

Affective and Creative Research Practices



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Predominant contemporary understandings of heritage agree that heritage is formed in the present, and that these formations – politically contested or not – pave the way for a certain future to happen [Lowenthal 2004, Harrison 2013 etc.]. Looking closer at ways of understanding heritage practices in the present, I take as a point of departure two prominent scholarly definitions. Firstly, Laurajane Smith puts forward her definition of heritage as discourse, stressing that heritage production always involves the exertion of power and authority of some groups over others who are invited to 'share', 'learn' and 'become educated' about authorised heritage values and meanings. Thus, heritage always involves power asymmetries. Such focus on identity, representation and access was more broadly a key concern in the new museology from the 1990s [Vergo 1989, Karp, Creamer, Lavine 1992],

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and Smith seeks to highlight the politics of representation of official heritage sites and narratives by arguing that heritage is not only a thing or a site, but "a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present" [Smith 2006: 44]. Heritage practice is, according to Smith, what people 'do' – subjectively and culturally – at heritage sites or with the concept of heritage itself, and these processes and practices are what a heritage scholar should investigate.

Secondly, however, I also draw on the understanding of heritage advanced by Rodney Harrison, who, inspired by indigenous ontologies and new materialism, questions heritage as a primarily discursive, intellectual and exclusively human endeavour. In his view, heritage practice means to enter a dialogue with or establish a relation to the affordances of the human and the non-human material world. Harrison and Rose initially defined heritage in absolute accord with Smith as "the processes and practices of keeping the past alive in the present" [Harrison and Rose 2010: 265 in Harrison 2013: 217], but in Harrison's later book *Heritage, Critical Approaches*, heritage is defined as "a fundamental quality of experience of the material (and hence social) world" [Harrison 2013: 217]. Here, heritage is thus a relationship, a connection established to other species, things, sites, technologies etc.,

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and it is also the *experiential quality* of this specific encounter for a human being. Therefore, the focus shifts from the representation and access of authorised heritage to the affective and sensorial dimensions of encounters between human bodies and the material-social world. In museology, a parallel shift can be seen towards more performative understandings of citizenship in which other ecologies of knowledge such as affects, memory and sensory forms of knowledge production as well as emotional relationships such as care, sympathy and empathy are rehearsed [Chakrabarty 2002, Witcomb 2013, 2015]. Witcomb even coins the term "a pedagogy of feeling" to describe the ways in which contemporary exhibition practices stage affective encounters between viewer and viewed in order to promote the sociopolitical work that many museums see themselves engaged in [Witcomb 2015: 322].

I find both of these approaches valuable and necessary for colonial heritage research and for the affective and creative methodologies part of ECHOES' 'toolkit' that I propose pieces of in the following.

A collaborative and self-organised future of heritage

The call to decolonise archives and the turn to "pluriverse" epistemologies in the acknowledgement of non-canonised ecologies of

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knowledge and alternative embodied sensations of the world are core ambitions of ECHOES as a research project, which thereby engages with recent work on decolonial heritage practices [Mignolo 2007, de Sousa Santos 2011, Mbembe 2016]. In order to seek knowledge of these activities and processes, it becomes crucial to ask how to support the decolonial view methodologically. If we bear in mind both the discursive and the relational affective definitions of heritage above, three possible paths to decolonise Western epistemologies through our methodological choices can be outlined. The first concerns the distribution of power and authority through participatory and collaborative methods of research. Since the 1960s and 1970s, participation has been pursued as a cultural logic in development and indigenous studies (now global studies), in political theory and in media studies. Especially due to the connective power of digital and mobile media around the globe, people today increasingly work together to collectively classify, organise and build worlds [Delwiche and Henderson 2013]. This means that we need to look at and understand how people organise themselves to meet their needs and survive economically, socio-politically and culturally as a community [Cohen and Uphoff 1980, Gibson-Graham 2006, 2013].

Of course, increased participation can be addressed in various ways and with different normative agendas. A very optimistic perspective on participation praises the potential for enhanced democratisation

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imminent in the participation processes, whether they are initiated by official authorities and institutions or whether they are more self-organised. Some even put forward that participation as the production of either material products or symbolic knowledge simply increases happiness among the participants and is furthermore capable of producing networks and connections across continents [Jenkins 2006, Bruns 2008, Simon 2010, Gauntlett 2011]. But others have been critical of the very broad definition of participation supporting such arguments, and even argue that such an all-inclusive understanding of participation can sometimes "cover up" business-as-usual research practices or even be accused of taking advantage of participants as work force [Carpentier 2011]. To go counter to that tendency, the critics suggest that only participation narrowed down to political decision-making – as early scholars in the 1960s and 1970s indeed first understood the term [Arnstein 1969] – should be considered true participation. Nonetheless, I would largely agree with those participation scholars who – while acknowledging the risks – insist on broadening the scope of participation enough to include multiple values such as educational, capacity-building, affective, connective, voice and visibility gains for participants in collaborative processes, even though political decision-making is delegated to well-known expert entities. They argue that participation and its forms and impacts are to be looked upon as complex phenomena that need to be evaluated individually in each and every case according

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to the desires of the different participants and the aims and visions of the various [May 2006, Cohen and Uphoff 2011, Kelty 2014].

Also in this vein, the museum and heritage sectors' turn to user studies is very focused on how to make visitors/citizens participate on different levels, thereby pursuing a more socio-museology-based approach focusing primarily on the museums' role in local and regional re-generation. This often also means moving beyond the interactive technologies in exhibition designs that produce 'user engagement on the spot', and instead consider how heritage institutions can generate spaces in the long term, i.e. socially lasting, participatory engagements, for example by engaging in different types of deeper user participation conceptualised by Simon as involving 'contributory', 'collaborative', 'co-creative' and 'hosted' exhibition forms shared between the museum and the public.

However, while the museological field has thus begun to internalise much of what would be needed to 'decolonise' exhibitions, there are still some major challenges when it comes to decolonising research practices within communities. Firstly, while most sites in the world are increasingly 'multicultural', 'mixed' or 'hybrid', many research methods remain monocultural, and as such neglect the need to situate the researcher in an intercultural dialogue with heterogenous groups that

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he/she hopes to understand. Secondly, traditional research methods are rooted in Western colonial cultural ecologies of knowledge, even if this is often denied or repressed by Western scholars [Gobo 2011 in Kara 2015]. Thirdly, researchers often are and feel responsible to (funding) institutions rather than to the participants with whom they engage [Kara 2015: 44].

In this light, it is little wonder that indigenous or formerly colonised populations often consider the attention of 'Western' research to be a continuation of or at least linked to the history of European colonialism [Tuhiwai Smith 2012], thereby undercutting rather than empowering their desire to become self-determining and to take control of individual and collective destinies. Tuahwai Smith therefore argues that methodological debates must be more broadly concerned with the politics and strategic goals of indigenous research in relation to the populations it addresses [ibid: 144]. As Kara argues, the urge to institute social change needs to come from the communities themselves, but researchers can play a facilitating role by offering transformative research frameworks, such as those inspired by participatory, feminist, decolonising or 'creative' methodologies. This means that the participants should be involved in setting the parameters for the intervening research projects, and therefore that the ones who need to change are often the departments and agencies involved, who will

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ultimately need to redirect policies, design new programmes and train staff differently [Kara 2015, Tuahwai Smith 2012].

In decolonising research practices, it is fundamentally important to consider the levels of participation and the degree to which the research design and processes include non-researchers in their set-ups. One way to meet such concerns would be to think in terms of 'hybrid forums' involving experts, citizens, technicians, politicians etc. who come together to discuss research priorities, practices and results, thereby undermining the divide between laypersons and experts [Callon et al. 2011, Harrison 2013: 223].

The future of affects

The turn to affect as an experiential quality of any heritage relation is sometimes portrayed as though it involves giving up on – or at least offering a strict alternative to – any discursive framing of heritage. I would pose the relationship between meaning-making and affective relationships differently. Any encounter in the socio-material world happens through social and cultural practices that to some extent are established socially and culturally. This inevitably involves – but is not

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exhausted by – the way a certain heritage is discursively framed. Whether humans are attracted to or repulsed by a given heritage 'thing' or site therefore also has to do with the ways in which various societies discursively value given heritage forms [Ahmed 2004, Wetherell 2012]. Thus, affects, emotions and discourses are always knitted together, but they are not simply two sides of the same coin. As argued in the edited volume on *Heritage, Affect and Emotion* (2017), "heritage and its economies are driven by affective politics and consolidated through sensibilities such as pride, awe, joy, pain, fear" [Tolia-Kelly et al. 2017: 4]. This entails the important awareness of how the affectively attuned forms of analysis *could* give access to new knowledge that a solely discursive exploration would not catch (for example through an analysis of rhythm and atmosphere instead of a socio-political analysis of a contested site). An affectively focused analysis proves its worth when it dislocates established patterns of knowledge, for example by showing how alternative connections, alliances and forms of solidarity are produced differently through the lens of affective research. In this case, such an analysis would be capable of identifying emergent practices and significations that could point in new directions [Knudsen and Stage 2015]. Thus, affective research methods must both complement and confront the discursive constructions of their 'sites' in order to point to emergent or re-emergent practices capable of transforming exactly the

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established discursive frames and perceptions of both researchers and publics.

Crucially, this means that an affective approach to research must begin with the researcher's self-awareness of her/his own embodied investment in the field of study [Blackman 2012, Sundén 2012, Knudsen and Stage 2015]. We can say that this self-awareness is an affective equivalent to the epistemological perspectivism of insisting that subjects and bodies always see and speak from certain positions. It involves a double rejection of the illusion of objectivity-based research models adopted into the humanities and social sciences from the natural sciences.

But it is also a self-awareness that becomes an ethics of [entanglement](#). In a decolonial framework, the focus on more-than-representational layers of knowledge production needs careful attention, as it becomes entangled in a wider range of (colonial) knowledge ecologies and relational connectivities concerning colonial heritage. Such self-awareness might lead to auto-ethnographic methods, which often use art-based techniques such as poetry, photography and creative fiction, and in which the researcher's *moved* body *moves* the readers' bodies affectively in the research results. Such methods have increasingly entered contemporary research, and are important as decolonising tools because they include and acknowledge a wider range of affective and

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discursive engagements regarding sites or objects of colonial heritage [Trandberg Jensen 2015, Kara 2015, Vannini 2015].

Fundamentally, it is crucial that the researcher pursuing affects and emotions has a clear idea of how to actually trace affects empirically. In language, the communication of affective content can be revealed through special phenomenological interview techniques or through poststructuralist reading techniques looking for certain rhetorical tropes such as hyperboles, repetitions, outbursts, emojis, onomatopoeia, silences etc. Field observations and shadowing can equally reveal affect through bodily expressions, practices, particular spatial and temporal intensifications of how bodies spread and gather, as well as in the ways bodies imitate each other or diverge in being attracted to or repulsed by a heritage phenomenon.

Of course, in the context of the particular research project, the researcher must decide how affective or embodied knowledge production can enter the research in valuable ways. Mixed-methods research and research using technologies in various constellations might be utilised in order to engage citizen groups in data gathering of affective and emotional realms. Adding to this, very often the data production could be handed over to participants who can keep diaries or log books, produce videos and drawings and take part in researchers' cultural mapping strategies, but one might also go even further and involve everyday props such as

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photo-elicitations or more fictional text productions (imagine writing a break up letter to your local museum, for example) [Gaver, Dunne, Pacenti 1999, Waterton and Watson 2015]. But a more elaborate methodology can also be mobilised by initiating or co-creating experiments intervening in everyday settings. 'Experiments in living' as coined by Noortje Marres present a notable device of social and cultural research, and they have to balance their easy ways to enroll social actors in new environments, new sensibilities and habits without creating contestation, discussion or adjustment [Marres 2012: 14]. She opts for an openness of the experiments in order to let the participants become co-creators of what the future could be like with – as in our case – changes towards more [decolonial practices](#) in the forefront.

Hope in experiments

Experiments are interesting as affective method devices because they present a will to engage with reality as well as reflecting on the experiment. Experiments can be seen as micro-utopian moments in which a socio-material situation is imagined, revealed and invented [Knudsen, Stage, Zandersen 2019]. Experiments in themselves must be the change that some actors want to see on a small scale. Beginning with *imagining* new futures – for example decolonial futures – entails assemblages of things, institutions, individuals and technologies that go

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together and imagine how the event-not-yet realised can be constructed and prepared for. The experiment – which could take place in public space or in institutionalised contexts such as a museum – can also *reveal* strong local resources, solidarity, forces and energies invested in the topic, unknown practices, relations and alliances already in play. And the experiment adds components to the socio-material environments in which it plays out. Which material, relational, discursive and affective transformations were produced by the experiment? The invention part of experiments opens up to what exceeds current understandings. The successful experiment is thus one in which normative goals such as decolonial futures are met with local resources and investment, and that is in fact realised and felt on a small scale in the form of a micro-utopia. Having done that, the decolonial future on a large scale could seem within reach.

One extraordinary example of an art-based research experiment will end this keyword entry. Dalila Mahdjoub carried out a project entitled *The Voices of the Objects* [La Voix des Objets] as part of an initiative of Mucem regarding a future exhibition on the entangled histories of France and Algeria. Mahdjoub, 4th grade students (11 years old) from the highly mixed secondary school Longchamp in Marseille and their professors finished a learning module resulting in a co-created work of art on colonial heritage. In the process, the students were exposed to several

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archives to facilitate an affective engagement in the colonial past. Images representing the colonial past were presented as projections on the floor, while the participants were placed in a circle around the images, viewing each image for 4 second. This was followed by rounds of reactions from the students, some quite intense, crying out: "It is racism, it is racism". Mahjoub and the professors shared their own memories and histories to unleash the often-untold family memories amongst the young participants. Entitled Human Zoo, a second round of engagement with the visual imagery involved displaying some post card images from 1909, which the students were asked to analyse. Often, they represented half-naked colonised bodies next to a fully equipped coloniser body. After covering the colonised bodies with white silk paper transforming the image into a white silhouette, the students were asked to make the colonised bodies re-appear in a re-emergent gesture. The mixed groups of participants were also asked to co-curate elements of the exhibition by bringing objects, photos, news footage, official documents etc. from their homes to the exhibition, and they were also involved in a cultural mapping procedure entailing an everyday object, a capacious plastic bag, Le Sac Belsunce. Equipped with a minor questionnaire and a map of the investigated neighbourhood, the students were to collect knowledge about the outlook, use and commercial stories of this everyday object often used as travel device for families visiting the countries of their parents/grandparents. *The Voices of the Objects* let the participants feel and

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reflect on themselves as part of the colonial history of France and Algeria, as well as allowing them to become producers of re-emergent decolonised bodies in the archival material, and, finally (and I have not mentioned all the aspects of this outstanding experiment), the participants could become part of the collection process as co-curators and co-researchers in their own hometown, Marseille in France.

Decolonising methodologies are a huge task and only a few components of this necessary endeavour are mentioned here. In terms of methods, decolonial futures are plural, mixed, affectively invested and replacing stable hegemonic structures with intercultural encounters. In some sense the future emerges in the form of experiments, often but not solely art-based, giving us a glimpse of the not-yet that is already here.



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