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Racialization and the Politics of Visibility

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Introduction to the thematic issue: racialisation and the politics of visibility

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Racialization and the Politics of Visibility

The statement that “visibility is a battlefield” has become a truism. However, in recent years, there has been a revival of the struggle for the recognition and redistribution of visual resources. One example is the call for decolonization, which draws on the reflections of Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, the activism of indigenous peoples in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Oceania, among others, as well as newly analyzed anti-colonial traditions.

In the field of culture, the decolonization of museums has become a burning topic. Its most important demand is to criticize the entanglement of cultural and knowledge institutions in European colonialism, and to combine this criticism with corrective action. Therefore, one of the activists’ main demands has become to return cultural objects that have been seized, acquired illegally or unethically, and to change the way non-European cultures are presented and narrated. The decolonization of museums also means reworking the ways of understanding art and culture still present in museum practices and research methodologies rooted in the colonial project.¹ Bruno Brulon Soares and Andrea Witcomb have described the multiplicity of meanings and possibilities for understanding the practice of decolonization, acknowledging that there is “no singular ‘decolonial’ approach that can be seen as detached from context, from politics, or from situated issues that will allow different groups and professionals to formulate, through negotiations and disputes, their own situated solutions.”²

Decolonization also implies a critical analysis of the relationship of individuals, institutions, and social mechanisms in the reproduction of patterns of whiteness. Such schemas are often normative and internalized by both majority and minority individuals, as well as by those institutions responsible for the production of knowledge, deciding, for example, on the visibility

and accessibility of archives. Interventions, exhibitions, subaltern knowledge production, community building, and solidarity are some of the ways in which we critically engage with established structures. These also aim to create a new inclusive language and social spaces in which the rights and demands of minorities are respected, and the minorities themselves are treated as partners rather than as a cultural resource or guardians of artefacts. By focusing on collaboration in the spirit of a community-based approach, the decolonization of museums aims to create sustainable relationships in which curators and institutions share authority on an equal footing with minorities.

Contemporary decolonization practices also face criticism from communities with different cultural or political backgrounds. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang rightly remind us in their account of violent settler colonialism in North America, decolonization is not a convenient metaphor that can be used to point out the inadequacies of institutions, but a real struggle by indigenous people and minorities to change social relations. Tuck and Yang's aim "is to remind readers what is unsettling about decolonization – what is unsettling and what should be unsettling," and thereby undermine its superficial domestication.³ Kevin Ochieng Okoth, on the other hand, points out that the field of decolonization studies is often dominated by academics working in wealthy and resource-accumulating universities in "Western" centers, reproducing Eurocentrism and consequently "epistemological colonialism."⁴

Given these conditions and debates, in this issue of *View* we focus not so much on demands related to the decolonization of cultural institutions or on visions of the future articulated in discourses on museums, but on an analysis of contemporary and historical mechanisms of visibility distribution concerning the groups that are subject to racialization. By focusing on the nexus between racialization, visibility, and minorities, we argue that visual culture – as an indispensable part of the process of

racialization and the creation of unequal dynamics in which minorities are in a weaker position – can also, or even should, rework and rewrite these relations in an active yet self-critical way.

Following J. L. A. Garcia, we understand racialization itself as that which is “*done to a group, by some social agent, at a certain time, for a given period, in and through various processes, and relative to a particular social context.*”⁵ In turn, the spectrum of this process can be grasped by referring to Philomena Essed’s definition, which brings together different scales of racism by analyzing “ordinary” racist interactions anchored in “ordinary” everyday life that affect Black people in the USA and the Netherlands.⁶ From a contemporary perspective, Essed’s descriptions of everyday racism can be seen as racializing processes.

In this issue, we are interested in how visual culture, migration, memory, and archives structure and produce knowledge about relations with countries in the Global South, as well as the histories of local immigrant communities in Europe. We also consider how archives themselves, institutions, exhibition practices, and processes of knowledge and culture production are being transformed by these contacts and grassroots immigrant activism. For many of our contributors, the archive is not just a stable and static resource holding the official information of various institutions, but rather a material and strategy for self-description and reflection. Therefore, part of this issue of *View* presents unobvious cultural migrant archives, artworks, memories, and interventions.

The cover of the issue features the work of Tammy Nguyen, a Vietnamese American artist. The image is created like a patchwork, by combining different materials, techniques, colors, and textures. The rich, layered, and sensual collage mixes etching and silkscreen with xerography, different types of paper, and newspaper prints with patterns reminiscent of Indonesian batiks. Peeking out from under the layers of color are fragmented, often technical descriptions of landscapes and their natural resources. The name Ertzberg (Dutch for “mountain of gold”), given to a mountain peak in New Guinea by a Dutch geologist who also described the rich copper deposits found there, appears several times.⁷ These studies laid the groundwork for the later exploitation of the mountains by the American company Freeport Minerals Co, and the creation of the Grasberg Mining District, one of the world’s largest gold and copper mines. While generating huge financial profits for the company, the extraction of natural resources has had dramatic consequences for the indigenous population, leaving them destitute, dispossessed of their land, and forced to live among toxic industrial waste. The SOS signal, which is repeated throughout the work, evokes these dangers. However, the artist is not only referring to the history of extractivist colonialism, but also to attempts to build alliances. Another thread in the work is the print of a newspaper article dedicated to the 1955 Bandung Conference, which brought together representatives of post-colonial African and Asian states, and laid the foundations for the Non-Aligned Movement and political projects of Afro-Asian solidarity.

Visually, Nguyen’s work combines the haptic aesthetic of inorganic matter with the scientific language of geology and the



Tammy Nguyen, *SOS: The Contact Zones Are Very Rich in Metasomatic Ores*, 2024

historical discourse of archival material. Meanwhile, the work's title, *SOS: The Contact Zones Are Very Rich in Metasomatic Ores*, adds further threads and associations. The "contact zones" evoke liminal contact spaces, and the term metasomatoses, borrowed from the language of geology to describe "changes in the chemical and mineral composition of a rock under the influence of circulating solutions within it," links movement, contact, and change, evoking not only the substance of rocks, but also the body (soma).⁸

The articles and texts gathered in this issue describe zones of contact in equally multifaceted and multidirectional ways, tracing, for example, the relations and tensions between minority knowledge production and the self-representation of racialized minorities and the ways in which they are presented and described in museums, or exploring archives at the interface between the personal and the institutional.

The issue opens with **Viewpoint**, which presents the work of the Roma feminist collective Roma Stars, founded by Mihaela Drăgan and Niko G. Roma Stars' songs deal with the contemporary situation of women, the struggle for their rights, raising issues of self-determination and self-representation for Roma women. Some songs, for example "Techno Witches," are elaborate alternative visions of a future in which Roma techno-witches wield emancipatory technologies based on accumulated knowledge. Others narrate current struggles, charting horizons of feminist intersectional solidarity.

The **Close-Up** section brings together scholarly articles that illuminate the problem of the visibility of archives, knowledge production, and the practices of cultural institutions concerning the representation of the histories of racialized minorities from different perspectives. The texts refer both to the present and analyze historical discourses and methods of representation. Some address the visibility of colonial histories, the traces of migration, and the mobility of minorities, while

others refer to the local perspective in Central and Eastern Europe, which is important for our issue.

This multifaceted section of *View* begins with a Polish translation of a chapter of the already canonical book *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* by Afro-Surinamese Dutch anthropologist Gloria Wekker, entitled “*‘...For Even Though I Am Black as Soot, My Intentions Are Good’: The Case of Zwarte Piet/Black Pete.*” The text discusses in depth the debate about the figure of Zwarte Piet [Black Pete] that swept across the Netherlands in the early 21st century. During the annual Sinterklaas festival parade, participants dress up as the character, painting their faces in blackface style and wearing wigs imitating afro hair. Pete has been described as “Santa’s Moorish helper,” but his story is linked to the history of the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved people, in which the Dutch colonial empire was involved. Wekker illuminates both the complex legal arguments, such as the handling of attempts to block the parade, as well as the artistic interventions organized by the Van Abbemuseum, and reconstructs and analyses the motivations of the Dutch in standing up for this “innocent” tradition. The text takes on weight and further meaning not only in the context of the recent victory of the Dutch right-wing populist Party for Freedom [PVV], but also Polish debates about school reading matter such as Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *In Desert and Wilderness*, whose racializing language is often presented as entirely “innocent.”

The articles collected in this section problematize how particular institutional and artistic practices take into account the presence of minorities and document the stories of people from racialized communities. Xuan Ma’s text examines the exhibition *Our Journeys, Our Stories*, from the Hurstville Museum & Gallery in New South Wales, Australia, which addressed the cultural history of Chinese immigrants. Analyzing the exhibited works by Chinese Australian artists Guan Wei and Linda Lee, Ma

demonstrates the potential of artistic research to reconfigure the relationship between institutional and personal archives through the rewriting of racialized migration histories.

The topic of archives of images in the context of colonial violence is also raised in Birgit Eusterschulte's article, in which she juxtaposes the artistic strategies of Belinda Kazeem-Kaminski and Nnenna Onuoha. These artists negotiate the visibility of colonial images differently, advocating either their critical presentation (Onuoha) or an analysis of the mechanisms of visibility without showing the images themselves (Kazeem-Kaminski). Following the thought of Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, Eusterschulte explores how artistic forms of historicization can become productive practices of (re)learning.

Thari Jungen and Friederike Nastold put two exhibitions at the center of their reflection: *Queer British Art* at Tate Britain and the *Gastarbajteri* project at the Wien Museum. In doing so, they raise the question of the connection between exhibition strategies, power, and the visibility of queer and migrant histories. The authors problematize the conviction that the increasing visibility of minorities in public space automatically translates into their increased emancipation and empowerment.

Two further articles deal with traumatized local history. Aleksandra Guja analyses the ways in which racialized visual discourses about Jews were shaped by caricatures published in satirical magazines during the interwar Second Polish Republic. Using the notion of ecology as a "network of sensibilities" after Hanna Pollin-Galay, she proposes the study of the ecology of representation framed as a network of semantic and visual relations.

In turn, Aleksandra Szczepan looks at the institutional and economic mechanisms responsible for commemorating and forgetting with regard to the visibility and invisibility of Roma minorities in the collective memory of the Holocaust. Focusing on the testimony of Roma genocide survivor Krystyna Gil captured

in an interview for the Fortunoff Archive, Szczepan shows how the categories of visibility and invisibility are inextricably linked.

In **Perspectives**, we give a platform to artists, researchers, and activists from minority communities. The growing research and artistic interest in engaging with the so-called “Global South” brings up important topics and processes – yet often forgotten from the perspective of the majority – such as the decolonization of African and Asian societies in the mid-20th century. However, something that seems to be forgotten or uncovered by researchers is often an indispensable part of the family biographies and migration histories of migrant and minority communities living in Poland, which makes it all the more important that such topics are analyzed in relation to the experience and activism of minorities. Let us discuss them together with minorities, rather than without them and on their behalf.

In our conversation with Oliwia Bosomtwe about her book *Like a White Man*, we zoom in on the stories of Black people living in Poland, both currently and historically, which form the book’s canvas. We discuss the author’s motivations for writing it and conducting her research, and reflect on Poland’s position in the context of global relations of knowledge production on racism and anti-racism.

In Thùy Dương Đặng's artistic interventions, the immediate political situation and social tensions are both stimulus and artistic material. Referring to the problematic policy of the Polish government on the Polish-Belarusian border, the difficult situation of people from Ukraine in the refugee crisis, Đặng also subtly makes visible his position resulting from belonging to the second generation of Vietnamese immigrants.

Lưu Bích Ngọc, in turn, provides a personal map of grassroots activism and migrant initiatives in Berlin. Migrating for educational purposes from Hanoi to Berlin and navigating the new reality in which she “discovered” her racialization in the eyes

of German society pushed Ngoc to engage in grassroots activism and curatorial activities. Activism in the Asian diasporas makes it possible to address such complex and important topics as generational trauma or the psychological wellbeing of minorities, which are often unknown or overlooked in public space.

In a discussion with Marysia Lewandowska, Magdalena Ziółkowska talks about the Women's Audio Archive project, which consists of recordings made by Lewandowska since 1984 of conversations with female art critics and artists. The discussion also evokes other artistic activities focused on recontextualization, and interventions that restore the absent voice of women, and therefore revolves around the sound archive of women in art that Lewandowska has built up over the years.

In the **Snapshots** section, Bartłomiej Brzozowski reviews historian Dipesh Chakrabarty's latest book, translated into Polish, and Katarzyna Bojarska writes about the exhibition *Difficult Pasts. Connected Words*, which becomes the starting point for a broader reflection on the exhibition as a space for the production of knowledge and memory.

The above texts map the processes of racialization taking place in different temporal and geopolitical spaces, bringing together academic discourse and activist practices. This issue of *View* shows how the intersection of visual culture, racialization, non-/visibility, and minority positions is an important point of reference for those involved in art and activism. While the themes of racialization and minorities are increasingly becoming an indispensable part of thinking about the contemporary world and visual culture, it will only be an essential part – not a marginal or substitute one – if we include, hear, and see minority communities in this reflection and then learn both from and with them.

- 1 See: Erica Lehrer and Joanna Wawrzyniak, "Decolonial Museology in East-Central Europe: A Preliminary To-Do List," <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2023/02/24/decolonial-museology-in-east-central-europe-a-preliminary-to-do-list/> (accessed December 3, 2024).
- 2 "By recognising the vast range of practices and interpretations related to decoloniality, we call attention to the fact that there is no singular 'decolonial' approach that can be seen as detached from context, from politics, or from situated issues that will allow different groups and professionals to formulate, through negotiations and disputes, their own situated solutions." Bruno Brulon Soares and Andrea Witcomb, "Editorial: Towards Decolonisation," *Museum International* no. 74 (2022): iv-xi, doi:10.1080/13500775.2022.2234187.
- 3 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* vol. 1, no. 1 (2012): 3.
- 4 Kevin Ochieng Okoth, *Red Africa: Reclaiming Revolutionary Black Politics* (London: Verso, 2023), 10.
- 5 J. L. A. Garcia, "Three Scalarities: Racialization, Racism, and Race in Blum," *Theory and Research in Education* no. 1 (2023): 285, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878503001003002> (accessed December 3, 2024).
- 6 Philomena Essed, *Understanding Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory* (London: Sage, 1991).
- 7 Susan Schulman, "The \$100bn gold mine and the West Papuans who say they are counting the cost," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/nov/02/100-bn-dollar-gold-mine-west-papuans-say-they-are-counting-the-cost-indonesia> (accessed December 3, 2024).
- 8 After the *Dictionary of Polish Language PWN*, www.sjp.pwn.pl (accessed December 2, 2024).

