

## [Deadline Extension \(February 7, 2022\) – ‘Decolonizing’ Museums beyond the ‘Bifurcation of Nature’: Collections of non-European Origin, Colonial Extractivism, and Environmental Ruination](#)

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In recent years, efforts to decolonize western museums and institutions have focused on removing overtly racist ethnographic displays, repatriating or reburying human remains, and lobbying for the restitution of looted or disputed artifacts. Meanwhile, the same museums and institutions have rarely addressed the coloniality of their botanical, geological, zoological, and other ‘scientific’ collections of non-European origin (CNEO). Echoing this divide, digital restitution initiatives have often offered to origin communities remote access to the collections classified as ‘cultural’ but failed to do the same with those classified as ‘*naturalia*’. Concurrently, scholars concerned with environmental ruination and biodiversity loss in postcolonial contexts have rarely connected the extraction of indigenous sacred artefacts and ‘ethnographic objects’ with the long-term ecological effects of plantations and large-scale mining.

The apparent discontinuity between these issues stems from what Bruno Latour (2008), following Alfred North Whitehead (1920), has defined as the foremost “vice” of western thinking, namely the tendency to bifurcate nature into what partakes to science and what is the object of humanistic and aesthetic inquiry. Because of this tendency, important debates concerning the ‘decolonisation’ of western museums and institutions have been precluded. For instance, how exactly do geological and botanical displays continue to ground institutional forms of racial exclusion? How has the enforced division between scientific data (primary qualities) and cultural knowledge (secondary qualities) led digitization projects to: a) discounting the physicality of ‘ethnographic’ and ‘art pieces;’ b) disregarding alternative regimes of knowledge concerning ‘*naturalia*’; c) not returning the patented knowledge extracted from CNEO; and d) excluding the psychical restitution of ‘cultural’ assets such as archives and treasures. Lastly, how would the restitution of looted ‘art’ pieces and human remains contribute to the ecological renewal of ruined ecosystems?

The special issue ‘**Decolonizing’ museums beyond the “bifurcation of Nature”**: **collections of non-European origin, colonial extractivism, and environmental ruination** aims to create the conditions for these debates to happen. It seeks from 8 to 9 contributions that address one of the following three themes:

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<https://networks.h-net.org/node/73374/announcements/9554602/deadline-extension-february-7-2022-%E2%80%94-%E2%80%99decolonizing%E2%80%99-museums>

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1. **Authority:** The first theme stands for the projection of an exclusive authority over CNEO by formerly colonising or imperial powers. This issue identifies this projection as the foremost obstacle that scholars need to overcome for CNEO to be appraised not as resources but as archival repositories. In the words of Carolyn Hamilton ‘disciplinary separations were key in robbing certain materials of archival capacities,’ while, moreover, dispossessing whole population groups of the authority to author their own histories (2014). Conversely, by appraising ‘natural specimens’ exclusively as extractable resources, current mass-digitization programs are denying to non-western agents the authority to use extracted digitized data to author new or conflicting cultural discourses, natural histories, and scientific theories. For this theme, the guest editors will assess proposals for full-length articles that, besides deconstructing the meanings and value that colonial discourses attributed to CNEO, forcefully reclaim their full ‘archival capacities.’
2. **Dark matter:** The second theme stands for the vast amount of CNEO that, to date, are still unaccounted for. The guest editors identify this unaccounted vastness as the second biggest obstacle that scholars need to overcome to fully grasp the extent to which CNEO wholly informed the inception and development of most western disciplines, colonial projects of native people displacement, native land dispossession, and accumulation of national wealth. In ‘The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage’ (2018), Felwine Sarr and Benedict Savoy stated that the “total number [...] of the pieces housed in museums in France would be difficult to estimate.” Concurrently, Ciraj Rassool, Nicky Rousseau and Riedwaan Moosage (2018) have coined the term “missing-ness” to describe how ‘objects’ as diverse as the human remains of the victims of colonialism and apartheid, stolen cultural artifacts, and scientific specimens are still factually missing, thus rendered incapable to inform relevant public debates. For this theme, the guest editors will assess proposals for full-length articles that, besides proposing better ways to account for the CNEO held in any given institution, envision how missing objects would radically change the ways in which we conceive of anti-racism, the fight against white supremacy, and the struggle for climate justice.
3. **Information Loss:** The third theme stands for the fear that, if not ‘salvaged,’ the knowledge embedded in CNEO would have been lost. In the past, under the banner of preserving whole indigenous material cultures or species to ‘progress’ and ‘mass extinction’ respectively, ethnographers and imperial bio-prospectors looted and destroyed entire local systems of knowledge. The same fear still permeates current endeavours, including projects of mass digitization that posit themselves as necessary to counter ecocide and environmental ruination. However, the violence of the first looting can be repeated in the process of migrating data from the analogic to the digital and, then from one metadata standard to another. This is the case in that information that is critical to re-invest formerly colonised subjects of their authority, might get lost. To counter this risk, the guest editors will assess proposals for full-length articles that, besides documenting how digitization projects repeat instead of redressing the violence of historical colonialism, elaborate upon possible measures that can be taken so that non-western agents can exert their authority over newly extracted digitized data.

To express your interest in the proposed special issue, please send an **abstract** of maximum **350 words** and **bio note** of maximum **150 words** to the guest editors João Figueiredo and Maria Elena Indelicato by **February 7, 2022**. Selected contributors will be notified by **March 7, 2022**. Pending approval, the special issue will be hosted by the journal **Cultural Studies** (H-index 52) and published early in **2023**. If you any question, please feel free to get in touch with the guest editors

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