma
  - museum identity & positioning
  - name change
  - paradigm shift
  - role of museum
  - selfreflexivity

THEME 2: Researching and recontextualising

- Collection and research
  - acquisition
  - collection care
  - collection limitations
  - collection size & stats
  - database keywords
  - decolonising collection
  - human remains
  - loan challenges
  - making data & collection accessible

- outdated database & website
- ownership
- presenting research results
- research
- research challenges
- research network
- technological advancements

- Curatorial practice & exhibitions
  - approach to tell history in dialogue with the present
  - channeling empathy
  - diversifying the content
  - exhibition development
  - exhibition series & examples
  - inclusive storytelling approaches
  - incorporation of contemporary artworks
  - multidisciplinary project teams
  - multiperspectivity
  - multiperspectivity as challenge
  - political exhibitions
  - programme lines & series
  - updates/new exhibitions

THEME 3: Democratising and opening up

- Community engagement & co-creation
  - centring the (indigenous) communitites' needs
  - co-creation
  - collaboration
  - different levels of participation
  - exchange of resources/knowledge with external partner
  - expansion of participatory practices
  - external partners
  - lasting cooperation
  - logistical & language barriers
  - network in the city
  - no lasting cooperation
  - other challenges for global collaboration
  - participatory exhibitions
  - reaching out to communities
  - sharing the space
  - social impact research
  - workshops
- Visitor experience & accessibility
  - accessibility
  - challenge of reaching a diverse audience
  - challenge to fulfil visitors' expectations
  - decolonising language
  - diverse visitors
  - making space
  - opening up the museum itself
  - organising events
  - shift of audience
  - strategies to diversify visitors
  - target audience
  - visitor dialogue & engagement