Introduction

The term “decoloniality” has been incorporated into the institutional vocabulary of museums and heritage organizations in recent years, moving from the periphery of critical theory. Decoloniality, which was formerly linked to radical criticisms of colonial power, knowledge production, and epistemic hierarchy, is now commonly used in financing frameworks, mission statements, exhibition narratives, and policy declarations. By incorporating concepts like “community engagement,” “representation,” and “decolonization” into their institutional identity, museums are increasingly positioning themselves as hubs of ethical responsibility, inclusivity, and discourse. This shift reflects broader transformations in how cultural institutions respond to historical injustices and contemporary demands for accountability. But it also poses an important question: what happens when a structural critique-based idea turns into institutional language?

The idea of “coloniality of power,” which describes the persistent systems of dominance created during colonialism that continue to influence global hierarchies of knowledge, labor, and identity, provides the theoretical foundation for decoloniality (Quijano, 2000). According to this viewpoint, decoloniality represents a serious challenge to the political and epistemological underpinnings of contemporary institutions rather than just a remedial action. It aims to challenge prevailing narratives and established knowledge systems and highlight historically marginalized alternative modes of knowledge. This means rethinking institutional authority, governance, and the conditions under which knowledge is created and presented in addition to reinterpreting collections in the context of museums and heritage.

However, the meaning and purpose of decoloniality shifted as it became part of institutional discourse. Decolonization, according to Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), is a materially grounded process connected to land, sovereignty, and structural change rather than a metaphor. Their criticism draws attention to the danger of decolonial language becoming diluted into a collection of symbolic gestures or rhetorical commitments when it is separated from those underlying conditions. This translation can lead to a type of conceptual slippage in institutional settings, where the use of decoloniality indicates ethical consciousness without necessarily changing underlying power dynamics. In this way, the use of decolonial terminology may function more as a means of institutional alignment with present moral and political standards than as a process of transformation.

The formal frameworks through which museums define their responsibilities make this

process of institutional translation particularly visible. In 2022, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) adopted a revised museum definition that foregrounds accessibility, inclusivity, diversity, sustainability, ethical and professional practice, community participation, reflection, and knowledge sharing. The definition states:

"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, 2022).

The significance of this formulation lies in the way social and ethical expectations are codified within an internationally recognizable professional vocabulary. In this sense, institutional language refers to the formal terms through which institutions articulate their responsibilities, values, and legitimate modes of practice. Such language should not, however, be equated with decoloniality itself. Accessibility, inclusion, diversity, and participation may intersect with concerns raised by decolonial critique, but they do not in themselves entail a redistribution of institutional authority, a transformation of epistemic hierarchies, or a material reckoning with colonial collections and histories. The 2022 definition therefore makes visible a central tension of institutionalization: critical and ethical demands can gain recognition and legitimacy through their incorporation into formal professional language, while such translation may also delimit the forms in which critique becomes institutionally intelligible and actionable. Whether this recognition produces substantive change ultimately depends on how these commitments are interpreted and enacted within particular institutional and national contexts.

By analyzing decoloniality as a type of institutional language in museums and heritage contexts, this paper attempts to answer these questions. Here, the emphasis is on how decoloniality itself changes when it enters institutional frameworks rather than evaluating the success or failure of decolonial endeavors. The main contention is that decolonization functions within a constructive tension: it enables forms of critique while opening new discursive space, but it is also vulnerable to institutional processes of standardization, translation, and containment. This study aims to comprehend the boundaries and potential of critique inside contemporary cultural institutions by examining the mobilization, circulation, and operationalization of decolonial terminology.

Methodologically, this article is a theoretically informed critical analysis rather than an

empirical study of a single institution or a systematic discourse analysis. It brings decolonial scholarship into dialogue with institutional theory and museum studies, using selected institutional texts and debates including the ICOM Museum Definition, the UNESCO Recommendation, and restitution discourse as illustrative sites through which the institutional translation of decolonial and related normative vocabularies can be examined. These examples are not intended to represent museums universally, but to illuminate the processes through which critique is articulated, negotiated, and potentially contained within institutional settings.

Decoloniality as a Critical Project

Decoloniality develops as a critical and transformative response to coloniality rather than simply as a corrective to the historical record of colonialism. Aníbal Quijano's early-1990s formulation of coloniality, subsequently elaborated through his account of the coloniality of power, provides a foundational point of reference for this distinction (Quijano, 1992; 2000). Whereas colonialism refers to direct political and territorial relations of domination, coloniality describes enduring patterns of power that outlive formal colonial administrations and continue to organize social classification, labor, authority, subjectivity, and knowledge. Central to Quijano's account is the racial classification established through the conquest of the Americas and subsequently embedded within the modern/colonial global order. Later decolonial scholarship foregrounded interconnected dimensions of these relations, including the coloniality of knowledge, which examines the privileging and universalization of Eurocentric epistemologies (Lander, 2000; Mignolo, 2000); the coloniality of being, which addresses the effects of colonial power on subjectivity, lived existence, and the differential attribution of humanity (Maldonado-Torres, 2007); and the coloniality of seeing, which examines the visual regimes through which racialized difference and colonial hierarchies are produced and reproduced (Barriendos, 2011). Decoloniality therefore does not constitute a single doctrine derived mechanically from coloniality, but a heterogeneous intellectual and political praxis concerned with identifying, contesting, unsettling, and transforming the material, epistemic, ontological, and representational conditions through which coloniality continues to be reproduced. In the context of museums, this distinction shifts attention beyond correcting historical narratives toward examining the structures that authorize particular forms of collecting, classification, interpretation, representation, and knowledge production while marginalizing others.

Walter D. Mignolo's concept of "delinking," which advocates a disengagement from the epistemic frameworks of Western modernity, is a key articulation of this effort (Mignolo, 2007). According to Mignolo, expanding or diversifying current frameworks is insufficient because coloniality is ingrained in the basic framework of contemporary knowledge. Rather, decolonization necessitates a shift in perspective that goes beyond the universal assertions of Western epistemology, creating room for what he refers to as a "pluriversal" reality of several coexisting knowledge systems. This change challenges those who have the power to create knowledge and whose viewpoints are accepted in institutional settings, making it profoundly political as well as methodological.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) extends this criticism by introducing the idea of the "coloniality of being," highlighting the ways in which colonial authority influences subjectivity and existence itself in addition to knowledge. According to this viewpoint, coloniality shapes how people and communities are acknowledged, respected, or excluded at the level of lived experience. Therefore, decolonization entails more than just symbolic inclusion; it necessitates a change in the social and institutional structures that determine who is fully human. Understanding the limitations of institutional responses that prioritize visibility or representation above deeper processes of marginalization requires an awareness of this ontological component.

Ramón Grosfoguel (2013), who challenges the epistemic underpinnings of Westernized universities and intellectual traditions, expands the continuance of colonialism within knowledge institutions. He contends that historical patterns of exclusion that favor some types of reasoning while marginalizing others have shaped contemporary knowledge systems. Since museums and heritage organizations serve as hubs for the creation and sharing of knowledge, this criticism is especially pertinent to them. These organizations are crucial in maintaining epistemic hierarchies through the selection, categorization, and interpretation of cultural content. In this setting, decolonization questions not just what is on show but also the frameworks used to create meaning.

By putting out the idea of "connected sociologies," Gurminder Bhambra (2014) expands this school of thought and urges a reconsideration of historical and social analysis outside of Eurocentric frameworks. She supports an approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness and entanglement of world histories rather than using Western modernity as the primary point of reference. By challenging the idea of European uniqueness and highlighting alternate histories and experiences, this viewpoint supports decolonial goals. Such an approach affects how audiences are engaged, how narratives are

organized, and how collections are viewed in institutional contexts.
It is crucial to consider how language itself functions within this vital endeavor, even as these theoretical contributions clarify the objectives and extent of decolonization. A helpful framework for comprehending the stakes of decolonial discourse is provided by Pierre Bourdieu's notion of language as symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991). According to Bourdieu, language is a site of power where authority is established and challenged rather than a neutral medium of communication. It is a type of symbolic dominance in and of itself to be able to define concepts, frame arguments, and establish discourse terms. In this way, the rise of decolonial language in institutional settings may be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity: it creates room for criticism, but it also raises concerns about who oversees its meaning and how it is used.

The Institutionalization of Decolonial Language

As decolonial ideas have been taken up within museums and heritage institutions, they have increasingly been translated into the formal vocabularies of policy, governance, professional practice, curatorial interpretation, and institutional self-description. This does not constitute a single historical turning point, nor does institutional adoption occur uniformly across national or institutional contexts. Rather, it describes an uneven process through which a critique of colonial power and epistemic hierarchy becomes articulated within established institutional forms. In this process, decolonial language may acquire greater visibility and legitimacy while simultaneously being shaped by the organizational structures, professional norms, and relations of authority through which it circulates.
Sara Ahmed's research on diversity work within institutions provides an important account of how critical vocabularies can become institutionalized. Ahmed (2012) describes some institutional commitments to diversity as "non-performatives": statements and policy commitments that may register an official stance without necessarily bringing about the changes they name. The relevant issue, therefore, is not that the institutions themselves simply remain in place, but that institutional policies, routine procedures, decision-making structures, and relations of authority may remain substantially unchanged even as the language of inclusion and anti-racism becomes more visible. Ahmed's analysis should not be taken to equate diversity discourse with decoloniality; rather, it identifies a mechanism through which critical demands can be translated into recognizable institutional vocabularies and become signs of responsiveness. This mechanism is particularly relevant to

museums, where decolonial terminology may enter strategic documents, exhibitions, public programmes, and professional discourse without necessarily altering the structures governing collections, curatorial authority, representation, restitution, or relationships with source communities. Recent museum scholarship has similarly drawn connections between Ahmed's critique of diversity policy and the decolonial turn in European museums, while questioning whether decolonial interventions necessarily transform the institutional conditions within which they operate (Monbaron, 2024). The institutional uptake of decolonial language should therefore be treated neither as proof of transformation nor as merely empty rhetoric; its significance depends on whether discursive commitments are accompanied by changes in policy, practice, authority, and material relations.

The work of Meyer and Rowan (1977) further clarifies the distinction between formal institutional commitment and organizational practice. They argue that organizations often incorporate widely institutionalized rules, categories, and formal structures because these confer legitimacy, even when such structures are only loosely connected to everyday activities. This process of "decoupling" enables organizations to demonstrate conformity with broader social expectations while maintaining continuity in their internal operations. Applied to the institutional uptake of decolonial discourse, this suggests that the incorporation of decolonial terminology into policy statements, strategic documents, and other forms of institutional communication may provide museums with a recognizable language of ethical responsiveness without necessarily producing equivalent changes in organizational structures or decision-making practices. The issue is therefore not whether such institutional commitments are inherently substantive or merely symbolic, but how far formal commitments are translated into changes in practice. Thus, a key aspect of the institutional uptake of decolonial discourse is the potential gap between formal commitment and organizational practice.

The larger culture of responsibility and verification that Michael Power (1997) outlined is intimately related to this dynamic. Institutions are increasingly expected to show adherence to normative standards by quantifiable indicators, reports, and assessments in what he refers to as the "audit society." This approach breaks down difficult social and ethical problems into digestible categories that can be evaluated and tracked. When integrated into such systems, decolonization is frequently operationalized through policy statements, diversity indicators, and checklists that make it understandable within institutional procedures. These methods run the risk of reducing decolonial critique to a collection of procedural criteria, even though they may promote visibility and consistency. The focus on

documentation and verification may divert attention from more fundamental structural issues, favoring easily quantifiable forms of interaction over those that actually defy institutional norms.

This institutionalization trend is particularly visible at the level of international cultural policy. The UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society (2015), for example, articulates an expanded social role for museums through the language of cultural diversity, social cohesion, accessibility, and public participation. In its discussion of the social role of museums, the Recommendation states that "Museums should be places that are open to all and committed to physical and cultural access to all, including disadvantaged groups" (UNESCO, 2015, para. 17). It also calls for communication policies attentive to integration, access, and social inclusion; encourages collaborative and participatory relationships between museums, communities, civil society, and the public; and, in relation to Indigenous heritage, supports dialogue concerning collection management and, where appropriate, return or restitution (UNESCO, 2015, paras. 11, 18, 24). These provisions illustrate how a shared normative vocabulary of inclusion, participation, accessibility, and institutional responsibility is articulated at the level of international museum policy. This vocabulary should not be equated with decoloniality itself; rather, it intersects with several concerns addressed by contemporary decolonial museum discourse. The analytical question is therefore how such internationally legitimized commitments are taken up and translated within museum institutions, and whether their incorporation into policy and professional language is accompanied by substantive changes in institutional practice, authority, and material relations.

Laurajane Smith's (2006) idea of the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), which outlines the prevalent methods in which heritage is identified, managed, and transmitted, sheds additional light on the importance of discourse in forming institutional practice. Smith claims that heritage organizations provide a framework that establishes what constitutes acceptable heritage by favoring narratives, values, and types of knowledge. Decolonial language may be assimilated into pre-existing systems, strengthening rather than altering institutional authority, without necessarily upsetting the framework's basic logic. Initiatives that are characterized as "decolonizing," for instance, could nonetheless function within preexisting curatorial hierarchies, retaining control over representation and interpretation even as they use more inclusive rhetoric. This implies that the institutionalization of decolonization entails both the adoption of a new language and its negotiation within

established power structures.

When combined, these viewpoints demonstrate the intricate processes by which decolonization transforms into institutional language. On the one hand, its incorporation into institutional discourse reflects a growing recognition of the need to address colonial legacies and engage with diverse perspectives. On the other hand, the processes through which this incorporation occurs, standardization, codification, and integration into policy frameworks, can limit the transformative potential of decolonial critique. The institutionalization of decolonial language thus operates within a tension between visibility and containment, where the very mechanisms that enable its circulation also shape its meaning and impact.

Understanding this tension needs more than just distinguishing between success and failure. The concern is not whether institutions are truly 'decolonizing', but how the vocabulary of decolonization is mobilized within institutional contexts, and what this indicates about the relationship between critique and power. Examining the ways in which decolonial discourse is translated into institutional forms allows us to see both the potential and limitations of engaging with decoloniality from within the structures it aspires to reform.

Between Critique and Containment: Potentials and Limits

The absorption of decoloniality into institutional discourse is more than just a loss of critical force, and it cannot be viewed exclusively as co-optation. Rather, it creates a complicated and ambiguous realm in which criticism and containment coexist. The institutionalization of decolonial discourse allows for new kinds of visibility, ethical engagement, and reflexivity while also subjecting critique processes of translation, regulation, and absorption. Understanding this contradiction implies a shift away from binary assessments and toward an examination of how institutions promote and restrict decolonial revolutionary aims.

Andrea Fraser's understanding of institutional critique offers one of the most important insights into this relationship. According to Fraser (2005), contemporary critique no longer exists outside of institutions, but rather acts within them, frequently becoming a part of the exact systems it attempts to question. In this view, critique is not an external opposition, but rather an internal practice influenced by institutional circumstances. When applied to decoloniality, this implies that its articulation inside museums and heritage institutions is inextricably linked to their logic. Adoption of decolonial language does not happen in a

vacuum; it is rooted in professional norms, administrative systems, and expectations of accountability. As a result, critique risks becoming institutionalized as a recognized and even mandatory method of speech, reducing its disruptive power in the process. However, Fraser's thesis argues that such institutionalization does not make critique worthless. Rather, it alters its mode of functioning, implying a more sophisticated understanding of how critical activities interact within institutional frameworks.

This tension is particularly visible in discussions about restitution and the material ramifications of decolonial claims. Dan Hicks (2020), in his research of the Benin Bronzes, emphasizes the limitations of symbolic gestures that fail to address the practical reality of colonial oppression. For Hicks, returning looted goods is more than just an issue of ethical representation; it is also an essential step in confronting the legacy of imperial extraction. In this context, the use of decolonial discourse without accompanying tangible action can be interpreted as a sort of deferral, in which institutions acknowledge historical injustices while postponing or preventing substantive change. However, the growing popularity of restitution debates indicates how decolonial discourse can put pressure on institutions, forcing them to engage with issues they may otherwise overlook. Even when institutionalized, the discourse of decoloniality can open the door to more substantial interventions, although uneven and contentious ones.

The Horniman Museum and Gardens provides a concrete example of how this tension operates in institutional practice. Following a restitution request from Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) and provenance research into the circumstances of acquisition, the Horniman transferred legal ownership of 72 objects taken from Benin City during the British military invasion of 1897 to Nigeria in November 2022 (Merriman, 2024). Six objects were physically returned at the time of the transfer, while others remained at the Horniman under loan arrangements with the NCMM. The significance of the case lies not only in institutional acknowledgment of colonial violence, but in a material alteration of ownership and authority. At the same time, restitution did not terminate the institutional relationship, since objects continued to circulate through loan arrangements and related practices of research, conservation, and display. The Horniman case therefore complicates a simple opposition between transformation and containment: restitution produced a substantive redistribution of legal authority while simultaneously generating new forms of institutional negotiation and continued circulation.

Amy Lonetree's work on museum decolonization delves deeper into the ethical elements of this contradiction. Lonetree (2012) emphasizes the significance of confronting difficult

histories and interacting with underrepresented people's daily realities, stating that museums must move beyond celebratory narratives and towards more honest and inclusive portrayals. However, she notes the limits that institutions face, such as finance systems, governance models, and professional practices, which hinder the breadth of reform. This creates a situation in which museums can utilize decolonial terminology and make reforms like collaborative displays or altered interpretive tactics while keeping fundamental institutional structures intact. The result is not failure, but rather a limited and negotiated kind of involvement in which ethical goals are modified by institutional realities. Lonetree's approach emphasizes the necessity of acknowledging both the opportunities and the constraints of institutional change, without limiting one to the other.

A comparable level of intricacy can be found in Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy's (2018) study on the recovery of African cultural assets – a turning point in the translation of decolonial principles into policy. Their recommendations, which call for the restitution of artifacts taken during colonial times, show how critical discourse may affect political and institutional goals. The report demonstrates a transition from symbolic acknowledgment to real action plans, implying that, under certain conditions, decolonial discourse might lead to tangible results. However, the various answers to these ideas highlight the limitations of such transformations. While some institutions have begun to engage in reparation processes, others have opposed or delayed implementation, demonstrating the unequal translation of discourse into practice. This unevenness reflects the larger difficulty of institutional change, in which competing interests, legal frameworks, and political concerns affect the amount to which decolonial promises are met.

Taken all together, these arguments imply that the relationship between critique and containment should not be viewed in rigid or opposing terms. The institutional adoption of decolonial language does not merely reduce critique, nor does it completely achieve its transformative potential. Instead, it modifies the environment in which critique occurs. Incorporating decolonial terminology into institutional frameworks can help it gain visibility and become part of professional and policy debate. Simultaneously, the procedures that facilitate this circulation, such as standardization, bureaucratic translation, and alignment with institutional priorities, shape and, in some cases, limit the scope of that critique. Rather than addressing this contradiction, institutions become sites of ongoing production and negotiation.

This also reflects a broader trait of institutions. According to Fraser (2005), institutions are not cohesive or static structures, but rather a collection of diverse, often competing,

behaviors and goals. Changes inside them typically occur gradually and unevenly, influenced by both internal dynamics and external stimuli. When decoloniality enters this milieu, it is transformed by institutional routines, expectations, and limits. The question is not whether institutions can fully deliver decolonial promises, but rather how critical discourse and institutional practice intersect to produce incomplete, sometimes conflicting results. Decolonial language's impacts must be understood in the context of these uneven and contested processes.

The institutionalization of decolonial language demonstrates the limitations of both blind optimism and complete skepticism. To see institutional participation as merely transformational ignores the ways power acts through language, policy, and structure. Conversely, seeing it as mere co-optation ignores the opportunities and pressures that such participation might create. The issue is to retain a critical awareness of these relations, acknowledging that decoloniality inside institutions is neither completely emancipatory nor utterly contained. Instead, it is a space of perpetual negotiation, where the meanings and consequences of decolonial discourse are constantly created, contested, and reinvented.

Knowledge, Position, and Institutional Authority

The concept of decoloniality as an institutional language is inextricably linked to the perspectives of people who engage with it. Knowledge concerning decoloniality is not created in a neutral or universal setting, particularly in museums and historical institutions. Specific locales, academic traditions, and institutional ties determine how decolonial ideas are understood, interpreted, and mobilized. As such, any examination of decolonial discourse must consider the contexts under which it is generated, as well as the positionalities that inform it.

Researchers frequently navigate uneven geographies of knowledge across academic and institutional settings. Even when scholarship addresses diverse geographical contexts shaped by colonial histories and ongoing relations of coloniality, dominant forms of theory production and international circulation remain disproportionately concentrated in Euro-American academic and institutional centers, including within heritage and museum studies (Quijano, 2000; Brulon Soares and Leshchenko, 2018). From a decolonial perspective, this unevenness should not be understood as a residual condition confined to formerly colonized societies; rather, it reflects the persistence of coloniality within contemporary structures of knowledge production and epistemic authority. Decolonial critique may therefore be

articulated through the very academic frameworks and institutions whose epistemic hierarchies it seeks to unsettle. This creates a productive but difficult tension for scholars working within these institutions, who must negotiate critical aims alongside established disciplinary conventions and institutional expectations. Unequal access to resources, archives, publishing infrastructures, and other mechanisms of scholarly circulation further shapes whose knowledge acquires visibility and authority and whose remains marginalized.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work on decolonizing research offers a valuable foundation for comprehending these interactions. Smith (2021) contends that research has historically been linked to colonial projects, particularly in how it categorizes, represents, and interprets Indigenous and non-Western communities. According to this viewpoint, decolonizing research entails more than just shifting topics or views but also challenging the underlying assumptions and power dynamics that shape knowledge production. For researchers working in institutional settings, this raises important considerations regarding power and responsibility. How can one interact with decoloniality without perpetuating the hierarchies it critiques? To what extent can institutional research frameworks accept different epistemologies?

When the researcher functions as both participant and spectator of institutional processes, these problems become more complex. Donna Haraway (1988) contends that knowledge is always "situated", formed by the specific positions and experiences of those who create it. The concept of a detached or objective perspective is thus unhelpful, especially in domains concerned with power, representation, and history. In the context of this article, the analysis of institutional language is informed by a perspective that is not independent of the structures under consideration. Engagement with museums, legacy discourse, and academic frameworks requires participation in the same systems that propagate decolonial or colonial language.

At the same time, acknowledging the contextual nature of knowledge does not rule out the possibility of critical examination. Rather, it offers a more transparent and reflective framework for comprehending how arguments are created. The goal is not to assert an authoritative or universal perspective, but to recognize the analysis's incomplete and contingent nature. This is especially critical when working in environments with diverse historical, cultural, and institutional variables. The gap between the Global South and European contexts, for example, is more than just geographical; it reflects larger disparities in access, representation, and institutional authority. These differences influence knowledge creation as well as how decoloniality is viewed and utilized.

Within this perspective, the researcher's job can be characterized as one of negotiation rather than resolution. Engaging with decoloniality from within institutional contexts entails balancing critique and participation, the desire to question dominant frameworks and the restrictions of operating within them. This perspective is not exceptional, but rather reflects a larger trend in contemporary academia, in which critical thoughts circulate inside institutional frameworks that both facilitate and limit their expression. Recognizing this dialectics does not alleviate the conflicts raised in previous sections, but it helps clarify the perspective from which they are viewed.

Finally, the question is not whether it is possible to completely disengage from institutional systems, but rather how awareness of one's position within them might guide more cautious and critical engagement. Recognizing the contextual and uneven nature of knowledge production allows us to approach decoloniality as an ongoing negotiation molded by both intellectual and institutional forces, rather than as a permanent framework.

Conclusion

This paper investigated what happens to decoloniality as it transitions from a critical philosophical perspective to the operational language of museums and heritage institutions. Rather than viewing decoloniality as a stable framework that can be easily implemented, the analysis has revealed that institutional adoption alters both its meaning and function. As a critique, decoloniality seeks to challenge prevailing epistemologies and question the authority of established knowledge systems. However, as it becomes embedded in institutional discourse, via policy language, curatorial tactics, and professional norms, it is rearticulated in ways that are consistent with the same structures. This does not mean that decolonization is useless, but it does change the circumstances in which it can work.

What emerges is not a straightforward story of change or co-optation, but rather a more unsteady and disputed landscape. Adopting decolonial terminology has the potential to broaden institutional perspectives, allowing for previously marginalized debates, ethical assertions, and modes of interaction. Simultaneously, the procedures that permit its incorporation, standardization, bureaucratic translation, and alignment with institutional priorities, shape its boundaries. In this sense, decoloniality becomes both a tool and a constraint: it circulates widely, but frequently in forms that conform to institutional frameworks rather than undermine them. This dual movement emphasizes the difficulty of continuing a significant endeavor in environments structured around continuity,

responsibility, and controlled change.
The repercussions of this tension go beyond institutional behavior and into larger conditions of knowledge production. If decoloniality is always mediated by the contexts in which it is articulated, its critical potential cannot be appraised in isolation. The question is thus not whether institutions have succeeded in 'becoming' decolonial, but rather how decolonial discourse is produced, contested, and reconfigured inside them. Recognizing this does not reduce the significance of decolonial work; rather, it places it in the context of continuing negotiation, where critique is neither wholly absorbed nor entirely external. The importance of decoloniality in contemporary museums and heritage work must be understood within this ambiguous space, between articulation and containment.

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