

Spaces of Care: Introduction

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Alarming environmental shifts and crises have raised public awareness of and anxieties regarding the future of the planet. While planetary in cause and scale, the negative effects of these global crises are (as we have long been aware) distributed unequally, affecting most intensely some of the already most fragile, including Indigenous and other formerly colonized peoples across the world, and contributing to rising global insecurity and inequality. Acknowledging the differential effects of such precarity, some scholars² have argued that in order to best understand, and to find strategies to combat these challenges, we ought to see them together with another prominent set of anxieties: those around the presumed failure of – or at least the protracted questioning of – the viability of the multicultural or plural democracies that have become commonplace in many parts of the world. This has certainly arisen in Europe, like in many other places across the globe, including North America, over the past few decades.³ These latter anxieties have been fueled by heightened xenophobic nationalism and an intensification of right-wing populism coupled with increased ethno-racial discrimination polarized by what has been presented in some corners as a migration crisis, as well as a vague sense that western welfare systems and identities are in danger.

For the scholars that see these challenges as conjoined, planetary precarity and ethno-racial discrimination share similar roots in the destructive colonial modes through which we have come to inhabit the earth.⁴ The recent Covid-19 pandemic has served only to confirm the alignment of these seemingly different concerns, evident in both how the pandemic was racialized, including by politicians such as US

1 Many people have contributed to this introduction by sharing their ideas and providing their thoughts on different drafts of the text. We want to especially thank Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, Doris Prlić, Esmee Schoutens, Ming Tiampo, and Nicholas Thomas for their generosity and critical input. Additionally, we want to thank the editorial group who guided the process to bring this book into fruition. Their sharp and insightful as well as joyous and supportive criticism helped make this publication what it is.

2 Hage 2017.

3 De Koning and Modest 2017.

4 Hage 2017.

president Donald Trump, and in the unequal ways in which its deadliest effects were distributed.

Connecting the reasons for such unequal distribution of precarity to the destructive workings of an unabated capitalism on differently valued subjects, scholar Achille Mbembe⁵ would describe the pandemic's effects as the unequal distribution of *the universal right to breathe*. Only months after he first published this article in 2020, in the wake of the brutal murder of the African-American George Floyd while he begged for breath under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer, Mbembe focussed his argument further so as to highlight the racial nature of these threats to life, of the foreclosure of the right to breathe, as posed by pandemic life.⁶ Indeed, as Covid-19 spread, there was a rise of xenophobic attacks on people of Asian descent in places across Europe and North America. Racism, as Ghassan Hage suggests, may also be understood as an environmental threat. It is in response to these twinned challenges that this publication is conceived, like the project from which it has emerged – seeking strategies to fashion more sustainable and just presents and futures. Focused around the concept of *care*, we explore the extent to which so-called ethnographic and world cultures museums can become spaces of care, in order to foster the emergence of these other presents and futures.

While discussions around possible futures for humanity in the age of the Anthropocene rage across academia and within some political and public debates, the question of the role museums continue to play in contributing to these challenges, or in finding possible strategies to address them, has received limited attention to date. *Spaces of Care: Confronting Colonial Afterlives in European Ethnographic Museums* contributes to this narrow but growing field, placing ethnographic or world cultures museums at the centre of these debates. These museums have long been embroiled in long-standing debates about their histories, their collections, and their practices in relation to the colonial past, and to the racialized calculus⁷ of life worth that it has left in its wake and which continues to define our political present.⁸ Indeed, if the last few years of demands to decolonize museums have made anything apparent, it is that ethnographic museums represent a sort of crossing of highly vexed historical

5 Mbembe 2020.

6 See conversation between Achille Mbembe and Paul Gilroy on 17 June 2020, <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/racism-racialisation/transcript-conversation-achille-mbembe>>, accessed 26 July 2023.

7 In her 2008 book *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman described the Afterlives of Slavery thus: 'If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.'

8 Hartman 2011.

currents – some evident, and many buried and protected in depots – of histories of colonialism, of race and racism, but also of our extractive and destructive relationship with the planet.

Within Europe, these museums have been uniquely formed. Arguably, no other cultural institutions have been as much created through these kinds of encounters as these museums: through cross-cultural exchange, often in the context of bolstering European colonialism. Their implicatedness in colonialism has received significant attention in recent years, as has their founding role and close ties with anthropology, a discipline that has also long been involved in its own soul searching.⁹ Much more remains to be done. While acknowledging and confronting the troubling sides of these histories and how they live on in the present, even starting from this history, this publication contributes to ongoing attempts to reorient these museums towards the scientific expression of the most positive and relativist strands of the discipline. Indeed, we acknowledge that many of the founding assumptions of these museums, like those of the discipline of anthropology, were grounded in colonial and racialising hierarchies. Yet, we still hold on to what we hope were their other founding ideas and practices that were genuinely open to the diversity of global knowledge, existence, and beliefs and which are dedicated to their documentation, understanding, and even, often simplistically or incautiously, to their celebration.¹⁰ And while we do not claim this to be a fully achievable task, we see it as a necessary one.

In saying this, we do not seek to minimise the role that these institutions have played as a part of colonialism's intellectual or practical infrastructure. Rather, we suggest that it may be precisely by looking into their complex entanglements with colonialism and its many afterlives that we may understand the conjoined nature of the two anxieties we seek to explore in these pages. Taken together with the many practices that these museums have developed over decades through collaborative, critical reflexivity, in national, regional, and international projects, and often together with members of diverse Indigenous and diasporic communities, we suggest that these museums may be ideal sites for speaking directly to the urgent and defining challenges of the twenty-first century, of planetary precarity, inequality, and the challenges to the futures of multiculturalism or plural democracies.

We want to ask whether by returning to these museums, to their histories, and to their practices as evidence of the histories of humanity's entanglement with the planet, of the entanglements between human and more than human worlds, we can find some indications towards what other, better, futures may be possible. In these efforts, we foreground the extensive collections of the material culture of Indigenous peoples, of peoples of the global majority, that embody deep diversity and 'en-

⁹ See, for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Clifford 1988.

¹⁰ Modest et al. 2019, Thomas 2016.

cyclopaedic' ecological knowledge, through the diverse floral, faunal, and mineral materials from which artworks and artefacts – technologies for living and for representing life – were made.

We therefore ask in what ways it is possible to 'mine' non-extractively and ethically this ecological knowledge as an archive for modes of sustainable living?¹¹ What can they tell us about the damaging impact of humans, of colonialism more generally, on the planet – for example, on cultural, linguistic, or species extinction? How might they help us to better understand racism's role in the histories of planetary precarity? How can they offer models and inspiration for the revival of (cultural and artistic) practices? And what might they tell us about the roles and responsibilities that we might be burdened with, indeed, that we might foster as museums, for making other possibles possible for a better world to come into being?¹²

On Care

Spaces of Care: Confronting Colonial Afterlives in European Ethnographic Museums locates its analytical fulcrum around care, a concept that has received increasing attention in recent years across a number of different domains, in scholarly discourses in the humanities and social sciences, but also, importantly, in popular, activist political projects.

For many people, care is self-evidently connected to museum practice. After all, to curate – one of the primary tasks of the museum – means to care. Moreover, museums across the world have departments for collection care and management, where professionals are dedicated to implementing the many practices and procedures that should ensure the preservation of the objects for which they are custodians. Embedded within a global museological infrastructure, and guided by the stipulations of organizations such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM), these departments have become increasingly professionalized in recent decades, committed to even greater scientific standards for the preservation of heritage objects in perpetuity. Care, in this sense, is subsumed under commitments to preservation, and embedded within the long-established traditions that are broadly accepted across a global heritage sector. As many critics of the museum, and especially of ethnographic museums, have argued, however, a commitment to science does not always ensure care – caring can be cruel to some, while sustaining others.¹³

¹¹ We use mine here not in the sense of extraction but in a similar way to how artist Fred Wilson uses it in his seminal work *Mining the Museum*: to uncover what is hidden, what is left unattended to, through erasure or elision.

¹² Escobar 2020.

¹³ Balkenhol and Modest 2019.

The concerns for care to which this project and publication are committed are very different from those conventionally mobilized by museums. We are interested in recent calls for more radical orientations to care, that have emerged from, for example, Black feminist and Indigenous activist scholarship, but also from scholars in science and technology studies and the environmental humanities. They take care, radical care, as 'a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds' or as practices that can 'radically remake worlds that exceed those offered by the neoliberal or post neoliberal state, which has proved inadequate'.¹⁴ By engaging with such an understanding of care, we seek to critique the museum as a cog in the wheel of the state, whether the colonial state of the past or the contemporary neoliberal, capitalist state that has proven inadequate to the task of caring for all.

In conceiving the project TAKING CARE we were interested in what museums, with their long history of collecting, research, and display could tell us about the care-less¹⁵ world we live in; but also what spaces we could open up to think about care otherwise. Mindful of the double anxieties that animated our interest at the time, of the precarious of the planet but also of its peoples, we wanted to rethink the ethnographic beyond simply a category of culture, abstracted from the natural world, to push against the long histories of an epistemic divide between presumed museums of culture and museums of science or of art. We wanted to see the museum as a site to reassemble the world, epistemologically and ontologically as one world, as one pluriversal world¹⁶, and to ask the question what multi-species care might look like from the museum.

The work of two scholars, Thom van Dooren and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, with overlapping academic and political projects, was especially interesting for our concerns. For Puig, 'To care can feel good; it can also feel awful. It can do good; it can oppress'. Embracing care's ambiguities, Puig's project is invested in what care affords us for thinking and living in a more than human world. They locate their work within longer histories of feminist engagement with care, both practical and theoretical, that has been both critical of how care has long been conceived as women's work, the overburdened role that women have in society to care for others, as with the potential care has for imagining and creating other worlds. Puig draws especially on the foundational work of scholars such as Joan Tronto and Bernice Fischer, who take care as 'everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair "our world" so that we can live in it as well as possible',¹⁷ to explore care as labour/work as affect/affections and as ethics/politics. With these ways of conceiving the work of care

¹⁴ Hobart and Kneese 2020. See also Finch 2022, van Dooren 2014, Puig 2017.

¹⁵ Here we draw on the recently published Chatzidakis et al. 2020, which invites us to think care beyond what the authors describe as the increasingly careless world we live in.

¹⁶ See Escobar 2018 & 2020.

¹⁷ Tronto 1993, 103, quoted in Puig 2017.

in mind, care, for Puig, then, is 'a concrete work of maintenance, with ethical and affective implications, and as a vital politics in interdependent worlds'.

Van Dooren draws on Puig to think care as 'an entry point into a grounded form of embodied and practical ethics' that as affect 'is an embodied phenomenon, the product of intellectual and emotional competencies: to care is to be affected by another, to be emotionally at stake in them in some way'. As ethical obligation, he continues, to care 'is to become subject to another, to recognise an obligation to look after another'. And as a labour, care 'requires that we get involved in some concrete way...that we do something (wherever possible) to take care of another.' It is this ethical work of remaking the world that informs the authors of this publication, and the TAKING CARE project more broadly, as the different museums in the project grapple with if and how they can become spaces of care. For these museums, ethnographic and world cultures museums, the question would be: what kind of maintenance work would be needed, with what ethical and affective attention, to attempt to repair the world in such a way that it becomes liveable for all humans and more than humans?

Van Dooren may give us some hints at this when he poses the question, 'what does it mean to care for others at the edge of extinction?' Within the history of the ethnographic museum, such a question cannot be uttered without a heavy burden of caution. As we are well aware, extinction was an important trope that served as grounds for many nineteenth century scientists and curators in these museums, to justify the amassing of large collections. Framed as salvage, or as civilizing, a narrative of extinction made it justifiable, even necessary, to violently dispossess peoples of their objects as part of the documenting of humankind's so-called progress from authentic and primitive other, to civilized European.¹⁸ Such taking of things, the taking of ancestral belongings, should also be seen together with other forms of taking: of land, of language, of customs, but also of knowledge. Van Dooren's call to think about care at the edge of extinction in the first place reminds us that narratives of Indigenous extinction are not an innocent recounting of self-evident truths, but are structured within colonizing acts of violence that would push peoples and their beliefs and customs to the edge. How might we use the museum and their collections to uncover such colonizing acts, and what responsibilities do they place on those currently working in these museums towards redress? However, van Dooren also invites us to ask other questions. His work in the ethics of care may be work that demands of these museums, but also of society in general, to think and to act now in order to redress historical injustices and to repair worlds in our attempt to care for human and more than human life. It is these kinds of question about care that we believe to be important as we try to reorient the ethnographic and world cultures

museums beyond their preservationist projects towards care, towards being caring and careful spaces for different, more just, and equitable futures.

TAKING CARE

This publication is one of the outcomes of the TAKING CARE project, a four-year multi-sited project comprising thirteen ethnographic and world cultures museums across Europe and funded by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union. TAKING CARE builds on work already begun in several earlier projects – SWICH (2014–2018), RIME (2008–2012), and READ-ME I & II (2007–2012) – , which addressed similar but also very different questions. These earlier projects were designed to help the participant museums rethink their role and mission within changing European societies, especially focused on developing practices that could critically address the colonial contexts in which they were founded and the postcolonial (and some might even say the ongoing colonial) contexts in which they continue to operate. These projects took as axiomatic the idea that the legacies of Europe's colonial histories continue to shape contemporary social and political life, discourses, and relations, and that museums can play important roles in addressing these colonial entailments in the present, while proposing other ways to imagine what a future Europe could be like. These earlier projects have not only helped to create a strong network of museums across Europe, but also aided these museums to become important players in addressing, perhaps even in confronting the colonial past in the present, and for developing more inclusive and collaborative practices for working with the interwoven network of stakeholders interested in these issues, including postcolonial and post-migrant citizens within Europe and Indigenous communities globally.

TAKING CARE was organized around a set of overlapping themes that linked museums to broader societal, even planetary concerns, in particular climate and racial justice. By adopting this scalar approach, from inside the museum to the world and then back inside the museum again, we were responding to the call of scholars, and many other decolonial activists globally, that suggest that efforts to decolonize museums and other institutions must be closely aligned with broader justice movements. Ariella Azoulay succinctly describes this when she suggests that to decolonize the museum, we need to decolonize the world.¹⁹ The themes of the project, then, were informed by those activist mobilizations, such as *Decolonize this Place* in the USA, that took decolonization as a capacious category for caring that could help

19 See <<https://www.guernicamag.com/miscellaneous-files-ariella-aisha-azoulay/#:~:text=The%20political%20theorist%20argues%20that,been%20plundered%20from%20their%20culture>>, accessed 26 July 2023.

us to develop anti-capitalist, feminist, anti-racist, anti-land-dispossessive futures for all, and were especially mindful of the need to create liveable futures for the most precarious among us. The different museums participating in the project organized programmes around care that responded not only to their collections and their histories as museums, but also to the discursive political space in which the different museums are operating. Questions of ecological knowledges and sustainability, of preservation, restitution, and reparation, but also of cultural resilience and rejuvenation were addressed in workshops and residency programmes that took the political present as the backdrop for thinking possible futures. Creativity and collaboration, and even forms of friendship, were at the core of these programmes. We were increasingly committed to the importance of coalition-building across Europe, but perhaps more significantly, across North/South divides, to imagine and create the kinds of planetary futures we felt were needed. This became more urgent just after the project was awarded in 2019, when the Covid-19 pandemic took hold, making it not just increasingly difficult to come together, but for many, increasingly important to develop strategies of thinking and being together. It is out of these four years of speculative thinking and doing together that this book emerges.

As a cautionary note, we want to acknowledge that these projects remain experimental and unfinished. Even while we are grateful for the opportunities to think about the role that our museums can play in finding solutions for our world's most urgent problems, to imagine different kinds of futures, we are mindful that we are complicit as institutions in the ongoing coloniality of the world we live in. *Spaces of Care*, and *TAKING CARE* more broadly, is part of our attempt to decolonize our museums.

About the Book

Spaces of Care: Confronting Colonial Afterlives in European Ethnographic Museums is more than a mere documentation of the *TAKING CARE* project. It is a project of speculative and collaborative theory-making, and of building practices for a better world. Organized in three parts, the book brings together the works of a wide range of scholars from diverse fields and disciplines across the humanities and social sciences, with artists and activist, curators and members of diverse (source) communities all committed to thinking about care; indeed, they are all involved in enacting practices of radical care in an uncaring world.

We open with *Speculating Towards More Caring Futures*, where we invite scholars whose ongoing work addresses our core concerns in the project to explore the analytical purchase for thinking through the lens of care for the ethnographic and world cultures museum, in connection with broader struggles in society. These scholars all come from outside the field; they do not work in or on museums. Still, their work en-

gages with the very concerns that we believe are needed to imagine a different kind of museum, indeed a different kind of world beyond colonial duress.²⁰ This kind of scholarly provocation fits the spirit of the project, aimed as it was at creating a coalition of advocates for better, more equitable futures. Moreover, it is in line with what the other projects sought to engender, to proffer novel theoretical and practical approaches to our most stubborn struggles as institutions.

All the essays in this section emerged from the final conference of the project, *Re/Creating Kinship in the Ethnographic Museum in Europe*. The conference dealt with the question of whether care as an ethic and practice may help us push beyond object-oriented preservationist thinking, towards a museum guided by urgency and advocacy for a better, more just, and equitable world for human and more than human life. We were also interested in the ways ethnographic museums can help us think beyond reductive ideas about others, towards thinking about otherwise worlds as practices in future-making.

The questions of multi-species care in an interdependent world became one of the recurring themes throughout the conference and inform the papers included here. The precarity of pandemic life, but also the growing climate change denialism from various politicians across the world, including Donald Trump of the USA and Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, provided an urgent backdrop for the presentations as they explored what many believed to be our increasingly careless world. Taking as her starting point wirewall, the racist technology of detention that is symbolic of the kind of political imagination of dehumanization that connects histories of slavery and colonialism with our contemporary world, Miriam Ticktin connects the long history of carcerality to the material cultural association with contemporary anxieties about racialized migrants, especially in the USA. Ticktin draws on an earlier project in speculative collaborative design, focused on the microbiome to imagine other modes of inhabiting and sharing the world beyond walling and bordering. In so doing, she speculates on what an anti-racist and anti-colonial ethnographic museum could look like, one that placed caring for all life as core to its project.

In his essay 'The Future Claimant's Representative', Ian Baucom explores the temporality of responsibility for past and present-day injustices, or, more particularly, on how past and present injustices (will) live on into the future and how we can think about our responsibilities for such precarious futures to mitigate against them. He argues for a reorientation of our approaches to the law, to care for possible future claimants for planetary justice today, so as to abate our ongoing violent relationship with the planet, to be caring about what we bequeath to future inhabitants. Can museums be representatives of such future claimants?

In 'Toward a Negative Zoology', Mayanthi L. Fernando discusses the limits of human-centred approaches to understanding the multispecies ecologies we inhabit.

²⁰ Stoler 2014.

Fernando proposes that we think through the idea of 'a negative zoology ... where the other – divine, animal – can never be fully known, where that unbridgeable gap is a basic onto-epistemological fact of being human'. This, she suggests may 'hold open the possibility that a heterogeneous multiplicity of non-humans may be worlding worlds together, sometimes with us, sometimes without us ... unsettling the fantasy of human mastery, as an ethical and political opportunity to cultivate a different kind of multispecies liveability than the one we currently practice'.

Audra Mitchell offers a work in immersive, inter-species, speculative fiction in 'Holding on, Letting Go', where a group of strangers are guided by a flying fox (or perhaps another creature; we are unsure) through an exhibition on extinction. During the tour, they explore not only the ways in which our human and more than human interactions, our relations, reproduce long held structures of inequality and violence, but uncover the museum's role in sustaining such narratives and structures of inequality.

In 'Experiment and Excavation in the Ethnographic Museum', Juno Salazar Parreñas questions how care is often imagined as good, but can in fact be cruel. She asks: when does care become cruel? Drawing on her ongoing work to decolonize care, to show that even with good intentions practices of care can indeed be cruel, she offers up the museum up as a site for both excavation and for experimentation, as we imagine what care could look like within institutions of preservation.

And in 'Museums of Non-Natural History', Kathryn Yusoff trains our attention to think about the museum as a site for a redressive ethics and politics. Drawing on her own longstanding interest in the geological, she argues, through the work of Martinique poet and thinker Aimé Césaire, that 'museums of non-natural history are needed that are the result of sympathy for, rather than power over, the colonised. Museums that might be curated around redress and reparation of the irreparable. Museums—that might put the space of loss at their centre.'

Amie Soudien closes this section with 'Alongside One Another', inviting us to think of the (im)possibility of the museum being a site for critical fabulation. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Saidiya Hartman,²¹ she sees care in the potential of the archive to tell histories of those suppressed, those dispossessed of land, of history, of life, by the colonial project. Her narrative is based on the lives of two enslaved women at the Cape in the second half of the seventeenth century. She bridges the gap between histories of enslavement as pasts that are excluded from many national narratives, or mythologized for contemporary political ends.

While section one of the book invites scholars from outside the institution to speculate with the museum about what theory can deliver for practice, section two explores the museum from inside. In *Making (a) Difference* we allude to the long history of ethnographic museums' involvement in making difference; in participating

²¹ Hartmann 2008.

in fashioning and in bolstering notions of hierarchical relations across humans represented as incommensurably different, or the difference between human and more than human worlds. Based in a spirit of multi and poly, whether it is in vocalities or perspectival approaches, the main actors in this section are artists and activists who participated in the residency programme of the project, working with the different museums; they were invited to imagine what a museum of the otherwise could look like. These artists and activists, these arts-activists, these makers, were driven by ancestral, aesthetic, and political connections to the objects in the museum, and used their residencies to explore the museum as an archive of past, present, and future wisdom about decolonial care, about caring for the planet and its human and more than human inhabitants.

The third and final section, *Material Memories for Future Worlds*, consists of thirteen object lessons. In these chapters, we stay with the trouble of objects and collections, but also with the promise that they may hold to think more critically about social and environmental justice. Tracing the genealogy of specific objects and collections, the authors ask what objects can tell us about life at the edge of extinction, about peoples and traditions made vulnerable through Europe's colonial project, or the unyielding force of capitalism's extractive regime. They ask whether we can return to these objects as evidence of past carelessness in order to use them as signposts for what a future could look like.

One final note. The cover design for the book is taken from the series *Dark Pairing* by the Austrian artist Wie-yi T. Lauw, and explores colonialism through the lens of botany; the collecting of 'exotic' plants was an important part of colonialism's scientific, but also its economic logic. In her work, the artist illuminates the quest for domination by colonial powers over Indigenous cultures by depicting exotic plants tangled in a web.²² This work trains our attention on the fact that a large majority of the objects in our storages are made from plants. And yet we too often ignore them as plant life, as part of our worlds beyond the human. Made up of wood and other plant fibres, of gold and other metals, of feathers and other animal materials, the collections of our museums evidence humanity's place in an interdependent world, but also the human exploitation of the earth's resources. Within our museums we need to recall that gold and silver objects may represent cosmologies and aesthetic ingenuity, but they also represent deep histories of mining embedded in a (neo-)colonial extractive relationship with the earth, its resources and peoples. Objects made from feathers tell of shamanistic practices in places like Amazonia, but also stories of Indigenous ideas about human–non-human relations, and of species extinction.

TAKING CARE should remind us that a better understanding of our interdependencies among humans and also with more than human others may help reorient world cultures museums towards the kinds of ethics that will fashion them as

²² See Busch n.d.

spaces of care for human and more than human worlds. It reminds us that this can be done only by continuing to acknowledge these museum's role in Europe's colonial infrastructure and in the political calculus of unequal life that it has left in its wake. And, importantly, it recalls to us that this is urgent, if we are to succeed in imagining and fashioning different kinds of, more just and equitable worlds for all of the earth's inhabitants, human and more than human.

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