

- Deborah Thomas: [00:00](#) Hello. My name is Deborah Thomas, Editor-in-Chief of American Anthropologist, and this is Anthropological Airwaves.
- Deborah Thomas: [00:16](#) In this episode of anthropological airwaves, we speak with Wayne Modest, Director of the Research Center for Material Culture at the consortium of four ethnographic museums in the Netherlands, including the Tropenmuseum, the African Museum, the Museum Volkekunde, and the Wereldmuseum, University of Pennsylvania Graduate Student, Chris Green, interviewed Wayne about current decolonization efforts within European ethnographic museums. The wide ranging conversation addresses issues related to how museums can be public facing while still engaging in forms of critical scholarship. Wayne's interest in the ways ethnographic museums address contemporary issues related to the histories of imperialism takes us into a discussion about the kinds of collaboration and repair that are possible in and around these spaces. Decolonizing emerges as an ongoing process. It entails a commitment to do the work of redress, to think differently about care, to deconstruct the categories through which we have come to collect exhibit and represent materials. To take the question of audience seriously and to fight against the persistence of imperial modes of thinking within a complexly formerly colonial world.
- Wayne Modest: [01:46](#) Okay.
- Wayne Modest: [01:48](#) So yeah, I work at what is called the National Museum of World Cultures, which is a kind of conglomeration of ethnographic museums in the Netherlands created in 2014, and within that museum, I am the head of the Research Center. You could say that this is a space where we tried to bring a certain set of a certain kind of criticality to what it means to have an ethnographic museum in the present. And how might we attend to the difficult issues of that kind of museum while still thinking about possible futures. So that's basically what the Center that I run, with a few people, do.
- Chris Green: [02:28](#) And this is more of a practical question, but how does your position work with some of the more public facing parts of the museum, or is your position an inherently public facing part of the museum?
- Wayne Modest: [02:41](#) Yeah, I mean we take research to be something else rather than only solely a thing where we understand research as being behind doors, looking at objects. I mean, I think the curatorial role or is always a public facing-role in a certain sense. I mean we're a little past the moment when we imagine the curator to

be sitting away just caring for... but the research center's role is double. On the one hand there is an attempt to stimulate research in the broadest sense. And that's through academics, through makers, artists, designers, as well as through curation. And so we tried to foster a certain kind of criticality to the collections that we have. And in doing that, the attempt is to try and bring a little bit more curatorial scholarship, with academic scholarship.

Wayne Modest: [03:45](#)

But, in addition to that, and this is where our center becomes extremely public facing. I mean, we think of research as something that happens in the public domain as a form of praxis. And so we have perhaps 38 events per year, either small critical conversations around photography that could be 10 people, or, we've had an event on this "Afterlives of Slavery in the Present" and that was, throughout the event, 1400 people. So it is distinctly public facing in a certain sense. But not public facing where there is any demand from us to water down the scholarship. So the idea of public facing, in the research sense, is actually to engage the public broadly in the criticality that we think is necessary to think otherwise about museums. So that's, that's what the Center does.

Chris Green: [04:45](#)

That sounds like a very envious position to be in for most people that work in museums.

Wayne Modest: [04:51](#)

Yeah, I would say so.

Wayne Modest: [04:53](#)

I mean it is also, on the one hand, it is envious, because in a funny way I think, and some of my colleagues said that, you know, we get the chance to do the nice things. I don't know if I would describe it as that, because our work is -- you know, we were talking yesterday -- the kind of work we do is emotional work. It is challenging work. It is work that one has to do openly and empathetically, realizing that you're also going to be challenged by other academics, by activists, and to come to that with humility. But it is a good position to be in because we are invested in that -- when we merged, to suggest that this kind of criticality was necessary for us to think a museum otherwise. And that is special I think. There aren't many museums that have that.

Chris Green: [05:48](#)

Yeah, so in keeping with our conversations that we had with the folks at the Museum, Ethnographers Group last year, their conference on Decolonizing the Museum, I wanted to ask a little bit about your thoughts on the capacity for the museum, especially a museum with many colonial legacies, to be able to be a political space. Certainly in your case you've been able to

manage that in different kinds of iterations, but maybe the degrees to which you see that being possible. If you feel like you're reaching any sorts of limits, or if you're, really just at the beginning and just describing a little bit about your experience in the museum as a political space.

Wayne Modest:

[06:25](#)

I would, I would first start by suggesting that museums *are* political spaces. So the distinction that we tried to make often that there are these things called cultural spaces or knowledge bases, and then there's politics. We don't make that distinction. Primarily because as a museum, just the very idea who produces knowledge, what knowledge is produced -- that in relationship, just questions of the colonization -- one has to see that as a critical political space. While there are a lot of curators doing important work, we should also acknowledge that a lot of the kinds of push towards thinking decolonial didn't come from internally. It came from a space of activism, a space of critical impatience that different diverse groups of people were having to try and push the museum to think its work otherwise, or think through the violence of its practice, or think through its exclusive practices or framings.

Wayne Modest:

[07:30](#)

If one acknowledges that, then one acknowledges that *it is in a political framework* that these practices happen. It doesn't happen outside of politics. And so for us, an important part of, I think what we, what we're going to do was to intervene into societal conversations of what it means to live in the world with others. And once you adopt that kind of mission, then you adopt a particular politics. So all work is in relation to that, but the mission was only one part. So if you ask me the question, what are the limits? First, you know, I should have said that to start off, which is what I was trying to do: one has to acknowledge the work of activism that it starts there, because even in the beginning when we started some of these projects and yeah, it was an uncomfortable space, also working with activism, we hadn't developed a methodology, an openness, an understanding of what we're doing at the time or we were trying -- we were open enough though, and that was important. And that led, I think to us constantly thinking through how to position ourselves, or how to think, how to create a space of care, a practice that is open. What, to make it short: if you say is decolonization even possible?

Wayne Modest:

[08:50](#)

You know, I would suggest that decolonizing the museum -- I like the use of the "i n g," because it indicates that it is a future practice that is, it's a labor, it's a burden. It's something that one has to do all the time and that one should not celebrate that one is there yet. I don't know any museums that can, but we

wouldn't celebrate because our work is an ongoing one. The question is on how committed we are to it.

Chris Green: [09:21](#) But there are several kinds of activists that would say if decolonizing the museum is not possible, if there is no end goal which is possible, which sees a decolonized museum, is it worth continuing to protect [it], by doing incremental kinds of things?

Wayne Modest: [09:42](#) Yeah. I mean that question has been posed as well. It has also been posed and I've been having it with several people, including scholars, activists, that "it is repairable", that "it is irredeemable." I'm a little bit more hopeful in that sense. Not because I think that we're going to reach a moment when we just simply celebrate, but because of another kind of work that I think needs to be done. First of all, I would want to say that a part of this problem I think is to think that the museum that I work in, the kind of museum that I work in, is irredeemable and that there are other museums that are redeemable that there is something about my museum, the kind of ethnographic museum that, you know, aligns itself with anthropology, archaeology, and its history, and that it is such a, a festering of the colonial whereas other places are not.

Wayne Modest: [10:44](#) And of course one needs to acknowledge the nature of anthropological museums and what they have done in aligning themselves with particular racializing practices, practices of theft, acquiring objects on the duress. You know, all of those things have to be acknowledged. But I want to suggest that we take the ethnographic museum as only one in a massive symptom, a bigger structure of colonial afterlives. That one has to continue to fight. To think that it is only *this* museum is actually to lose the battle already, because it is, the afterlives are so intricately networked out there, that continue to ensnare people over and over, to make them continually precarious to address that, which I think is a burdensome task for all of us. One has to commit to the work and commit to the work bigger than the ethnographic museum. So that's why I'm interested in the idea of decolonizing as a commitment to the labor to undo, and that undoing might mean a kind of unraveling, or Reorganization, or rethinking, a disintegration, however you want to call it, of what we understand as ethnographic museums.

Wayne Modest: [12:15](#) But it shouldn't mean because we see it as being so impossible we shouldn't commit. Otherwise we would have failed already to create space for those who colonialism has made most precarious. I've been working in museums at least for nearly two decades now and I would want to suggest that until, and

every time I say that always -- when, when I say until, I always remember Bob Marley, the philosophy that holds one race superior... Yeah. But, until we have done away with them, until that moment comes, and even if that moment is the horizon, then the work needs to be done to create other futures and that is what I'm committed to. And if that work leads to an unraveling of the institution, then okay we can understand that. But until that moment, until it is empty, until whatever, then committing to the project of justice is still important and I am committed to that project. We are committed to that project.

- Bob Marley: [13:27](#) [music] Until the philosophy -- which old one race superior and another inferior -- is finally, and permanently, discredited and abandoned... everywhere is war, is a war.
- Chris Green: [13:55](#) So can you talk a little bit about what you have done in terms of trying to repair and redress some of the kinds of relationships that the museum maybe, didn't have or wanted to improve?
- Wayne Modest: [14:08](#) One of the things that I've come to think about recently -- and well, we launched a book recently, last June, called "Words Matter," which emerged as a way of thinking about the conceptual categories, the terminologies that we use, and the ways in which those terminologies themselves form part of maintaining certain structures. You know, they're a part of a colonial way of being and knowing. And we continue to use them so easily without even thinking. So we produced this book called "Words Matter." And the intention was with that book to give our curators. And actually, we produced it to help our curators think more critically... or our exhibition makers or our marketing department... what words might mean. And it came as well from them asking, okay, this word is uncomfortable, I don't know what to do with it. But why I wanted to bring that up, the categories we've struggled with, is that I want to be incautious and suggest to you that perhaps many ethnographic museums in New Zealand, in Australia, here in Europe have already committed to reparative practices. Even though the conceptual categories in which they framed them sometimes are really strange and out-moded. And therefore, the good work sometimes get overshadowed because the conceptual mobilization of an outmoded way of thinking keeps returning again and again. And so a part of our work is to try and move away from that to try and imagine other categories of thinking and doing.
- Chris Green: [15:45](#) What do you see is that mode that has the gravity that's people are unable to carry themselves away from?

- Wayne Modest: [15:53](#) Well I think we've come to believe a lot in a kind of non-criticality towards the things that we do. So as a museum, I'm invested in just critiquing what might it mean that UNESCO has this definition of what, ICOM, I mean, what a museum is. And many people don't critique that. They just see that the museum is this and it does this and it should do this. So it says "it should preserve," and "it should preserve in this and this way", without actually thinking that, as these conceptual frameworks become globalized and mobilize all over the world, that they also can perpetuate another kind of violence, because it is another kind of centralizing of knowledge that says this is what it should be and this is how it should happen. So we've been thinking what might it mean that a museum doesn't see itself, or its mode of practice as a site of preservation. All it, it talks about preserving things, but that think other ways about caring and caring, not just for objects but what, what if it were to critique itself through you know, kind of feminist or queer notions of caring... for thinking about the world, thinking and what people, and objects former part of that, but are not the center of that. If one inhabits only that thing of "we need to preserve and preservation is the only thing," then one doesn't a low oneself to think beyond that category. If one thinks of "we need to keep because keeping is going to keep it for the world," then one doesn't think about what does keeping [do], "what is keeping," when it is in a bigger structure of a colonial afterlife.
- Wayne Modest: [17:44](#) We need to critically think about it and I think that that's what hold us practices, holders, traditions hold us, the idea that heritage is something holds us, rather than thinking that these things are constituted by us, and that in the constitution of these things, even in the moment that they were constituted, they were constituted when some people were not a part of the constitution of the idea itself, and one needs to challenge that, which is why I think decolonizing the museum is a wonderful thing. Because I think the people who are practicing it, whether or not it is at the Brooklyn Museum, or in Berlin, or in Amsterdam, are contesting the very categories that we are saying we need to hold to.... the contesting, the idea of what an institution should be, who an institution serves. And I think -- that -- we need to be uncomfortable as museums to move past that.
- Wayne Modest: [18:44](#) We hold fixed to the categories that we've come to know without thinking that those categories maintain balance or do violence to some, and not to others.
- Chris Green: [18:55](#) So what does this look like for you then, for other institutions moving forward, whether it's a major museum, a small

University Museum, even a Department of Anthropology that has some sort of collections. To be able to practice care, to be able to curate with love, these things that you've talked about and what does this look like for these folks that are interested or invested in these concepts to actually practice it?

Wayne Modest: [19:23](#)

You know, that's actually, that's one of the reasons why for us to have this Research Institute. The first thing I'd say is that we should be careful, that the notion of decolonize the museum isn't a fad, a fashionable moment that does nothing to reorganize the museum as space. So how do we make it both political and embedded? My interest would be to ask an anthropology museum like mine in the Netherlands, it has a specific history. The Troepenmuseum isn't like the museum here. The Troepenmuseum was The colonial museum. That's what it was called. You know, that's why it was built. So first of all, I want to suggest that one of my fears is that in this fashionability of the decolonizing museum project, everybody thinks that it is the same answer that's going to solve their problems.

Wayne Modest: [20:20](#)

And on the one hand there is a need for conceptual rethinking and that's possible. But one also has to ask: what is this specific museum doing? What kind of colonial entrapments does the art institution have that is different from here? And how do you address that differently? One of the things we do in our museum in the Netherlands, so in the Troepenmuseum for example, is that we've started do is a set of programming just simply thinking about that. What are the contemporary concerns of Amsterdam today: questions around migration, questions around inclusion and exclusion, questions around religion and religious values. And so we started to think through what kind of intellectual, academic, discursive, public programs can we do to be able to put on the agenda or invite people to place their concerns on the agenda. What kind of collaborations do we do?

Wayne Modest: [21:23](#)

And so almost everything we do know is we try to do it through collaborative work. We have an exhibition going on now, called "Afterlives." And a part of that was to try and develop a methodology with that exhibition. So at the beginning, when the concept was being developed, what we did was, we invited activists and academics and community members to come to us and talk through the concept with us. And they stayed from the beginning of the concept development until the exhibition opened, criticizing every moment of it. So what we're trying to do is to develop that kind of methodology, of stealing from somebody else, I would call a kind of "contingent collaboration,"

a kind of "common implicatedness" in creating more non-imperial futures. And so we're trying to think through what that methodology means for any exhibition we do.

Wayne Modest: [22:18](#)

If it is going to be about, um, the next exhibition that we're -- one of the big exhibitions we're doing shortly is on gender and sexuality. What does it mean to think together with those who live lives made difficult because of their gender and sexuality, to do an exhibition with them or to at least invite them to criticize. So if anything else, one of the things that taught us is that we should be comfortable with criticism, discomfort, being slapped in the face, being told that we're not doing it right. We should be honest in our collaboration to say this is what we want to get out of it. Are you okay with that? We should understand that it might fail, and we should commit to this kind of motto that I put into the Research Center, which is to say that we never make the same mistake twice in any collaboration.

Wayne Modest: [23:10](#)

You know, you mess it up. We are trying to learn and the next one is better and the next one is with, I know that the horizon is always going to be somewhere else. So we, with that kind of methodology of collaboration and collaborative practice, with people who are interested in a decolonial museum, that makes us vulnerable, try to push aside our authority. I think that that is a way we've been trying to learn. We describe ourselves as a learning museum, as a museum that can make mistakes, as a collaborative space, and in a certain sense as a space that is somehow humble about what it is we do. While at the same time, acknowledging that we are not perfect, we will fail. We haven't reached there yet. There's nothing to celebrate but that we're trying. I think all of us need to adopt that commitment kind of humility in our practices of representation. If that is what we want to do.

Chris Green: [24:13](#)

Well, it's a tough proposition for a lot of institutions, I know. But, I think it's a fantastic methodology to work towards, and like you said, it just can't end. Hopefully we'll be able to put your recommendations into action at museums across the US.

Wayne Modest: [24:28](#)

Oh, but the US inhabits, It's another space to inhabit, eh? So I mean, I'm interested in them being a space, where one can destabilize, provincialize, allow the US or Europe to realize how small it is. How really tiny it is in the world. That is my horizon, that an ethnographic museum is a space you come to know that you really, really tiny. And the world of being and knowing him the world is unending, you're just one speck. So let's respect what else is out there and try to learn from it.

Wayne Modest: [25:09](#) So the US, that's another kettle of fish.

Chris Green: [25:14](#) Well thank you so much, this has been really fantastic.

Kyle Olson: [25:27](#) Thank you for tuning in to the third installment of our special feature on Decolonizing Museums. We would also like to extend a special thank you to Chris and Cassandra Green as well as Deborah Thomas and all of the scholars and activists that sat down to speak with us on this issue. If you want to get in touch with us, reach out @amanthpodcast on Twitter. We're also on Facebook and you can check us out on the americananthro.org or send us an email at amanthpodcast@gmail.com. Thanks again for listening and we'll see you next time.