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Postcolonial and decolonial perspectives in history education and historical culture

Editorial

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Keywords

Postcolonialism, decolonization, indigenous populations, colonialism, history instruction

The last decades have clearly shown a change in how societies perceive colonialism. History museums seem to increasingly reflect critically on their colonial pasts and consequent curatorial practices (Brücke-Museum 2022; Lonetree 2012; Schorch et al. 2016), long accepted statues representing colonial leaders are being overturned (Decker 2024; Grever 2025; Wüstenberg & Gensburger 2023), and there is an apparent feeling of uncertainty as to which pictures and artefacts can still be shown in school lessons or exhibitions as evidence of colonial processes and atrocities (Edwards 2001; Foliard 2022; Hinz 2025; Sieg 2021). In many cases these changes are developing at a different pace in different countries. See, for example, the Spanish case (Carrillo Castillo, 2024; Estaba Amaiz, 2024; Nerín, 2020). Exploring the specific political and cultural conditions of how societies are dealing with both the past and history is key for understanding the historical narratives, perceptions and discussions in those contexts that also have a similar impact and influence on educational practices in formal and informal settings.

The debates on the decolonization of history education and historical culture are diverse and arise from different political situations in varied (post)colonial settings on the one hand, and in settings of the former and current beneficiaries of a (neo)colonial world system, on the other. Depending on their situatedness, such debates often focus on different aspects that have been neglected or only marginally perceived in other regions of the world, leading to the following questions: Why do certain countries attempt to deal with colonialism more openly than others? What strategies have been used to break through established patterns in dealing with colonialism? Why are certain voices still not heard or even ignored? How are postcolonial or decolonial perspectives introduced in school settings? What influence do historical master narratives or other established forms of dealing with the past still have? Can postcolonial thinking or decolonization even succeed with those conventional approaches to historical learning? The present HTCE issue approaches these and related questions through case studies from South Africa, Canada, Austria, Germany, Spain, and Australia. By drawing on historical, art-historical, museological, and history education frameworks, the contributions present a multifaceted prism through which these debates can be explored. The challenges associated with the decolonization of history education and historical culture cannot be adequately understood through a narrow national or regional lens. Instead, a wide range of case studies and diverse contexts is required to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the debates, approaches, possible pathways, and the conflicts that continue to shape these discussions. Achieving a constructive dialogue

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between different epistemic cultures that frame Indigenous concepts of dealing with the past is key (Kühberger 2025; Mahuika 2019; Sonkqayi 2024). Self-critical questioning of the status quo in different educational systems, media, disciplines, or institutions can also be considered. Aspects of anti-discrimination and anti-racism should not be neglected either.

The present issue addresses a variety of challenges and questions related to this topic. The research paper by Bongani Shabangu takes us to southern Africa. The text discusses debates about what kinds of knowledge and evidence should shape the school history curriculum in South Africa. Shabangu criticizes epistemic universalism, the idea that Western historical epistemologies are universally valid, arguing that this perspective marginalizes or dismisses other knowledge systems, especially indigenous ways of understanding the past. By examining the 1967 apartheid history syllabus and the 2011 post-apartheid curriculum, the paper shows how such hegemonic approaches can lead to epistemicide, the erasure of alternative knowledge systems in history education.

A similarly framed contribution by Heather E. McGregor and Harrison Dressler takes us to North America. They present findings from the Thinking Historically for Canada's Future project, which analysed social studies curricula from the Canadian territories of Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut published between 1996 and 2021. The study examines how second-order historical thinking concepts are integrated into northern curricula and identifies five key themes, including cultural reclamation, reconciliation, alternative conceptions of time, the role of non-human beings, and experiential learning. It argues that history education in Canada's North adapts historical thinking to Indigenous knowledges, languages, and community priorities while operating within a curricular framework still shaped by colonial and Euro-Canadian traditions.

A markedly different situation is identified by A. José Farrujia de la Rosa in the Canary Islands. Although the influence of West African cultures is also present, the absence of Indigenous populations gave rise to distorted interpretations of the past. The paper examines how colonial epistemologies have shaped archaeology, museum displays, and school education about the Indigenous past in the Canary Islands. Using thematic analysis of documents and textbooks, it identifies narrative patterns that marginalize Indigenous perspectives and explains these through the concept of the "colonial library." It also presents the educational project Memorias Guanches as a practical example of decolonial pedagogy that connects classroom learning with heritage governance and museum practices.

A further research paper directs our attention to Central Europe. The paper of Julia Allerstorfer-Hertel examines how images of cultural difference in art history contributed to legitimizing colonial ideologies. It applies the concept of the "colonial unconscious," originally proposed for German art history, to the Austrian context and focuses on the role of exoticism in visual representations. Through case studies from the late 19th century during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (e. g. Franz Kollarz or Leopold Carl Müller), the study shows how non-European people were depicted and argues for postcolonial reinterpretations of images in Austria's art history and historical culture.

Franziska Rein's contribution moves the discussion onto more theoretical terrain within a postcolonial framework. Her research paper examines the role of ambiguity and the concept of tolerance of ambiguity in history education considering debates within postcolonial studies. It argues that fostering tolerance of ambiguity can help students engage with complex and contested historical narratives, while cautioning against the risk of relativism that may undermine historical orientation. The article advocates a more differentiated approach to history education that challenges binary thinking and encourages critical dialogue about the entanglements of past, present, and future within persistent (post-)colonial power structures.

The miniatures section likewise features contributions that address the main theme of the issue. For instance, Rebecca Cairns' article examines how Australian history education research contributes to global efforts to decolonise history education within a settler-colonial context. Drawing on recent scholarship, it outlines practical strategies for decolonising classroom practice–centred on reflection, listening, learning, localisation, and evaluation–and highlights the theoretical importance of place, positionality, and settler colonialism. While emphasising that structural change must be led by First Nations communities, the article argues that non-Indigenous educators also bear responsibility for advancing decolonising approaches in history education.

For the situation in Germany, Johannes Jansen and Holger Thünemann provide an important insight through the project Colonial History, Historical Culture, and Historical-Political Education in North Rhine-Westphalia. The project investigates how people in Germany perceive

the colonial era, whether they consider engagement with this past relevant, and to what extent they recognise connections between colonial history and present-day historical culture. Based on the first nationally representative large-scale survey on this topic in Germany, conducted in collaboration with the polling institute forsa, the working paper outlines the project's structure, methodology, and initial findings while also reflecting on methodological challenges encountered during the research.

A contribution by Laurin Blecha and Marius Müller on the museum landscape in Austria examines the colonial dimensions of Salzburg's cultural heritage through the early modern Cabinet of Art and Curiosities in the former residence of the prince-archbishops. Drawing on archival sources and secondary literature, the article traces the global entanglements of European colonialism reflected in the collection and critically analyses its historical formation, contemporary exhibition, and the persistence of Eurocentric narratives about non-European cultures and nature. It argues that Salzburg's particular historical position within the Holy Roman Empire and its ideological legacy have led to the decision to preserve—rather than fundamentally transform—the Cabinet, a choice that continues to shape the exhibition today.

This volume concludes with two miniatures that do not engage with the main theme of the issue but provide interesting insights into history teaching in international settings. Kevin Van Loon asks how the use of image interpretation scaffolds in history classrooms. His article addresses the challenge that students often engage with historical images passively rather than critically in history education. It introduces two image interpretation scaffolds – sequenced and flexible – that support adolescents in analysing and interpreting visual historical sources and situates their use within relevant didactical frameworks. The article also highlights how internet searches and AI tools such as ChatGPT can complement these scaffolds to foster deeper engagement and active historical inquiry.

The article by Niklas Ammert et al. examines the development and outcomes of an international history teacher training course organized by researchers from Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden within the European University consortium EUniWell. Focusing on heritage as a central theme, the course combined online seminars with an on-site week in Cologne to foster international collaboration, multiperspectivity, and critical reflection among teacher students. The evaluation highlights the educational value of international exchange and suggests that integrating moral perspectives and inclusive practices in history education can support democratic citizenship and enrich learning outcomes.

Given the richness of the arguments and the diversity of perspectives incorporated in the texts mentioned, we consider the result to be of great interest to educational discourse and encourage readers to learn more about the research compiled in this volume. We would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks to the authors for their contributions, as well as to all colleagues who provided peer reviews in the preparation of this volume.

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Problematising the ‘hegemony’ of epistemic ‘universalism’

A case of the South African school history curriculum

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Abstract

In contemporary times, history education has been the subject of rigorous debates about the type of knowledge that should shape and define the South African school history curriculum. At the heart of these debates lie questions of epistemology – the idea of what constitutes evidence and valid knowledge or truth when dealing with the past. Beyond that, the processes of interpreting evidence, assessing validity, and reaching the truth are also the locus of such debates. In other words, the debates often foreground dissent over what substantive and procedural knowledge should be disseminated through the school history curriculum. Within these debates, the paper critiques epistemic universalism – the notion that epistemologies of history, both procedural and substantive, developed in Western societies should be applicable across all contexts for representing and understanding the past. This paper argues that Western epistemologies of history are not only local but also situated in a geographical context. Their situatedness and locality are often hidden within abstract universalism, which is used to dismiss other knowledge systems, particularly indigenous epistemologies of history, as non-knowledge. While it cannot be disputed that these Western epistemologies of history are important, universalising their existence creates hegemony, reified by coloniality, which the paper intends to challenge. Subsequently, as an exemplar, the paper interrogates two curriculum documents, focusing on the apartheid school history syllabus of 1967 and the post-apartheid school history curriculum of 2011, as a way of problematising how hegemony leads to epistemicide in relation to history education.

Keywords

Universalism, history, curriculum, hegemony, apartheid, epistemic

1. Introduction: locating the problem

The paper discusses how epistemic universalism has been sustaining coloniality through the school’s official history (intended) curriculum. It focuses on the skills and content that have been officially sanctioned and prescribed to be taught by education and government authorities. The notion of epistemic universalism, which can be understood as the assumption that only Western epistemologies are objective and legitimate, has been a central issue that many

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Global South societies grapple with, especially in the 'postcolonial' period (De Sousa Santos, 2005; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Mbembe, 2015; Heleta, 2018). What seems to be more appalling with epistemic universalism is that it positions Western epistemologies as the standard of what should count as valid knowledge. It does not end there; it also presupposes that Western epistemologies are universally applicable to all contexts, as postulated by Horsthemke (2010) and Sonkqayi (2023). Godsell et al. (2024) stress it as a false universal, a colonial universal created to trap other ways of knowing. It shows that, despite the formal end of colonialism, "...we continue to live in a time of ongoing global, epistemic coloniality, embedded in, and shaped by, colonial ideas and practices" (Botha et al., 2021, p. 52). These epistemic conditions imply that Western epistemologies continue to serve as the primary framework for education in many 'postcolonial' societies (Iyer, 2025). Hence, Mignolo (2007, p. 176) cogently articulated that "Europe thought of itself as the mirror of the future of all the other societies and cultures; as the advanced form of the history of the entire species". In short, education in 'postcolonial' societies continues to endure the remnants of colonialism and remains shaped by the Western milieus. It explains why "...national educational...[systems] continue to be organised almost exclusively around what can be considered Western ontological and epistemological assumptions, resulting in a problematic relationship between these divergent epistemic communities" (Botha, 2018, p. 20).

In line with epistemic universalism contentions, recent decolonial deliberations have questioned and challenged the hegemony it sustains, accusing it of fostering and reinforcing epistemicide (Dei, 2017; Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Sonkqayi, 2023; Zembylas, 2018). A part of the questioning raises the issue that epistemic universalism negates, subjugates, and suppresses indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge under the guise that their existence is illegitimate. According to Horsthemke (2010) and Sonkqayi (2023), these indigenous epistemologies cannot count as valid knowledge due to a lack of 'objectivity' or 'universality'. For Horsthemke (2010) and Sonkqayi (2023), true knowledge should exist in a propositional sense where it is supported by a 'justified true belief' which should be universally accepted, not only to a certain group of people, as is the case with indigenous epistemologies. However, Maldonado-Torres (2017) refutes this, arguing that Western knowledge was inherently accorded the status of universality through epistemic coloniality and Western hegemony, which resulted from political and territorial conquest.

The problem with such a framing of epistemology is that any knowledge that is not in alignment with the dominant paradigm of epistemic universalism becomes "relegated to zones of invisibility and complete deterioration" (Bennett, 2007, in Sonkqayi, 2023, p. 1307). According to Breidlid (2013) and Botha et al. (2021), who argue against epistemic universalism, are of the view that epistemic universalism characterises other knowledges, such as spiritual knowledge, as irrational or superstitions, thereby denying and undermining the existence of epistemic diversity. As a result, it is epistemic universalism that sustains Western hegemony in education, where we continuously get to have Western worldviews shaping and defining it. In the context of the paper, it should be noted that epistemology is understood in a pluriversalism sense.

History education in settler-colonial contexts and the Global South has been a victim of epistemic universalism, where it has been underpinned by the objective, linear, Cartesian normative thinking (Ogot, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 2008; McGregor, 2017; Cutrara, 2018; Godsell & Maluleka, 2025). Epistemic universalism in history education demonstrates "the need for Western logic, Western epistemic rule, to organize and make sense of the past" (Cutrara, 2018, p.257). In other words, it denies the fact that there are other ways of making sense of the past. Shabangu (2024) criticises it for treating history as if there is a universal structure of engaging with the past that applies to various cultures and contexts. McGregor (2017, p. 5) reminds us that "there is no singular way to teach and learn indigenous histories, just as there is no singular indigenous experience with the past". These indigenous epistemologies of history, according to Archibald (2008) and Marker (2011), are rooted in the ecologies of cultures where understanding the past is influenced by the relationship between animals and the environment or land. However, Peter Seixas (2012):

> ...leaves the element of learning from the land behind and derides the notion that historians must take animals seriously in the study of the past. Seixas argues that animals do not have agency or intentionality, and because the study of history requires that we look at the cause and consequence of intentional actions, animals cannot be part of the study of the past; humans must remain the "centre of the story" (Cutrara, 2018, p. 261).

Peter Seixas' assertion reflects epistemic universalism that privileges Western ways of knowing in history. This undermines indigenous epistemologies by claiming that their existence does not fit within the Western dominant knowledge framework rooted in the notion of universality.

Seixas (2012) is suggesting that indigenous epistemologies, which are embedded in ecology, are devoid of truth and evidence. But Fatnowna and Pickett (2002) made a compelling argument to say, indigenous epistemologies of history tied to the spiritual realm (ecology) require no demonstration of proof as it exists, and all truths begin and end there. This is also supported by Dion (2009) and McGregor (2017) who argue that there are many indigenous ways of reaching truth or evidence when dealing with the past, which heavily rely on openness and the credibility of orality. Trust in the speaker and shared testimonies are also what lead to acquiring evidence when dealing with the past of indigenous people[1] (McGregor, 2017; Shabangu, 2024). For example, Cutrara (2018, p. 265) mentions that "the process of listening without judgment or analytical disciplinary rigour is not a less demanding way of understanding the past. It is a different way of understanding the past, one that invites a shift in how and what we understand as truth". This shows that indigenous epistemologies of history are different from the disciplinary logics that always stress uniformity and universal techniques, despite context and location where the past is engaged (McGregor, 2017). It is under such circumstances that epistemic universalism denies indigenous practices of history in Africa as legitimate ways and sociocultural tools of engaging with the past.

The denial of Africa as a continent that had legitimate ways of studying the past was far worse during the colonial-apartheid period, as it was portrayed to be ahistorical and a dark place with no history. According to the "colonial discourse, Europeans came upon the indigenous people and saw a people unmitigated darkness and chaos described in childhood images" (Tisani, 2018, p. 20). The idea of Africa as a dark continent comes from the likes of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher who made it his mission to bastardise indigenous epistemologies of history (Ogot, 2009; Shabangu, 2024). The nuances of that are captured by Nkrumah (1964, p. 62), who explained that:

> The history of Africa, as presented by European scholars, has been encumbered with malicious myths. It was even denied that we were a historical people. It was said that whereas other continents had shaped history, and determined its course, Africa had stood still, held down by inertia; that Africa was only propelled into history by European contact.

For those reasons, history education in many African societies has been shaped by Western theories, worldviews, narratives, archives and languages of history (Godsell, 2019; Maluleka, 2021; Mkhize, 2018; Mudimbe,1994; Ndille, 2020; Shabangu, 2024). Hence, in many cases, the history curricula of these societies have been crafted to begin with narratives focusing on the advent of Europeans. As noted by Ogot (2009, p. 71):

> African history was for the most part seen as the history of Europeans in Africa - a part of the historical progress and development of Western Europe and an appendix of the national history of the metropolis. It was argued at the time that Africa had no history because history begins with writing and thus with the arrival of the Europeans. Their presence in Africa was therefore justified, among other things, by their ability to place Africa in the 'path of history'. Colonialism was celebrated as a 'civilising mission' carried out by European traders, missionaries, and administrators.

In South Africa, Seroto (1999) argues that the history of the region was then believed to have begun in 1652 with the arrival of Dutch people, in particular Jan Van Riebeek. The arrival of the Dutch at the 'Cape' under apartheid history education was for example phrased using a Eurocentric approach, narrating that it was discovered by the Dutch people (Seroto, 2015). Notwithstanding, it comes from the universalistic framework implying that history in indigenous communities only began with the arrival of the Europeans, as noted by Seroto (1999). As a result, the representation of the 'Cape' history had to focus mainly on the Dutch people and later the British and their historical discourses. Post-independence and recently, some of these African societies have undergone a decolonial cleansing process with the intention of addressing the colonial epistemologies of history that have been defining their history education. For instance, Iyer (2025) argues that history education in Namibia and Zimbabwe, in particular their textbooks, have a stronger influence of decolonial historiography compared to the South African history education.

1 Indigenous people in the paper refer to all the social groups that have been residing in the region that later became known as South Africa before the region was colonised by the Dutch and later the British.

Despite that, Kabombwe et al. (2024) are of the view that history education in Zambia is currently suffering from epistemic coloniality. Also in South Africa, the history education has been accused of suffering from coloniality, which is perceived by Maluleka (2021) and Shabangu (2024) to be central in reinforcing Western ideas of history in the 'post-colonial' period. Ramoupi (2014) described it as a missed opportunity to infuse an African-centered epistemology. It is therefore explains why history education is still trapped in colonial legacies, which result in epistemicide against indigenous epistemologies of history in South Africa. These remnants of coloniality are evident in the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for History (Grade 10–12) of 2011, which informs the current teaching and learning of history in South Africa (Maluleka & Ledwaba, 2023; Shabangu, 2024; Seroto, 2018). According to Maluleka and Ramoupi (2022) and Shabangu (2024), the issue of epistemic coloniality in history education is not new; it dates back to the apartheid period, where it played a central role in shaping the syllabi, such as the Final syllabus for History (Standard 9 - 10) of 1967.

Subsequently, the paper problematises these two documents with a focus on how epistemic universalism has been reinforcing and reproducing Western epistemologies of history. Problematising epistemic universalism involves interrogating "the history and logic of those processes that allowed the Western episteme to erase or conceal the contextual and temporal dimensions of its own origin so that it could present itself as acontextual, ahistorical and universal" (Praeg 2019, p. 1). In the paper, it denotes questioning how epistemic universalism manifest in procedural and substantive knowledge choices which subtly hide the idea that these Western epistemologies of history are too local or context-bound. In essence, the paper unpacks how these Western epistemologies became universalised in the school history curriculum, which in turn erases or conceals the contextual and temporal dimensions of its own origin, as observed by Praeg (2019). To do that, the paper interrogates the Western knowledge tradition, which illegitimises non-dominant knowledges, and the paper does so by being attentive to and taking seriously indigenous epistemologies of history that remain marginalised (Botha et al., 2021; Dei 2002; Shabangu, 2024). Nevertheless, the next section discusses the nature of history education in relation to aspects of epistemic universalism from the apartheid to the democratic period.

2. Epistemic ruptures in history education: from apartheid syllabi to democratic curricula

The school history curriculum is always shaped by two domains of knowledge: procedural and substantive. Lee and Ashby (2000, cited in Husbands et al., 2003, p. 69) distinguish between the two when saying "substantive history is the content of history, what history is 'about' … procedural ideas about history … concepts like historical evidence, explanation, change are ideas that provide our understanding of history as a discipline or form of knowledge". According to Bertram (2009), procedural knowledge is about 'doing' history, while substantive knowledge is about 'knowing' history. Simply put, procedural knowledge in history is concerned with the skills of making sense of the past, while substantive knowledge is about narratives of the past. These skills and narratives in the South African school history syllabi and later curricula have been influenced by Western epistemologies since the inception of history education. It is noteworthy mentioning that the nature of coloniality in the apartheid school history syllabi and post-apartheid school history curricula is complicated than it could be captured in the paper. What this section does is to highlight some aspects relating to epistemic universalism that have been previously discussed, as the paper will show shortly.

2.1 The apartheid school history syllabi, from 1948 to 1994

The essence of the apartheid school history syllabi in terms of its content and skills envisaged by the government of the time, led by the National Party (NP), is captured by Shabangu (2024, pp. 72-73), who articulates that:

> While it is true that during the apartheid period, the South African school history curriculum was informed by Western forms of rationality, Western milieu, 'White' interlocutors who happened to be biased, and Eurocentric archives, a related aspect is that the ideas of history were rooted in Eurocentrism.

What Shabangu (2024) is raising is that the narratives in the syllabi, as part of the content, were centered around the discourses of Europeans, and the archives informing such narratives came from Europeans themselves. He further highlights that the ideas of history, which mainly focus on cultivating historical skills of engaging with the past in a disciplinary way, were dominated by European theories. This was affirmed by Bertram (2008), who asserted that curriculum development in South Africa has generally been influenced by the British ideas of history. This is epitomised by Maluleka and Ramoupi (2022), who argue that the skills the apartheid government sought to cultivate were conceptualised from a Eurocentric perspective. These skills, amongst others, were based on "the concept of cause and effect, the concept of time, and the concept of value of a true record (Seroto, 2013 in Maluleka and Ramoupi, 2022, p. 73). Thus, these skills became dominant and the foundation of the school history syllabi throughout the apartheid period (Seroto, 1999; Kgari-Masondo, 2019). In terms of the narratives, Maluleka and Ramoupi (2022, p. 73) note that "the history of South Africa was presented as starting with the arrival of Dutchmen in 1652", as raised earlier on by Seroto (1999). Hence, these narratives in the Final syllabus for History standard 6 – 8 (Now grades 8-10) of 1967, according to Seroto (2013, p. 3), "(i) Van Riebeeck: his significance. (ii) Simon van der Stel: immigration, expansion, agriculture, Cape-Dutch architecture…".

According to Shabangu (2024), the idea that the history of South(ern) Africa began in 1652 comes from the epistemic arrogance that the indigenous people did not have any ways of engaging with the past that were in line with the Western universalised paradigm. the justification was based on the idea that the universal way of engaging with the past, which is 'written' history, did not exist during their first encounter with the Khoi-Khoi people at the Cape (Kim, 2001; Seroto, 2015). Therefore, their conclusion was that all the indigenous people in the southern tip of Africa were ahistorical. Their assumption was misplaced as the indigenous people had their own ways of engaging with history, which were based on their oral 'traditions', such as Izithakazelo (clan names) or Izibongo (poetry praises) (Mvenene, 2024; Tisani, 2018; Shabangu, 2024). Those Europeans, at the time, assumed that history could only be engaged in the form of written archives, and any society that did not have that was perceived to be ahistorical. Their understanding of what constitutes history was premised on the notion of universality as observed by Maluleka and Ramoupi (2022). Shabangu (2024) argues that the apartheid government then adopted the narrative that [south(ern)] Africa was ahistorical when constructing the syllabi. For that, European epistemologies of history had to be central and dominant, thus making the syllabi about the history of Europe(ans) in Africa (Ogot, 2009; Shabangu, 2024).

Some of the skills that the school history syllabi sought to impart at the time, together with the historical content, came from the Christian religious archives. Maluleka and Ramoupi (2022) posit that the Christian doctrines played an important role in promoting cultural imperialism through the school history syllabi. The impetus for this view is that the school history syllabi were Christian National Education (CNE) oriented (Maluleka & Ramoupi, 2022; Seroto, 2018). Article 15 of the 1948 policy affirms that in an extract describing the purpose of Christian Education in South Africa where it states that:

> We believe that the calling and task of White South Africa [about] the native is to Christianise him and help him on culturally, and that. . . [there is] no equality [but] segregation. We believe . . . that the teaching and education of the native must be grounded in the life and worldview of the Whites . . . especially the Boer nation as senior White trustee of the native (Msila, 2007, p. 149).

With that, the apartheid government aimed at cultivating skills of obedience and respect for colonial authority. Even the historical knowledge incorporated in the school history syllabi had to follow the Christian convictions and church teachings. Shabangu (2024, p. 75) cogently puts it when saying:

> Archival sources from the bible such as Ephesians 6:5 ESV/11 [The biblical verse is based on the notion that "Slaves, [should] obey [their] earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as [they] would obey Christ"] were emphasised in the teaching of history to reinforce respect at the workplace and conformity to colonial authority where it is not questioned the same way indigenous people would not question 'God'.

It did not end there; the idea of having Christian knowledge in the school history syllabi, according to Tisani (2018), was meant to further justify the fabricated myth that Africa was a place of darkness. For Tisani (2018), it then became important to align the myth of darkness with the story of creation in the bible, which states that "in the beginning of creation, when God made

heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the abyss…" (The New English Bible, 1991, p. 1). Likewise, the narratives in the school history syllabi took a similar posture to create an impression that, the Africans before the arrival of Europeans in [south(ern)] Africa were without a history and that their livelihood was chaotic, without a direct or a knowledge base that informed their social, political and economic structures (Ogot, 2009; Tisani, 2018). Shabangu (2024) observes that these biblical sources were embraced as universal sources that had to inform the teaching of history at the time. This shows that "the heritage, values and ideals referred to here were all conceptualized from a Eurocentric perspective, thus, Africans and their ways of knowing and being were excluded from the official syllabus" (Maluleka & Ramoupi, 2022, p. 73). However, Maluleka & Ramoupi, (2022) did not demonstrate what these African ways of knowing and being might entail in the context of history education.

2.2 Complexities of the school history curricula reforms from 1997 to 2011

The post-apartheid school history curriculum has been plagued by numerous epistemic issues, despite efforts to address the epistemicide. Maluleka and Ramoupi (2022, p. 74) note that the focus of the post-apartheid school history curricula was to address the "archaic, racist content that was underpinned by Euro-western forms of rationality and modernity". The first phase of the curricula reform began in 1997 with the introduction of Curriculum 2005 (C2005), which was based on Outcome-Based Learning (OBE) (Bertram, 2008; Chisholm, 2005a; Seleti, 1997). Chisholm (2005b) argues that the first phase of curriculum reform faced many challenges, which involved an unstructured framework, with no clear skills or content to be covered. Maluleka and Ramoupi (2022) bemoan that as a lack of a clear, structured curriculum, the colonial-apartheid script continued to heavily rely on the historical skills and knowledge that were dominant during the apartheid period. According to Shabangu (2024), it becomes clear that the first phase of curricula reform did not bother to consider indigenous ideas of the past. In other words, local archives and ideas of history sourced from indigenous worldviews continued to be overlooked. Overall, the first phase drastically failed, and Siebörger (2000) convincingly posits that such a failure could be attributed to the amalgamation of the subject, history, with other learning areas, Geography, and Civic Education. Maluleka & Ramoupi (2022) are of the view that such a move posed a great threat to history, which would see the subject losing its identity. Such a move was colonial in its nature, as according to Siebörger (2000), it aimed to conceal the atrocities of colonialism and apartheid from being reinterpreted in a democratic society. Unsurprisingly, the people who served under the apartheid education system continued to influence what content and skills should characterise the school history curriculum (Maluleka, 2021).

Due to the epistemic issues identified above, as a second phase of curriculum reform, the government introduced the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) (Chisholm, 2005b; Wassermann, 2017). In the year 2002, as a way of addressing the amalgamation, History and Geography were now offered as separate subjects in the Further Education and Training (FET), which is the final stage of basic education in South Africa, made up of Grades 10 to 12. It was only under the Social Sciences offered in the Intermediate (Grades 4-6) and Senior (Grades 7-9) phases that these subjects were combined (Chisholm, 2005b; Maluleka, 2021). However, according to Bertram (2020, p. 19), these subjects had:

> …their own learning outcomes and content, although they were still part of the Social Science learning area (Department of Education, 2002). History had its own learning outcomes which promoted 'enquiry skills to investigate the past and present, historical knowledge and understanding and historical interpretation skills' (Department of Education, 2002, p. 5). This curriculum was still outcomes-based, in that it set the outcomes and assessment standards to be achieved and encouraged a learner-centred and activity based approach to education.

Though it was the case, Maluleka (2021) argues that the curriculum continued to be informed by Western conceptions of history. For him, the curriculum continued to be framed by the market fundamentalist outlook, which prioritised practices of capitalism. What is worse, according to Subreenduth (2013), is that indigenous ideas of history were not considered in these revisions and reforms, as it continues to mimic the colonial-apartheid ideas of history. Maluleka (2021) argues that the only transformation that took place here was the 'only' inclusion of those who were previously not a part of the school history syllabi. The inclusion of what Maluleka (2021) is saying was not done at an epistemic level. Hence, the curriculum's "epistemic and recontextualisation logics continued to be dominated and controlled by those aligned with colonial-apartheid" (Maluleka, 2021, p. 79).

In 2011, the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) for History were introduced as the third phase of reforming the epistemic injustices that have been plaguing the subject (Subreenduth, 2013; Bertram, 2020; Maluleka, 2021). According to Maluleka (2021), the content and skills informing the curriculum were still not fully transformed. Subreenduth (2013) notes that such a move took place even though the curriculum had to align with the principles of the constitution, which involves, amongst others, the idea of equality, inclusivity, curbing sexism, and racism. This, according to Maluleka & Ramoupi (2022), demonstrates that the curriculum has not yet delinked the colonial-apartheid logics or epistemic coloniality. Maluleka (2021) argues that the lack of transformation in the curriculum perpetuates epistemicide, culturecide, and linguicide. A similar issue was observed by Kgari-Masondo (2019), who argues that the curriculum contains similar ramifications to those of the apartheid school history syllabi. In her justification, Kgari-Masondo (2019) claims that much of the content is burdened with a Western focus, thus making it foreign in the South African context. According to Shabangu (2024), the curriculum also fails to focus on cultivating skills that align with indigenous ways of knowing. He also contends that the curriculum still relies on Western archives, which have been coined as universal. What Shabangu (2024) and others are saying is that epistemic universalism is the central issue that allows Western ideas to continue dominating. But it remains unclear how the curriculum still operates within the confines of epistemic universalism, which only privileges Western procedural and substantive knowledge.

2.3 Conceptual orientation: Decoloniality

The paper is underpinned by decoloniality as a conceptual framing that seeks to problematise the epistemic enigma that has been facing history education in South Africa. Decoloniality, according to Godsell and Maluleka (2025, p. 57), was "developed in contexts that encountered and continue to encounter colonialism, imperialism, and apartheid in many forms". In other words, decoloniality is not only concerned with how colonisation was detrimental to indigenous epistemologies, but also with the lingering colonial residues. Iyer (2025) describes it as a tool that seeks to address the enduring repercussions of Western colonialism. She argues that it is accompanied by the ongoing epistemic struggles confronted by indigenous and marginalised societies (Iyer, 2025). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, p. 489) has argued, quite compellingly, that decoloniality can be best understood as a framework that:

> Push[es] for shifting of geography of reason from the West as the epistemic locale from which the 'world is described, conceptualized and ranked' to the ex-colonized epistemic sites as legitimate points of departure in describing the construction of the modern world order...

In the context of decoloniality, Shabangu (2024) argues that shifting the geography entails that the spatiality of reasoning should be relocated from the West as the epistemic center of knowledge production and epistemological lenses of validating what should count as legitimate knowledge. In that case, decoloniality is concerned with addressing epistemic hegemony that continues to dominate the type of skills and content that shape curricula in the global South (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mbembe, 2016). Decoloniality is then about unmasking, unveiling, and reaving "coloniality as an underside of modernity that coexisted with its rhetoric of progress, equality, fraternity, and liberty" (Mignolo, 1995, p. 93). This view is echoed by Godsell and Maluleka (2025), who argue that decoloniality as a lens challenges and transcends the Eurocentric ways of knowing and epistemologies that have been universalised in non-Western societies.

In the paper, decoloniality is more concerned with the epistemic part, focusing on questioning the notion of epistemic universalism as a central issue that sustains hegemony. It functions as a framework for embracing epistemic diversity and 'ecologies of knowledges' (Green, 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Zembylas, 2018). Decoloniality presupposes that there exist multiple ways of knowing and validating what should count as legitimate epistemology (Breidlid, 2013; Mbembe, 2015). In other words, there is a diversity of knowledges and truths that are context-dependent. However, Sonkqayi (2023, p. 1309) argues that "knowledge has, for centuries, been conceived as justified true belief (Sosa, 1991). It can be observed from the three tenets of knowledge that, as generally agreed, knowledge is profoundly reinforced by truth". Dube and Moyo (2022, p. 82) reject such a conception of knowledge, arguing that "knowledge is essentially a human construction and that, as such, knowledge represents the embedded and lived realities of those who produce it". Despite the critiques of decoloniality, which reveal some flaws, there is a need to embrace the idea that there are many ways of constructing knowledge and verifying or reaching truth that cannot be universalised.

Nevertheless, decoloniality remains a relevant framework for challenging and overcoming epistemicide in the school history curriculum, which is perpetuated through epistemic universalism, as noted by Shabangu (2024). This is because, decoloniality "requires being attentive to, and taking seriously, nondominant knowledges and their epistemes, so as to open up the possibility of interrogating and dismantling the hegemony of the Western knowledge tradition (Botha et al., 2021, p. 52). Equally so, the paper pays attention to indigenous epistemologies of history that have not been considered when developing the school history curriculum. The decoloniality framework is applied to examine the enduring repercussions of epistemic universalism, which has defined both procedural and substantive knowledge in the school history curriculum. In essence, it functions as a framework for unearthing and unmasking the misinterpretations of indigenous history that emerge as a result of epistemic universalism. In the same line of thought, decoloniality is used to demonstrate how the universalistic approach would not work in understanding and interpreting the history of indigenous people. In a light view, decoloniality serves as a tool for exploring how epistemic universalism relegates indigenous epistemologies of history to the 'zero-point' or to the 'barbarian margins' (Mignolo, 2007; Sales, 2019). But beyond that, it is used as a framework for rehumanising the dehumanised as a way of being attentive to their marginalised epistemes. Here, it is done at the level of epistemology, which highlights the silenced indigenous means of representing and engaging the past (Botha et al., 2021; Godsell & Maluleka, 2025).

3. Methodological approach

This is a conceptual paper that adopts a literature review methodology to problematise the issue of epistemic universalism. Snyder (2019, p. 333) describes a literature review methodology as a "more or less systematic way of collecting and synthesizing previous research" as a way of building arguments from existing knowledge. While it primarily focuses on theoretical development, the paper also considers empirical work, which is supported by data gathered from various existing narratives and perspectives (Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Snyder, 2019). In other words, the paper utilises existing knowledge to support the analysis of the two curriculum documents, which are purposively sampled (Nieuwenhuis, 2007): the Final Syllabus for History (Standard 9-10) [Now Grades 11-12] of 1967 and the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for History (Grades 10-12), as mentioned previously. The paper begins with an analysis of the Final syllabus for History Standard 9-10, which was used under the Transvaal Education Department during the apartheid era. It highlights how the syllabus was influenced by Eurocentric notions of history at the expense of indigenous ways of engaging with the past, under the assumption that Eurocentric ways of knowing are universal and objective. This syllabus document was intentionally selected because it was offered during what can be described as a 'high apartheid' period, stretching from 1948 to 1970. The 'high apartheid' period refers to the time when the apartheid government was committed to racial segregation (Nishino, 2011) and incorporated an epistemology into the history syllabus that supported racist ideologies. The analysis then shifts to examine the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for History, Grades 10-12, which is currently in use during the democratic era. It was chosen for close review because it is the current prescribed curriculum, and to evaluate how much Eurocentric ideas of history continue to silence indigenous epistemologies of history.

The close examination of both the curriculum documents pays attention to procedural and substantive knowledge. This close examination aims to investigate how epistemic universalism has evolved and remained consistent in the school's history curricula from the apartheid to the democratic period. Extracts were randomly extrapolated from different themes in the curricula documents to illustrate the epistemic universalism that is under investigation in the paper. These extracts were respectively sourced from different levels (grades) in the apartheid syllabus and the democratic curriculum. Themes for analysis were selected based on the fact that they have never been studied before in relation to epistemic universalism. When extracting examples to illustrate epistemic universalism in the selected curriculum documents, convenient sampling (Teddlie & Yu, 2007) was adopted. To analyse the opaque and transparent structural issues of epistemic universalism that have been perpetuating epistemic dominance and marginality in the selected two curriculum documents, the paper uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Martin & Wodak, 2003; Van Dijk, 1993).

In the paper, the conceptual framework is used to "unearth how power relations were situated, maintained, reproduced and transmitted in specific social, historical and political contexts" (Seroto, 2015, p. 172) through the selected curriculum developments. It pays more attention to how language was used as a tool (Haig, 2008) for reinforcing epistemic universalism in both the selected curriculum documents. To achieve this, three interrelated processes of critical discourse analysis (CDA) were followed, as advised by Fairclough (1989). First, the object of analysis is used to examine verbal text; second, the process by means of which the object is produced or received played a role in exploring how human subjects who have been in power produced the curriculum documents and lastly, the socio-cultural conditions which govern these processes, served as a blueprint for making sense of the worldviews that shaped the human subjects in producing the procedural and substantive knowledge that have been shaping the selected curriculum documents (Fairclough, 1989; Seroto, 2015).

4. Epistemic analysis of the final syllabus for history, standard 9-10 of 1967

4.1 Cartesian normative thinking in the procedural knowledge

Although the indigenous people had their own ways of engaging with history before colonial times in what later became known as South Africa, the procedural knowledge in the syllabus was shaped by Western epistemology of history. In introducing what history education entails, the syllabus states that:

> History is based upon the concept of cause and effect, the concept of social unity, the concept of time and the concept of the value of a true record. If we can develop these four concepts the pupils will be fully equipped to contend with problems by which they will be confronted (Transvaal Education Department, 1967, p. 2).

The extract presents an idea of historical procedural knowledge that is shaped by universal ideas of engaging with the past. While these four concepts might appear to be innocent, their adoption in the syllabus reflected a cartesian normative thinking, meaning their existence was supported by the Western milieu perceived to be the global standards of studying the past, as observed by Shabangu (2024) and Masondo-Kgari (2019). These are some of the British or Eurocentric tools of engaging with the past that Bertram (2008) and Maluleka and Ramoupi (2022) spoke about. Undoubtedly, these concepts played an important role in engaging with the past, but their framing lacked a pluriversal way of engaging with history. For instance, the concept of 'cause and effect' has "subordinate[d] and subsume[d] all human histories within the Western episteme and reduce[d] all diverse histories into mere episodes within an assumed universal transcendental history" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 18).

What makes it possible for the concept of 'cause and effect' to subordinate and subsume other tools of engaging with the past is that it was projected as a universal phenomenon in studying the past. What is appalling is that, through it, changes in the global community were seen to be a result of Western actions. In other words, the concept of 'cause and effect' was central in creating the idea that it was Western societies that shaped global historical moments, events, or effected change in indigenous communities. Hence, the likes of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel claimed that the history of Africa was only propelled into history by European contact, as articulated by Ogot (2009) and Nkrumah (1964). In essence, the notion of 'cause and effect' assumes that history for everyone should always be about understanding and studying reasons and consequences for historical events. At the same time, it is not the case for some indigenous people. An example of the fact that 'cause and effect' is not always applicable when studying history would be in the case where animals and the environment have a direct influence on engaging with the past in indigenous communities, as raised earlier by Cutrara (2018). For some indigenous people, *Milorho* in the Xitsonga language or *Iphupho* in the isiZulu language (dreaming) functions as a sociocultural tool for engaging with the past, which does not require history to be understood from the concept of 'cause and effect'. This is epitomised in a study conducted by Booi (2004), which reveals how historical knowledge is generated and communicated through dreaming. One of the participants, who had a calling to be a *Sangoma*, a custodian of indigenous knowledge of healing and medicine (Magoqwana, 2018; Shabangu, 2024), alluded that:

> ...[she] saw people eating these wild plants in the field and [she] also did the same. [She] was also told by the ancestors through a dream to dig out certain roots, that [she] was asked to grind and soak in cold water and drink. The mixture tasted very good, and [she] drank it daily as prescribed. [She] also used it for washing my body. [Her] grandmother took some of the roots from that medicine to someone, to ask what it was. She was told that it was *Isilawu*, which is a medicinal root (Booi, 2004, p. 30).

What Booi (2004) observed disapproves of what Seixas (2012) claimed when saying that history is not intertwined with the indigenous cosmology. This revelation highlights that the environment has a direct influence on how the indigenous people come to construct knowledge of their past and engage with it. For instance, here, the creation of medicine was sourced and accessed from the ancestral archive – a spiritual realm, which has for years played an important role in archiving and transmitting indigenous historical knowledge of edible plants that could be used for healing or medicine (see Shabangu, 2024). This shows that history for indigenous people was never about interpreting the causes of historical events and examining their consequences as envisaged by the concept of 'cause and effect'. It has rather been about equipping people in their respective societies with the 'necessary practical skills for survival' as noted by Mazoonde (2001). Therefore, humans cannot remain the only "centre of the story" as:

> ...the relationship between humans, animals, and the land demonstrates the ecological and spiritual learning that comes from being in harmony with nature, and that by understanding the historical relationships between humans, animals, and the land, we can understand our present differently, even better (Cutrara, 2018, p. 261).

Despite these convictions and the anecdote shared by Booi's (2004) participant, according to the universalistic approach, indigenous approaches to history would still be considered illegitimate. This would be because knowledge within the universalistic framework is perceived to be a justified true belief, and indigenous epistemology is said to lack that, as highlighted by Sonkqayi (2023) and Horsthemke (2010). But that is misleading to claim that indigenous epistemology is devoid of truth, as argued by Sonkqayi (2023) and Horsthemke (2010). The universalistic framework fails to take into account that not all knowledge systems can be verified through Western ways postulated by Sosa (1991). In other words, there are diverse ways of reaching truth and 'validating' what should count as true knowledge. As seen above from Booi's (2004) participant, where her grandmother was skeptical of the plants that she was eating, which she had a 'vision' or 'dream' of, out of curiosity and doubt, the grandmother then took the roots of the medicine to someone more knowledgeable to ask what it was. There are two noticeable ways of verifying historical truth here: the idea of testimonial and *Ukuhlola* (an indigenous way of consulting a traditional healer in a quest for truth). The testimonial was important in reaching truth about the effectiveness of the roots, which are based on historical knowledge of medicine. What the participant 'dreamt of' with the account from the knowledgeable person consulted by her grandmother became a 'shared testimony' as noted by McGregor (2017). To further justify the credibility of such historical knowledge, *Ukuhlola* was used, where the traditional healer used oracles to communicate and seek wisdom from the ancestors on whether the roots are indeed edible or whether the dreams that the participant had were genuine (Booi, 2004; Mokgethi, 2018).

It becomes clear that, through its political power (Martin & Wodak, 2003; Van Dijk,1993), the apartheid government had prescribed procedural knowledge for the school history syllabus, which would eulogise Western ideas of history while reproducing epistemicide against indigenous tools of engaging with the past, which Shabangu (2024), Maluleka, and Ramoupi (2022) had raised somewhere in the paper. Another problematic concept in the syllabus was the one focusing on the 'value of a true record'. The concept of valuing a 'true record' in history has been problematised by Godsell (2019) and Olaowula (2016), who argue that it is trapped within the objectivity framework that sustains Enlightenment logic. Shabangu (2024) also questioned it to say; it assumes that there is a universal structure of interpreting the past rooted in objectivity. The issue here, as noted earlier, is that this objectivity has been associated only with Western epistemologies of history (De Sousa Santos, 2005). This overlooks the existence of the 'ecologies of knowledge'(see Zembylas, 2018) when it comes to procedural tools of studying history. This is further reproduced (Martin & Wodak, 2003) in the section where the syllabus speaks of the general skills that it sought to cultivate. It mentions that history aimed to:

> Develop to some degree in every pupil qualities and values which a study of history should promote, e.g. a sense of time and proportion; a critical approach to modern conditions and ways of life; an ability to express himself lucidly in speech and written; to be tolerant and impartial of his outlook; to help him [sic] to appreciate the interaction of cause and effect (Transvaal Education Department, 1967, p. 2).

This treated history as if the practice of engaging history through the approach of speech and writing applies to all cultures and contexts, as postulated by Shabangu (2024). While speech is verbal, it does not categorise the types that would 'accommodate' oral 'traditions' of engaging with the past, which was prevalent in indigenous societies. As a result, this undermined and suppressed the indigenous practices of engaging with history, which, according to Seroto (2011), involve oral histories, oral lore, and oral culture, primarily based on testimonies and stories passed down from one generation to another orally. This suppression justified the notion that history is about the 'written past', which only relies on 'historical documentation' as a source of evidence. Beyond the oral histories from the indigenous people and the Western 'written' forms of history, some of the indigenous people in southern Africa were also engaged in writing, which was, however, not based on the 'written words' (Ogot, 2009; Souag, 2010). The San people, who are sometimes derogatorily referred to as the 'Bushmen[2]', are a typical example of indigenous people who engaged in documenting their history through writing using rock paintings and engravings (Seroto, 2011). This dismisses the notion that upon the arrival of Europeans, the indigenous people were not engaged in writing, as explained by Kim (2001). These indigenous historical sources and tools of engaging with the past are not always easily open to interpretation (Seroto, 2011), or to interpret, meaning their use in the syllabus would have cultivated critical thinking the same way Western tools of history do. Nevertheless, these assertions unveil that Western procedural knowledge for history was universalised to push the indigenous ones to what Sales (2019) and Mignolo (2007) respectively referred to as the 'zero-point' or to the 'barbarian margins'.

4.2 Epistemological harm in the substantive knowledge shaping the syllabus

The idea that the history of Africa began with the arrival of Europeans, and Jan Van Riebeck in South Africa, as noted by Ogot (2009) and Seroto (1999), was also reinforced in the structuring of the content, where it started with the teaching of European history, to South African history. Notwithstanding, what was perceived to be South African history mainly focused on the discourses of Europeans in Africa, and what was coined to be African history or the history of indigenous people was mainly characterised by historical stereotypes and epistemic biases or silences. This is evident where the syllabus mentions that:

> The course has been planned to enable pupils to obtain a clear idea of the outstanding features of the formative movements of the world of to-day as shaped the formative movements of the last century and a half, particularly in the countries of Western Europe, North America and South Africa. New material incorporated in this syllabus brings the study of South African and general history up to the second decade of the twentieth century and, in some instances, up to the present (Transvaal Department of Education, 1967, p.7).

Based on the extract, Euro-North American history was given prominence in the syllabus as the content began with the teaching of it which underscores the fact that, in Africa, there was rich history which to some extent influenced 'development' in Europe such as the Egyptian civilisation, Great Zimbabwe, Mapungubwe and so forth (Chang'ach, 2015; Diop, 1974; Huffman, 1996). Those who have been in power during the apartheid period had produced the syllabus following the Eurocentric historians who wrongfully claimed that Africa was not part and parcel of world history nor civilisation, as demonstrated by Tisani (2018). This, in turn, was supposed to feed into the narrative that Africa 'waited in darkness for Europeans to bring light' (Chang'ach, 2015). Hence, the officials who planned the curriculum had opted to begin the teaching of history with European history, which would subtly create an impression that Africa had no history, as mentioned previously by Shabangu (2024) and Ogot (2009), that could have been featured in the syllabus, especially as a starting point. To perpetuate this rhetoric of progress and enlighten-

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2 These two labels are complex and controversial in that their meanings and use are contested. For instance, "'Bushman' is ambiguous because it was used by colonists to describe hunter-gatherer communities..." (Adhikari, 2010, p.44). While the San label is, to some extent, rejected for failing to capture the livelihood of the hunter-gatherers. But it is more acceptable in that it is not gender-bias toward women like 'Bush[men]', it is less pejorative, less ambiguous....and currently is the term most widely accepted by leaders and organisations representing San people" (Adhikari, 2014, p.44).

ment, as identified by Mignolo (1995), the syllabus was produced (Fairclough, 1989) by apartheid officials who “suppress[e], distort[ed] or ignore[d] African history with the intent of perpetuating white supremacy and hegemony” (Chang’ach, 2015, p. 1).

Furthermore, the South African history in the syllabus is still centered on European discourses, meaning it also ignores the ancient history of Africa, or at least the history of the indigenous people who inhabited the region before the settlers’ encroachment. The syllabus within the South African history mentions that it focused more on “(i) establishment of a permanent white population in South Africa, (ii) exploration of this interior, (iii) expansion of the rule of the D.E.I.C. [Dutch East India Company]…” (Transvaal Department of Education, 1967, p. 20). This shows that Western views of history and content were so heavy and dominant in the syllabus that there were no signs of indigenous histories, even though the section claimed to be focusing on South African history. This affirms that the repercussions of Western colonialism, as argued by Iyer (2025), were far detrimental to the historical knwoeldges of indigenous people, whose history before colonial times was not considered and prioritised as one of the first themes that should be studied. Aspects that featured the history of indigenous people and other racial groups were presented using problematic language (Haig, 2008), which would see the justification of their ‘inferiorisation’. For instance, the part that speaks about historical events that led to the formation of the South African Union in 1910, also known as the consolidation of White power between the Afrikaans-speaking Whites and the British Whites, introduces their section as the “Bantu and Indian question” (Transvaal Department of Education, 1967, p. 28). In another instance, the section that discusses the interaction between indigenous people and Europeans describes Sir George Gray as someone who introduced policies that would civilise the indigenous people. The syllabus dedicates a section titled “Grey’s civilising policy” (Department of Education, 1967, p. 32) meant to bring ‘light’ to those who have been perceived to be ‘backward’. This is what Mignolo (2007) warned us about, where he postulated that colonisation was justified as a civilising mission, as epitomised in the syllabus, where it was justified as a practice that sought to bring ‘advancement’ to the indigenous people, assumed to be lacking it.

5. Issues of epistemic hegemony in the post-apartheid curriculum document, grades 10 – 12

5.1 The reproduction of coloniality through procedural knowledge

Major reforms were made in terms of the procedural knowledge informing the teaching of history in the post-apartheid curriculum. This is evident where the curriculum claims that, with the study of history, it supports the idea of “reflecting the perspectives of a broad social spectrum so that race, class, gender and the voices of ordinary people are represented” (Department of Education, 2011, p. 8). Taken into context, the curriculum is implying that engaging with history should reflect the diverse perspectives of our country, which is a phenomenon that was ignored during the apartheid era, as shown somewhere in the paper. What is interesting is that the curriculum also mentions that there is a need for “valuing of indigenous knowledge [and] acknowledging the rich history and heritage of [our] country” (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 5). In essence, the curriculum was being attentive to what Botha et al. (2021) referred to as nondominant knowledges. This means the curriculum saw the need to start recognising indigenous ideas of history that have been silenced in the apartheid history syllabus. Although it was the case, this recognition did not necessarily lead towards dismantling the hegemony of Western epistemology informing the study of history as envisaged by Botha et al. (2021) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015). Shabangu (2024) criticised this, describing it as a performative move that did not lead to the use of multiple approaches in studying the past. This is because “the curriculum is prescriptive and performative[3] in that, despite claiming to be promoting multiperspectivity, there are still no indigenous perspectives of the past which are sourced from their archives” (Shabangu, 2024, p. 77).

3 According to Sahlins (1985, cited in Shabangu, 2024, p. 77), “a prescriptive structure assimilates contingent circumstances to itself, thereby resisting change, while a performative structure assimilates itself to contingent circumstances, thereby becoming susceptible to change and re-arrangement”.

The current concepts informing the teaching of history in the curriculum are refined, and they draw from the work of Peter Seixas, known as historical thinking concepts, the big six. The concepts that each country adopts vary in their curricula, and in the South African context, the concepts are identified as "historical sources as evidence, multiperspectivity, cause and effect, change and continuity, and time and chronology" (Department of Education, 2011, p. 10). It is important to note that, although these concepts were refined by the Canadian historian and scholars, Peter Seixas, for easy implementation in the 'modern' society, these concepts have their roots in Britain (Clark, 2011). It is without a doubt that these concepts are important in studying the past, as noted by McGregor (2017, p.7), that:

> The historical thinking approach to history education resists teaching a set of fixed narratives for student consumption. It is predicated on the idea that the stories we tell about the past—histories—are not facsimiles of the past, but rather constructions arrived at through imperfect human processes of interpretation. The more students know about these processes, the better they can participate in them, and eventually influence the stories produced by them.

The problem with these concepts lies in that they have been universalised and made to be normative when it comes to studying the past. This universalisation continues to sustain the objective, linear, and cartesian normative thinking in history, which McGregor (2017) and Godsell (2019) exposed. These concepts cannot be applied to the study of all histories due to the diverse nature of cultures, which in a way shape how people come to make sense of their past. For example, the concept of 'time and chronology' in the curriculum encourages history to be "studied and written in time sequence. [It further mentions that] it is important to be able to place events in the order in which they happened. Timelines are often used to develop this concept (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 10), which cannot always be the case when representing the history of indigenous people. In other words, the concept of 'time and chronology' in its current understanding does not take into account of the African cosmology, where time is embedded in the 'circular nature of time' (see Ramose, 2005). Therefore, this dominant view of time cannot be used to study the history of indigenous people, as history for them is not just about a series of events that should be studied and represented chronologically (Marker, 2011). This is because "there is a continuity of cultural values from past experiences that helps shape the present. Similarly, the present also influences the narration of the past" (Dei, 2000, p. 120). Tisani (2018) bemoans that the Western conception of time is not adequate in explaining and representing the history of indigenous people. She claims that:

> Europeans have tamed time through their application of mathematical knowledge, as well as the use of chronometers. In addition, the big moment in the cosmology of Europeans is framed around the historical person of Jesus. Their notion of time is calculated around the era before the coming, as well as the Year of our lord, *Anno Domini* (Ramose, 2005, p. 26). Perhaps it is because there has been the final coming, through the birth of Jesus Christ, that the European worldview is rigidly linear, forever going forward (Tisani, 2018, p. 23).

Because of this Western 'forever going forward' notion of time, the history of indigenous people, which is sometimes expressed through the circular context, could be misinterpreted when applying this framework of time. Historical narratives such as that of Booi's (2004) participant, which is based on the African spiritual realm, would be rejected and silenced (Godsell & Maluleka, 2025), arguing that it is not objective and universal (Sonkqayi, 2023), since the actual past has gone, and it cannot be accessed nor interpreted through 'dreaming' but only objectively (see Bevir, 1994). Such a history generated at a spiritual and intuitive level cannot be written chronologically or even be periodised as envisaged by the 'time and chronology' concept in the curriculum (see Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 10).

5.2 Settler grammar and narratives influencing the substantive knowledge in the curriculum

The inclusion of narratives from those previously marginalised in the apartheid syllabi is evident in the post-apartheid curriculum, as noted by Maluleka (2021). However, their framing is still shaped by settler grammar, which can be seen as a tool of sustaining coloniality in the curriculum. The manner in which this is done is succinctly captured by Calderon (2014), who argues that those at the helm of designing school history curricula tend to legitimise coloniality by using colonial languages and ideologies of history, which render the indigenous people absent. In Grade 10, under Topic 6, which focuses on "The South African War and Union" (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 18), there is a sub-topic that addresses the land question, which is

framed and narrated from a Eurocentric perspective. The sub-topic which is “The Natives Land Act of 1913[4]” (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 18), stipulates that it focuses on “economic and social impact - Sol Plaatje; and the precursor of the Apartheid pattern” (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 18). These impacts are explained through the capitalist framework, where everything is understood through a commodification lens. This is the market fundamentalist outlook that Maluleka (2021) spoke of, which continues to inform the curriculum. This framing, which only focuses on the economic aspects, suppresses the impacts that the Act had on the African cosmology, and it does not encourage the engagement of such aspects of history. For instance, some indigenous people whose cultural beliefs are based on the practice of *Kuphahla* in the Siswati language, which could be loosely translated as the process of communicating with ancestors at the graveyard/site, were disturbed by the Act, which forced them to move to other areas. This is because the Act prohibited these people from accessing their sacred lands, where their cultural rites and rituals could be performed. This is an indirect way of rendering such indigenous historical knowledge to the ‘barbarian margins’ (Mignolo, 2007).

Sources framing the content in the curriculum are not diversified, meaning Western archives of the past are still dominant and universalised. This affirms what Shabangu (2024) articulated: the curriculum remains informed by Western forms of rationality and archives. The curriculum in its current setting ignores indigenous archives such as *Iingoma* (traditional songs), *Izibongo* (traditional poems), which are prevalent in the Zulu culture (Mvenene, 2024), and *Iintsomi* (folklore), which are practiced by the isiXhosa-speaking indigenous people (Magoqwana, 2018). According to Mvenene (2024), these historical sources have silenced the idea of multi-perspectivity and diversity in the curriculum. For instance, *Iingoma* can be encouraged in the curriculum as an archive of history that can highlight certain historical events, such as “Topic 5: Apartheid South Africa 1940s to 1960s” (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 24), offered in Grade 11 and “Topic 4: Civil Resistance in South Africa 1970s to 1980” offered in Grade 12. Some of these *Iingoma*, which are sung as struggle songs, can offer a clear picture of what life was like during the apartheid period, the emotions that were evoked during the struggle, what was happening at the time when the song was sung, and so forth (Gasa, 2011; Mvenene, 2024). The following struggle song titled: *Sobashiya’ bazali ekhaya/ We Shall Leave Our Parents Behind* epitomises that:

Sobashiya’ bazali ekhaya
Savuma, sangena kwamanye amazwe
Lapho kungazi khona ubaba no mama
Silandela inkululeko
Sobashiya abafowethu
Savuma sangena kwamanye amazwe
Lapho kungazi khona ubaba nomama
Silandela inkululeko
Sithi salani, salani, salani ekhaya
Sangena kwamanye amazwe
Lapho kungazi khona ubaba nomama
Silandela inkululeko
We shall leave our parents behind
We agreed, and we entered other countries
Where neither father nor mother had ever been before
As we pursue freedom
We shall leave our siblings behind
We agreed to go to other countries
Where neither father nor mother had ever been before
As we pursue freedom
We are saying goodbye, goodbye, goodbye to everyone at home
As we entered other countries
Where neither father nor mother had ever been before
As we pursue freedom (Lekgoathi, 2010, p. 141)

4 The Natives Land Act of 1913 is described as a discriminatory policy in South Africa that prohibited and prevented indigenous people from owning any land in particularly in arable and urban spaces. It also restricted indigenous people from leasing land where possible. In short, it became the cornerstone of land dispossession, which has allowed Europeans to expropriate their land without compensation, as phrased by Mellet (2020).

These songs are sung in African languages and documented in such languages. However, it becomes imperative to translate these songs or any other indigenous historical sources for epistemic access. This should be done even though, in some instances, the embedded meaning in the sources might be lost in translation, but for ensuring that such historical information becomes accessible among the indigenous people who speak different languages, it should then be translated into the English language, which has naturalised to become a common language. Such a move should not be mistaken with Anglonormativity, but rather as a move towards epistemological access. Nevertheless, according to Mvenene (2024), the song contains narratives that can highlight the brutality of apartheid, where people would sacrifice leaving their parents behind to go to exile and get training to fight against the regime of apartheid. Therefore, such historical sources can be of historical significance in enhancing the teaching and learning of history through the curriculum (Mvenene, 2024; Shabangu, 2024).

6. Conclusion

This paper, through decoloniality as a conceptual framework underpinning it, supported by the critical discourse analysis (CDA), has shown that epistemic universalism during the apartheid period was implicitly perpetuated in the syllabi. This is where indigenous epistemologies of history became illegitimised and silenced. With the post-apartheid curricula, the paper has demonstrated that, to some extent, reforms were made. However, it failed to establish an alternative history of South Africa derived from a broader range of indigenous sources, including the archaeological and oral archives, which would be centered on the African experience. It also failed to grapple with the coloniality of the curriculum and its epistemological foundations, which are rooted in Western modernity, rationality, theories, and archives. In other words, it still does not reflect the historiographical advances made in recent years in history education, as noted by Shabangu (2024), Maluleka (2021), and Godsell (2019). The paper has problematised, exposed, and unveiled the hegemony of epistemic universalism that has been manifesting in the school history curricula dating back to the apartheid period. While problematising, exposing, and unveiling epistemic universalism, it has concurrently paid attention to nondominant knowledges as a way of opening “up the possibility of interrogating and dismantling the hegemony of the Western knowledge tradition” as envisaged by Botha et al. (2021, p. 52).

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The acclimation of historical thinking to the “northern spirit” of northern Canadian social studies curricula

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Abstract

This article details our findings from the Thinking Historically for Canada’s Future project, wherein we conducted a descriptive survey of selected social studies curricula from the Canadian territories of the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut. Examining documents published between 1996 and 2021, we sought evidence of the presence of second-order historical thinking concepts. We found that certain principles of historical thinking were being acclimated to purposes and pedagogies evident in five themes that characterize and distinguish the history education in northern curricula: 1) history education as cultural reclamation; 2) reconciliation and resistance framings; 3) linear and cyclical models of time; 4) the role of non-human beings; and 5) student-centred, experiential learning. We provide empirical examples of how curriculum authors in Canada’s northern territories integrate tenets of Indigenous education, incorporating knowledges, languages and cultures relevant to northern communities, while nested in a curricular system grappling with colonial and Euro-Canadian roots and ongoing influences. Northern social studies education pursues historical thinking while acclimating itself to the goals and aspirations embodied by “northern spirit.”

Keywords

History education, historical thinking, social studies curriculum, Indigenous knowledges, curriculum analysis

1 Introduction

The work of Peter Seixas and his colleagues (Ercikan & Seixas, 2015; Peck & Seixas, 2008; Seixas, 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013) in theorizing and crystalizing a set of six historical thinking concepts to support history instruction is prevalent in the curriculum documents and classrooms of most Canadian provinces and territories (Clark, 2018; 2019; 2024; Seixas & Colyer, 2014). Curriculum scholars, however, have identified potential shortcomings in the historical thinking approach to history education, with respect to how it may silence, undermine, constrain, misinterpret, or crowd out Indigenous voices and historical meaning-making (Cutrara, 2018; Gibson & Case, 2019; Karn, Llewellyn & Clark, 2024; Marker, 2011; McGregor, 2017; Miles, 2018; Wallace-Casey, 2022). This is particularly salient for settler-colonial states like Canada, where public schooling has played

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a significant role in shaping the country's development by attempting to assimilate Indigenous culture according to white, Eurocentric, universal, and Western norms (Battiste, 2013; Carleton, 2022; Kirkness, 1999). Fundamental questions remain about the use of historical thinking concepts in teaching contexts that serve predominantly Indigenous communities, which privilege local, place-based knowledges and cultural practices. The relationship between Indigenous knowledge and historical thinking in history or social studies classrooms is a theoretical and practical problem compounded by the absence of recent empirical reviews of the curricula in predominantly Indigenous contexts such as the three northern Canadian territories (Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut).

This article describes our findings from analyzing selections of social studies curricula from Canada's northern jurisdictions as part of the Thinking Historically for Canada's Future (THFCF)[1] project. The THFCF project, led by Dr. Carla Peck at the University of Alberta and funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Partnership Grant, is the first major national review of K-12 Canadian social studies and history curriculum since 1968. Heather McGregor is a project co-investigator, and Harrison Dressler worked on the project as a researcher from 2023 to 2025. The THFCF project analyzed at least two history and social studies curriculum documents from each province or territory then in use in classrooms by educators (see also Karn, Llewellyn, & Clark, 2024). We analyzed a sub-set of curricular selections from the northern territories using the methodological approach of the national project framework. To select the curricula for our analysis, Heather first created an inventory of northern social studies curricula and then examined how each was written and by whom. Since our goal was to analyze curricula produced by northern authors specifically for northern teaching and learning audiences and contexts, we prioritized made-in-the-North curriculum documents. This selective approach was necessary because territorial governments can lack the capacity and economies of scale required to create proprietary curricula, driving them to adapt, or sometimes adopt wholesale, curricular guidelines from other Canadian jurisdictions.

The analysis of made-in-the-North curriculum documents offers insight into how educational authorities serving predominantly Indigenous populations in rural and remote locations engage with historical thinking concepts and integrate them into curricula, often using storytelling practices, ecological concepts, and land-based education. As shown below, historical thinking approaches to history and social studies education are not merely transported into the curriculum indiscriminately, nor are they used to the exclusion of Indigenous knowledges. In applying a European model of historical thinking to the curricula of Canada's northern territories, we found our analysis would be overly reductive if formulated as a checklist of the presence or absence of the six historical thinking concepts. Instead, our primarily descriptive survey shows that the authors worked to acclimate—that is, to integrate, reappropriate, adapt, or synthesize—second-order historical thinking concepts using local Indigenous content from history, philosophy, culture, and politics. Our purpose is to describe the unique offerings of these northern curricular documents, allowing future curriculum developers to mediate the tensions of diverse theoretical influences, rather than to problematize the historical thinking framework or Indigenous knowledges as such.

We begin the article by setting the curriculum documents in historical context, showing how northern education systems have pursued distinct objectives in curriculum and education policy. Then, we outline the methodology used to examine keywords, content, pedagogical approaches, and the roles of teachers regarding historical thinking. Understanding the difficulties inherent in applying a rigid model of historical thinking to predominantly Indigenous curricula, we decided that our responses to the research prompts could be used for showcasing what stories the documents tell us about the place of history and historical consciousness in northern educational priorities. Our content and critical discourse analysis identifies five themes specific to northern curricula: (1) history education as cultural reclamation; (2) reconciliation and resistance framings; (3) the interplay of linear and cyclical models of time; (4) the role of non-human beings; (5) and student-centred, experiential learning. We highlight that the social studies education courses of Canada's northern jurisdictions, which are embedded with Indigenous knowledge systems and aspirations, pursue the acclimation of second-order historical thinking concepts in locally-specific ways. Throughout nearly all the documents, we can identify the will of Indigenous northerners to sustain their collective "Northern spirit," defined by the Government of the Northwest Territories (2015) as the "spirit that will be fundamental in creating a sense of belonging for each one of our students as he or she engages in active and responsible citizenship locally, nationally, and globally" (p. 1).

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1 See the project website: thinking-historically.ca

1.1 Author positionality

Heather was born and raised in Canada's North to white settler parents, who were both involved in northern teaching and educational administration. She worked for the Department of Education in Nunavut on curriculum and policy initiatives for several years, in addition to conducting research on educational change over time. Heather does not speak Indigenous languages, nor carry Indigenous cultural knowledges, although her prior scholarship has intended to document the processes of infusing public education in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut with those knowledges, languages, cultural practices and ways of being (McGregor, H. E., 2010; 2012a; 2012b; 2013, 2017; McGregor, H. E., & McGregor, C. A., 2017; 2020). Her motivation in carrying out this research is to ensure that the complexities and opportunities of the unique educational contexts of the northern jurisdictions are accurately represented in research occurring on a national scale, aiming to yield a national portrait. Harrison is a white settler-Canadian and English speaker who does not purport to represent an Indigenous perspective. He is an independent scholar with limited experience researching the role of the media and public sphere in shaping the resistance of Indigenous nations to state-managed energy projects in New Brunswick. His research is largely shaped by an ecological, non-developmentalist materialism sensitive to the environmental and bodily impacts of colonization and industrialization on Indigenous nations, disabled people, and workers in Canada and elsewhere.

2 Northern Canadian context of curriculum development and selection

The scope of this article does not allow for a comprehensive review of the environmental, political, economic, and educational contexts of Canada's North (see e.g., Fraser, 2024; McGregor & Millar, 2015). Canadian northern populations are largely rural Indigenous peoples, with many communities accessible only through air travel, ice roads, or lengthy highway journeys. Settlement agreements between the Crown and Indigenous nations or peoples have resulted in the right to educational autonomy in many northern contexts, but its implementation is hampered by limited capacity for curricular development, insufficient human resource training, and the entrenched nature of colonial systems. The Indigenous peoples of Nunavut are closely related and politically affiliated (Inuit, Inuvialuit), whereas nations in the Northwest Territories and Yukon are more linguistically and culturally diverse, meaning that one cultural program or set of teaching materials may not align with the beliefs, customs, and practices of all communities. Northern peoples are committed to protecting and stewarding their lands, waters, and Arctic species, but resource extraction industries remain a dominant economic force in the region.

Northern and rural areas of Canada face significant difficulties in retaining a skilled workforce (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010). Reporting from CBC News in 2019—prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic that significantly worsened teacher shortages—suggests that Nunavut was re-hiring 50% of its teaching positions, demonstrating very low rates of retention (Hill, 2019). Many teachers employed in the North are white, Euro-descendent "Southerners" trained in southern universities and schools, who may struggle to relate to or understand northern culture. According to APTN News, out of a total of 682 teachers employed in the Northwest Territories in 2015, only 108 were Indigenous (Kassam, 2015). Other challenges stem from deficits in how northerners receive professional training; even Indigenous teachers familiar with northern culture must navigate manifold challenges with local and cultural integration (Berger, Johnston & Oskineegish, 2016). For instance, northern teachers are most commonly trained in teacher's colleges for K-6 Indigenous language integration rather than middle- or high-school subjects like social studies and history, making in-depth knowledge of Canadian and Indigenous history difficult to acquire. Similarly, since many Indigenous teachers have attended schools and universities that teach predominantly Euro-Canadian and colonial perspectives, they may not have had sufficient opportunity to learn how to deliver social studies content informed by northern values.

2.1 Yukon

Perhaps the most significant, and still largely prospective, change to education in the Yukon happened only in 2021, when 10 out of the 14 Yukon First Nations finalized an agreement with the Government of Yukon to create a First Nations School Board, thereby beginning steps to

administer an autonomous school system (Wallingham, 2021, p. 1). According to numerous final settlement agreements with the Crown, the Yukon First Nations have the right to authority over education and heritage. But, like elsewhere in Canada, the exercise of Indigenous educational rights is constrained by challenges with generating enough capacity to write and replace Euro-Western curricula, as well as retrain teachers, to reflect First Nations language and culture. All schools in the Yukon are using the British Columbia (BC) provincial curriculum. The First Nations Initiatives branch of the Department of Education provides Yukon-specific supplementary materials to the BC curriculum and textbooks at various grade levels. Teacher's Guides and Student Booklets are provided for units on First Nations Clans and First Nations Languages in elementary social studies, which are among the documents selected for our analysis.

2.2 Northwest Territories and Nunavut

Catherine McGregor (2015), in examining the development of the social studies curriculum of the NWT and Nunavut, argues that curricula written in the North at the turn of the twenty-first century could be called "culturally founded." Functioning as an extension and elaboration of what curriculum scholars consider "culturally responsive" approaches—meant to affirm and adapt to the diverse cultures that children bring to school—"culturally grounded" pedagogy is distinct in: "the purposes for teaching; perspectives on, and sources of, knowledge; the depth of cultural content; and the extent to which Indigenous teachers, community members, and Elders are involved as significant knowledge-holders and educators" (McGregor, C. A., 2015, p. 61).

The unique legislation and policy contexts of the NWT and the eastern Arctic region that would become Nunavut in 1999 provided the conditions in which culturally founded curriculum could be created. The highest required social studies credit in secondary school was converted in 1991 from social studies to a grade 10 "Northern Studies" course in the NWT (McGregor, C. A., 2015). The 1990s were a crucial time for the creativity and momentum of the movement for Indigenous-made curriculum and education materials, which propelled the documentation of Elder knowledge across subject areas. When the *Dene Kede* curriculum (reflecting Dene worldviews) and the *Inuuqatigiit* curriculum (for Inuit knowledge) were issued in 1993 and 1996, respectively, they provided foundational understandings of Indigenous languages, worldviews, knowledge, and educational practices in terms of attitudes, training, and life skills. Teachers were expected to refer to these documents but were offered little guidance concerning how and what to teach on a day-to-day basis. As McGregor (2015) observes: "One element was still lacking, however: neither *Inuuqatigiit* nor *Dene Kede* fully explained how teachers reconcile instruction of these curricula with other required social studies documents representing conflicting Euro-Canadian worldviews, content, and skills" (p. 68). Further curriculum work has sought to improve the long-term viability of northern thought and schools by providing teachers with classroom-ready supports and resources. In Nunavut, Elders, Inuit educators and long-term settler teachers are working to bridge the gap between Inuit knowledge frameworks and concrete implementation by developing more in-depth classroom ready materials. Key Inuit values and attitudes—such as respect, harmony, planning, and pursuing the common good—are integrated throughout. Grade 10 social studies curriculum (or Nunavusiutit, as the strand is called in Nunavut) introduced full modules for teachers, focusing on the history of Inuit land claims, the intergenerational impacts of Canadian and northern residential schools, Inuit forms of governance and leadership, and Inuit and Canadian perspectives on rights, responsibilities, and justice.

Critiques of northern curriculum continue to reverberate, however, from teachers, parents, and communities. Commentators allege that schools and governments have yet to sufficiently align the standards of curriculum and teacher training with the social, cultural, and practical knowledge required to live a fulfilling life in the North. These values and habits include a strong sense of identity and belonging, skills in bilingualism or multilingualism, and preparation for entry into what remain predominantly Eurocentric post-secondary educational opportunities (Berger, Johnston & Oskineegish, 2016; Lewthwaite et al., 2013; Sallaffie et al., 2022). Despite the salience of some of these critiques, we intend to spotlight the insights and innovations of the curriculum developers of the northern jurisdictions in producing curricula that reflect the values and aspirations of northern place and people. These curricula are, in many cases, distinct from their southern Canadian counterparts, especially in how they adapt or adopt historical thinking. Although Nunavut, NWT, and Yukon are distinct administratively, socio-politically, culturally, and with reference to curricula, here we carefully construct generalizations that we view as fair across the three territories, in the interest of contributing a northern portrait to a larger national picture of history education.

3 Curriculum documents

Curriculum documents in the territories, like elsewhere in Canada, are updated at varying frequencies across different jurisdictions, depending on political will, policy context, and available resources. It can take a decade or more for a territorial government to update curriculum at any given grade level. The documents under review, published between 1996 and 2021, were being used in classrooms from Grade 4 to Grade 12 as of 2021. As shown in Table 1, they reflect a range of Indigenous worldviews, showcasing the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity of their respective jurisdictions. These worldviews include the perspectives of Inuit (or, at times, of Inuvialuit specifically), Yukon First Nations, Dene, and Gwich'in.

Table 1: Curriculum documents selected for analysis from Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut

<table>
<tr><th>Grade</th><th>Date</th><th>Document title</th><th>Worldviews</th><th>Use of historical thinking</th><th>Production influences</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="6">Yukon (YT)</td></tr>
<tr><td>4[2]</td><td>2008</td><td>Yukon First Nations – Languages teacher's guide</td><td rowspan="2">Yukon First Nations, Moieties: Crow and Wolf, Gwich'in</td><td>Absent, uses “critical thinking” framework</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>2008</td><td>Yukon First Nations – Clans teacher's guide</td><td>Absent, uses “critical thinking” framework</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>12</td><td>2020</td><td>Yukon First Nations Studies 12: Localization considerations</td><td>Yukon First Nations</td><td>Present</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="6">Northwest Territories (NWT)</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td>2011</td><td>Canada: The peoples and stories of this land; A curriculum and guide to implementation</td><td rowspan="2">Dene (primary First Nation referenced), Inuvialuit & Inuinait</td><td>Present, combined with “critical thinking” framework</td><td>Adapted from Manitoba education, citizenship, and youth</td></tr>
<tr><td>10</td><td>2015</td><td>Northern Studies 10: Northern Homeland</td><td>Present</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="6">Nunavut (NU)</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td>1996</td><td>Inuuqatigiit: The curriculum from the Inuit perspective</td><td rowspan="3">Inuit</td><td>Absent (published before historical thinking literature)</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td>2021</td><td>Grade 5 2021-22 core curriculum</td><td>Absent</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>10</td><td>2014</td><td>Inuuqatigiitsiarniq: Seeking harmony; Teacher's handbook 10-1</td><td>Present</td><td>The skills and competencies are “borrowed from other provinces, primarily Alberta” (p. 21)</td></tr>
</table>

2 Although the documents themselves refer to grade 5 in their title, as of 2021 they were listed for grade 4 use in the Yukon's inventory of curriculum.

3.1 Pedagogical guidance in documents

Some documents considered curriculum for the purposes of this study function as more than a list of learning outcomes, offering teachers in-depth content, guidance, and pedagogical support, given the challenges retaining well-trained staff in northern schools, as discussed above. The documents sometimes contain, for example, fleshed-out lesson plans, as well as advice on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and educational practices in the classroom. While these detailed guides may depart from what is traditionally expected of curriculum documents in other jurisdictions, for the purposes of our analysis, they provided important contextual information that deepened our understanding of the intentions of the curriculum developers in producing uniquely northern lessons and pedagogy.

4 Historical thinking analysis framework & method

The curriculum documents were analyzed for historical thinking using a content and critical discourse approach (see also Karn et al., 2024). The analysis protocol was developed by multiple researchers involved in the THFCF project and applied consistently across the documents from all Canadian jurisdictions. It was not developed specifically for, nor adapted to, northern or predominantly Indigenous jurisdictions, nor customized for the inquiry we feature here. The protocol consisted of a series of questions indicated in Table 2 and a list of keywords indicated in Table 3. These questions were crafted to loosely resemble the structure of the six second-order historical thinking concepts and associated vocabulary used in classrooms across Canada, constructed and defined in the work of Seixas and Morton (2013).

Table 2: Historical thinking curriculum analysis protocol (January 2022)

	Analysis question
1	What is the view of history in this curriculum document (e.g., uncontested descriptions of what really happened, historians' interpretations of extant evidence)?
2	In a few sentences, describe how the curriculum explains and/or applies historical thinking.
3	How does the curriculum explain and/or apply historical significance?
4	How does the curriculum explain and/or apply use of evidence and interpretation? Are primary sources provided for student inquiries? Does the curriculum emphasize contextualization, corroboration and sourcing?
5	How does the curriculum explain and/or apply the concepts of continuity and change? Does it refer to related concepts such as periodization or progress and decline?
6	How does the curriculum explain and/or apply the concepts of cause and consequence? Does it refer to related concepts such as historical actors or historical agency?
7	How does the curriculum explain and/or apply the concept of historical perspective? Does it present diverse historical perspectives?
8	How does the curriculum explain and/or apply the concept of the ethical dimension? Is the ethical dimension made explicit or is it simply assumed?
9	Does the curriculum include attention to the concept of historical consciousness? If so, in what ways?
10	Does the curriculum provide suggestions for pedagogy to support historical thinking?
11	What are your general comments about this curriculum based on your analysis?

Table 3: Historical thinking keywords examined in curricula

Keywords	Sub-concepts	Further embedded concepts
Competencies		
Historical consciousness		
Historical literacy		
History	Narratives; first-order or substantive concepts; second-order concepts	
Historical thinking	Historical significance	Importance; impact; quantity; durability; relevance to today; resulting in change
	Use of evidence	Interpretation; primary sources (traces; accounts; relics; records) secondary sources; sourcing; contextualizing; corroborating
	Cause and consequence	Short-term and long-term; intended and unintended; not inevitable; historical agency; historical actor(s)
	Continuity and change	Progress and decline; periodization; rate of change; location of change; turning points
	Historical perspective	Historical context/historical empathy; presentism; diverse historical perspectives; factors that shaped lives and actions; motivations
	Ethical dimension	Implicit and explicit; historical context; informed judgments; judge/evaluate; presentism; type of judgment

Further to the questions in Table 2, as indicated by Table 3, there was a keyword analysis step in the methodology, where the analyst looked at the presence, absence, and frequency of keywords or concepts. The appearance of the keywords in the documents were examined for observations related to: noteworthy coupling of words, emphasis of words, exclusion of words, or affirming of wording in visuals/graphics.

To conduct each review, an initial analyst responded to the questions in Table 2 and examined the keywords from Table 3. Then, a secondary review was completed by another analyst. The secondary analyst read the curriculum with the framework questions in mind, examined the work of the first analyst, and then affirmed their findings, added details or examples, or provided contrasting perspectives (each analysis is between 1,900 and 4,000 words). Some curricula were published before Seixas' work on the historical thinking concepts, causing analysts to, at times, adapt or stretch the THFCF project framework to account for the lack of specific references to historical thinking. Harrison was responsible for the secondary analysis of every northern document, and Heather reviewed each final analysis, at times reconciling differences of opinion between the initial and secondary analyst.

Taking stock of the meaning to be made from the use of the historical thinking analysis protocol, we designed the last stage of analysis specifically for this article, resulting in the identification of each of the five themes detailed below. The synthesis was, in each case, informed and guided by at least one, and often two or three, THFCF project questions in Table 2. Due to the exploratory nature of this article, each section of the thematic analysis provides a broad yet granular and textured descriptive survey. Iterative revision, close reading and review led to the detection of "descriptive themes" intended to "stay close" to and remain representative of the curriculum content (Thomas & Harden, 2008). We elucidate how shared or common ideas

and topics are theoretically and practically applied, including but not limited to the role of students, teachers, parents, and the community, the conceptualization of time and space, and the institutional direction or hierarchies of formal schooling.[3] By signposting areas of tension and synthesis, highlighting unique or challenging ideas, and identifying the curriculum's specifically northern characteristics, this article provides insights for curriculum developers working to balance Western models of historical thinking with Indigenous worldviews.

There are several ways in which this research is limited. In terms of evidence, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of a curriculum review in conveying the practical use of curricula in classrooms, or in representing the experiences of teachers and students who are interpreting normative guidelines. The focus on curriculum analysis in this project under the THFCF banner (see also Karn et al., 2024) was later extended to review accompanying learning materials, such as textbooks, and those findings will be published in the future. Another sub-project of THFCF in which Heather was involved pursued interviews with a small number of teachers from each Canadian jurisdiction regarding, among other things, the use of social studies curricula and textbooks in supporting teaching historical thinking. In the future, we could explore the interview data set alongside these findings. However, currently we do not have other forms of empirical data, such as classroom observations, on which to base our claims.

With respect to limitations in drawing conclusions on the construction of contextually-relevant knowledge through schooling, we must note that public education has, across different regions of Canada and throughout different periods of Canadian history, supported a program of racial, cultural, and linguistic assimilation (Carleton, 2022; Curtis, 1988; Di Mascio & Hortop-Di Mascio, 2011; Marker, 2009; Miller, 1996; Milloy, 1999). The historical legacies of schooling for Indigenous children, adolescents, and adults compels us to avoid reductionism and the reproduction of cultural essentialisms, especially given our backgrounds as non-Indigenous settler scholars. Furthermore, the complex task of analyzing curriculum produced in the northern territories using a national project framework intended for use in the provinces was a challenge in itself; analysts were regularly confronted with the difficulties associated with juggling Western and Euro-Canadian historical thinking concepts with Indigenous philosophy and worldviews. While the analysts were particularly concerned with advancing curricular imperatives and modes of analysis that confront the colonial legacies of Canadian schooling, we believe that researchers and practitioners should be reticent to declare that curricular reforms of any kind have resolved, or can resolve, the system's underlying tensions. We believe that historical thinking is embedded in and should be informed by discussions about the respective merits of reconciliation and Indigenous resurgence (Alfred, 2022; Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2011). Unfortunately, we cannot delve deeply into the theoretical and practical applications of reconciliation and resurgence with respect to Canada's northern territories and Indigenous nations and peoples. By pursuing an open and flexible approach, building upon the strengths of the local people and context, we worked to avoid imposing a strict view of historical thinking that solely privileges fidelity to Seixas' theories. As Glen Coulthard (2014), a political theorist of the Yellowknives-Dene First Nation, located in the NWT, explains:

> [W]hen [normative and] constructivist views of culture are posited as a universal feature of social life and then used as a means to evaluate the legitimacy of Indigenous claims for cultural recognition against the uncontested authority of the colonial state, it can serve to sanction the very forms of domination and inequality that anti-essentialist criticism ought to mitigate. (p. 21)

Promoting a rigid and inflexible approach to curriculum analysis, in prioritizing a set of educational imperatives primarily informed by European theory and philosophy, can reimpose colonial epistemologies onto teachers and students. At the same time, assuming a priori the fundamental incompatibility of Western and Indigenous perspectives can prevent the natural transmission of ideas across cultures—in effect, siloing Indigenous worldviews (Santiago & Dozono, 2022). We are therefore interested in exploring, across both approaches, potential avenues for debate, rupture, and synthesis.

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3 For example, Questions 7, 8, and 9 of the THFCF project framework (Table 2) foreground the ethics of engaging with historical consciousness by illustrating how power and the positionality of the historical subject and historian shape the construction of historical narratives, informing the elaboration of Theme 2, "Reconciliation or Resistance?" Questions 1 and 6 fuel discussions about the periodization and process of history, supporting the synthesis of Theme 3, "linear and cyclical models of time." Questions 3 and 10 centre around the issue of how historical significance is understood and practically applied, leading to the development of Theme 5, "experiential learning through on-the-land, student-centred activities."

5 Literature review

The THFCF project's historical thinking framework, serving as the basis of the curriculum analysis methodology described above, is drawn primarily from the scholarship of the late Peter Seixas (Ercikan & Seixas, 2015; Peck & Seixas, 2008; Seixas, 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013). Drawing from British, American, and German theories and pedagogical practices, Seixas (2017) promoted an approach to history education that eschews rote memorization in favour of instilling in students the conceptual tools, habits, and methods required to recognize and construct informed, evidence-based historical interpretations. Proponents of the historical thinking approach, reconceptualized by Seixas for the Canadian context, contend its pluralistic foundations can allow curriculum designers to extricate the discipline's legacy of, and tendency towards, nationalist and racist undertones, allowing learners to garner a more well-rounded and representative understanding of how various actors conceptualize the past, present, and future (Seixas, 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013). Emphasizing skills and practices over content alone might allow public school curriculum to explore much-neglected topics in Canadian history, including, for example, labour history, disability history, the history of sexuality, gender history, and Indigenous history. As Penney Clark's research documents, the historical thinking approach has been generative and popular in both history education scholarship and curriculum writing across Canada since Seixas' Historical Thinking Project began in 2006 (Clark, 2011; 2018; 2019; 2024; Lévesque & Clark, 2018). Former graduate students of Peter Seixas, students of his collaborators, and other history education scholars across Canada, have since published extensively on historical thinking from dozens of perspectives, producing too many studies to list here.

As mentioned above, critiques of Seixas' model have emerged relative to Indigenous knowledges and educational practices, particularly in terms of its potential to re-entrench nationalist themes, Eurocentric biases, and colonialist narratives (Cutrara, 2018; Marker, 2011). Seixas (2012) was himself doubtful about the compatibility of Indigenous epistemology and historical thinking concepts. While the literature has delineated important differences between the historical thinking approach and Indigenous epistemologies, many scholars argue that both schemas contain helpful guidelines for Canadian and Indigenous educators, particularly when using evidence-based methods of historical analysis (Gibson & Case, 2019; McGregor, 2017; Miles, 2018). The centrality of Indigenous scholarship in guiding the development of history and social studies education is clear, even considering its tendency to avoid commenting on specific models of historical thinking (Dion, 2009; Donald, 2012; Marker, 2019). As Arapaho scholar and former THFCF co-investigator Michael Marker (2019) posits, "If the students of the future learn about Indigenous mindscapes as they learn about the history of colonization that shattered sustainable ways of life, they may gain new insights about the possibilities for being in innovative relationships with plants, animals, humans, and the more-than-humans" (p. 197). Mi'kmaw scholar Marie Battiste, a THFCF project co-investigator, is leading concurrent work to conceptualize approaches to history education better suited to advancing what she calls "trans-systemic approaches" to history curricula, ideas which are yet to be published.

Recognizing the contestations described above, to exclude the northern curricula from this study because the methodology asks questions derived from Seixas' framework of historical thinking would be to leave out an important segment of the country. It would plaster over the complexity of asking what history education is and does in a federation composed of provinces, territories, distinct nations within nations, and a wide variety of publicly funded school systems. For example, Karn et al. (2024), as co-investigators on the THFCF project, drew from the same curricular dataset referred to here, combined with analyses of provincial curricula from other regions of Canada, demonstrating the potential and future utility of this analysis exercise.

At the same time, building on the work of Marker (2011; 2019) and Battiste (2013), we find major issues with asking documents informed in large part by Indigenous knowledge systems to account for their "match" or a one-to-one correspondence with European-derived epistemological frameworks. Rather, even while using European-derived epistemological frameworks in the methodology, we worked to analyze the Indigenous or local, place-based knowledges on their own terms. Thus, this article does not neatly resolve the differences and tensions of European and Indigenous worldviews—if such a goal would even be possible or preferable—but rather gives valuable materials to future curriculum developers responsible for supporting northern schools and pedagogies. The themes we identified could be discretely explored through the literature on Indigenous knowledges related to each theme: history education as cultural reclamation (Brownlie, 2009; Dion, 2009); reconciliation or resistance in education (Styres & Kempf, 2022);

circular notions of time (Fixico, 2024; Marker, 2015); the agency of non-human beings (Simpson 2014; Watts, 2020); and experiential, land-based learning (McCoy et al., 2016; Kress & Horn-Miller, 2023). Each of these themes is not a new feature of Indigenous or northern knowledge systems and teaching and learning approaches. Since belabouring an extensive literature review of these topics would exceed the scope of this article, some references to literature have been threaded through the Discussion and Conclusion sections to wed these themes with the Indigenous voices who can say more about them.

Extending from and building upon the existing literature, our study offers empirical analyses of the curricula of multiple northern jurisdictions, with a focus on how they engage predominantly Indigenous learners in a public-school context. Our project aims to spark much-needed discussions among teachers, education researchers, and curriculum writers about how different frameworks for history education can enable meaningful, place-responsive learning without flattening complexity and difference.

6 Thematic findings

In this section, we summarize the five identified themes, providing examples and evidence from the documents. For brevity, and given the large number of references, we refer to each document throughout our analysis by its jurisdiction abbreviation (YT, NWT, NU) and grade level, rather than by its full title.

6.1 History education as cultural reclamation

Most northern curricula demonstrate a commitment to reclaiming or perpetuating the traditional practices of local Indigenous cultures. Practices of cultural reclamation allow educators to showcase the linkages between Indigenous worldviews and present-day realities, including but not limited to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural consequences of colonization. These discussions familiarize students with historical thinking concepts like continuity and change, the ethical dimension, and historical significance, which are present in the curricula, albeit to varying degrees. Students might wonder, and teachers might ask: Why are people in the North concerned with preserving elements of traditional Indigenous culture, and how might their efforts compare to Euro-Canadian projects of nationalism and nation-building? How might someone celebrate the traditional values and authentic practices of Indigenous nations or peoples while valuing the experiences and identities of people from diverse backgrounds?[4]

Two curriculum documents—NWT10 and NU10—underscore the sense of common values shared by northern Indigenous nations by connecting histories of survival and adaptation to present-day concerns about environmental stewardship. Both documents explore a kind of pan-northern historical consciousness that, at times, transcends the temporal boundaries of disciplinary history. Whereas NWT10 explores a “common Northern spirit” (p. 1) rooted in the “connectedness” (p. 9) and “incredible resilience and courage [of northern culture and history]” (p. 3), NU10 identifies several “natural laws” that Inuit “have always followed.” These natural laws include: “working for the common good,” “having respect for all living things,” “maintaining harmony,” and “planning for the future” (p. 19). Still, the curricula refrain from portraying Dene, and Inuit peoples as unchanging or static. As NWT10 states, “our Northern culture and history are not artifacts of the past” (p. 4). Students are expected to participate in the “evolving future” (p. 3) of a “democratic and pluralistic Northern society” (p. 9). Likewise, in NU10, students “understand that societies are dynamic and change over time” (p. 29).

NU5 and YT4 provide a foundational, traditionalist style of pedagogy, which explores the ethical values, practical skills, and traditional knowledge necessary to thrive in a northern rural society. NU5 explores a “true Inuit essence” (pp. 4–5) and privileges the views of Elders, who are “almost the only ones who have the knowledge of traditional skills and language” (p. 47). Students consider how: the introduction of waged labour affected the social roles of men, boys, women, and girls (pp. 51, 55, 59, 63); traditional shamanistic practices were displaced by modern medicine (p. 71); Inuit legal structures were altered by colonial intervention (p. 75); and traditional Inuit fishing, whaling, and trapping practices were affected by international regulations

4 Specific questions asked by NU10 include: “How has the economy changed over the years?”; “How has the [Inuit] lifestyle changed over the years?”; “What was important to Inuit in the past?”; “What is important to Inuit today?”; “When did Inuit travel and why?” (p. 36).

and the penetration of the market (p. 125). Likewise, YT4 foregrounds the "traditional laws" of the Yukon First Nations (Clans, pp. 9, 71), with kinship networks functioning to "[keep the] language and culture [of the Inuit and Yukon First Nations] alive" (Languages, p. 37). The curriculum is framed as a response to the decline of traditional Indigenous culture: "Today, all Yukon First Nations languages face extinction" (Languages, p. 9). It uses creation stories to strengthen the foundational ethical mores of Yukon First Nations (Clans, p. 10; Languages, pp. 50–61), encouraging students to attend dances (Languages, pp. 9, 41), recreate potlaches (Clans, p. 65), meet artists (Clans, p. 77), watch dancers in costumes (Clans, p. 73), and identify regalia (Clans, p. 10, 75).

The cultural generalizations and essentializations on which the curricula rely can pose concerns and may demand sensitivity or adaptation on the part of each teacher, especially given present understandings surrounding the fluidity and complexity of identity. For example, despite how NU5 celebrates the contributions of women, girls, men, and boys to Inuit society, its understanding of sex and gender is relatively fixed. Whereas women are "raised to nurture" and have "authority in the home" (p. 51), "men provide food and other things [like money] for their families" (p. 55). Similarly, YT4 states that children were traditionally expected to revere authority, exhibit "appropriate behaviour," and remain silent, obedient, and reserved (Clans, pp. 41, 45, 49, 87; Languages, pp. 43, 105, 107, 118). Regardless of how one responds to these claims, the dominance of Euro-descendent cultural knowledges and practices, even in northern communities, are being met by the curricula with Indigenous supplements and alternatives.

6.2 Reconciliation or resistance?

Northern curricula encourage students to engage with histories of colonization; each document can be positioned along a spectrum between reconciliation and resistance. Reconciliation framings within the documents promote a collective rights-based political program that encourages the co-existence of Indigenous nations and settler-Canadians, whereas resistance framings emphasize the structural nature of colonial violence, illuminating its operation in the present. The issue of Indigenous-settler relations encourages students to consider, to varying degrees of effectiveness, questions relating to historical thinking concepts like historical perspectives, the ethical dimension, and cause and consequence. The implicit categories of reconciliation and resistance, which are permeable and non-exclusive within the documents, help students investigate the relationship between structure and agency. That is, students consider the ethical and emotional dynamics of colonial violence, charting its evolution from the past to the present. Students might wonder, and teachers might ask: Which economic, cultural, and political factors motivated settler-Canadians to pursue control over Indigenous territory? How might Indigenous nations, settler-Canadians, and the federal government choose to respond today, and how will the legacy of historical events condition these responses?

Both NWT10 and NU10 promote a reconciliation framing of Indigenous-Canadian relations, in that they adopt a collective rights-based approach to politics, encourage community-led initiatives, and promote healing between Indigenous nations and Canadian settlers. For example, NWT10 highlights the importance of "participating in the political process" and valuing "democratic ideals such as equality, freedom, rights, and responsibilities" (p. 7). It encourages students to "engage in community life" (p. 2) and "strengthen the critical relationship between the community and the school" (p. III). The response of Northerners to contemporary political issues, the curriculum contends, will promote "healing and reconciliation" (p. 25). Second, NU10 investigates concepts like "rights, responsibilities and justice through an Inuit perspective," encouraging the "participation [of students] in the political and electoral processes [*sic*]" (pp. 13, 28). The curriculum intends to develop "responsible citizens" who "[contribute] to their community" (p. 25). These discussions are, ultimately, meant to promote "reconciliation and healing" (p. 31). The approaches taken by NWT10 and NU10 during their discussions of the harms of colonization offer different answers to the question of structure and agency. NU10 focuses on the residential school system, which it describes as a "dramatic and tragic period of Canadian history" (p. 14), perhaps insinuating that patterns of colonial violence have since ended. NWT10 stresses that colonial violence operates in the present, stating that actors can "[redress] past wrongs." The "impact[s]" of colonization were "powerful and sometimes negative," the curriculum states, and "many colonial policies are still in existence today" (pp. 3, 25, 28).

In contrast, YT12 can be said to use a resistance framing, as the document asserts that colonial structures are embedded in Canada's "political, social, and economic [institutions]" and critiques its "legacies of colonialism" (p. 1). These legacies include: "intergenerational trauma," inequitable access to "housing, education, and employment," and "missing and Murdered [*sic*]

Indigenous women and girls" (p. 7). The curriculum details the "provincial and federal government policies and practices that have affected, and continue to affect, the responses of Yukon First Nations to colonialism" (p. 1). In upholding ethical values like "self-governance" and "self-determination," the curriculum encourages students to struggle against "ongoing colonialism" (p. 1) and "disrupt [...] social violence" (p. 4)—for example, through "protests" for "ecological justice," exemplified by the "Idle No More" movement (p. 9).

6.3 Linear and cyclical models of time

The curriculum documents borrow from Indigenous and Western epistemologies to integrate elements of both linear and cyclical understandings of time and space. These representations of culture and history, especially when complemented by thoughtful engagement with competing perspectives—for example, through storytelling, philosophy, and science—may align with historical thinking concepts like historical perspectives, continuity and change, and cause and consequence. Discussions of time, if complemented by detailed guidelines for educators grounded in historical analysis, could help students question how subjective experiences are conditioned by place and circumstance. Students might wonder, and teachers might ask: Is time scientific and objective, measured exclusively by globally dominant technologies like clocks, watches, and calendars? Or, from a more sociological view, is time slippery and socially constructed, shaped by a culture's underlying values, beliefs, and assumptions?

Three documents—YT12, NU5, and NWT10—foreground cyclical understandings of history. Cyclical models emphasize the experiential, qualitative, and relational elements of time, often through discussions of ecological processes. First, YT12 introduces an "indigenous concept of time," described as "spiraling versus linear." The oral tradition "shapes identity and connects to the past, present, and future," thereby providing "guiding principles for living" (p. 6). Second, NU5 merges past and present verb tenses to explore the non-linearity of history, a strategy we interpret as attempting to "create a link between past and present" (p. 5). Finally, NWT10 criticizes Western disciplinary history, which "tries to organize events in order, with dates and blocks of time, and to write these things down" (p. 13). According to the curriculum document, "Dene ways of knowing history place more value on the living of the events themselves, and on the role of the listener in giving that history meaning" (p. 14). The non-linearity of time and the relational qualities of storytelling, the curriculum suggests, means that creation stories "live in [the] past, present and future simultaneously" (p. 20).

Two curricula—NU10 and NWT5—borrow certain elements from both Western and Indigenous traditions, integrating their precepts to varying degrees. First, NU10 recognizes linear time by framing itself as a "journey through an arc of change for Inuit in Canada"; it develops a three-stage periodization thesis, which "begins with the period of Inuit independence and self-sufficiency," reaches its midpoint with the "challenges of colonization," and concludes with "Inuit leaders reclaim[ing] their land and their rights" (p. 13). Second, NWT5 adopts a mixed approach that encourages students to organize events chronologically but nonetheless criticizes Western models of linear time. While the curriculum criticizes Western disciplinary history for "tr[ying] to organize events in order, with dates and blocks of time," it tends to prioritize the agency of settler-Canadians while relegating Indigenous figures to passive roles. According to the curriculum, whereas Europeans "explor[ed]" and "developed roots" in Canada, overseeing its "development [...] as a nation," Indigenous nations merely "inhabited" the territory, "a vast land rich in natural resources." Indeed, in focusing on "how the history and geography of this land has shaped Canadians," the curriculum either assumes that Indigenous nations are an ethnic minority within a larger Canadian identity or claims that land has not impacted Indigenous leaders and their communities (p. 27).[5]

6.4 The role of non-human beings

Most of the curricula include discussions about the environment that centre around the role of non-human beings—including plants and animals, as well as weather events and earth systems like the wind, water, and sky—in ecology, social life, and storytelling practices. By conceiving of the land as providing the basis for all life on earth, the curriculum documents present a networked understanding of historical change in which the economy and society are necessarily

5 The sections that emphasize Indigenous contributions and self-determination are considerably shorter: "They [students] explore the origins of First Peoples and their ways of life before and after European contact. Students consider how Aboriginal cultures have influenced this country" (NWT5, p. 27).

intertwined, which relates to historical thinking concepts like cause and consequence and continuity and change. Teaching creation stories and Elder knowledge helps students learn about the philosophical and ethical basis for their relationship with the planet, shaping their historical consciousness through an engagement with the ethical dimension. These discussions, especially if expanded with supplemental materials that explore the history of climate change and the origins of Western science, might allow students to consider the respective merits of humanist and non-humanist philosophies. Students might wonder, and teachers might ask: What is the role of non-human beings in affecting social relations and the environment? How might the perspectives of Indigenous storytelling and Western science inform each other in their application to the issue of climate change and environmental stewardship?

Three documents emphasize the role of non-human beings like land, water, ice, air, sky, wind, plants, animals, and bugs in history, politics, and ecology. First, NWT5 emphasizes the study of non-human beings because "the land and our [Inuit] history" are intimately connected (p. i). Social studies, the curriculum states, is the "study of people in relation to each other and to their world" (p. 6). Second, NWT10 pursues the study of non-human beings because "humans exist in a dynamic relationship with the land" (p. 6). Students are expected to "appreciate the relationship between people and the land and animals" (p. 29). Both NWT5 and NWT10 state that traditional storytelling practices provide a philosophical rather than a literal or scientific basis for historical consciousness:

> In Inuuqatigiit, 'the land' includes all of nature: the earth itself as well as the water, the ice, the wind, the sky, the plants and animals. [...] [Creation stories] create a sense of wonder, of connection, of teachings, and of understanding behaviour. [...] Inuit creation stories aren't trying to explain the physical arrival of Inuit in their part of the world, but are dealing with other levels of existence. (NWT5, p. 29; NWT10, p. 14)

Finally, NU5 prioritizes the study of non-human beings, which are "part of the life cycle" and "not to be treated cruelly" (p. 145). As the curriculum notes, "all living things are connected in a continuous cycle of life, and cannot actually be separated" (p. 91). It states that Inuit recognize that "weather controls humans and that humans do not control the weather" (p. 109), decentring humans as the proverbial owners of nature: "The land has given life to Inuit, but it can also be harsh and dangerous and can take life away" (p. 91).

While the curriculum documents of NU10 and YT12 do not explicitly discuss the role of non-human beings, they view environmental processes as interdependent and relational. First, NU10 presents the economy as socially embedded within the environment. Inuit are "part of a larger world in which everything is connected" (p. 18). According to the curriculum, "Everything that becomes a resource, including ourselves, is the economy" (p. 18). The curriculum's "Great Conversation" framework stresses that the search for "truth" is "elusive" and shaped by global power dynamics that have largely excluded indigenous peoples (p. 16). Second, YT12 understands Inuit identity as connected to the land and water, underscoring the "connectedness or the reciprocal relationship between people and place" (p. 1).

6.5 Experiential learning through on-the-land, student-centred activities

The curricula exemplify the belief that schooling is meant to be integrated within the community, shaped by community values, and representative of the will of its constituents. The pedagogical function of place-based and experiential learning gives students significant autonomy in deducing historical significance, feeling historical empathy, and understanding historical perspectives, all while using their skills of evidence and interpretation. Experiential learning activities, especially on-the-land experiences, retain certain elements of traditional Indigenous education, which has, for centuries, relied on learning through games, play, and harvesting to transmit practical and conceptual knowledge across generations. The curriculum documents stress that classrooms should be student-centred and catered to the diverse aptitudes and interests of the children and adolescents involved. Students might wonder, and teachers might ask: How has the land shaped the course of history in the North, and how have Northerners, in turn, shaped the land? How might have different figures in history behaved during specific places and times, and how might have their emotions and patterns of thought differed from mine?

Several documents, especially YT12, NU5, and NWT10, favour community-based education practices that help students learn from and on the land. First, YT12 relies on "place-based and "experiential" activities (p. 2), which foreground the perspectives of "Elders" and the "community" (p. 4). Students are encouraged to visit local sites of displacement and resistance (p. 6). Sec-

ond, NU5 uses a bottom-up approach that situates the power of education as emanating from within the community to the student to the school. It prioritizes hands-on, practical activities like hunting, trapping, cooking, and sewing, the mastery of which by students strengthens their relationship with the land. "Families contribute to their community," the curriculum document states. "The family, immediate or extended, is very important" (p. 39). Students are intended to "respect the traditional structure of Inuit families and kinship" and "represent the traditional family at school" (p. 39). Finally, NWT10 expects students to "learn from the land and from Elders" (p. 3). It attests that students have "multiple needs" (p. v), meaning that, since children are "naturally curious," lessons should be "student-driven" (p. 3). Students move from a "theoretical to a deeply grounded exploration of identity and citizenship" (p. 1), from "knowing to doing" (p. 3). Students are, after class, expected to "take their learning back to their community" (p. 2).

Similarly, NU10 and NWT5 prioritize the role of student agency in the classroom, allowing youth to guide their own education. First, NU10 recognizes that children possess different intellectual aptitudes and interests (pp. 11, 18), meaning that the length of time required to complete lessons "all depends on your students" (p. 6). The curriculum uses "game[s]" and "drama activit[ies]" to strengthen Inuit culture (p. 10). These activities can, at times, make questionable decisions about how to deliver learning outcomes. For example, in *Staking the Claim*, the teacher's guide for NU10, the "E-tags" activity has teachers replace the names of their students with disc numbers for an entire module to simulate the "level of frustration and lack of control Inuit felt" during the 1940s (p. 21). Second, NWT5 privileges "student choice" (p. 5) because "children are born with integrity" (p. 6). It prioritizes "open-ended, student-driven inquiry" (p. 15), with students learning from "resource-based and experiential learning [activities]" like "on-the-land experiences," "role-plays," and "mock trials" (pp. 52, 56). The curriculum gives students considerable authority in shaping historical interpretation, but the included prompts tend to reinforce patterns of binary thinking based more on subjective opinion than critical analysis: "Which [Aboriginal] group seems to you to have had the best way of life?" (p. 37); "Who was the best explorer to come from Europe to Canada?" (p. 37); and "Can forcing people off their land ever be the right thing to do?" (p. 38).

7 Discussion and conclusions

This descriptive survey of northern curriculum has aimed to avoid applying an inflexible model of historical thinking (Seixas, 2017) to Indigenous educational contexts, or dwelling on its absence, without also acknowledging the value of what is present in the curriculum documents. Applying a rigid view of what constitutes "thinking historically" could lead analysts to make ethnocentric judgments about the quality of curricula. Curriculum analysis in general, including when using historical thinking methods, should not be reduced to an exercise in disciplinary scorekeeping, wherein Western theory and philosophy is used to undermine Indigenous thought. Our value-added approach has, instead, worked to conceptualize second-order historical thinking concepts—themselves conditioned by history—as valuable yet context-dependent and mutable guidelines for northern educators. Historical thinking concepts should be acclimated and applied discriminately, where and when they advance learning.

We faced challenges in balancing the need to accurately identify the depth of northern history and thought, without sacrificing analytic rigour or neglecting the significance of curricular trends towards historical thinking skill development. Indeed, we uncovered ambiguities and contradictions between the stated aims and actual content of some documents, namely places where conflicts between Western and Indigenous values might inadvertently reproduce Eurocentric assumptions about Indigenous nations and cultures. But most of these conflicts stem from curricular influences originating in southern jurisdictions, leading us to argue that historical thinking is best mobilized when guided and applied by Indigenous and northern voices. Documents created by northern curriculum developers are rooted, both formally and informally, in notions of "Northern spirit," a uniquely Indigenous conception of historical consciousness wedded to localized and place-based understandings of history, culture, and politics.

Despite frontmatter commentary that clearly establishes northern curricula as being carefully crafted by the author teams, the documents themselves do not explicitly critique historical thinking frameworks or concepts, and they do not speak to the propensity of disciplinary historical practice to exclude Indigenous skill development. We do not view the resolution of these tensions as within the scope of this article, nor do we regard the development of Indige-

nous pedagogy as the prerogative of two white, Anglophone scholars. The evidence presented here could, however, be used in a more systematic problematization of historical thinking in the future. Furthermore, this project only reflects a small selection of curriculum, and our analysis does not parse by jurisdiction—among or between the three distinct northern territories. Rather, we have distilled themes that were common across the three northern territories. Perhaps another project could apply a comparative framework to the analysis of northern curricula.

The precepts embedded in northern curriculum provide several innovations that may not play a central role in southern Canadian or non-Indigenous contexts. Take, for example, the theme of history education as cultural reclamation, which appears in several curriculum documents. Haudenosaunee historian Susan Hill (2017) regards the primary task of non-Western Indigenous history as the elaboration and rediscovery of a uniquely Indigenous historical consciousness, expressed through land- and place-based practices that decentre humans and "great men" from historical narratives. Practices of cultural reclamation, especially in regions that predominantly serve Indigenous peoples, can also offer a vehicle to reaffirm the slower rhythms of work and lifestyle sustained by the commons. Residents of rural places may uphold principles like community identity, cultural heritage, and support for extended family, as well as control over the form and pace of work and labour—ethical values and economic imperatives frequently marginalized by formal schooling (Corbett, 2001; Corbett, 2004; Curtis, 1988). The focus of the curriculum documents on preserving authentic Indigenous perspectives allows educators to cultivate interpretive zones where students might critique Western developmentalist narratives, which foreground colonial endeavours like resource exploitation, territorial expansion, and economic growth. But challenges remain. As Indigenous scholars Coulthard (2014) and Leanne Simpson (2011) explain, the project of cultural reclamation consists of balancing claims to cultural authenticity while recognizing that people belong to diverse backgrounds and may possess hybrid, fluid identities. Implementing a culturally founded yet inclusive curriculum begins with, first and foremost, acknowledging that people belong to a plurality of backgrounds. As our analysis shows, curriculum developers and writers are clearly working to strike that balance.

Northern curriculum documents share a commitment to addressing the impacts of colonization, each aligning with reconciliation or resistance, partly owing to the time and place of publication. These different approaches to settler-Indigenous relations are distinguished by, on the one hand, a recognition-based approach to state-Indigenous relations that attempts to accommodate the unique status of Indigenous nations by providing concessions through legal mechanisms (Taylor, 1992) and, on the other hand, a more recent, radical politics of resurgence that stresses the self-determination of Indigenous nations, maintains a commitment to community organizing, and draws firmer boundaries between Indigenous and settler interests (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson 2011; Alfred, 2022). Historical thinking, especially concepts like historical perspectives and cause and consequence, can serve Indigenous objectives by illuminating the dialectic of structure and agency (Seixas, 2017). Curriculum documents attuned to the structures of the colonial encounter can avoid the construction of a moralizing discourse that blames colonization on a few "bad apples"—a "distancing strateg[y]" that absolves the federal government, extractive industries, and settler-Canadians of responsibility in the present (Schaefli et al., 2018, p. 491). Regardless of the frame, each curriculum should ideally identify the structures of colonization; investigate specific episodes of conquest and resistance; and recognize patterns of settlement and dispossession as ongoing processes.

To adequately address differing conceptions of time, curriculum writers need to provide teachers with supplemental materials that examine the emergence of both linear and cyclical understandings of time. Exploring linear and cyclical time without explaining how the former overtook the latter could reimpose a kind of pedagogical imperialism onto Indigenous concepts, since teachers unfamiliar with alternative perspectives may ignore rather than integrate Indigenous epistemology. One could employ E.P. Thompson's (1967) notion of time-discipline, which interprets "clock time" time as implicated within the disciplining of an industrial workforce under capitalism, to showcase how colonization imposed synchronous clock-time onto Inuit and Dene societies. That is, it replaced a qualitative time-sense measured by the completion of tasks, cycles, and seasons, with a quantitative time-sense measured by clocks, schedules, and minutes. Exploring debates concerning linear and cyclical time does not mean, however, that history teachers should be on the frontline of providing conclusive statements about science and physics to students (Gibson & Case, 2019). Rather, history educators are concerned with, above all, revealing to students the historical conditions that allowed divergent time-senses to become considered definitive knowledge—that is, explicating their emergence in history.

By exploring the role of non-human beings in society and history, northern curricula infuse historical interpretation with ethical principles concerning the well-being of the land, plants, and animals. Storytelling practices in general, and creation stories in particular, serve in northern classrooms a similar function to liberal political philosophy in the Canadian provinces: by outlining a common political and moral philosophy, they frame how to ethically engage in politics using knowledge of the past. But, whereas Enlightenment philosophy endorsed the mastery over and domination of nature (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002), drew strict divisions between the "civilized" and "uncivilized" (Knight, 2019), and idealized the fully perfectible human being (Burghardt, 2018), northern curricula convey a less dualistic and more animistic, non-humanist conception of people and the environment, advancing an ecologically grounded philosophy that decentres human beings as the necessary locus of historical change. Northern curriculum, we contend, provides a counterweight to the common-sense positions naturalized by the Western, developmentalist paradigm. In presenting a heterodox understanding of the economy and environment that stresses the social embeddedness of economic activities, northern curriculum documents recognize nature as providing the basis for all life on earth, framing the interdependence of humans and the land as an inescapable feature of social life. Given the existential threats facing humanity today, we believe that northern curricula hold immense value for social studies teachers looking to provide effective lessons on sustainability and climate change.

Northern curriculum documents also tend to prioritize land-based and experiential, student-centred learning, which, in keeping with the foundations of historical thinking, gives students agency in deducing their own historical interpretations. The curriculum documents, in championing student choice through games and play, are concerned with revitalizing a form of Indigenous education displaced by the federal government and religious institutions through residential schooling. Considering these historical legacies, efforts to ensure the self-determination of students, and to help decentre the teacher as the sole authority figure in education, are representative of the self-determination of Indigenous nations themselves. History and social studies are both subject areas rife with opportunity for use as sites of cultural intervention and continuity for Indigenous nations and peoples in Canada and elsewhere. History education can provide a venue for northern Indigenous peoples to tell their own stories, assert their own visions of the past, present, and future, and elaborate unique forms of historical consciousness. Our findings suggest that developers and writers of social studies curriculum have drawn on educational reforms evident in other jurisdictions, including the historical thinking concepts; however, these innovations have, by and large, not come at the expense of Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning. Teachers and students are encountering both dissonance and consonance between multiple knowledge systems and, we can presume, learning to tolerate that complexity. But there is undoubtedly more curriculum and resource work to be done to support teachers in the North, as well as in untangling the colonial roots of formal public schooling from pedagogical theory and practice. If curriculum developers and the teachers who embody their work continue to support the trajectories towards Indigenization evident in these documents, then future reforms to history and social studies education in the territories will be likely to demand an ongoing adherence—and, in all likelihood, an even greater commitment—to representing the goals and aspirations of northern peoples through place, language and culture.

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This research did not require ethical approval because it solely involved document analysis.

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The colonial library and its discontents

Archaeology, museums and education in the Canary Islands

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Abstract

This paper examines, focusing on the Indigenous period, how colonial epistemologies have shaped archaeology, museum display, and formal education in the Canary Islands, asking how coordinated legal, institutional, and pedagogical reforms can disrupt this "colonial library." Drawing on a documentary corpus and a purposive sample of textbooks, the study uses thematic document analysis to identify recurrent narrative frames that marginalize Indigenous perspectives. Framed by decolonial theory and the concept of the colonial library, the paper analyses museological and curricular mechanisms of reification and presents the educational project *Memorias Guanches* package as a school based intervention for primary and secondary students, and as a practical example of decolonial pedagogy, that aligns classroom activities with heritage governance instruments and museum practices. Findings point to persistent Eurocentric framings, but also to institutional openings (legal reform, exhibition revisions). The article concludes with a discussion of future tasks.

Keywords

Colonialism, archaeology, education, museums, indigenous heritage

1 Introduction: The imperative of decolonizing historical narratives

The imperative to critically examine the historical narratives that shape our understanding of the past has gained increasing recognition across various academic disciplines, particularly within archaeology and education (Hodder, 2012; Ebbitt, 2021). Central to this endeavour is the acknowledgment that science, including archaeology, operates within a specific political and historical context, making it neither objective nor politically neutral. This understanding is especially crucial when dealing with societies that have experienced colonialism, where the interpretation and communication of the past have often been influenced by power imbalances and the imposition of dominant cultural perspectives (Quijano, 2000).

Archaeology, as a discipline, is deeply intertwined with the construction and dissemination of historical narratives. As such, it can either perpetuate or challenge existing power structures. Dictatorial regimes have frequently exploited archaeology to serve their ideological and nationalistic agendas, selectively interpreting the past to legitimize their political dominance and

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promote myths of national unity. This manipulation of history is particularly evident in colonial and postcolonial contexts, where archaeological narratives have been shaped to serve the interests of colonizers, often at the expense of marginalized Indigenous communities and alternative historical interpretations (Kehoe, 2008).

Historical education, while serving as a cornerstone of cultural and national identity, has often been instrumentalized to manipulate perceptions of the past. Through selective narratives and the omission or emphasis of specific events, educational systems have shaped collective memory to align with political, ideological, or social objectives. Such manipulation not only distorts historical accuracy but also frames past events in ways that legitimize contemporary power structures or suppress alternative perspectives. This phenomenon underscores the need for critical approaches to historical study, fostering an awareness of how historical narratives are constructed and the motivations behind them (Apple, 2004).

The Canary Islands provide a compelling case study for examining the complex interplay between colonialism, archaeology, education, and the communication of the past. The archipelago's Indigenous culture, of Amazigh origin, and present in the islands since the beginning of the first millennium BC (Atoche & Arco, 2023), underwent profound changes as a result of the European conquest in the 15th century. This historical encounter led to cultural erasure, the imposition of new social and economic systems, and the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge and practices (Farrujia, 2021).

Historically positioned as a strategic gateway between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, the archipelago played a pivotal role in the early phases of European imperial expansion. The Castilian conquest, initiated in the 15th century, did not merely entail the military subjugation of the Indigenous peoples but also introduced a long-lasting regime of cultural domination and epistemological violence that persists today in the ways the past is remembered, represented, and institutionalized.

This paper aims to analyse how the Indigenous past of the Canary Islands has been constructed and communicated through archaeology, museums, and education, with a specific focus on the period spanning from the late 19th century through Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975). It will also explore decolonial and critical proposals that question the colonial perspectives that have dominated the interpretation of this past. In contemporary times, these decolonial narratives has been challenged by critical heritage studies and decolonial thought. Scholars such as Achille Mbembe (2001), Walter Mignolo (2011) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argue that decolonization involves not only recovering subaltern histories but also dismantling the epistemic frameworks that have legitimized colonialism. Within the Canarian context, these critiques intersect with growing calls to reconfigure museum practices, heritage interpretation, and educational curricula in ways that acknowledge Indigenous agency, cultural continuity, and the violence of colonial erasure.

I deploy the concepts of 'colonial library' (Mbembe, 2001; Taylor, 2003; Stoler, 2009; Mignolo, 2011) and 'decolonizing methodologies' (Kovach, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Smith, 2012) as complementary heuristics: the colonial library diagnoses the institutional, classificatory and representational mechanisms that produced epistemic marginalization; decolonizing methodologies provide epistemic and methodological principles for re centering Indigenous perspectives in research and pedagogy. Framing the study in this combined register clarifies both the structural critique and the normative commitments that underpin the project *Memorias guanches* (Guanche Memories)[1]. By connecting the 'colonial library' to concrete mechanisms—museum classification, legal nomenclature, textbook framing and pedagogical practices—this paper contributes a mid range analytical framework that links macro theory (coloniality) to institutional practice in a small island context.

By critically examining the historical narratives that have shaped our understanding of the Canary Islands' Indigenous heritage, this study seeks to explore strategies to break through established patterns in dealing with colonialism, amplifying marginalized voices, and questioning conventional approaches to historical learning. Ultimately, the study advocates for a more inclusive and critically engaged approach to the past—one that moves beyond romanticized or exoticized portrayals of Indigenous heritage and instead centers questions of power, representation, and historical accountability. In doing so, it aligns with the journal's emphasis on postcolonial and decolonial perspectives in history education and historical culture, contributing to a broader dialogue on the urgent need for decolonizing historical narratives and promoting more inclusive and equitable representations of the past.

1 "Guanche" is the ethnonym for the first Indigenous inhabitants of the island of Tenerife. The educational project is freely accessible and is available at https://proyectodidacticomemoriasguanches.com/

This manuscript, therefore, advances three interrelated claims. First, that the representation of the Indigenous past of the Canary Islands has been persistently structured by colonial epistemologies—what this paper frames as the "colonial library"—which link archaeological practice, museum display and curricular production into a coherent system that marginalizes Indigenous perspectives. Second, that this systemic erasure remains visible in twentieth century and contemporary institutions (particularly during the late-19th century and the Franco period) and continues to shape public memory. Third, that targeted decolonial interventions in museum governance and school curricula can disrupt these patterns if they combine legal reform, community participation and pedagogical redesign. The research gap addressed here is the absence of an integrated analysis that connects archaeological production, museology and formal education in the Canarian case and that examines how a concrete educational initiative (*Memorias Guanches*) intervenes within that system.

This paper therefore proceeds in three tightly connected steps: first, a historical overview establishes how archaeological knowledge and nationalist politics contributed to the colonial library; second, two empirical sections examine how museums and formal education operationalize those narratives through display logic and curricular choices; third, the project *Memorias Guanches* is analysed as an intervention that links museum reform, legal change and classroom practice. Each section returns explicitly to the central research question: how can coordinated legal, institutional and pedagogical reforms disrupt the colonial library in the Canary Islands?

2 Methodology

This paper asks (1) how colonial epistemologies shaped archaeological and museological representations of the Canarian Indigenous past; (2) how formal education reproduced or resisted these narratives; and (3) in what ways the materials within the project *Memorias Guanches* intervene in that system. These guiding questions frame sampling, coding and interpretation.

This study adopts a critical-historical, document-analytic and interpretive approach aimed at tracing how archaeological knowledge, museum practice and formal curricula have co-produced colonial narratives in the Canary Islands. The primary corpus consists of three interrelated source sets: (1) published archaeological reports and exhibition texts produced in the Canary Islands from the late nineteenth century to the present; (2) legal material, including Law 11/2019 (and its enacted amendments); and (3) educational materials, specifically a purposive sample of history and social-science textbooks used in compulsory education, together with the pedagogical resources prepared for *Memorias Guanches*.

2.1 Sampling and data treatment

Archaeological materials were selected to represent major institutional actors (El Museo Canario, Museo Arqueológico de Tenerife) and to cover the period of intense narrative formation (late 19th century through to the Franco era) as well as contemporary institutional statements and exhibition catalogues (Farrujia, 2014).

Legal and administrative documents were chosen for their relevance to heritage classification, museum governance and the management of human remains (notably the drafting and final text of Law 11/2019 and the text of the amendments referenced in the manuscript) (Farrujia, 2020).

Textbook sampling followed a purposive logic and the study also examined the curricula in Social Sciences (Primary) and Geography and History (Secondary). The corpus includes 36 titles used in the Canary Islands during the LOMCE regulatory period (Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa, LOMCE; 2013–2020; Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality) and corresponds to the corpus analysed in Farrujia et al. (2022a). Of these, 24 titles are primary-level textbooks and 12 are secondary-level textbooks used in 2º and 4º of the Educación Secundaria Obligatoria (ESO), the school years in which the Indigenous period is addressed in the curriculum. Two coders independently coded all materials using a 12-category frame (categories included: conquest framing; objectification; agency; absence of Indigenous languages; chronological placement; visual rhetoric; captioning practices; contextualisation; racial typologies; gender representation; local content presence; pedagogical objectives) (Farrujia et al., 2022a, 2022b). Pedagogical materials for *Memorias Guanches* (short stories, teacher guides, session plans) were examined as the project stands at the time of writing.

2.2 Analytic procedures

All documents were read and coded thematically to identify recurring narrative frames (for example: conquest as new beginning; Indigenous culture as static), classificatory practices (treatment of human remains; objectification of artefacts), and institutional decisions (exhibition choices; legal categorizations) that contribute to epistemic marginalisation. Coding combined deductive categories derived from the decolonial and museum-studies literature (e.g., reification, colonial library, participatory governance) with inductive categories emerging from the corpus (Farrujia, 2014; Farrujia, 2020).

Textbook and pedagogical material analysis emphasised content (which topics are present/absent), framing (how events and artefacts are contextualised), and visual rhetoric (image captions, use of artefacts as illustration) (Farrujia et al., 2022a). Museum materials were analysed for display logic, labelling practices (Farrujia, 2014). Legal documents were read to map formal definitions, classifications and procedural mechanisms relevant to sensitive heritage (Farrujia, 2020).

Comparative contextualisation used secondary literature on museum decolonisation and Indigenous pedagogy (selected cases from New Zealand and South Africa) to help interpret local patterns within transnational debates about restitution, reburial, interpretive authority and curricular reform.

2.3 Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of human remains and Indigenous heritage, the study prioritises respectful language and relies on publicly available institutional and legal documents. No new fieldwork involving human subjects or handling of human remains was undertaken for the present study.

2.4 Status of *Memorias Guanches* in the study and closing note on evaluation

Memorias Guanches was developed by the Department of Didactics of the Social Sciences at the University of La Laguna and made available to schools by the Municipal Department of Cultural Heritage (Concejalía de Patrimonio Cultural) as a curricular and didactic resource. The municipal brief requested dissemination, not formal impact assessment; accordingly, the materials were distributed to all schools in the municipality, but no external, funder-mandated evaluation was commissioned at that time. The study therefore analyses the *Memorias Guanches* materials as provided (content, pedagogical design and alignment with decolonial aims). Future systematic outcome data (pre/post measures, classroom observations, teacher interviews) could be implemented in future research to assess the pedagogical impact.

3 The colonial construction of indigenous identity in the Canary Islands: a historical overview

In this paper, the Canary Islands' archaeological, museological and educational practices are read through a decolonial lens that foregrounds the "colonial library" of knowledge production and the process of reification. This framework clarifies how scholarly taxonomies, exhibition practices and curricular choices are mutually reinforcing mechanisms of epistemic marginalisation. The historical overview that follows traces the emergence of these mechanisms; the museum and education sections specify how they operationalise exclusion in display and pedagogy; and the project *Memorias Guanches* exemplifies a pedagogical response designed to reconfigure these relations.

The colonial encounter in the Canary Islands, commencing in the 14th century with initial European contact, set in motion a series of events that would profoundly alter the archipelago's social, cultural, and political landscape (Rumeu, 2006; Lobo 2012). As European powers began to assert their influence, various hypotheses emerged in an attempt to explain the presence of settlers on these Atlantic islands. However, the construction of knowledge about this pre-conquest world was severely hindered by the absence of Indigenous chronicles, leaving European ethnohistorical written sources as the primary, albeit biased, source of information about the ancient Canarians. These sources, originating from an external, Western, non-Indigenous perspective, inevitably shaped the understanding of the archipelago's past, often marginalizing Indigenous voices and perspectives (Farrujia, 2014).

The undervaluation of Indigenous knowledge led to a process of cultural ethnocide, resulting in the progressive loss of traditional practices, beliefs, and ways of life. While the Indigenous population survived on the islands, the process of crossbreeding and assimilation further contributed to the erosion of distinct cultural markers. European colonizers, lacking a tradition of listening to the 'other,' sought to assimilate the Indigenous population, leading to the suppression of Indigenous languages, customs, and spiritual beliefs (Farrujia & Martín, 2024). Today, the absence of ethnically or culturally differentiated Indigenous groups on the islands stands as a stark reminder of the profound impact of colonialism on the archipelago's cultural heritage, despite genetic studies confirming the presence of an Indigenous human component, reaching as high as 49% in La Gomera (Fregel et al., 2019).

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the Canary Islands became entangled in the broader context of European imperialism and the colonial division of Africa. The archipelago's geostrategic location in relation to Africa and its potential for expansion throughout the South Atlantic region made it a focal point in the imperialist ambitions of countries such as France and Germany. This geopolitical significance led to the involvement of French and German academics in archaeological studies of Canarian prehistory, further shaping the interpretation of the islands' past (Ortiz, 2016).

French scholars, driven by French ambitions in the Canary Islands, developed a Frenchified view of the Canarian Indigenous people, attempting to justify French interventionism in the archipelago. Linking the first settlers of the Canary Islands to the Cro-Magnon race and the Celts, they sought to establish a historical connection between the islands and European civilization. In contrast, German scholars associated the settlement of the Canary Islands with the Aryan race and the Indo-European world, reflecting the prevailing racial and cultural ideologies of the time. The influence of unilineal evolutionism on these scholars led them to draw forced archaeological comparisons between the Indigenous period of the Canary Islands and French or German archaeological contexts, further distorting the understanding of the archipelago's unique cultural heritage (Farrujia, 2014).

These practices aligned with broader trends in 19th and 20th century imperial archaeology, where colonized subjects were systematically objectified and their cultures represented through hierarchical models of development (Trigger, 2006). The representation of the Canarian Indigenous culture followed a similar trajectory to that of other Indigenous groups in Africa, Oceania, and the Americas: valorised for its "authenticity" yet stripped of agency and presented as disconnected from the present. In this sense, Canarian archaeology operated within what Mbembe (2001) refers to as the "colonial library"—a system of knowledge production that frames colonized peoples as static and legible only through the categories of the colonizer.

During Francisco Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975), archaeology was strategically mobilized to reinforce the regime's narrative of a unified and timeless Spanish nation. Rather than functioning solely as an academic discipline, archaeological research became intertwined with state ideology, serving to legitimize Spain's political and territorial aspirations (Quero, 2002). Scholars aligned with the regime promoted the notion that the Indigenous peoples of the Canary Islands shared deep historical ties with North African populations located in areas that had fallen under Spanish colonial rule. This claim formed the basis of what Francoist scholars termed an "Archaeology of the Empire," a framework designed to assert the existence of a long-standing Hispano-African cultural sphere stretching back to prehistory (Farrujia, 2014).

The political purpose behind this narrative was clear: it sought to provide historical justification for Spain's continued presence in the Sahara and to reinforce the idea of an inherently Iberian —or broadly Hispanic— identity extending beyond the Peninsula. Archaeological interpretations were thus shaped to align with the geopolitical interests of the dictatorship, presenting the archipelago as an integral component of a historical unity between Spain and North Africa (Farrujia, 2014).

This ideological instrumentalization of archaeology relied heavily on the theoretical foundations of cultural historicism, the dominant paradigm during those decades. Combined with a deeply conservative and Catholic anthropological outlook (Gracia, 2009), cultural historicism encouraged models based on expansive cultural circles and assumptions of prehistoric homogeneity. Such frameworks made it easier to establish artificial parallels between ancient Canarian societies and European or North African cultural traditions, producing narratives that conveniently supported the regime's identity politics.

Although contemporary research leaves little doubt about the Amazigh origins of the Canary Islands' Indigenous population (Ramos, 2014), Franco-era interpretations consistently emphasized European or Hispanic connections. These selective readings generated multiple, often contradictory, versions of the archipelago's past—each shaped by the political needs of the mo-

ment. As a result, Francoist archaeology played a crucial role in constructing Eurocentric representations of Canarian history, influencing not only academic discourse but also the stories told in museums and educational settings.

4 Museums as spaces of colonial memory representation: reifying the canarian indigenous people

Museums, as institutions dedicated to the preservation, study, and exhibition of cultural and historical artefacts, play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of the past. Far from being neutral spaces of preservation and education, these institutions have historically reproduced the ideological frameworks of colonialism—selecting, classifying, and displaying artefacts in ways that reinforce Eurocentric visions of history, culture, and identity (Bennett, 2004; Rassool, 2015). Museums are not neutral spaces; they are often implicated in power dynamics and can serve to reinforce colonial ideologies (Macdonald, 2022). In the case of the Canary Islands, the development of museums and their representation of the Indigenous past have been significantly influenced by colonial power relations and Eurocentric perspectives (Farrujia, 2020)[2].

The development of archaeological collections in the Canary Islands must be situated within the broader museological landscape of the nineteenth century, when European nations expanded and institutionalized the display of material culture from peoples categorized as "primitive" or prehistoric. Although the earliest antiquarian collections in the Western world date back to the sixteenth century, it was not until the late nineteenth century that museums became central arenas for assembling, classifying, and exhibiting the material remains of non-European societies (Bennett, 2013). This period saw the consolidation of curatorial models that reflected the imperial and scientific ambitions of competing European powers.

In the Canary Islands, these trends materialized early. The first documented exhibitions of Indigenous human remains and artifacts appeared in 1840 at the Museo Casilda in Tacoronte (Tenerife), followed shortly by displays within the scientific societies that emerged later in the century—such as the Gabinete Científico in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, El Museo Canario in Las Palmas, and La Cosmológica in La Palma. The museological frameworks developed in these institutions were shaped by European intellectual currents and would remain remarkably stable into the twenty-first century (Farrujia, 2020).

A key factor behind this continuity was the strong influence of the French museological tradition. The model adopted in the Canary Islands at the end of the nineteenth century mirrored prevailing French approaches to classification and display, which prioritized typology, chronology, and racialized interpretive schemes (Ortiz, 2016). The French interpretive model exemplified broader imperial archaeological practices described by Trigger (2006), in which colonized peoples were placed within hierarchical schemes of human development. In the Canary Islands, such frameworks simultaneously celebrated the "authenticity" of Indigenous culture while disconnecting it from contemporary society, relegating it to a timeless and exoticized past. This dynamic illustrates what Mbembe (2001) later conceptualized as the "colonial library": a system of knowledge production that renders colonized subjects legible only through the classificatory and epistemic categories imposed by colonial powers.

Following the private initiatives of the 19th century led by scientific societies and cabinets established by the bourgeois intellectuals of the Canary Islands, the Franco regime took control in 1939, centralizing the administration of museums, expanding archaeological fieldwork, and reinforcing nationalist ideology. Museums became the primary medium for disseminating this knowledge. Exhibits featured the *xaxos* or embalmed bodies, alongside artifacts such as pottery, lithic tools, and bone artefacts, which were framed as both Neolithic and European in origin. This intervention by the Spanish government introduced its own interpretation of history, establishing institutional structures and an administrative framework. The Franco regime's approach to the Indigenous Canarian past was marked by a relationship of unequal domination. The archaeology of the archipelago was shaped by the scientific narratives propagated by Francoist intellectuals, who recontextualized the remains of the ancient Canarians within a Hispanicized framework.

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2 Museums, as Western European institutions, emerged within specific historical and epistemic frameworks. Many Indigenous cultures and nations do not traditionally maintain museums and may view the exhibition of certain objects —especially human remains— outside of their cultural and ceremonial contexts as inappropriate or alien to their heritage practices (Lonetree, 2012; Macdonald, 2022).

The museological narratives developed in the Canary Islands have often served to reify the Indigenous people, presenting them as static, primitive, and disconnected from the present. The exhibition of embalmed remains and artefacts in glass cases, without adequate contextualization or sensitivity, has contributed to the objectification and dehumanization of the Indigenous people. This reification is deeply rooted in colonial power dynamics, where Indigenous cultures are often treated as objects of study and display, rather than as living, dynamic societies with their own histories and perspectives (Rassool, 2015).

5 Questioning colonial narratives through indigenous heritage and museum practices

In the 21st century, even as evolutionism has faced both widespread adoption and subsequent critique, practices such as the commercialization of collections, cultural historicism, colonial policies, and traditional museological narratives remain entrenched (Ortiz, 2016). The *xaxos* or embalmed bodies of the ancient Canarians continue to feature prominently in the glass showcases of archaeological museums, while also being utilized in contemporary art installations, as previously discussed (Farrujia, 2020). This enduring situation resonates with Theodor Adorno's (2008) observations on museums, which he metaphorically describes as mausoleums, repositories of lifeless and static objects that are presented as consumer goods representing the nation.

Discussions about the objectification of Indigenous peoples in museums and archaeological practice can be better understood through the conceptual lens of reification, a notion rooted in Marxist thought and later reworked by Georg Lukács and Axel Honneth. Marx first described how capitalist systems transform human relations into relations between things, obscuring the social and historical processes that produce them. Lukács expanded this idea, arguing that reification occurs when people and their lived realities are treated as fixed, object-like entities, stripped of agency and reduced to mere data points within institutional classifications (García, 2022).

This theoretical tradition illuminates the dynamics at play when Indigenous human remains are handled as museum artifacts. Lukács' analysis stresses how objects acquire a seemingly autonomous status, overshadowing the human stories and relationships embedded within them. In the context of archaeological collections, this results in ancestral remains being approached not as individuals with social and cultural significance but as typological specimens that serve scientific or curatorial aims.

Axel Honneth later reframed reification as a failure of recognition, introducing an affective and relational dimension to the concept. For Honneth (2005), reification arises when the basic empathetic and ethical relationships that ground human understanding are forgotten. Once recognition is suspended, the world becomes populated by detached objects rather than interconnected subjects. Applying this perspective to museum practice reveals how the treatment of Indigenous remains as neutral scientific material contributes to their dehumanization: their ties to specific communities, territories, and histories are dissolved, and they enter classificatory systems that prioritize knowledge production over human dignity.

Anthropologists and critical heritage scholars have highlighted that such processes are not merely technical or curatorial; they are deeply rooted in colonial epistemologies. Museums have historically reorganized Indigenous bodies and belongings into categories such as "anthropological," "ethnographic," or "archaeological," generating what Alvarado (2008) terms a "colonial hierarchy." Through this hierarchy, the remains of colonized peoples become subject to institutional ownership, national heritage laws, and even market dynamics. Reification, in this sense, is not only a philosophical concept but also a lived political condition reproduced in exhibition design, legal classification, and heritage governance (Carina, 2020).

Understanding reification through the combined insights of Marx, Lukács, and Honneth helps expose how the transformation of Indigenous ancestors into museum objects perpetuates colonial forms of knowledge and authority. It underscores the need to move beyond purely scientific or aesthetic justifications for display and toward frameworks that foreground recognition, relationality, and the ethical responsibilities owed to descendant communities.

To address this issue in the Canary Islands, amendments proposed by the undersigned (Farrujia, 2020) were made to the draft of Law 11/2019 on Cultural Heritage of the Canary Islands, which was enacted on April 25, 2019[3]. Debates around the treatment of Indigenous human re-

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3 The full text of Law 11/2019 on Cultural Heritage of the Canary Islands is available at the following link: https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2019-8707

mains in the Canary Islands entered a new phase with the drafting and approval of Law 11/2019 on Cultural Heritage of the Canary Islands. The original bill contained a controversial provision—Article 87—which placed human skeletal remains and material artifacts within the same legal category. By subsuming both under the umbrella of “material culture”, the draft law reproduced long-standing colonial logics that regarded human bodies as collectible objects comparable to ceramics or tools.

This approach was challenged during the legislative process, leading to the introduction of Amendment 121, which fundamentally reshaped Article 87. The amendment created a dedicated legal category for human remains, formally separating them from archaeological artifacts. Under the revised article, human remains are now recognized as sensitive heritage, whose management requires specific safeguards grounded in respect for dignity and cross-cultural ethical norms. The text also incorporates explicit provisions for repatriation and mandates the conservation of burial sites after excavation, ensuring that skeletal material is not treated as disposable once scientific study has been completed (Farrujia, 2020).

A second modification, Amendment 122, targeted the domain of museum governance. Inserted into Article 110, it established a mechanism through which members of the public may request the removal of items from museum displays if deemed culturally offensive or ethically inappropriate. This reform opens a channel for communities—particularly descendant—to challenge the continued exhibition of ancestral remains. It also encourages more dialogical relations between museums and society by recognizing that public sensibilities, cultural rights, and heritage ethics must shape curatorial decisions.

Law 11/2019 thus marked the first attempt within the Spanish legal system to build a dedicated framework for the management of human remains as a distinct category of heritage. While the legislation represents a significant step forward, its implementation has been uneven. Despite the law’s emphasis on dignity and sensitivity, Indigenous remains continue to appear in museum displays, revealing the persistence of institutional inertia and the lingering influence of colonial heritage practices. The effectiveness of the reforms ultimately depends on political will, the involvement of heritage professionals, and the active participation of the communities most directly affected.

Comparative experiences elsewhere—such as repatriation practices under NAGPRA in the United States (Fine-Dare, 2002) or Māori-led protocols in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Smith, 2012)—demonstrate that meaningful change requires sustained collaboration between museums and descendant groups (Henare, 2005). In South Africa, agency has been exercised by named cultural communities and nations—e.g., Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho Tswana and San—whose leadership has informed restitution, reburial and community curation processes and heritage interpretation (Rassool, 2015)[4]. These cases demonstrate that meaningful change is possible when institutions are willing to confront their histories and share authority with those whose heritage they claim to represent.

In this regard, Law 11/2019 lays an important foundation, but its transformative potential can only be realized if the legal provisions translate into tangible shifts in practice, interpretation, and institutional accountability.

Nevertheless, some signs of change can be observed in the Canary Islands, albeit limited and uneven. The *Museo Arqueológico de Tenerife*, for example, has begun to revise certain aspects of its permanent exhibitions, introducing more contextual information and questioning older racial typologies, although the Indigenous anthropological remains are still exhibited, even after the recent decolonial policies developed in 2025 in the National Spanish Museums (Molina, 2025). Collaborative projects involving local scholars and cultural associations have pushed for a more inclusive heritage narrative that recognizes the diversity and resilience of Indigenous legacies (Santana, 2018; Serrano et al., 2023; Farrujia, 2023). Nonetheless, institutional inertia and political sensitivities continue to hamper deeper transformations.

To decolonize museums in the Canary Islands, it is essential to move beyond the reification of the Indigenous people and create more inclusive and participatory spaces. This requires a critical re-evaluation of existing museological narratives, addressing issues of representation, repatriation, and community engagement (Lonetree, 2012). By transforming museums into spaces of dialogue, learning, and cultural exchange, it is possible to challenge colonial legacies and promote a more equitable and respectful understanding of the Canary Islands’ Indigenous heritage.

4 The proposal developed in New Zealand would not fit the context of the Canary Islands, as the process of ethnocide carried out since the 15th century in the archipelago has resulted in the absence of a distinct indigenous ethnic group today.

6 Education as a site of colonial reproduction: the silencing of the indigenous world

Education, as a fundamental institution for the transmission of knowledge and values, plays a crucial role in shaping individual and collective identities. However, educational systems can also serve as sites of colonial reproduction, perpetuating dominant cultural perspectives and marginalizing the histories and experiences of Indigenous peoples. In the case of the Canary Islands, the educational system has historically contributed to the silencing of the Indigenous world, reinforcing colonial ideologies and perpetuating Eurocentric biases (Karboune, 2022).

The narrative promoted by museums has fostered a 'museum culture' regarding the Indigenous world, leading to the objectification of the Indigenous Canary Islanders. However, what has occurred within the realm of education? The following analysis highlights how Spanish educational policies have historically overlooked the inclusion of Canarian perspectives and, more specifically, Indigenous heritage, which has been insufficiently incorporated into curricula since the 19th century.

Following the implementation of the Moyano Law in 1857, a nationwide education system was established in Spain. This system was initially tailored to the needs of the social elite. In the Canary Islands, the curriculum lacked content specifically addressing the archipelago's unique context. Instead, education prioritized the assimilation of Canarian society into a centralized Spanish identity, fostering patriotism. Within this framework, Juan de la Puerta Canseco's *Descripción Geográfica de las Islas Canarias* (Geographical Description of the Canary Islands), published in 1861, became part of Canarian educational materials by Royal Order on November 1, 1863 (Karboune, 2022).

Nevertheless, the educational landscape shifted significantly under Franco's dictatorship, starting in 1939, as a centralized model excluded regional content. Across Spain, the curriculum was heavily influenced by Catholic values and a strong emphasis on the Spanish language (Corchón et al., 2013). Despite this homogenizing tendency, isolated efforts emerged, such as Luis Diego Cuscoy's 1942 initiative in Tenerife. He created the school booklet *Leyendo Islas: Método completo de lectura* (Reading Islands: A Comprehensive Reading Method), designed to teach children literacy using vocabulary, place names, and cultural references from the Canary Islands (Karboune, 2022).

The centralized educational model persisted until the enactment of the General Education Law in 1970, which introduced the possibility of incorporating regional specificities into education. However, this change was only applied to the final two years of primary education (seventh and eighth grades) through the Order issued on June 30, 1977 (Karboune, 2022).

In the Canary Islands, the inclusion of local content was mostly symbolic. It was thanks to the efforts of educators—especially the Canarian Movement for Pedagogical Renewal Tamonante during the 1977–78 academic year—that a meaningful integration of Canarian topics began. Drawing inspiration from Célestin Freinet's pedagogical principles, this movement organized summer workshops to prepare teachers in incorporating regional content (Ferraz, 2017). Within this context, the publication of *Natura y Cultura de las Islas Canarias* (Nature and Culture of the Canary Islands) in 1977, directed by Pedro Hernández, marked a notable step. Nevertheless, its representation of the Indigenous world largely reflected Franco-era archaeological narratives, presenting a Neolithic Indigenous past with connections to Hispanic influences (Farrujia, 2014).

After the Franco regime ended and the Spanish Constitution was ratified in 1978, the country transitioned into a decentralized system comprising 17 autonomous communities, including the Canary Islands. This newfound administrative decentralization began to affect education after decades of strict centralism. The *Ley Orgánica de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo* (Organic Law on the General Organization of the Education System), approved in 1990, granted autonomous regions the ability to develop 45% of their curriculum in areas with a regional language and 35% in other areas, including the Canary Islands (Turienzo, 2020). To support the incorporation of regional content, the *Programa Contenidos Canarios* (Canarian Contents Program) was established in 1993 to train teachers and facilitate the integration of Canarian subjects into classrooms, continuing until 2003.

Considering the historical background and the legal measures enacted in Spain, how have these influenced the representation of the Indigenous Canary Islands within education? Currently, while the curriculum does address the Indigenous world of the Canary Islands, it is primarily presented through textbooks, which remain the cornerstone of the educational system. Research

(Farrujia et al., 2022a) highlights the limited inclusion of Canarian content in these materials, in compulsory education, falling short of the quotas set by educational laws. Furthermore, the depiction of the Indigenous world often adopts a Eurocentric lens. Although the African origins of the settlers are acknowledged, Africa's role is reduced to a mere geographical fact, with its cultural contributions to the Indigenous Canary Islands neither appreciated nor explored. In essence, identity markers are framed in ways that exclude the influence of Amazigh culture on the archipelago.

This Eurocentric view is not confined to the Canary Islands but extends to other regions and topics both within Spain and abroad (Paredes, 2012). Additionally, the portrayal of Indigenous Canarian heritage often involves comparisons with major Western cultural accomplishments. For instance, textbooks frequently highlight ceramic artefacts from islands like Gran Canaria and La Palma, emphasizing their intricate decoration and aesthetic appeal. This approach establishes a direct connection between heritage and visual value. As a result, the methodology and focus underpinning these textbooks shapes the selection of cultural materials and heritage assets (Farrujia et al., 2022a).

One significant issue is the lack of archaeological context given to heritage objects in textbooks. These items are often presented without accompanying explanations or captions, reducing them to mere illustrations. This approach resembles how material culture is displayed in museums, where archaeological artefacts are frequently exhibited in glass cases as static, "lifeless" objects (Ruiz, 2009).

Additionally, textbooks tend to reinforce "terminal narratives" that highlight the extinction of Indigenous cultures and underscore the dominance of the conquerors. This storytelling framework, rooted in Canarian historiography since the Franco era, still permeates the teaching of social sciences and history. The conquest of the Canary Islands is typically portrayed as the start of a new historical chapter in which the Indigenous presence vanishes entirely. This narrative overlooks the cultural fusion resulting from the conquest and colonization—an essential aspect of Canarian identity. By neglecting this perspective, textbooks hinder students' ability to fully appreciate the region's cultural heritage, limiting their understanding of its rich and complex legacy (Farrujia et al., 2022a).

The educational system in the Canary Islands has historically contributed to the silencing of Indigenous voices and perspectives, reinforcing colonial ideologies and perpetuating Eurocentric biases. The curriculum has often prioritized Spanish history and culture, marginalizing the history and cultural contributions of the Indigenous people. Textbooks have often presented a biased and incomplete picture of the archipelago's past, perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing colonial narratives. As a result, many students in the Canary Islands have grown up with a limited understanding of their own Indigenous heritage, disconnected from their cultural roots.

Textbook analysis reveals, therefore, a complementary dynamic in schools. Legal provisions permitting regional content have not been translated into substantive curricular change because textbooks continue to prioritize conquest narratives and to present material culture as isolated illustrations rather than as evidence of living traditions. This curricular form—combining symbolic inclusion (selected images) with substantive omission (lack of social, economic or cultural context)—functions to classify Indigenous heritage as a relic and thereby reproduces the very epistemic hierarchies that the museological field sustains (Lonetree, 2012).

To decolonize education in the Canary Islands, it is essential to challenge these colonial legacies and create more inclusive and equitable learning environments. This requires a critical re-evaluation of the curriculum, incorporating Indigenous historical contents from a decolonial perspective, and promoting critical thinking. By transforming education into a space of empowerment and cultural affirmation, it is possible to challenge colonial legacies and foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Canary Islands' Indigenous heritage.

7 *Memorias Guanches*: a decolonial educational project

In response to the challenges outlined above, the Department of Didactics of the Social Sciences at the University of La Laguna has developed the educational project *Memorias Guanches* from a critical and decolonial perspective. This project, funded by the Department of Historical Heritage of the City Council of La Laguna, targets primary and secondary school students, aiming to deepen their understanding of the Indigenous world of the Canary Islands. It does so through a collection of short stories that, while literary in nature, are rooted in archaeological, documentary, and ethno-historical sources. The focus is specifically on the period of interaction between the Indigenous population and the conquerors after Tenerife's conquest in 1496.

As noted above, the project materials were made available to schools as a curricular and didactic resource at the request of the funding municipal body, which did not commission a formal impact evaluation; consequently, no systematic outcome data on student learning or classroom implementation were collected as part of that dissemination. The initiative was financed by the municipal administration in office at the time. However, following the change in political leadership within that specific department after the municipal elections on 28 May 2023, this second phase has not been commissioned to date.

7.1 Project description and status

Memorias Guanches is an applied pedagogical initiative that exists as a curricular package composed of: (1) a corpus of 18 short stories grounded in archaeological, documentary and ethnohistorical sources; (2) teacher guides with contents, activities, learning objectives and session plans; and (3) community-link activity templates for site visits.

The Municipal Historical Archive (Archivo Histórico Municipal) was included as one of the key community-link sites, designed especially for secondary-level students, as it preserves documentary collections dating back to the 16th century. The archive holds the Cabildo of Tenerife's agreements and ordinances, which document the measures imposed on Indigenous groups who resisted integration—such as refusing to settle in colonial villages or to adopt the newly imposed Christian faith, amongst others. Complementing these archival sources, the Memorias Guanches literary texts incorporate information drawn from wills, notarial protocols, and other legal documents, thereby attesting to the participation of Indigenous individuals in everyday social and economic life from the 16th century. Taken together, the archival records and the literary materials provide students with a direct encounter with primary sources that illuminate both Indigenous agency and the coercive mechanisms through which the colonial order was consolidated.

7.2 Concrete classroom activities

To illustrate, classroom sequences engage students through the following steps—structured across several sessions and detailed on the project webpage—following the same overall framework in both primary and secondary education, albeit with the corresponding curricular, didactic and cognitive adaptations for each level:

Activation phase

- A brief introductory activity activates prior knowledge and frames the topic before reading and field work; activities include quick prompts, a timeline review, and a map orientation to situate the unit.

Text and object work

- Guided reading of a historically anchored short stories that foregrounds Guanche daily life.
- Object based enquiry using local museum images where students hypothesize material function and social meaning; these activities promote textual and visual analysis within the classroom session.

Spatial localisation and contextualisation

- A targeted classroom task locates the story's Indigenous characters on contemporary maps, distinguishing urban and rural settings according to each case (for example, Indigenous people who continued living apart from the new settler towns, or those who became incorporated into emerging urban centers such as La Laguna).
- This mapping work prepares students for the field element by linking characters to specific landscapes, streets and historical sites associated with Indigenous presence and post-conquest transformations.

Field walk

- A guided field walk through sectors of the historic center of La Laguna traces spaces historically inhabited or repurposed after the conquest. Teachers and students narrate and critically examine processes of ethnocide and acculturation that transformed Indigenous lifeways, linking streets, buildings and place names to episodes of dispossession, cultural suppression and continuity. The walk includes structured stops (the Historical Archive just for secondary-level students) with short contextual comments, archival images or map overlays, and prompts for reflective note taking to ensure difficult themes (violence, loss, assimilation) are addressed with historical accuracy and pedagogical sensitivity.

Follow up and assessment (in class)

- A reflective writing task, completed at school after the field visit, connects local heritage to questions of identity and power.
- The sequence culminates in a collaborative final product: the class divides into small groups, each selecting and developing a distinct Indigenous character. One member records a first person performance while peers support writing, rehearsal and staging; groups are encouraged to ensure gender balance so both male and female perspectives are represented. Groups jointly compose a first person short narrative, rehearse and interpret the monologue, and produce an audiovisual recording of the performance.

These structured activities are designed to move learners from passive reception to critical inquiry, to foster collective perspective taking and empathy, and to model heritage practices grounded in collaboration between educators and municipal archival staff.

7.3 Goals and objectives of the educational project

The educational project and its activities are designed to help students explore the enduring Guanche heritage that has survived to the present day. This is conveyed through various forms of tangible, intangible, and immovable cultural heritages featured in the narratives. The project also incorporates colonial heritage, placing special emphasis on the historic centre of La Laguna, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999. Central to the project's approach is a historical perspective grounded in diversity, which highlights the contributions of both men and women. This fosters a value-based education that moves beyond androcentric interpretations of history.

The portrayal of the natural environment is of central importance, since the Indigenous world cannot be fully understood without acknowledging its profound ties to mountains, water, the sky, and other essential resources. In this sense, Indigenous heritage emerges as a crucial educational theme, with the environment functioning as an indispensable framework for interpreting the cultural accomplishments of its people.

Incorporating a decolonial perspective into the project is essential for moving beyond conventional Eurocentric narratives. By critically examining the history of the conquest and emphasizing the agency of Indigenous peoples, the project aims to challenge the enduring depiction of the Guanche as passive victims of colonization. Instead, it underscores their resilience and capacity for adaptation, acknowledging their active role in shaping their own history and cultural identity. In doing so, the project repositions Indigenous peoples as contributors to the rich cultural diversity of the Canary Islands, rather than mere subjects of historical events. This approach supports the broader educational objective of fostering critical thinking and advancing a more inclusive view of the past, breaking away from oversimplified or one-dimensional interpretations.

Additionally, the project underscores the value of heritage not only as a means of exploring the past but also as a catalyst for fostering collective memory. Within the framework of the project, heritage is conceived as a dynamic and evolving process, encompassing the continual reinterpretation and contextualization of historical narratives. Through the activities included in the project, students are encouraged to view heritage as a participatory and negotiated experience, where diverse perspectives on history intersect, enriching their understanding of the present. This approach strengthens students' connection to their heritage, empowering them to take active roles in cultural preservation and to champion the importance of cultural diversity within their communities (UNESCO, 2021).

The project stands out for its capacity to link formal education with the active collaboration of municipal archival staff. By integrating local heritage and given the fragmentary and mediated nature of Indigenous sources, the project develops narratives on the Indigenous past rather than purporting to reproduce 'narratives from' it. In this sense, the project helps students cultivate a sense of local and cultural identity while linking it to broader global Indigenous struggles. Additionally, the use of literature as the core educational medium enriches the learning process by fostering empathy and emotional engagement (Cremin et al., 2014). This comprehensive approach not only deepens students' academic understanding but also encourages them to critically reflect on contemporary issues like colonialism, cultural appropriation, and identity within their own context.

Employing literature as a foundation for educational initiatives is particularly valuable for several reasons: its capacity to innovate traditional teaching methods, its effectiveness in developing competencies and foundational skills in alternative ways, and its ability to complement textbooks while inspiring students' creativity and imagination (Cremin et al., 2014). By presenting historical and cultural content in a dynamic and relatable literary form, students are better equipped to internalize and engage with complex historical topics. Moreover, literature serves as a bridge for interdisciplinary learning, merging subjects like history, social studies, literature, and environmental education into a cohesive educational experience. This fusion of analytical thinking, emotional connection, and intellectual challenge enables the project to offer a richer and more diverse learning environment for students (Drake & Burns, 2004).

8 Conclusions: echoing indigenous heritage in the 21st century

This paper has shown how the colonial library, inscribed in archaeological practice, museum classification and curricular and didactic production, continues to shape Canarian public memory, a dynamic that resonates with comparable processes of colonial knowledge production and memory formation in other regions of the world. It further argues that legal reform (Law 11/2019), institutional shifts in museums, and community centered pedagogies can constitute a coordinated pathway to decolonization only if accompanied by sustained political commitment and empirical evaluation.

Given that this study relies predominantly on documentary evidence and that data on implementation is uneven, claims regarding learning outcomes should be regarded as provisional and subject to empirical verification. Robust evidence will need classroom experiments, follow-up studies with students over time, museum ethnography, and policy analysis to link reforms such as Law 11/2019 to actual institutional change. Future research should prioritize systematic classroom trials, stakeholder interviews (museum and archive professionals, teachers, community groups) and long term monitoring of restitution and reinterpretation processes to assess whether these combined measures achieve durable epistemic change.

Decolonizing the communication of the past in the Canary Islands, therefore, is an ongoing process that requires a sustained commitment from researchers, educators, policymakers, and community members. Museums should adopt participatory governance protocols that include local scholars and cultural associations in decisions concerning display, interpretation and repatriation. Education authorities should mandate curricular modules that integrate contextualised local heritage materials and provide teacher training on decolonial pedagogies, accompanied by textbook review protocols that move beyond tokenistic inclusion. Policymakers should operationalise Law 11/2019 through binding museum standards, transparent restitution procedures and funding for community-led heritage projects, coupled with monitoring mechanisms to assess institutional change.

The narratives presented in Canary Islands museums and schools, as argued, are shaped by political and colonial legacies that continue to frame Indigenous history as static and marginal. Archaeological practice, museum classification, and curricular choices have reproduced Eurocentric perspectives that valorise colonial narratives while sidelining Indigenous agency and continuity.

This reductive framing often reduces Guanche artefacts to curiosities or decorative objects, detached from the social contexts that gave them meaning. As a result, public and academic understandings frequently overlook the complexity of Indigenous lifeways and their ongoing influence on contemporary Canarian society through processes of cultural intermingling.

Correcting this requires a shift from aesthetic or ahistorical display toward interpretive frameworks that treat material culture and archaeological remains as evidence of lived, dynamic societies. Inclusive, decolonial approaches in both museum curation and school curricula can foreground Indigenous agency, reveal processes of dispossession and resilience, and situate local histories within broader transregional connections.

Policy and educational interventions are complementary routes to change: legal reform (for example, the revision of the Canary Islands Cultural Heritage Law) must be matched by pedagogical innovation (for example, the creation of decolonial educational programmes) so that institutional practices and classroom experiences mutually reinforce more nuanced narratives.

Reassessing presentation, interpretation, and teaching practices will help dismantle entrenched Eurocentric assumptions and foster richer, more empathetic public memories that recognise the past and present contributions of Indigenous peoples in the Canary Islands and beyond. By challenging colonial legacies, promoting Indigenous perspectives, and fostering critical thinking, it is possible to create a more equitable and inclusive understanding of the archipelago's rich and complex history. In the 21st century, reclaiming Indigenous heritage is not only a matter of historical accuracy but also a vital step towards building a more just and sustainable future for all.

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Ethical statement

This study adheres strictly to ethical research standards. As it did not involve human participants, issues of anonymity and consent were not applicable. The research processes were conducted responsibly, ensuring compliance with all relevant ethical and legal guidelines.

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Decolonizing art history in Austria

Postcolonial perspectives on exoticism and the representation of the "Other"

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Abstract

The numerous images of cultural difference in art history have formed part of the legitimization process of colonial ideologies. They play an important role within current debates on researching, teaching, and learning against the backdrop of colonialism. In the wake of decolonial endeavors within German-speaking academia, it is of interest to take a closer look at the discipline in Austria. Referring to Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff and her thesis of the "colonial unconscious" in German art history, this paper transfers the discussion to the Austrian context. Particular attention is paid to the concept of exoticism and its manifestations in the visual arts. Using case studies from the late 19th century, this paper examines the various ways non-European people were represented at the time of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The entanglements of artistic practices with European colonialism emphasize the necessity of postcolonial re-readings of images in Austria's historical culture and art history.

Keywords

Art history, Austria, exoticism, decolonization, postcolonial studies

1 Colonial entanglements and legacies in art history: The postcolonial turn and the demand for decolonization

The manifold entanglements of art history and visual culture with colonial discourses have been an increasingly important topic of research for the discipline of art history since the 1980s at the latest. To the present day, the discipline and its canon formation are linked to Eurocentric classification methods, evaluation systems, as well as modes of representation (Karentzos, 2012, p. 249). In their introduction to the anthology *The Routledge companion to decolonizing art history*, the editors Flores, San Martín, and Black get to the heart of these problematic interconnections:

> Art history as a discipline and its corollary institutions—the museum, the art market—are not only products of colonial legacies, but active agents in the consolidation of empire, the construction of the West, the naturalization of Eurocentrism, and the reproduction of white supremacy, all the while giving the false impression that their authority is somehow neutral. (Flores et al., 2024, p. 8)

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This seeming neutrality and objectivity of white hegemony is one of the major focuses of postcolonial art history. Some of the key questions are how cultural differences and hierarchies have been (re)produced and negotiated, and how colonial fantasies and ideologies become apparent in art works and in art historiography. As Susanne Leeb (2012, p. 13) has pointed out, the entanglement in global histories through trade, discovery, colonial, and imperial histories, as well as through the economic processes of globalization and migration suggests that the postcolonial condition entails changing the discipline's criteria, narratives, and concepts of value. She concludes that one of the main challenges is to overcome methodological Eurocentrism and Occidentalism. In short, postcolonial interventions in the field of art history begin with a reflection on and revision of foundations, principles, and histories. This involves, for example, a critical examination of the construction of metanarratives of national identity and the forms of devaluation and marginalization of the other cultures. In the same way, these interventions must address the exclusions within the art historical canon, the dominant figure of the white, male artist, as well as the ethnic and gender coding of artists outside the Euro-American sphere or artists in migration (Karentzos, 2012, pp. 253–254). Postcolonial art history, as Christian Kravagna puts it, is on the one hand concerned with the revaluation of previously marginalized art by non-European and Black artists and on the other with the analysis of the canon of Western modernism in relation to the manifestation of colonialist, racist, and exoticist ideas in the works of European art (Kravagna, 2016, p. 78). Other important subjects of investigation include the analysis of the appropriation of non-European motifs and art over the centuries, the deconstruction of the claim to authenticity and originality of Western modernism, the development of alternative perspectives and counter-narratives to the colonial/imperial discourse, the investigation of transnational artistic contacts and collaborations at the time of modernity (Kravagna, 2017 and 2022), and transcultural exchange and transfer processes in the sense of entanglements as entangled art histories (Weiß & Wiegert, 2022).

Having mentioned the problematic involvements of art history with the colonial project, one would expect that in 2025, postcolonial perspectives on the art and visual culture of the past and present rank among the analytical and methodological foundations of art history. After all, the postcolonial turn (Bachmann-Medick, 2006, pp. 184–237) and the critical revisions of colonial history, decolonization, and neocolonialism had already begun to take place in the field of literary studies as early as the 1980s. As a result, postcolonial theories were adapted by other academic disciplines at different times and to varying degrees and, in the best case, made fruitful for the respective subject-specific foundations and discourses (Reuter & Karentzos, 2012, pp. 189–364). The origins of postcolonial art history go back to anticolonial artistic practices in the early 20th century. In 1977, just one year before Edward W. Said published his groundbreaking study *Orientalism* (Said, 1978), the Indian art historian Partha Mitter released his book entitled *Much maligned monsters*, in which he traced European reactions to Indian art and raised the topic of exoticism and cultural representation (Mitter, 1977). Inspired by writings of anticolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, or by seminal publications of postcolonial theorists like Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, or Gayatri Spivak, several other scholars contributed considerably to the further development of the postcolonial critique within the discipline (e.g., Araeen et al., 2002; Mercer, 1994; Nochlin, 1989, pp. 33–59). While in the international context postcolonial themes and problems were being critically addressed by artists, art critics, or even in exhibitions of contemporary art, institutionalized art history was relatively late in taking up these issues. As recently as 2021, the authors Kelly and Özpınar noted the belated impact of postcolonial theories: "Over 30 years since the rise of postcolonial art history, we are only now starting to witness the slow-paced integration of these ideas into undergraduate survey teaching in the history of art" (Kelly & Özpınar, 2021).

This remark is interesting in so far as Kelly and Özpınar, who are working at Irish and British universities, criticize the anglophone academic context of the study of art history. Against the backdrop of Great Britain's colonial history and the fact that postcolonial studies initially spread mainly through English-language publications, one would assume that this research focus would have found its way into the curricula of English-speaking universities slightly earlier. This thus highlights the difficulty in implementing this transdisciplinary and methodologically heterogeneous research area in the various fields of study. This problem is also mentioned by Reuter and Karentzos (2012, pp. 9–10) in relation to the German-speaking world.

Despite these belated and rather slow receptions at universities, the desire to decolonize art history is omnipresent at recent conferences or in current publications. According to the authors Flores et al. (2024, p. 5), the initial demand for a decolonial turn was made during a conference at the University of California by the organizer Nelson Maldonado-Torres, who argued that this

concept is “a way of articulating the massive theoretical and epistemological breakthroughs in the works of Third World” (Maldonado-Torres, 2011, p. 5) theorists. Subsequently, and in a global context, the call for decolonization has been reflected in many areas of critical practices of art and art history. One striking example of this is the publication Decolonizing art history by Grant and Price (2020), in which the authors interviewed various people involved in the field of art on the question of decolonization, thus providing a multi-perspective view of this central and red-hot topic.

2 The colonial unconscious in the discipline of art history in Austria

This brings us to the question of what the situation looks like in academic art history in the German-speaking world. In an article published in 2002 entitled Kunst und kulturelle Differenz oder: Warum hat die kritische Kunstgeschichte in Deutschland den postcolonial turn ausgelassen? [Art and cultural difference or: Why has critical art history in Germany skipped the postcolonial turn?], Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff (2002, pp. 7–16) criticized German art history’s conspicuous ignorance of postcolonial theories. According to her, this lack of interest refers to an unconscious, national everyday knowledge based on the conviction that the problems of postcolonialism would not affect Germany because there was no great colonial history in comparison to other European powers and that the examination and reappraisal of National Socialism is task enough (Schmidt-Linsenhoff. 2002, p. 10). Therefore, she introduced the term “colonial unconscious” to describe the discipline’s rigid defensive stance against postcolonial theories and stated that the postcolonial turn happened more in exhibitions of contemporary art in the 1990s and less in institutionally established art history (Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 2005, pp. 19–44). This criticism is in line with subsequent observations in other sciences. In 2005, the political scientists Castro Varela and Dhawan (2005, p. 8) also noted a delay in the reception of postcolonial theories in German-speaking countries. Ten years later, the authors still pointed out that the decolonization of universities and academic discourses is a major challenge because of a noticeable resistance to the institutionalization of postcolonial criticism (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2015, p. 9). In 2012, Karentzos and Reuter also stated that in recent years, few efforts have been made to address the potential of postcolonial perspectives along and across disciplinary boundaries (Karentzos & Reuter, 2012, p. 9).

The state of a colonial amnesia and a certain unease towards postcolonial studies not only applies to the German academic world, to which Schmidt-Linsenhoff explicitly referred in her article, but also to that of Austria. With the line of argument that in contrast to the former colonial powers Austria had not claimed any territorial possessions overseas and therefore had no colonial history, the thesis of a colonial “unencumberedness” was put forward after 1945 (Sauer, 2017, p. 420). Walter Sauer, who examined the role of Austria-Hungary in the context of European overseas expansion, notes that the Habsburg Empire is hardly mentioned in the literature on colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries:

> The silence regarding Austria in academic debate corresponds with the attitude in national—academic as well as popular—discourse. Far from entering into analysis of whether or not imperialist or colonialist tendencies are to be found in the country’s history, and if so, why, the discussion is largely based on the assumption that Austria was not a colonial power, and hence the consequences of its overseas activities need not be examined. Sometimes this alleged abstention from colonial intervention is constructed as an important element of present day political identity (Sauer, 2012, p. 5–6).

By mentioning several individuals, for example, missionaries, medical doctors, colonial officers, travelers, explorers or scientists, Sauer reveals the Austrian or Austro-Hungarian involvement in imperialism and overseas expansion (Sauer, 2012, pp. 7–12). Nevertheless, and in comparison to other European great powers, the Habsburg monarchy was unable to claim any major and permanent territorial possessions overseas. For this reason, the term colonial power is somehow controversial for Austria. In view of the history of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, there were several colonial activities, albeit not successful in the long term. Nevertheless, Austria-Hungary pursued imperial interests in a global context: In economic terms, the monarchy benefited above all from the East India Trading Companies founded in 1722 and 1775 and was involved in

several land seizures, smaller projects, and military interventions alongside colonial powers (Sauer, 2017, pp. 418–420; Sauer, 2007, pp. 17–78). In addition, numerous expeditions and voyages of exploration were undertaken with colonial intentions (Basch-Ritter, 2008; Klemun & Mattes, 2022, pp. 197–273; Mückler, 2012;). In 1894, the Austro-Hungarian Colonial Society was founded, whose colonial propaganda and pro-colonial activities are documented by the publication of its own colonial newspaper (Loidl, 2017). In the same way, Austria-Hungary actively pursued intra-continental colonization measures (Bachinger, Dornik & Lehnstaedt, 2020; Feichtinger, 2003, pp. 13–31; Ruthner & Scheer, 2018), which is why the politics of the Austro-Hungarian Empire are regarded as "a certain form of European 'inner colonialism'" (Bobinac, 2015, p. 240). According to Walter Sauer, the relationship between the Habsburg Empire and colonialism was assessed very differently in the 20th century: While in the 1930s and early 1940s the Austro-Hungarian colonial activity was considered as an important precursor of German imperialism, both political and academic discourse, even after 1945, supported the aforementioned thesis of a colonial innocence. This insistence on Austria's colonial innocence was intended on the one hand to distance the country from National Socialism and on the other hand to reinforce the position of the neutral republic towards the colonies that had become independent. It was only after the turn of the millennium that a de-ideologized investigation of Austria-Hungary's and Austria's colonial history began (Sauer, 2017, p. 420). More recent research is now refuting the long-held conviction that Austria was unencumbered by colonial history, pointing to Austria's multiple cultural, political, economic, and ideological entanglements with colonial history. One early example of the research on the (post-)colonial debate on the Austro-Hungarian monarchy within the field of literary and cultural studies was the working group Habsburg revisited, which was founded in 2001 (kakanien revisited) and has published several anthologies, the latest one in 2024 (Bobinac, Müller-Funk & Ruthner).

Although Austria's seeming colonial innocence has meanwhile been disproved by historical, cultural, literary, and sociological studies, there still seems to be a lack of (historical) awareness of colonial and postcolonial issues in various areas. As argued elsewhere (Allerstorfer, 2024, pp. 67–85), this attitude can in turn be traced back to the "unconscious, national everyday knowledge" criticized by Schmidt-Linsenhoff, which appears to be even more pronounced in Austria than in Germany due to the absence of colonies on other continents: Since Austria does not belong to the classic colonial powers, there could be no major contact with (post-)colonialism. However, Austria, or rather the Austrian Empire and later the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, were also involved in European colonialism in a variety of ways, and the multiple entanglements with colonial history have left clear traces in its visual culture, museum collections, and urban space. Some striking examples thereof are colonial and neo-colonial product advertisements and company logos, such as the historical signet of the coffee merchant Julius Meinl, several art works and artefacts in the collection of the Weltmuseum in Vienna, or street names. Also, science, and specifically disciplines such as medicine, geography, linguistics, archeology, or anthropology, have significantly contributed to the legitimization of European colonialism. The development of race theories in anthropology, ethnology, sociology, or biology in the 19th century had a major influence on other sciences (MacMaster, 2001). Anti-Semitic and racial ideologies were also widespread in Austria, successfully popularizing ethnic alterity constructions based on pseudoscientific criteria such as physiognomic specifics or skin colors (Fuchs, 2003, pp. 137–151 and pp. 176–185).

In the field of art and art history, colonial ideologies are evident in works of art and the use of Eurocentric and racializing terms and concepts in historiography and canon formation in various periods over the last two centuries. As in Germany, postcolonial studies reached Austria relatively late. While disciplines such as history, cultural studies, literature, political, and social science extensively examined the imperial ambitions of Austria-Hungary from the turn of the last century onwards, drawing on postcolonial studies (Feichtinger, Prutsch, & Csáky, 2003; kakanien revisited, 2001; Müller-Funk & Wagner, 2005; Ruthner, 2018), art history showed comparatively little interest in the critical research on postcolonialism. For instance, there are not many surveys on the colonial entanglements of Austria-Hungary and later Austria in the field of art history. In the 1990s, there were only a few professionals such as artists, curators, and art historians who explicitly addressed postcolonial issues in their exhibitions or art criticism (Weibel & Žižek, 1997). Among the limited number of art-historical studies focused on (post-)colonial issues are several articles and curatorial projects by Christian Kravagna (2008 and 2010) or, in the field of art historiography, history of science, museum collections, and architecture by Matthew Rampley (2013 and 2020), Pia Schölnberger (2021), and Michael Falser (2022). In 2006, the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna placed important educational and political emphasis on postcolonialism by

establishing Austria's first professorship for postcolonial studies at the Institute for Art Theory and Cultural Studies, which has been held by Kravagna since this date. Even if the situation is currently changing due to the engagement of individual researchers or various universities and non-university initiatives, there are a lot of blind spots, especially regarding the past. These are related to the aforementioned colonial amnesia and a certain kind of repression, in which postcolonial studies are either regarded as irrelevant or incompatible with the German-speaking world or degraded as anachronistic and as an outdated relict from the 1980s. Within traditional art history, this kind of unease is understandable, as the usual approach entails adhering to national art historiography as well as the associated identity constructions and established discourses, plus the fact that postcolonial rereading and interventions would shake and deconstruct several convictions and foundations.

What this means is that there is a range of art-historical topics that require differentiated postcolonial analysis. The central issues here include the exoticism and primitivism inherent in many important movements in art history in the 19th and 20th centuries that have been discussed to little or no extent in the light of postcolonial criticism. While there have been isolated studies and exhibition catalogues on Orientalism (Morton, 2019, pp. 291–310) or Japonism (Benesch, 2018; Panzer, 1990), the forms of appropriation of cultural foreign elements in avant-garde movements, such as Expressionism or Cubism, have not yet been examined in the context of critical debates on primitivism in modern art. The colonial discourses interwoven with modern art movements were also largely ignored in post-war artistic movements until the turn of the millennium. Some specific examples of research topics include the 1873 Vienna World's Fair as an epochal major project, which not only inspired trade relations and the founding of museums, but also different varieties of exoticism (Kos & Gleis, 2014). While topics such as the West's fascination with the Orient and its architecture have already been addressed (Niemand, 2019), more detailed studies on the visual construction of cultural differences and stereotypes in recording works of other media origins would be of further interest. The situation is similar regarding the Austrian version of Orientalism and Orientalist tendencies in 19th and 20th century art. Although several research papers and academic projects already exist in this heterogeneous field (Hartmuth, 2024; Hartmuth & Jäger-Klein, 2023; Morton, 2019, pp. 291–310; Morton, 2021, pp. 107–147), there are also topics in need of research such as a critical analysis of the modes of representation of the "Orient" and "Orientals" in the different art movements, which have hitherto received little attention. A further subject is an examination of the visual discourses related to the human zoos or anthropological displays that took place in the Viennese Prater between 1870 and 1910 (Schwarz, 2001). Some examples of these are several gouaches by the German-Austrian artist Wilhelm Gause (1853–1916), which he created on the occasion of the anthropological exhibition of an "Ashanti village" in 1897, or the lost and retrieved portrait of William Nii Nortey Dowuona from a royal family in Ghana (Allerstorfer, forthcoming in 2026). The image archives and collections of non-European art of missionary orders are a particularly interesting research area, but at the same time still a niche topic in Austria. Around 2,000 historical glass slides have been found in the mission house Maria Sorg in Salzburg, which the order's founder Maria Theresia Ledóchowska (1863–1922) used in her slide shows in the early 20th century to raise funds for the Catholic mission in Africa. In addition to cultural-historical and ethnographic images, the collection includes numerous photographs of African mission stations. These photographs are important sources for analyzing the complex relationship between colonial rule and missionary work, as well as the perception of Africa in Europe in the first decades of the 20th century (Allerstorfer, 2024, pp. 118–137). Another topic within postcolonial Austrian art history would be the aforementioned entanglements of several movements of modernist art with primitivism. Whereas a focus on the art of archaic and non-European cultures as well as folk art is considered a decisive feature of the Fauves, *Die Brücke*, or *Der Blaue Reiter*, Austrian avant-garde movements such as Expressionism are rarely discussed within the context of primitivism. An analysis of the different forms of appropriation and strategies for utilization of culturally "foreign" and "own" elements in the context of the respective life stories, personal motives, as well as socio-political and colonial cultural discourses could provide new insights into the complex correlations of exoticism, primitivism, and coloniality (Allerstorfer, 2023, pp. 24–39). The list of research topics could be expanded to include the neo-primitivist and exoticist tendencies in post-war art or various exhibitions up to the present day.

3 Exoticism revisited: Representations of the foreign and Other. Case studies from the late 19th century

The third part of this paper will discuss the concept of exoticism and its manifestations in the visual arts. Case studies from the late 19th century will be used to examine several versions of the representation of non-European people at the time of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy from a postcolonial perspective. Exoticism describes different attitudes towards foreign cultures. Nicola Gess (2017, p. 145) argues that as with primitivism, exoticism is characterized by an ambivalent fascination with the (non-European) foreign people, objects, or places, fluctuating between positive and negative stereotyping and between self-criticism and racism, and can be located in colonial or post-colonial contexts. As an ambivalent term, it combines contradictory views that encompass objective attention, fascination, ethnographic interest, escapism, and criticism of civilization, as well as negative stereotyping, racism, and sexism (von Beyme, 2008, p. 7; Olbrich, 2004, p. 403). Due to its close interconnection with colonial history and its ideological program, it is a Eurocentric perspective that is often accepted relatively uncritically. In art history, the term functions as a kind of hypernym for different movements in Western art history, such as Chinoiseries, Orientalism, or Japonism, where foreign cultural elements have been absorbed and adapted to the European taste (Hackenschmidt, 2011, p. 359; Rincón, 2001, p. 338). Within the context of colonialism, and especially during the heyday of imperialism in the 19th century, exoticism "increasingly gained, throughout the empire, the connotations of a stimulating or exciting difference, something with which the domestic could be (safely) spiced" (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 87). The "exotic" objects imported from abroad included not only minerals, plants, and artefacts, but also animals and people of other cultures, who had been brought back as "souvenirs" or displayed in private or public zoos as part of anthropological exhibitions. Since Austria-Hungary's visual culture is interwoven with European colonialism in many respects, exoticism also emerges in different facets and versions in the art of the 19th and 20th century. The following section focuses on the representation of non-European persons as supposed "Orientals" or Black people who were often depicted as the foreign "Others" in paintings or sculptures in a racializing way. Based on strategies of othering, some of the characteristics of these works of art are the production and reproduction of cultural stereotypes, the clear distinction between the European identity and the non-European alterity, and thus the further establishment of constructions of otherness and the consolidation of hierarchies. In this context, important postcolonial concepts such as othering or stereotyping are discussed, which are particularly relevant for the visual arts. The aforementioned 1873 Vienna World's Fair was an important project with universalist tendencies, which promoted exoticism. The desire to showcase foreign civilizations through characteristic buildings, interiors, and human representatives went hand in hand with the construction of cultural stereotypes and differences. This can be seen very clearly in an illustration of the different types of men at the World's Fair by the artist Franz Kollarz, in which a Black male figure, next to the words Amerik. Bar, is depicted on the left with an exaggerated physiognomy and in the traditionally submissive role of a waiter in a serving position (fig. 1). There are also representatives of China, Japan and Russia, as well as several depictions of men of Islamic cultures, dressed in wide robes and with turbans on their heads. Despite the dynamic nature of the picture due to the large number of figures and although the individual illustrations are labeled as Arab, Moroccan, Palestinian, Egyptian (Khedive), or Turkish, most of the images are very similar and thus interchangeable.

Figure 1: Franz Kollarz (Kolář) (Illustrator) *Vienna World's Fair.* Types of men from the World's Fair (newspaper clip with illustration)

Similar stereotypes can also be found in the "Austrian" version of Orientalism in 19th century art. A preferred travel destination for artists at this time was North Africa, and Egypt in particular (Grabner, 2010, p. 138). In terms of visual representations of Black or "Oriental" people, depictions of Nubians or Arabs are of particular interest here. Several portraits and figure studies can be found in the oeuvre of Leopold Carl Müller (1834–1892), an important Austrian painter of Orientalism, whose works created in Egypt are often regarded as objective and realistic in a pan-European comparison (Grabner, 2010, p. 149; Oehring, 2012, p. 38). One example that maybe deviates from this general opinion is the figure of a veiled Arab woman carrying a vessel on her head, which is a common motif of traditional Western imaginations of the exotic and mystic Orient (fig. 2). She has almost completely turned her back to the viewer, and her profile and body are concealed by the veil and the long dress. By turning away and covering her face and body, the female figure doubly dispossesses herself, which makes her appear even more "mysterious". Although several of Müller's pictures convey a certain authenticity due to his skills of observation and specific attention to detail, the subject represented must also be seen as an object of study and thus within the context of ethnography, racial discourses, and Orientalism in Vienna during the Habsburg monarchy (Morton, 2021, pp. 107–147). For these reasons, it can be argued that this painting is more of an aestheticizing product based on the artist's subjective views on the supposed Orient and its representatives.

Figure 2: Leopold Carl Müller (Artist) Figure study of an Arab woman carrying a vessel

In view of the relatively small number of images of Black people in Austria's art history, it is important to keep some historical facts in mind. During the Scramble for Africa, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, unlike other European powers, was unable to claim any colonies. Probably for this reason, migration movements from Africa, and thus the African population in Austria, in the 19th century were relatively small, which is why direct encounters between Africans and Austrians were not a regular part of the everyday social situation of the majority of Austrian people (Sulzbacher, 2007, p. 124). With regard to the 19th century, the main roles for members of the African diaspora were limited to domestic services for aristocratic or upper middle classes, who regarded them as "living souvenirs" resulting from scientific expeditions or as "products" of the Catholic mission, or exploitation in the entertainment industry in the circus or anthropological expositions (Sulzbacher, 2007, pp. 99–128). Despite the small African diaspora and the few direct contacts, racialized ideas and anti-African stereotypes became established, which is why Sander Gilman's concept of "blackness without blacks" (Gilman, 1982) is also relevant to Austria. If one takes a critical look at the visual representations of people from sub-Saharan Africa or African motifs in Austrian art history, there are a number of conventions that were based less on reality and more on clichés in the age of colonialism and imperialism, despite the increasing intercontinental traffic and travelling (Sauer, 2011, pp. 105–131).

In the visual realm, these processes of devaluation of Africa and Africans became manifest in depictions of the stereotypical "Moor", the heathen in need of help, the noble savage, or the de-individualized and racialized figure of the "Negro" (Sauer, 2011, p. 131). Sauer's observations

regarding Austrian art correspond to the discourses on Africa in the colonial cultural contexts in Europe. In the foreword to the comprehensive anthology The image of the Black in Western art, Bindman and Gates (2012, p. xv) note that the numerous images of Black people before and after the 18th century only very rarely referred to real humans. The racial theories and racisms of the 19th century contributed significantly to the stereotyping of the appearance and behavior of Black people:

"The effects of this dichotomy between 'civilized' and 'savage' can be seen in art in a concern with the distinctiveness of black physiognomy and a growing emphasis on the 'primitive' nature of Africans, expressed often in a prurient concern with black sexuality, even in the avant-garde art of the early twentieth century […]" (Bindman & Gates, 2012, p. xix).

Striking examples of a common racist topos of the Black African man and woman are two ceramic sculptures produced by the Friedrich Goldscheider manufactory of Vienna in the last decade of the 19th century, which are in the collection of Wien Museum (fig. 3–4). Both sculptures are listed in the catalogue raisonné under the numbers 895 and 767, but there are no detailed descriptions of the art works (Dechant, 2007, p. 305 and p. 300). Following the "Oriental fashion" of this period, the globally successful company started to create stereotypical figures of non-European persons, especially from North Africa, in the 1880s. With a focus on Arabs and Black people, these ceramic figures of men, women, and children convey Eurocentric, exoticized, racist, and sexualized perceptions and projections. Most of the pieces of Goldscheider's extensive group of North Africans were created by anonymous sculptors. Due to their popularity, these sculptures remained in the company's product range until around 1905 (Orosz & Stuiber, 2023; Wien Museum online collection, accession no. 219114). Eva-Maria Orosz remarks that the fact that these figures had a permanent decorative presence in the living rooms of Europeans reinforced the discriminating discourses against people of color (Orosz & Stuiber, 2023). There is also a short passage on this problematic group of works in Goldscheider's comprehensive catalogue raisonné. Filipp Goldscheider describes the fascination with the foreign and the popularity of these figures in Central Europe against the backdrop of the relatively late onset of colonization policies in this region. The exotic served as a symbol of the "wild" and "primitive" as well as a platform for a liberated and unconstrained life: "Enlightened Europe, with all the modesty and prudery propagated in the 19th century, found in part an outlet for erotic fantasizing in representing what was exotically uncivilized and naked" (Goldscheider, 2007, p. 34).

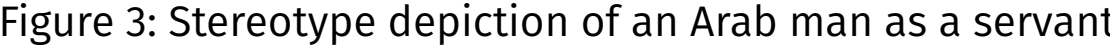
Figure 3: Stereotype depiction of an Arab man as a servant

Figure 4: Stereotype depiciton of a young African woman with bare breasts and neck jewelry

The first example of this group of works I would like to discuss is the half-figure of a young Black man with a bare torso carrying a large shell that resembles a tray, dated around 1897 (fig. 3). His head is tilted slightly to the left, and his gaze seems focused on his surroundings, while his muscular physique conveys strength. In the online collection of Wien Museum, this ceramic is entitled Stereotype Darstellung eines Arabers als Diener [Stereotypical depiction of an Arab as a servant]. The original designation Mohr mit Muschel [Moor with shell] goes back to Goldscheider's product catalogue from 1901 and reflects the discriminatory language used at the time to describe people with a dark skin color (Wien Museum online collection, accession no. 219114). One of the problematic aspects of this figure is the obvious reference to the clichéd role model of the Black servant or tribute-bearer. The motif of the Black servant, which vividly reflects colonial ideologies of cultural and racial superiority, can be found in many works of Euro-American art history. This topos can also be found in colonial product advertisements, such as in the prominent brand logo of the Austrian grocer and coffee trader Julius Meinl, which shows a Black boy with a fez on his head. Just like the servant role, the erotic connotation rendered by the figure's nudity and his well-trained and muscular upper body is also characteristic of the colonial zeitgeist. In the course of further research, it will be interesting to see whether this ceramic can be linked to the anthropological exhibition Große ethnographische Ausstellung: Die afrikanische Goldküste (Major ethnographic exhibition: The African Gold Coast) that took place in Vienna's Prater in 1897, with 120 persons from Ghana. If this is true, the attribution as "Arab" should be revised.

Another sculpture by the Goldscheider manufactory in the collection of Wien Museum is the ceramic entitled Stereotype Darstellung einer jungen Afrikanerin mit entblößten Brüsten und Halsschmuck [Stereotypical depiction of a young African woman with bare breasts and neck jewelry] (Wien Museum online collection, accession no. 219131) (fig. 4). In many respects, the sculpture resembles the Arab as a servant (fig. 3), such as their formal design and stylistic execution, which is why the proposed date of 1893 could be questioned. In the catalogue raisonné, the ceramic is attributed to the Belgian artist Auguste Maurice Lévèque (Dechant, 2007, p. 300), although this reference cannot be investigated further here. The young woman's naked torso is playfully covered by a drapery, with both arms only being hinted at under the fabric. One of the striking details is the bare right breast, which is a classic and widespread iconographic motif not only in Western art but was also adapted for numerous eroticizing depictions of "foreign" women in Orientalist paintings. In this sense, Goldscheider's sculpture can be regarded as a projection

surface for exotic fantasies and unfulfilled sexual desires, created for the male, white voyeur. It is interesting that the half-figure of the young Black woman, unlike the Arab as a servant (fig. 3), is referred to as an African. As with the previously discussed ceramic, an examination of the neck ornament is still missing here as well. Perhaps the three medallions and the symbolic content of the signs will reveal something about the identity about her identity and the affiliation to a specific ethnic group.

Finally, I would like to briefly analyze the case studies in the context of some central concepts of postcolonial theory. The term "othering," coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985, pp. 128–151), describes the processes of demarcation by which the identity of the other, or the colonized subject, is produced in colonial discourse in contrast to that of the self, or rather the colonizing subject, although the difference from the other is always fundamental to the construction of the self. In terms of stereotyping, othering involves attributing negative characteristics to other or foreign people or groups. The postcolonial examination of stereotypes can be traced back to the seminal essay by Homi K. Bhabha in his book The location of culture, published in 1994 (Bhabha, 2008, pp. 94–120). Stereotyping denotes a typecasting of subjects with overdetermined and asymmetrical differentiation schemes that entail valorization and devaluation. In visual discourses, physical characteristics, in particular, have been instrumentalized for the representation of ethnic difference (Reckwitz, 2008, pp. 100–103). In discussing the case studies from the 19th century, it turned out that colonial ideologies and exoticist tendencies became manifest in a considerable number of art works created in Austria-Hungary. These are just a few examples that demonstrate the far-reaching influence of colonialism on Austrian art in the 19th century. With regard to exoticism, primitivism, and forms of cultural appropriation in modern avant-garde art movements, this influence persisted well into the 20th century.

Franz Kollarz's illustration of male foreigners during the 1873 Vienna World's Fair shows how people from different countries of origin were typified and simultaneously subjected to processes of othering (fig. 1). The painting of the veiled and mystified Arabian woman by Leopold Carl Müller (fig. 2) reproduces Orientalist clichés and stereotypes by staging and over-accentuating the symbolism of the Islamic veil, thereby de-individualizing the depicted woman and assigning her the role of the "Oriental other". Othering and stereotyping as colonial practices in the visual sphere can also be found in the two ceramic sculptures by the Viennese Goldscheider manufactory (fig. 3–4). The representations of the Black man and woman as tilting figures demonstrate the ambivalence within the encounters and engagement with non-European people by assigning different attributes to those depicted: The beauty and apparent immaculacy of their bodies, the nudity, physical stimuli, and the roles as the Black servant or the exposed and seemingly available Black woman form part of the processes of colonial stereotyping.

The aim of this paper was to draw attention to some topics in need of research based on a discussion of case studies from Austrian art history in the 19th century. At the same time, it is about the urgent need for critical analyses from a postcolonial perspective that have hitherto been lacking in this field. In this regard, a differentiated examination of exoticized representations of the supposedly foreign, and artistic views that have received little attention to date are an important step towards developing a postcolonial art history in Austria. This is particularly important in light of the current debate on a decolonial teaching of art history at universities in Austria. Finally, I would like to briefly address the educational aspects related to a decolonial teaching of art history at universities in Austria. Some of the essential foundations for implementing this are the commitment to postcolonial perspectives of the respective departments, a heterogenous and culturally diverse teaching staff with specific skills, and the restructuring of traditional curricula to install global, decolonial, and postcolonial perspectives. After several art history departments in Vienna, Linz, Salzburg, Graz, and Innsbruck decided to follow this path at different times, students now have the opportunity to attend courses in the field of non-European, postcolonial, and transcultural art history (Leisch-Kiesl & Allerstorfer, 2017, pp. 47–62). Nevertheless, the entanglements of Austrian art history with colonialism are rarely discussed. In the course of my work as an assistant professor at the Katholische Privat-Universität Linz, I have sought to raise awareness of this neglected topic in seminars and lectures. By providing historical context, examining colonial discourses and their impact on art, culture, and science, as well as analyzing case studies from art history, these courses have promoted critical thinking, diverse perspectives, and alternative approaches that focus on the colonial unconscious in our past and present culture. The quest to decolonize Austrian art history involves revealing blind spots, reframing and decentering Eurocentric art historical narratives and canon formation, and promoting transnational contacts and exchanges.

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Figures

Figure 1: Kollarz (Kolář), F. (1873). *Wiener Weltausstellung. Männertypen aus der Weltausstellung* [Vienna World's Fair. Types of men from the World's Fair] [Newspaper illustration]. Wien Museum, Vienna, Austria. https://sammlung.wienmuseum.at/objekt/350159/

Figure 2: Müller, L. C. (ca. 1880). *Figurenstudie einer gefäßtragenden Araberin* [Figure study of an Arab woman carrying a vessel] [Drawing]. Wien Museum, Vienna, Austria. https://sammlung.wienmuseum.at/objekt/200671/

Figure 3: Wiener Manufaktur Friedrich Goldscheider. (ca. 1897). *Stereotype Darstellung eines Arabers als Diener* [Stereotype depiction of an Arab man as a servant] [Sculpture]. Wien Museum, Vienna, Austria. https://sammlung.wienmuseum.at/objekt/8051/

Figure 4: Wiener Manufaktur Friedrich Goldscheider. (ca. 1893). *Stereotype Darstellung einer jungen Afrikanerin mit entblößten Brüsten und Halsschmuck* [Stereotype depiction of a young African woman with bare breasts and neck jewelry] [Bust]. Wien Museum, Vienna, Austria. https://sammlung.wienmuseum.at/objekt/8118/

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Ambiguity

Rethinking history education in postcolonial perspectives

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Abstract

This contribution examines the role of ambiguity and the integration of tolerance of ambiguity in history education in response to debates within postcolonial studies. It argues that fostering tolerance of ambiguity holds potential for supporting students in engaging with complex and contested historical narratives, while also cautioning against the risk of slipping into relativism, which may undermine orientation in interpreting the past or present. Dealing with complexity emerges as a central human challenge and appears to be a core concern of history education in our world shaped by plurality, ambiguities, contradictions, and persistent (post-/)colonial power structures. In addressing the challenges involved in cultivating tolerance of ambiguity, the contribution critically reflects on tendencies toward binary thinking in historical narratives. It emphasizes the role of history education in enabling critical dialogue and in questioning (post-/colonial) narratives, advocating a more differentiated approach that takes seriously the complexities of the past, the present, the future, and their entanglements.

Keywords

History education, postcolonial studies, ambiguity, ambiguity tolerance, decolonize

1. Problem outline

> "For this is precisely our world: ambiguous." (Bauer, 2024, p. 14)[1]

This diagnosis by the scholar of Islamic studies Thomas Bauer provides both the foundation and the impetus for the contemplations that follow in this text. When we consider our world as being characterized by ambiguity, it follows that also the processes of history education are likewise inherently ambiguous. These processes take place within an ambiguous world and engage with ambiguous pasts, which in turn allow for a wide range of interpretations and narratives. Such inherent ambiguities and the multiplicity of interpretative possibilities are closely linked to the social plurality we experience. In this context, it is unrealistic to expect every individual, regardless of personal backgrounds or affiliation, to engage with historical narratives in an identical manner. Consequently, it is reasonable to anticipate variations in narratives about the

1 All German-language quotations have been translated into English by the author of this contribution.

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past, and indeed that vigorous debates may arise when the narratives presented are perceived as overly controversial or even contradictory. This dynamic is especially visible when historians engage in contentious discussions about historical interpretative possibilities and the resulting claims to interpretation.

At the latest, since a consensus has emerged in history education that historical narratives are interpretations of the past constructed in the present (Völkel, 2014), and that these narratives are bound by time, perspective, and context, it has been recognized that the past itself, as well as historical interpretations of the past, is characterized by plurality and ambiguity. Accordingly, a central aim of history education is to enable students through engagement with processes of historical interpretation, to arrive at a range of historical judgments, an aim reflected in the didactic principle of multiperspectivity (Bergmann, 2016). From the perspective of history education, this point becomes both particularly intriguing and complex: such narratives and forms of historical reasoning do not necessarily have to converge into the consensual or dominant narrative; rather, they may contradict one another. Dealing with these ambiguities therefore also entails dealing with uncertainty, as ambiguity inherently points to openness and indeterminacy. Since learning always involves movement from uncertainty to certainty, while at the same time leading from certainty back into uncertainty (Meyer, 1987, p. 74), it appears essential to engage with uncertainty in the context of history education.

In this regard, it remains valuable for history education to engage with critical societal and cultural discourses, which in recent years have been particularly stimulated by debates within Postcolonial Studies (e.g. Bhabha, 2011; Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2015; Hall, 2021; Spivak, 2020). These discourses critically examine hierarchical global relationships and post-/colonial power structures, as notably illustrated by scholars such as Alisha Heinemann and Maria do Mar Castro Varela (Heinemann & Castro Varela, 2016) and Homi K. Bhabha (Bhabha, 2016). Building on these power-critical discussions, history education in schools could pay particular attention to processes shaped by such ambiguities. After all, these ambiguities do not stop at the colonial past (or any other past) and its manifold interpretations from a postcolonial perspective. This becomes apparent, for example, when societal debates ignite over colonial traces in historical culture, such as street names or monuments. In recent years, numerous cities f.e. in Germany have witnessed lively and controversial conflicts over how to address problematic street names or monuments (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2019). Nearly twenty years ago, Rainer Pöppinghege already explored what street names reveal about German historical consciousness, also considering them from postcolonial perspectives (Pöppinghege, 2007).

Postcolonial perspectives challenge not only the discipline of history but also history education itself, as they demand an engagement with the (colonial) past beyond dominant and Eurocentric questions, narratives, and concepts, as Bernd-Stefan Grewe emphasizes (Grewe, 2016, p. 11–12). As a result, engaging with history is complex: historical meaning is fluid, the past appears ambiguous, and historical interpretations can contradict one another without necessarily being deemed unequivocally wrong. What, then, does it mean for history education if these ambiguities and contradictions are accepted as inherent circumstances of the world? How can students learn to engage with these ambiguities and contradictions without being overwhelmed by the complexity and losing their orientation? It must be assumed that ambiguity and contradiction in history education present challenges for both history teachers and students. These ambiguities and contradictions reveal just how complex and multi-layered both our lived reality and our perspectives on the past are. Accordingly, students could, on the one hand, learn to recognize that interpretations of the past can be multi-faceted and complex. On the other hand, they could also develop the ability to deal constructively with this complexity. This may constitute a crucial competence for navigating an ambiguous world. Consequently, a key task for teachers would be to address the ambiguities and contradictions of the past and historical narratives within history education.

At this point, it should be noted that a desire for clarity and a reduction of complexity is understandable, and, as we will later discuss, can be regarded as a fundamental human need to maintain orientation and the capacity to act. However, a reduction of complexity can be risky and consequential if the desire for clarity leads to the suppression or elimination of and ambiguity and contradiction. Such a process may be accompanied by tendencies toward radicalization and rigid interpretations, which, given current societal and political developments, pose a serious threat to democratic and pluralistic societies. In this sense, recognizing ambiguity, uncertainty, or contradiction within historical narratives represent an opportunity for history education. To address the guiding questions outlined above, this chapter explores the role of ambiguity tolerance in the context of (postcolonial) history education and attempts to examine the concept of

ambiguity tolerance from a history education perspective. To do so, the chapter first considers history education within the framework of postcolonial studies, discussing the significance and necessity to incorporate ambiguity and contradictions. Following this, the chapter examines the role that ambiguity tolerance may have in history education and the extent to which applying this concept could influence historical learning in the context of critical postcolonial approaches.

2. History education and postcolonial studies

Discourses of postcolonial studies appear to be highly significant from both historical perspectives when seeking to understand colonialism and to minimize traces and impacts on the present. In the context of power-critical history education, colonial narratives are particularly notable because they often rely on notions of unambiguity and dichotomous attributions, which reduce complexity and ambiguity. "The dichotomies and hierarchies have not been discursively overcome to this day."[2] (Grewe, 2016, p. 21) These dichotomous, hierarchical role assignments continue to shape and simplify our thinking today and perpetuate colonial power structures. Narratives that follow colonial patterns of interpretation often present the colonized primarily as victims, exploited, oppressed, etc., but rarely as capable, acting, and autonomous agents. They frequently imply deficient attributions to colonized groups and reproduce concepts such as so-called European achievements, so-called European progressiveness, or the so-called European Enlightenment as driving forces behind societal modernization (Grewe, 2016, p. 25). Such master narratives can still legitimize the domination of one group over another or at least be misused for that purpose. They follow colonial ideas and power structures which, given the associated social inequalities and discriminations, should be critically examined, for example through history education. This highlights that history education, aligned with power-critical postcolonial approaches and attempts to minimize the influence of colonial narratives, also has a decolonizing dimension. In the spirit of decolonization, as Grada Kilomba understands it as "the undoing of colonialism" (Kilomba, 2016, p. 138), simplistic narratives could and should be challenged by broadening perspectives, concepts, and alternative stories. This also implies an increase in complexity due to ambiguity and contradictions. Drawing on Malte Kleinschmidt's considerations of decolonial political education, a decolonial history education could similarly "aim at the recognition of the postcolonial legacy, at a transformation of the coloniality of the present produced by colonialism and imperialism, and be nurtured by the hope for a future not–or at least not to the same extent–structured by colonial frameworks"[3] (Kleinschmidt, 2021, p. 9). To emphasize the ongoing and continuous nature of the colonial legacy, it seems appropriate to speak of colonial *inheriting*, as we all inherit the traces of the colonial past. This idea is already addressed in the 2021 issue of the journal *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, with a central introduction to the complex problem by Bernd-Stefan Grewe (Grewe, 2021). History education, from a postcolonial perspective, is therefore inherently accompanied by ambiguities, contradictions, and negotiation, as also addressed by Philipp Bernhard in his recent research. Drawing on discussions within postcolonial studies, he examines, among other things, narrative contradictions within historical narratives, thereby highlighting the ambiguity present in historical discourses and educational processes (Bernhard, 2024). A thorough exploration seems to be needed regarding what these ambiguities and contradictions concretely mean for history education and how they could be further theoretically and conceptually linked to current theories in order to respond adequately on this challenge. This systematic theoretical-conceptual foundation is a prerequisite for both appropriate empirical research and pragmatic approaches to dealing with ambiguities in history education.

In terms of a critical understanding of power within history education that moves beyond homogenizing master narratives and pursues the decolonization of education, it seems productive to consider history as inherently open and fundamentally unfinished, with their outcomes and processes bound by space, time, and perspective. Of course, being open and unfinished does not imply that interpretations are arbitrary: historical analyses must always satisfy criteria of plausibility and coherence. Yet, just as the exploration of the past is inexhaustible, so too are the interpretations and interpretive possibilities, alongside the stories still waiting to be told. This is especially pertinent when for example examining (Germany's) colonial past, its continu-

2 Translated quotation.
3 Translated quotation.

ing impacts, and the narratives arising from here. Not only do discourses in history education engage with the role that ambiguities might play in learning, but scholars in related fields also recognize the educational potential of ambiguous situations. In the context of ambiguity in art, Ansgar Schnurr and colleagues argue that complexity is worth preserving from an educational perspective, allowing ambiguous situations to be approached with openness and maintaining their open-ended character (Schnurr et al., 2021, p. 12). "These," Schnurr et al. continue, "become the starting point and key moment for education. [...] It is precisely unresolved, ambiguous situations that, in their controversial nature, have the potential to be educational"[4] (Schnurr et al., 2021, p. 13).

These discussions regarding the relationship between postcolonial studies and history education touch on a core question: what the concept of history education actually encompasses, and which moments might, from a historical perspective, count as central to *education*. Reflecting on this, it becomes evident that the concept of history education has so far been only marginally explored and discussed within the field. There has been little systematic clarification of what is specifically meant by history education. Since the 1970s, history education has often been operationalized as historical learning by focusing on the central category of "historical consciousness"[5] (Heuer, 2022). While the term is often addressed in the academic discourses, so far there is no consistent, systematic engagement with what education means. This is likely due to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the concept of education (Sattler, 2023, p. 59). In light of the focus of this contribution, the aim here is not to trace the historical development of the concept of education, but rather to consider what might be understood today by education and, consequently, what could be specific to history education. While it is impossible to fully encompass current discourses, certain strands of discussion appear particularly for shaping the concept of history education. According to Elisabeth Sattler, education is a "multifaceted concept"[6] that fundamentally concerns the relationship between humans and the world. A critical component is the development of the concept of education in the tradition of critical theory, as comprehensively illustrated by Wolfgang Klafki (Klafki, 2007). Understood in this way, education does not aim to uncritically affirm existing conditions. Rather it assumes that existing structures should and can be continuously reflected upon and scrutinized (Sattler, 2023, p. 61). As Ludwig Duncker emphasizes, "Only when children and adolescents are enabled to surpass familiar perspectives and expand their own horizons of world knowledge and understanding through the acquisition of new insights and perspectives can limitations in perception and thinking be overcome and intellectual agility in interpreting and understanding reality be achieved."[7] (Duncker, 2018, p. 144) In this way, Duncker highlights the potential of challenging one's own, perhaps previously unquestioned habits as both a productive and educational moment. To underscore the inherent transformative nature of education, it seems also useful to incorporate phenomenological perspectives. According to Hans-Christoph Koller, education from a phenomenological view implies crisis-like experiences that unsettle previous relationships with oneself and the world (Koller, 2023). Such experiences enable the perception and integration of new or different elements into one's own perspectives. This resonates with the idea that we are always dealing with ambiguities and contradictions, which can themselves be educational. According to these approaches, education always contains a (self-)critically productive and provocatively generative element, enabling individuals to question and observe their own reactions, such as by challenging previous perspectives or ideas, in order to integrate new elements. This understanding of education appears fundamentally significant for the following reflections, as well as for history education. Emphasizing the critically productive aspect of education Christian Heuer conceptualizes history education as "possibilities of becoming otherwise,"[8] transforming, and being in contexts from which new insights and perspectives can emerge (Heuer, 2022). It would be presumptuous to propose a universally valid and complete concept of history education here. However, taking these critical and phenomenological reflections into account, history education appears to be fundamentally grounded in a critically productive distance toward past presents, oneself, and one's circumstances. This critically productive encompasses two dimensions: first, the world and the traces of the past, as well as second, the self and one's own perspectives on the past and the process of engaging with the past and history.

4 Translated quotation.
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From a history education perspective, fostering tolerance for ambiguity is closely connected to a reflexive understanding of history education that does not treat history as a reflection of objectively given canon of fixed facts, but rather as a field of competing interpretations of past presents. Using debates surrounding the renaming of streets shaped by colonial legacies in Germany as an example, it becomes clear how formerly colonial narratives, embedded in public historical culture, are challenged by alternative perspectives that illuminate the power relations and violence of the colonial past. These contestations have tangible effects on historical culture, reshaping public memory and commemorative practices. The discussions around street renamings, for instance in Berlin, illustrate how historical interpretations are publicly renegotiated and how marginalized perspectives gain visibility.[9] This example demonstrates that postcolonial theories and postcolonial narratives are significant, as they promote the critical re-evaluation and pluralization of historical meanings.

Beyond this example, engaging with history inherently involves negotiating complexity and ambiguity, even in cases unrelated to the colonial past. Thus, history education, both in general and specifically regarding colonial legacies, may entail an expansion of perspectives, interpretive possibilities, and narratives, accompanied by increased complexity that gives rise to ambiguities, uncertainties, lack of clarity, and even contradictions. These ambiguities should first be identified and perceived, but also endured, since not all contradictions can be resolved through consensus. Within the context of history education, fostering ambiguity tolerance could serve the important task of strengthening the ability to intentionally perceive and acknowledge different perspectives without becoming overwhelmed by them. To further develop this argument, it is first necessary to clarify what the concept of ambiguity tolerance entails.

3. Ambiguity and tolerance of ambiguity

According to Thomas Bauer, ambiguity refers to a fundamental feature of phenomena that are ambiguous, unclear, undecidable, contradictory, or vague (Bauer, 2024, p. 15), and it essentially describes an anthropological constant in the circumstances for all human existence. Bauer further asserts that ambiguity can scarcely, if ever, be completely eliminated, simply because a world entirely free of ambiguity is impossible. "It is, therefore, humanity's fate to live with ambiguity"[10] (Bauer, 2024, p. 17). Maintaining states of ambiguity without prematurely reducing them into clarity presents a particular challenge, as such reduction often fails to capture the inherent complexity and indeterminacy of the situation. Conceptually, it becomes apparent that the term ambiguity and ambiguity tolerance can be misleading, as the prefix *ambi* suggests duality, which seems overly simplistic in light of existing (historical) complexities and indeterminacies.[11] Since alternative terms like polyguity tolerance or complexity tolerance have not yet become gained traction in the academic discourses, this contribution will continue to use ambiguity and tolerance of ambiguity. At the same time, related concepts such as tolerance for uncertainty (König & Dalbert, 2004) or tolerance for complexity (Dalbert & Radant, 2008) or the need for cognitive closure (von Collani, 2003) are often understood as conceptually equivalent to ambiguity tolerance.

The concept of ambiguity tolerance originates from the psychologist Else Frenkel-Brunswik, who explored the phenomenon in the late 1940s as part of her studies on the authoritarian personality, alongside Theodor W. Adorno (Adorno, 2020), among others. In 1949, Frenkel-Brunswik described how individuals differ in their tolerance of ambiguity (Frenkel-Brunswik, 1949). She characterized those who are unable to endure ambiguous or contradictory situations, responding to complex and multifaceted matters with rigidity and inflexibility, thereby resisting them, as intolerant of ambiguity, the opposite of being ambiguity tolerant. Tolerance of ambiguity as a psychological phenomenon, can be understood, following the definition provided by English and English in the late 1950s, as the

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9 Some of these debates can be traced here: https://www.zeit.de/news/2022-12/02/strasse-und-platz-in-berlin-nach-freiheitskaempfern-benannt; https://www.zeit.de/2025/44/strassenumbenennung-berlin-mohrenstrasse-anton-wilhelm-amo-strasse; https://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/menschen/mohrenstrasse-in-berlin-wird-umbenannt-nach-erstem-schwarzen-gelehrten-16915320.html; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/02/campaigners-celebrate-changing-of-colonial-street-names-in-berlin?. All newspaper articles last accessed on January 15, 2026.

10 Translated quotation.

11 I would like to express my sincere thanks to Philipp McLean for drawing my attention to this during a presentation.

> willingness to accept a state of affairs capable of alternate interpretations, or of alternate outcomes: e.g., feeling comfortable (or at least not feeling uncomfortable) when faced by a complex social issue in which opposed principles are intermingled. Low ambiguity tolerance is shown by the desire to have everything reduced to black and white. (English & English, 1958, p. 25)

This definition implies that a high tolerance of ambiguity is associated with a lower need for certainty and clarity. In other words, individuals with a high tolerance of ambiguity are more likely to manage and sustain ambiguities and contradictions without prematurely resolving them Studies by Milton Rokeach or Else Frenkel-Brunswik, for example, indicate that individuals with strong prejudices tend to think in more concrete terms than those with less pronounced prejudices (Rokeach, 1951), and that they are less likely to engage with complex issues, instead restructuring them into simpler and less differentiated frameworks (Frenkel-Brunswik, 1948; 1949/50; 1951).[12] According to sociologist Lothar Krappmann, the dynamic interplay between identity and ambiguity tolerance is particularly significant. In his understanding, ego identity emerges not despite contradictions, but through the capacity to live with and interpret conflicting role demands and competing motivational structures. Identity formation thus relies on the ability to endure and negotiate tensions rather than eliminating them, making ambiguity tolerance a key prerequisite for maintaining a coherent sense of self (Krappmann, 1969, p. 155). Drawing on empirical studies of how individuals deal with ambiguity, Krappmann identifies two basic strategies. First, individuals may suppress discrepancies and uncertainties, effectively removing contradictions from view. Second, they may reinterpret ambiguous and complex perceptions by transforming them into clear and simplified understandings (Krappmann, 1969, p. 155–157). As Thomas Bauer observes that our environments have always been and still are ambiguous, the world is full of contradictions, various interpretative possibilities, and ambiguity. Ambiguous phenomena and situations challenge individuals, who tend to avoid them, leading Bauer to conclude that humans are generally inclined toward intolerance of ambiguity (Bauer, 2024, p. 12–18). This view is further supported by Günther L. Huber and Jürgen H. W. Roth concerning learning processes (Huber & Roth, 1999, p. 11). Endorsing this perspective highlights the importance of placing the ability to handle ambiguity at the core of educational processes, recognizing it as a key skill for navigating contemporary global challenges and promoting students' tolerance of ambiguity. The goal, then, is not to suppress or reduce complexity, but to sustain it in order to engage with it productively. Fundamentally, as Krappmann (1969, p. 167) emphasizes, this involves enabling learners to encounter and grapple with ambiguity and uncertainty. Therefore, it is evident that this key capability should receive particular attention in history education, as the competent handling of ambiguities appears to constitute a fundamental objective for history education.

As already indicated, ambiguity and uncertainty are closely intertwined. When phenomena appear ambiguous, that is, equivocal or even contradictory, it is simultaneously uncertain which interpretation is correct. For instance, it may be unclear which judgment is more accurate regarding past or even present, assuming that multiple judgments are equally plausible and well-founded. Drawing on studies by Jean Piaget, Günter L. Huber and Jürgen H.W. Roth argue that the ability to distance oneself from one's own actions and perspectives can expand the range of ways of knowing and to more complex worldviews. At the same time, however, this also increases uncertainty (Huber & Roth, 1999, 15). Huber and Roth describe a potential inherent in uncertainty, which, in their view, lies in its capacity to initiate individual action: contradictions or ambiguities can prompt the restructuring of individual knowledge (Huber & Roth, 1999, p. 13). They suggest that, triggered by such contingencies, individuals may engage with controversies or even provoke them. As already indicated by Krappmann, an alternative to uncertainty and ambiguity is avoidance, clinging instead to one's existing certainties. From a societal perspective, uncertainty (like certainty) carries a social dimension, as it is constructed through social interaction. In this way, uncertainty becomes both a medium and an object of social engagement. Approaches to contradictions may either seek to reduce complexity by limiting the range of perspectives, or embrace contradictions as a fundamental condition of thought and learn to live with them. Contradictions, therefore, do not necessarily need to be reconciled or resolved (Riegel, 1973). Students can thus learn to recognize and tolerate these inner tensions, using them as a source of reflection and intellectual stimulation (Huber & Roth, 1999, p. 16). A study by David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson as early as 1985 already suggests that engaging with uncertainty and the controversies may foster learners' curiosity and interest. Controversial learning

12 A comprehensive overview of early studies that provide insights relevant to the concept of ambiguity tolerance can be found in Lothar Krappmann (1969, pp. 150–155).

situations can, for instance, encourage greater interaction among learners and prompt them to actively seek out information (Johnson & Johnson, 1985). However, as Huber and Roth emphasize, it remains unclear whether these effects are attributable to the controversial nature of the learning conditions themselves, or rather to the fact that the controversial settings were more strongly oriented toward cooperation and consensus than the comparison condition, which was characterized by competition and negative social interdependence (Huber & Roth, 1999, p. 17).

Findings suggesting that individuals tend to be either uncertainty-oriented or certainty-oriented present a particular challenge (f.e. Sorrentino, Short & Raynor, 1984). Since these personality orientations are also central to learners and their learning behavior, it can be assumed that students who are oriented toward uncertainty are more likely to be engaged by, and to learn more effectively in, open learning environments that address contradictions and controversies. In contrast, students who are oriented toward certainty are more likely to benefit from clearly structured learning formats that pose well-defined questions and offer corresponding answers (Huber & Roth, 1999, p. 32). Similarly, it can be assumed that teachers who are oriented toward certainty tend to create well-structured and predictable learning situations, whereas teachers who are oriented toward uncertainty are more likely to design learning environments that invite learners to engage openly and contribute their own ideas and suggestions, as Huber and Roth consider. Their study provides indications that align with this hypothesis (Huber & Roth, 1999, p. 34–40). It therefore seems plausible that learners' orientations toward uncertainty or certainty are related to how they approach learning, and that teachers' corresponding orientations influence how learning environments are designed. This, in turn, suggests that learning experiences deliberately engaging with contradictions and controversies should take learners' individual traits and prior knowledge into account. As Huber and Roth (1999) also argue, such learning situations could, for example, be structured in a way that gradually helps students develop the skills to tackle complex problems and questions independently (Huber & Roth, 1999, pp. 140–143).

While discussions about handling ambiguity and fostering ambiguity tolerance are not unfamiliar in the theories of history education, engagement with these concepts remains relatively new within the discipline. As of now, there is no systematic framework outlining the role of ambiguity, and consequently tolerance of ambiguity in history education. For history education, the principle of engaging with the past from multiple perspectives, openness and indeterminacy are particularly crucial. However, this is not always reflected in school-based educational contexts. Ludwig Duncker, for instance, criticizes the prevailing understanding of knowledge that tends to categorize reality into 'right' and 'wrong' (Duncker, 2018, p. 145), which fosters ambiguity-intolerant judgments and attitudes. Tolerance of ambiguity has already been addressed in considerations of history education, though in a rather limited way. As early as 1997, Bernd Schönemann proposed incorporating ambiguity tolerance as a sub-goal within history education and identity, since it involves repeatedly questioning and recalibrating interpretive patterns, and consequently, one's own identity (Schönemann, 2022). Also, Bärbel Völkel emphasizes this ability, conceptualizing it as a competence relevant to human life and coexistence, which operates in areas of tension, rendering definitive answers or decisions elusive (Völkel, 2016, p. 118). Likewise, Heike Bormuth, Andreas Körber, and Patrizia Seidel emphasize this ability as a central didactical criterion (Bormuth et al., 2020).

As briefly outlined above, the concept of ambiguity tolerance appears particularly relevant and adaptable as an extension or refinement of the didactic principle of multiperspectivity dealing with controversy of history (Bergmann, 2016; Lücke, 2012). When perspectives and diversity of viewpoints are applied to phenomena these phenomena can be perceived and assessed as ambiguous, contradictory, or uncertain. Multiperspectivity refers to the recognition and consideration of multiple, contrasting, or even conflicting perspectives on a particular historical topic (f.e. Lozano & Wansink, 2022). Klaus Bergmann (2016, p. 34) and Bodo von Borries (1996) suggest that tolerance, as it relates to multiperspectivity, constitutes an important aspect. Also, Stefan Benz notes that the concept of multiperspectivity is inherently linked with notions of tolerance (Benz, 2018, p. 299).[13] Accordingly, it can be argued that ambiguity plays a central role across all three levels of perspectivity: multiperspectivity, controversiality, and plurality (Bergmann, 2016, p. 29-30). Inherent to this principle is that learners engage in reflective and self-reflective examination of the perspectivity of sources, representations, and their own judgments, coming to understand that history cannot reproduce the past itself, but can only construct a narrative through

13 Benz (2018, p. 299) links tolerance in particular to the third level of plurality, which directly focuses on learners themselves. Depending on the questions they pose to the past and the ways in which they interpret it, students may arrive at different answers for the present and the future.

interpretive processes (Benz, 2018, p. 296–300). The culmination of history educational is that students engage in historical reasoning, and the resulting historical judgements may indeed be ambiguous, contradictory, and uncertain. This implies that history education inherently operates with ambiguity and includes ambiguity as a goal of the educational process. This brings us back to a key point: it is crucial to consider how students can engage with this ambiguity without becoming overwhelmed. Here, the concept of ambiguity tolerance offers a potential approach that history education could promote to help students manage these challenges. Multiperspectivity is thus associated with recognizing and considering different perspectives on historical topics, which can help reduce negative "Us-Them" perceptions and intergroup tensions while promoting mutual understanding (Korostelina, 2013, p. 19). From a postcolonial perspective, this is particularly significant because it underscores the importance to acknowledge multiple, often marginalized perspectives on history. By doing so, it challenges dominant or Eurocentric narratives and creates space for more inclusive and critical understandings of the past. At the same time, the concept of ambiguity tolerance is closely linked contingency. Contingency[14], which already constitutes a theoretical and conceptual premise of history education (f.e. Grewe, 2024; Rüsen, 2020), and ambiguity are closely related, as both highlight the openness and indeterminacy of social reality. Contingency refers to the fundamental possibility that things could be otherwise, whereas ambiguity describes the coexistence of multiple interpretations that cannot be clearly resolved. Ambiguity can therefore be understood as a concrete experiential form of contingency, making perceptible that meanings, evaluations, or explanations are not fixed but depend on perspective and context. Engaging with ambiguity thus necessarily involves dealing with contingency and the uncertainty it entails. Drawing on Niklas Luhmann's system-theoretical concept of contingency, Arno Combe, Angelika Paseka, and Manuela Keller-Schneider argue that dynamics of uncertainty can be understood as constitutive elements of procedural experience, knowledge formation, and, consequently, of educational processes (Combe et al., 2025).

To reflect the concept of ambiguity tolerance for history education, it appears especially fruitful to draw on insights from neighboring disciplines, for example considerations by Claudia Lenz, who has explored the concept of ambiguity tolerance as central concept for democratic education (Lenz, 2020). Lenz emphasizes that tolerance of ambiguity is a crucial skill for pluralistic and diverse societies (Lenz, 2020, p. 16). This is especially relevant from the perspective of history education when democratic education is considered as a key objective. In the narrower sense of promoting a mature engagement with both the past and the present, one potential aim of history education could be to enable students to develop the capacity to navigate and manage the ambiguities that surround them. In this way, history education could make a meaningful contribution to democratic education by fostering students' ability to engage thoughtfully and critically with complexity and uncertainty.

As demonstrated, the concept of ambiguity tolerance is particularly compelling from the perspective of history education, especially when considered through a critical understanding of historical learning that aligns with postcolonial critiques. Since this contribution primarily aims to explore the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of ambiguity tolerance, it will, at this stage, forgo an in-depth review of empirical research. Nevertheless, a few observations warrant mention. Currently, within research in the field of history education, there are no empirical studies that explicitly engage with investigating tolerance of ambiguity among learners or teachers. This is likely because the concept has not yet been systematically developed for historical education, nor has it been empirically investigated. A considerable need for further research emerges here. At the same time, a tentative outlook on empirical research from neighboring disciplines may be informative. Markus Bredendiek, for example, found that tolerance of ambiguity correlates with intercultural competence and the understanding of others (Bredendiek, 2015, p. 222). Both interculturality (e.g. Gentner, 2019) and understanding of others (e.g. Degner & Henke-Bockschatz, 2004) have already been addressed within history education research, though what precisely is meant by the concept of understanding others and whether it is a useful concept for history education remains debated. It would therefore be valuable to investigate whether these correlations between interculturality, understanding of others, and tolerance of ambiguity also manifest in history education, among both students and teachers. Another relevant observation comes from Angelika Paseka and Ilse Schrittesser, who note that uncertainties in the classroom are often quickly resolved, while potentially productive moments of uncertainty are not further explored by teachers (Paseka & Schrittesser, 2018). Understanding how teach-

14 A comprehensive treatment of the concept of contingency from an educational and educational-philosophical perspective is provided by Ralf Mayer (Mayer, 2020).

ers handle ambiguity in history educational processes, whether they use it as an opportunity for learning, quickly resolve it for the sake of clarity, or manage it differently, remains an open question. In this context, it would also be valuable to refine the findings by Claudia Dalbert and Matthias Radant, who reported that teachers demonstrate significantly lower tolerance for uncertainty compared to other professional groups (Dalbert & Radant, 2010). Similar insights are highlighted in Andreas Gruschka's work, who introduced uncertainty as a structural feature and prerequisite of educational processes in 2005 (Gruschka, 2005) and revisited the concept in 2025 (Gruschka, 2025). Gruschka observes that classrooms rarely engage with the inherent ambiguity of the subject matter, favoring instead closure, narrowing, and simplification (Gruschka, 2011). So, it would be particularly interesting to examine whether this tendency is also present among history teachers, either to a lesser or greater extent. Analyzing the potential of ambiguity and ambiguity tolerance in history education raises immediate questions about the feasibility of this concept. Are history teachers and students even capable of engaging in such complex cognitive operations? Would they be overwhelmed when confronted with pervasive ambiguity? Research on philosophical discussions with children by educational scientist Kerstin Michalik shows that children are capable of participating in differentiated and reflective discussions that teachers might not have expected (Michalik, 2019). Of course, it would be somewhat bold to generalize these findings to all students, suggesting that they are universally able to engage in such complex, nuanced, and reflective discourse. Drawing on these insights from neighboring disciplines, it appears to be particularly intriguing and relevant, alongside the further theoretical-conceptual investigations of this concept deemed necessary by the author, to empirically explore how students and teachers actually handle ambiguity in history education. Clearly, significant further research on students' and teachers' engagement with ambiguity is still needed.

Building on these considerations, the next question arises about the role of tolerance of ambiguity in the context of history education, particularly when viewed through the lens of critical postcolonial approaches.

4. Tolerance of ambiguity as a goal for history education?

Assuming that critical postcolonial approaches in the context of history education call for an increase in complexity as well as in ambiguities the question arises as to how theories of history education can respond to that. It seems reasonable to suggest that fostering tolerance of ambiguity could enhance students' ability to navigate a complex, ambiguous world, and serve as an educational goal aimed at developing a historically oriented competence: one that tolerates ambiguity without being overwhelmed by the complexity or slipping into black-and-white thinking. Promoting this capability could contribute to history education in the spirit of postcolonial studies by helping students identify, question, and challenge colonial thought patterns, perspectives, and narratives, thereby rendering representations of colonialism more ambiguous, multifaceted, and power-critical, one of the central theses of this contribution. Consequently, history education could aim to enable students to engage in exploratory processes to develop their own historical interpretations, which may be ambiguous and contradictory, and to collaboratively explore and negotiate these through dialogue. This involves students discussing their own positions, perspectives, and even values and norms, in order to appreciate the complexity underlying historical and contemporary circumstances. From a stance of tolerance toward ambiguity, the goal would be for students to recognize and sustain alternative, potentially conflicting perspectives without feeling compelled by uncertainties to select a single "truth" or perspective as correct. Such an approach supports the power-critical deconstruction of master narratives, which are often aligned with colonial ideas or frameworks. It is assumed that by promoting tolerance of ambiguity, especially when discussing, questioning, and attempting to dismantle colonial traces in the present, students can cultivate critical, open, and flexible thinking. Encouraging ambiguity tolerance could prepare students to manage the contradictions and uncertainties of their world, a key capability that is likely essential in today's rapidly changing societal and global contexts. Attention, however, should not be limited to students and their engagement with ambiguity. Also, teachers should be considered. In this regard, Bettina Blanck argues that engaging with uncertainty, an inherent feature of ambiguous and complex contexts, constitutes a central dimension of teacher professionalism (Blanck, 2007).

Despite these potential benefits, the role of ambiguity tolerance in history education remains insufficiently explored and cannot be assumed to be uniformly advantageous. This contribution

can offer only initial reflections to discuss the opportunities and limitations of engaging with ambiguity in history education. These reflections do not aim to provide concrete strategies for fostering ambiguity tolerance in history education. However, they do suggest that grappling with ambiguity must be taken seriously, particularly given its connection to democratic education and the complexities of the globalized world. The preceding discussion also highlights a potential risk: History education could veer toward relativism. Such relativism may result in an inability to reach any consensus on the interpretation of past events, with the potential consequence that students lose their sense of orientation in relation to history, thereby undermining key educational objectives such as the capacity to act and orient oneself historically. This raises four questions: 1) Are historical narratives or is historical reasoning permissible even if they stretch plausibility and validity? 2) How should teachers deal with historical narratives or reasoning that, for instance, advance hostile, discriminatory or anti-democratic arguments? This leads to a related question. 3) Is there a definable framework for tolerance of ambiguity? And necessarily connected to the next question is: 4) Who would establish such a framework? These questions themselves generate further ambiguities, demonstrating that while the concept of ambiguity tolerance appears both plausible and potentially valuable for history education in a globally complex context, implementing it is clearly a highly complex undertaking, especially in a world still shaped by post-/colonial power structures.

As a preliminary conclusion, history educational processes that engage with tolerance of ambiguity are situated within the tension between recognizing complexity and deliberately deepening it. They aim to enable learners to participate in exploratory and transformative processes without sliding into relativism, disorientation, or inaction. At the same time, these processes should provide opportunities for students to learn how to navigate ambiguities and contradictions. From a postcolonial perspective, it appears particularly promising for history education to treat historical meaning as negotiable and fundamentally mutable, fostering dialogue about the past, present, values, norms, judgments, attitudes, opinions, ambiguities, and contradictions. Such dialogues could facilitate an exchange on equal footing, or at least attempt to minimize power imbalances. Especially on topics involving challenging historical content, such as colonial histories, cultivating a tolerant stance toward ambiguity in negotiating historical meaning can productively harness tensions and help prevent the deepening of societal divides.

These considerations suggest that fostering tolerance of ambiguity can make a substantial contribution to history education and directly engages with central concepts of history education such as multiperspectivity or contingency. It is plausible that students, through dialogical negotiation about the past, can gain fundamentally new insights. Firstly, they are confronted with perspectives, ways of thinking, and opinions that were likely unfamiliar to them. Secondly, because they are challenged to critically examine their own standpoints, ideas, and arguments. In this respect, promoting ambiguity tolerance supports transformative learning thus constitutes a core element of history education. Hegemonic narratives often lack complexity, entanglements, alternative perspectives, ambiguities, contradictions, and diverse interpretations. They do not stimulate the uncertainty and exploratory engagement that seem central to history education. Expanding the complexity of narratives and embracing a diversity of perspectives, though, for example, by including the personal experiences of those affected by colonial pasts and their ongoing impacts can make a meaningful contribution to achieving this goal.

In the sense of a history education that seeks to contribute to decolonization, what is crucial is "the fundamental engagement with our own ideas, narratives, and semantics of our discipline, which were established during a time and in a scientific context when Europe still ruled large parts of the world as colonies and sought to explore and comprehend them"[15] (Grewe, 2016, p. 16). Such competent engagement seems to be grounded in ambiguity tolerance and the ability to endure ambiguities, uncertainties, contradictions, and controversies, approaching them with curiosity, openness, and mutual recognition. Viewed in this way, the concept of tolerance of ambiguity may serve as a lens for examining how students can be supported in dealing with the ambiguities of past and present without becoming overwhelmed or resorting prematurely to black-and-white thinking. Recognizing and engaging with ambiguity may thus constitute key moments in history education. Accordingly, it appears worthwhile to further investigate whether tolerance of ambiguity should be understood both as a component and as a goal of history educational processes, and whether it ought to be systematically elaborated on both theoretical-conceptual and empirical-pragmatic levels.

15 Translated quotation.

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Decolonising Australian history education

An Australian perspective

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Abstract

History education communities worldwide are grappling with the imperative to decolonise history education. Australian history education researchers are uniquely placed to contribute to this project, owing to their experience of decolonising history education within a settler-colonial context. We do not claim to have any quick fixes, however, recent scholarship provides practical strategies for enacting decolonising approaches and elevating sovereign First Nations voices in history classrooms. The article encapsulates these strategies as actions centred on critically reflecting, listening, learning, localising and evaluating. It also illustrates how the concepts of place, positionality, and settler colonialism provide theoretical underpinnings for this work. Overall, it shows that although structural reforms need to be led by First Nations leaders and communities, non-Indigenous educators have a responsibility for decolonising history education and themselves. International readers will be interested in how these approaches and challenges converge with those in their own contexts.

Keywords

Decolonising, First Nations histories and cultures, Australian history education, settler colonialism, positionality

1. Positioning

It is the end of January and the hot, dry season here where I live as a non-Indigenous person on Wadawurrung Country, in Victoria, Australia. Moonah trees are abundantly blossoming, providing shade for other plants in the heat and nectar for birds and butterflies. They are covered in sweetly scented, creamy coloured flowers, which Wadawurrung People made into a sweet drink (BCN, n.d.). These gnarly trees can live up to 200 years, which means many of them predate European colonisation of this area.

This time of year is also the anniversary of the colonial invasion of these lands. The January 26 public holiday recalls the date Captain Phillip and the First Fleet, with its boatloads of convicts, sailed into Sydney Cove or what the local Eora Nation know as *Warrane*. Australia Day/Invasion Day/Survival Day has many meanings. For some, it is a day for patriotic celebration and citizenship ceremonies. For First Nations People it is not a date to celebrate. It is a day of mourning, a day to recognise the impact of the invasion of unceded, sovereign First Nations lands, as well as a day to respect the resistance and survival of First Nations People.

This year, these perspectives were deliberately polarised here in Geelong/Djilang on Wadawurrung Country. Early in 2024, the City of Greater Geelong Council consulted with the

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community and agreed not to celebrate 26 January. More recently the newly elected Council voted – without community consultation – to reinstate the celebration of Australia Day and to hold citizenship ceremonies. Wadawurrung Traditional Owner groups passed a vote of no confidence in the Council, stating: "January 26 is not a day of celebration for First Nations Peoples, but one of mourning, survival, and remembrance" (First Peoples United Together Djilang, 2025). In contrast, the neighbouring Surf Coast Shire Council– also on Wadawurrung Country– continues not to formally recognise Australia Day, holding a truth-telling event with Wadawurrung Traditional Owners instead.

At the federal level, the Australian opposition leader, Peter Dutton, has been flagrantly fueling these sorts of divisions. Dutton said if he was to become prime minister he would not stand in front of the Aboriginal flag during official press conferences as is the custom, and his first act would be to make it law for councils to hold celebratory events like citizenship ceremonies on Australia Day. Speaking of the need to be proud of Australia, he said on national television: "We've got university lecturers and some teachers who are telling children they should be ashamed of their history and who we are as a country" (cited by Ireland, 2025).

As one of those university lecturers, I would remind Mr Dutton that lecturers and teachers do not tell students how they should think or feel about the history of this country, rather we help them develop the knowledge and skills that enable them to form their own interpretations. However, some of us do seek to do this in ways that actively centre once marginalised historical narratives and perspectives, and encourage critically investigating historical injustices, including the ongoing effects of settler colonialism. As explored below, this can be a challenging and sometimes discomforting process, but one that is essential to decolonising Australian history education. As a non-Indigenous person of mostly Irish and Scottish ancestry, I cannot truly feel the pain that 26 January brings to First Nations Peoples. However, I can recognise that in the past my ancestors directly and indirectly furthered the violent project of settler colonialism, and I continue to benefit from the denial of First Nations sovereignty. In developing a decolonising praxis, I grapple with my complicity as a history educator within an education system that has long deployed history education to reproduce a dominant Westerncentric metanarrative that ignored more than 60,000 years of continuous First Nations culture and whitewashed settler-colonial history.

This article offers an Australian perspective on decolonising history education by providing readers with a snapshot of recent scholarship in this space, drawing largely on a new edited collection, *Decolonising Australian history education: Fresh perspectives from beyond the 'history wars'* (Cairns et al., 2024). I have commenced by evoking two key concepts–place and positionality. The importance of localising decolonising practices is highlighted by Mignolo and Walsh (2018): "What does it mean to decolonize? cannot be an abstract universal. It has to be answered by looking at other W questions: Who is doing it, where, why and how?" (p. 18). The notion of place is also one that requires decolonising, given that non-Indigenous renderings of place, such as my own, are shaped by a Westerncentric framing that differs vastly to First Nations worldviews about place (see Tuck & McKenzie, 2015) and Country (see Lowe et al., 2020).

Meanings and interpretations of decolonising education shift depending on place and positionality. Elsewhere I have articulated my interpretation of the broader objective of decolonising history education as "seeking to recognise and redress the way colonial powers (i.e., Euro-American powers) have controlled the knowledge production practices of disciplinary History and therefore presented distorted views of historical processes, especially the ongoing effects of the invasion of the lands of Indigenous Peoples across the world" (Cairns, 2024, p. 160). This aligns with the broader aims of decolonising education, which, Moncriefe (2022) suggests, seeks to "expose and disrupt the ongoing processes of colonialism, identified by the uncritical reproduction of Eurocentric curriculum, knowledge and discourses" (p. 1). My interpretation is further refined when applied to settler-colonial Australia and school history:

> In settler-colonial Australia decolonising history curriculum recognises the rights of First Nations Peoples to exercise sovereignty and self- determination, promotes teaching and learning about First Nations Peoples histories and cultures in ways that re-centre First Nations Peoples perspectives, uses but also problematises historical inquiry as a means to interrogate settler colonialism, and seeks opportunities for critical self-reflection on one's own historical positioning in relation to Australia's colonial past and decolonising present and future. (Cairns, 2024, p. 160).

A commonality that unites interpretations is an appreciation that *decolonising* education is a verb, an action. It should therefore be focused on outcomes (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Throughout the article I mostly use the term First Nations People. Given the cultural and linguistic diversity within and between First Nations communities, this is not used as a homogenising term but one that recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People as the First Peoples of Australia. Where possible I have also referred to specific Traditional Owner groups and language groups, of which there are more than 250 (AIATSIS, 2024).

2. Contextualising

The project of decolonising history education aligns with the broader purposes for decolonising education and is rooted in the scholarship and praxis of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, educators and activists. In Australia, it builds on research on postcolonial history education (e. g. Parkes, 2011) and research that critiques the politicisation of history education (e. g. Clark, 2006; Taylor, 2012). Within the broader field of history education research, the emerging field of decolonising history curriculum connects with, but is different to, literature on difficult histories. Epstein and Peck (2017) define these as "historical narratives and other forms (learning standards, curricular frameworks) that incorporate contested, painful and/or violent events into regional, national or global accounts of the past" (p. 1). This work often focuses on how history education contributes to the transformation of societies emerging from conflict (e.g. Ahonen, 2014). However, conceptualisations of difficult histories seem to lack the specificity required in settler-colonial societies like Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand. This is pinpointed by Prebble (n. d.), a historian-educator in Aotearoa/New Zealand:

> I find myself grappling with this label, not because it's inaccurate but because it feels incomplete. Yes, this history can be difficult – it feels uncomfortable, unsettling, challenging and confrontational, a thing to be avoided. But the term 'difficult histories' doesn't really articulate what is difficult, let alone how to respond to these difficulties. (para. 4)

As Prebble (n. d.) contends, an important starting point for thinking about how to respond to what is difficult about some histories, such as settler-colonial history, is acknowledging that, in addition to intergenerational trauma, "there is shame, guilt and anxiety" (para. 12). How people individually and collectively respond emotionally will depend on how they are positioned by settler colonialism.

Similarly, in the field of transitional justice, there is recognition that, while history education as an instrument for facilitating transitional justice in settler states has potential to contribute to truth telling and reconciliation, it is considerably limited by the historical thinking models that frame disciplinary approaches (see Keynes, 2019). Keynes (2024) argues a decolonial approach to transitional justice requires substantial structural reform of current history education frameworks to better "accommodate enduring injustices or Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing history" (p. 25).

3. Critically reflecting

Of the 27.2 million Australians, just over one million or 3.8 per cent are First Nations People (ABS, 2024). In 2023, there were 515,000 registered teachers in Australia of which 6,577 identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers (AITSL, 2024). As most registered history teachers are non-Indigenous, much of the decolonising work required in history classrooms hinges on them. Even if they do not readily adopt a decolonising approach, having the capacity to teach First Nations content and First Nations students are professional requirements. Since 2010, the Australian Curriculum has required all teachers to enact the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority and teach First Nations content. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2017) also include the following standards: i) Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; ii) Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Despite these expectations, research indicates teachers are fearful of integrating First Nations histories, cultures and perspectives (e. g. Hogarth, 2022; Harvie, 2024; Hradsky, 2024; Madsen et al., 2021; Weuffen, 2024). This is often attributed to feelings of being unfamiliar, under-prepared and under-resourced to teach locally anchored content and First Nations culture, history

and pedagogies (Harvie, 2024). Weuffen (2024) articulates the broader colonial power structures at work here:

> For non-Indigenous teachers who have been raised within the Australian education system, they are caught up in an indoctrination process that has been operationalised to a point where pedagogical practices become inextricably aligned to a particular settler-colonial ideology without them even knowing it. (p. 74)

Compounded by the fear of getting it wrong or offending someone, this dominant ideology results in “epistemic inertia” (Weuffen, 2024, p. 71) and the “silencing of Indigenous Knowledges in curricula and educational spaces” (Hogarth, 2022, p. 5).

Decolonising approaches therefore seek to confront the perpetuation of these avoidance tactics and challenge educators to grapple with their positionality through critical self-reflection, that is, decolonising self (Briggs et al., 2024; Harvie, 2024; Hradsky, 2024; McKnight, 2024; Weuffen, 2024). Reflecting on the teachings of Boon Wurrung Elder, N’arweet Professor Carloyn Briggs, Anderson and Slater (2024) articulate the self-reflection process as one of learning, unlearning and relearning:

> The realisation that the knowledge you have been taught is biased can lead to feelings of discomfort and of not knowing what to do. When teachers speak about embedding First Nations Peoples teaching into their curriculum, they often comment, “What if I do it wrong?” Self- reflection can be confronting, and you may not know what to do with such feelings. Sitting with the discomfort can lead to deeper learning, a stronger commitment, and changes to pedagogy and practice. Not acting on these feelings keeps the current learning environment in the status quo. (p. 92)

Similarly, Hradsky (2024) observes: “What has proven to be successful in assisting in processing discomfort is leaning into it, processing it, and forming new practices based on new knowledge” (p. 12). Methods for facilitating this sort of critical self-reflection include learning with First Nations educators and communities; walking with and learning from Country and using resources created by First Nations People (Briggs et al., 2024); acknowledging lived and educational experiences through memory writing and shared reflective exercises (McKnight, 2024; Harvie, 2024); and participating in embodied pedagogies and drama-based reflective activities (Hradsky, 2024). Explicit examples of questions to scaffold critical reflection are also outlined in this literature. For example, Weuffen (2024) articulates two sets of Who am I? and Where do I come from? reflective questions to help teachers interrogate their positionality.

These strategies for self-reflection are also applicable in initial teacher education (ITE) settings, where most teacher educators are non-Indigenous (Hogarth, 2022; Hughes & Fricker, 2024). With the aim of addressing the over-burdening of First Nations stakeholders with the labour of decolonisng within ITE, Hughes and Fricker (2024) have developed a model that “promotes co-construction of education contexts through shared labour and leadership of First Nations and non-Indigenous stakeholders” (p. 1907). The first step involves “critical reflection and decolonial positionality” particularly for non-Indigenous educators and students through “reflecting on one’s own complicity, pre-conceived notions and countering norms” (Hughes & Fricker, 2024, p.1917). The next step relates to the “recognition of First Nations sovereignty and self-determination” (Hughes & Fricker, 2024, p. 1917), which foregrounds First Nations leadership in the indigenising of educational contexts, a process that can only be undertaken by First Nations stakeholders owing to their heritage and culture. For example, Fricker (2024), a sovereign Dja Dja Wurrung educator, illustrates how he enacts this indigenising work through the authorship of a secondary school history textbook chapter about First Nations rights and freedoms, which “allows First Nations stakeholders to tell First Nations stories” (p. 60). The third step is about “co-constructing education contexts” and “decolonising labour and leadership of non-Indigenous stakeholders” (Hughes & Fricker, 2022, p. 1917), meaning:

> … the responsibility and work of decolonising the curriculum and classroom contexts must be the responsibility of those who have traditionally perpetuated and benefited from the colonisation of the curriculum in the first place, that is, this is work for non-Indigenous people. (Hughes & Fricker, 2022, p. 1918)

This ITE model could and should be readily adapted to schools. Speaking specifically about history education, Weuffen (2024) warns that if non-Indigenous educators do not engage in this critical work “First Nations Peoples will continue to do a disproportionate amount of heavy lifting in the Australian education space and in efforts to decolonise the Eurocentric (re)telling of history on the Australian continent” (p. 79).

Guidance from such models and other protocols created by First Nations People can assist non-Indigenous educators overcome the notion that they need special permission to teach about First Nations histories, cultures and perspectives. Professor Melitta Hogarth, a Kamilaroi woman and Director of Ngarrngga (a resource for teachers made in collaboration Indigenous Knowledge Experts) says:

> Some teachers may think that they need permission to actually engage with Indigenous Knowledge, or to do the work about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures... You don't need permission. What you need is the knowledge and the understanding about how to engage respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. If you don't start somewhere, you're never going to start. (Ngarrngga, 2023, Episode 2)

This sentiment is reiterated by Hradsky (2024): "Listen. Hear. Let stories be told. Teach the truth. Let excitement overcome your fear. If we don't do this, it won't happen" (p. 48). These messages do not seek to oversimplify the complex and challenging work required of decolonising history education, rather they impel educators to get on with challenging the status quo.

4. Listening, learning and localising

Some other practical ways history teachers can enact a decolonising approach are centred on listening, learning and localising. Keynes (2024) underscores listening is fundamental to building understanding of First Nations knowledges: "While the project of articulating a decolonial history education should be led by First Nations Peoples, settlers in this space have a responsibility to first listen, and second, decentre settler ways of knowing and being" (pp. 25-26). This includes actively listening to how First Nations People think the failures of history curriculum can be addressed, reflecting on how Western and First Nations conceptualisations of 'history', nationhood and sovereignty differ, and engaging with local and national truth-telling processes (Keynes, 2024). At the national level this may involve engaging with the views of First Nations leaders (e.g. Behrendt, 2024) on how we move forward from the failed 2023 Voice Referendum, in which the majority of Australians rejected the proposed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament. At the state level, listening to the truth telling facilitated by justice commissions can help history teachers develop a deeper understanding of the true impact of colonisation.

Building local connections to Country and First Nations communities is an important way of learning about First Nations ways of knowledges, and fostering care, trust and respect (Briggs, et al., 2024; King, 2024; Harvie, 2024). Drawing on research with pre-service teachers, Burgess et al. (2022) developed the Learning From Country Framework, which begins with building respect through deep listening to First Nations community voices. King (2024) encourages teachers to fill in "the silences of local settler histories to reveal the truth about the impact of colonisation" (p. 177) by finding local history texts, exploring Country in the local area and building community relationships. This can also lead to co-creation of localised resources. King exemplifies this with the VR 360 film he co-created with Peek Wurrung Elder, Uncle Rob Lowe, about Uncle Rob's lived experiences of segregation and racism, which can be viewed on YouTube (King, 2021). Another example is the series of picture books Balnarring preschool school co-created with Boon Wurrung Elder N'arweet Professor Carloyn Briggs (see Briggs et al., 2024). Increasingly, a range of resources are being created by First Nations People that tell their local stories and teachers have access to First Nations-led incursions and excursions to learn about the Country on which they live. Renumerating First Nations People for their knowledge and expertise, as well as committing a budget to resourcing are essential to this (Fricker, 2024; Harvie, 2024).

5. Evaluating

The last set of strategies centre on how history educators evaluate curricular texts and resources to address the limitations of official curricula. Conducting an audit of the school's library, textbooks and curriculum plans can help teachers assess the extent to which sovereign First Nations voices are represented (Fricker, 2024; Harvie, 2024). Having the evaluative skills to do this is imperative because:

> Educators need to ensure that resources that they select are appropriate, meaningful, and that they represent the stories, knowledges, lived experiences, and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people rather than simply re-presenting historical misunderstandings and ideas that are under-pinned by racialised ideas. (Madsen et al., 2021, p. 142)

To support teachers to do this, First Nations educators Madsen, Perkins and Shay (2021) have developed the YARNS tool as a framework for critically evaluating resources related to First Nations content. In my experience with pre-service teachers, it is highly effective tool for building confidence with selecting appropriate resources and could be used by schools for auditing purposes. History teachers also need to be conscious of advice on using historical sources that include terminology considered inappropriate and offensive; such language should be historicised and contextualised "to support students to understand why these terms are now so offensive" (Madsen et al., 2021, p. 138).

Another fundamental area of history education that requires evaluation is the official curriculum. Despite the expanded inclusion of First Nations content in national and state curricula, many have critiqued the capacity of curriculum structures more broadly, and the disciplinary nature of history more specifically, to meaningfully embed First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing, confront the ongoing impact of settler colonialism, and further truth telling (e.g. Bedford, 2023; Hradsky, 2020; Keynes, 2019; 2024; Lowe et al., 2020). Decolonial critiques argue that the significant structural reform needed should be led by First Nations People (Bedford, 2023; Hradsky, 2020; Keynes, 2024). This is further highlighted in current Treaty discussions. At the end of 2024, Rueben Berg, Gunditjmara man and co-chair of Victoria's First Peoples' Assembly, opened Treaty discussions with the Victorian government by saying he wants local First Nations leaders and communities to have decision-making powers over how the state's Indigenous history is taught (see Ore, 2024).

Notwithstanding the need for comprehensive curriculum reform, history teachers can utilise decolonising strategies to resist some of these shortcomings. Garrard (2024) encourages history teachers to tackle the colonialist narrative that has long dominated history curricula and texts by doing Australian history as intercultural history. Drawing on explicit curriculum descriptors and textbooks, Garrard (2024) maps strategies for enacting an intercultural history framework. This models how teachers can work with students to build intercultural understanding by "sharing, negotiating, accepting, or rejecting the story" (Garrard, 2024, p. 153) represented in the historical texts and visual sources they use. Deconstructing historical meta/narratives enables teachers and students to "speak back to instrumental ethnocentric and Eurocentric narratives" (Garrard, 2024, p. 154) that have sustained discourses of white possession in history curricula (see Cairns, 2024). My own research (Cairns, 2024) shows this work is not limited to meta/narratives about settler denial of First Nations sovereignty, as similar strategies can be taken up in decolonising approaches to Asia-related Australian history. Arguably, history teachers can extend decolonising approaches to all historical contexts by engaging critically with "new questions about agency, power, narrative and sovereignty" (Cairns, 2024, p. 173). For example, in the context of the Palestine crisis there have been calls for teachers to take a deeper look at how settler colonialisms in other places intersect with settler colonialism in Australia (Calleja et al., 2024).

6. Concluding

Throughout this article I have deliberately avoided engaging with the so-called 'history wars' debate. These debates get ample attention and, by getting on with the work of decolonising education, we can push history education beyond a perpetual cycle of politicisation and polarisation (Fricker et al., 2024). Instead, the energy of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and scholars in the history education community can be focused on actioning decolonising approaches centred on critically reflecting, listening, learning, localising and evaluating. This is not to suggest that the political context is unimportant or that there are quick fixes; this is challenging, complex and discomforting work. The considerable structural changes needed to achieve decolonising outcomes will require sovereign First Nations voices to lead curriculum reform. These challenges are compounded by other systemic pressures teachers face in schools presently. Furthermore, as highlighted by the opening vignette, this project is being undertaken at a time of heightened socio-political division spurred by fresh waves of Australian jingoism and the influence of neocolonial forces. How we decolonise history education depends on who and where we are; however, the opportunity to bring together perspectives in this journal's special issue will hopefully create space to form transnational connections and solidarities.

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Attitudes towards colonial history and postcolonialism in Germany

Empirical findings

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Abstract

How much do people in Germany know about the colonial era, and how do they perceive contemporary historical culture that addresses this period? Do they consider such engagement relevant? Do they recognise connections between the colonial past and the present? And how, if at all, do they relate the colonial era to other historical events and developments?
These questions are central to the project *Colonial History, Historical Culture, and Historical-Political Education in North Rhine-Westphalia* (*Kolonialgeschichte, Geschichtskultur und historisch-politische Bildung in Nordrhein-Westfalen*). This working paper outlines the project's structure, research questions, and methodology. In addition, it presents initial findings from one of its core studies, conducted in collaboration with the polling institute *forsa*. To date, this study constitutes the first nationally representative large-scale survey on this topic in Germany. Reflecting the character of a working report, the paper also discusses methodological challenges encountered during data collection and preliminary analysis.

Keywords

Postcolonialism, German colonial era, historical culture, empirical survey, public opinion

1 Introduction

What do people in Germany know about the colonial era, and how do they perceive the ways in which it is addressed in contemporary historical culture? To what extent do they consider such engagement relevant? Do individuals feel any personal connection to the events and developments of German colonial rule? And if such connections are largely absent, should this be accepted as given, or does it imply an educational and political responsibility to foster greater understanding and, consequently, engagement?

These are among the central questions explored by the project *Colonial History, Historical Culture, and Historical-Political Education in North Rhine-Westphalia (Kolonialgeschichte, Geschichtskultur und historisch-politische Bildung in Nordrhein-Westfalen)*. This third-party funded project, carried out at the Universities of Aachen and Münster, is supported by the Ministry of Culture and Science and the State Agency for Civic Education in North Rhine-Westphalia.

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This paper first provides an overview of the overall project before turning in greater depth to the empirically grounded subproject based at the University of Münster, which directly addresses the questions outlined above.

Given that the data from the 2,000 interviewees have only recently been collected, this text should be considered a working paper. It discusses the subproject's primary research questions, concepts, methodology, and initial findings from one of the project's main studies – a survey conducted in cooperation with the polling institute forsa. While especially the opinion research institute YouGov has examined and compared public attitudes in several countries towards their respective former colonial powers based on a rather small number of items (Smith, 2020) to date, this study represents the first nationally representative survey on this topic in Germany. Reflecting its status as a work-in-progress report, the paper also considers methodological challenges and unresolved issues encountered during data collection and preliminary analysis.

2 Colonial history, historical culture, and historical-political education

In line with the mandate set out in the coalition agreement of the current state government (CDU Nordrhein-Westfalen & Die Grünen Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2022), the project places particular emphasis on the colonial history of what is now the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia at the centre of its four-part research agenda. The first subproject, conducted within the framework of a large-scale critical edition of primary sources, reconstructs the history of colonial events with a specific focus on regional contexts in North Rhine-Westphalia.

A second subproject is devoted to the systematic analysis of contemporary forms of remembrance and engagement with the colonial past in both formal and non-formal contexts in North Rhine-Westphalia. A third develops educational materials, primarily for the non-formal educational sector. The fourth subproject – on which this paper focuses – broadens the project's perspective by extending its scope to Germany as a whole. Through its empirical approach, it also provides a foundation for the development of educational materials.

The central research interest of this subproject lies in the empirical assessment and analysis of attitudes towards the German colonial past and its representation in contemporary historical culture. This investigation is conducted within the framework of an academic survey that encompasses different groups of respondents. In addition to a representative sample of the general population, the survey includes university students of history, school pupils, teachers, and experts working in non-formal education who are professionally connected to the topic of colonial history. A fundamental premise of our approach is the belief that, if made aware of these issues during the survey, respondents will engage in interpretive and evaluative relationships with the German colonial past, as well as with contemporary colonial and decolonial phenomena.

3 Attitudes

This research objective and its underlying proposition require theoretical refinement and the integration of the following key analytical categories: attitudes, knowledge, historical consciousness, and historical culture. Accordingly, we place particular emphasis on the concept of attitudes, which was described decades ago as "the most distinctive and indispensable concept" in the field of social psychology (Allport, 1935, p. 798). However, discussing attitudes towards both historical and contemporary events inevitably involves reference to historical knowledge (Jeismann, 1977, p. 13). Simultaneously, the interview situation reveals the interconnection between historical consciousness and historical culture. To summarise, the processes of interviewing and data analysis are understood as a dense process of potential externalisation, objectivation, and internalisation, and accordingly, as a complex interplay between historical consciousness and historical culture (Handro, 2025; Heuer, 2025; Thünemann, 2018, pp. 144–148; Thünemann, 2023; Zülsdorf-Kersting, 2021, pp. 105–113). The prompts employed in this study ideally elicit processes of externalisation, thereby rendering previously inaccessible, purely mental operations of historical consciousness communicable (Jeismann, 1988, pp. 14–16; Rüsen, 2013, pp. 38–40). The subsequent analysis of knowledge and attitudes is to be understood as an engagement with

the results of this (communicative) process of externalisation. A key objective of the survey is to facilitate the interpretation of articulations (of traces) of individual historical consciousness (Rüsen, 1994).

Coinciding with the widely accepted definition by Geoffrey Haddock and Gregory R. Maio (2008, p. 113), attitudes are commonly understood as an “overall evaluation of a stimulus object”. According to the multi-component model proposed by Mark P. Zanna and John K. Rempel (1988, pp. 315–334), which remains a central framework for modelling attitudes, this global evaluation arises from the interaction of cognitive, affective, and behavioural components. Concurrently, attitudes exert reciprocal effects on all three of these domains. As with the concept of historical consciousness, attitudes cannot be directly observed. They require expression through what Jörn Rüsen, recognised for his contributions to historical theory, termed ‘practically effective’ behaviour (1994, p. 5).

As posited by Haddock and Maio, the attitudes in question vary in terms of their content, structure, function, as well as their strength. This variance also mediates the other dimensions to a certain degree. The following overview of these dimensions of attitudes is intended to underscore both connections to history didactics (notably in relation to Rüsen’s and Karl-Ernst Jeismann’s theoretical frameworks) and project-specific implications.

Attitude content: In the multi-component model previously referenced, *cognitions* comprise thoughts and beliefs about the attitude object, together with attributes ascribed to it (Haddock & Maio, 2008). These may include the self, other individuals, social groups, abstract entities (such as colonialism), or concrete phenomena including, for instance, an anti-racism protest. The *affective component* encompasses emotions and feelings either pre-existing in relation to the attitude object or caused and elicited by the very act of questioning. The *behavioural component* refers to past or potential behaviours directed towards the object in question.

The association between core definitions of attitudes and core elements of theoretical frameworks in history didactics, such as Rüsen’s dimensions of historical culture, is, in our view, clearly observable. The overlap extends far beyond mere terminological similarities, as evidenced by the cognitive dimension (Rüsen, 2013, pp. 78–85). The behavioural component appears likely to be linked to the political dimension of historical culture. Within the various sub-operations of historical thinking or historical consciousness, affective engagements, for example, emotionally charged affinities or aversions, are always at play. In Jeismann’s distinction between historical causal judgements and historical value judgements, the concept of evaluative assessment of a (historical or historically relevant) object is given particular emphasis (Jeismann, 2000, pp. 65–66; Thünemann & Jansen, 2022, pp. 73–75).

In relation to the present research project and the survey data under consideration, it can be said that the participants’ responses may be interpreted, at least partly, as articulations of their engagement with historical ‘facts’, as well as causal and value judgements, especially as these are embedded within the prompts given. This does not necessarily imply that participants engage in historical reasoning from a scientific perspective. Rather, Jeismann’s and Rüsen’s theoretical frameworks offer conceptual tools to integrate phenomena affiliated to historical culture and their perception in a nuanced and differentiated manner into the survey design. If items reflecting historical value judgements – e.g., in Likert-scale statements – were excluded, the survey would be just as incomplete as it would be without items addressing historical orientation and motivation in Rüsen’s sense (2013, pp. 41–43).

Attitude structure, function, and strength: These dimensions represent essential features beyond the scope of attitude content. In terms of structure, a distinction can be made between unidimensional and bidimensional perspectives. The former describes cases in which beliefs, emotions, and behavioural tendencies align consistently in either a positive or negative direction towards the attitude object. Conversely, bidimensional attitudes contain both positive and negative responses to the same object – a phenomenon frequently referred to as attitudinal ambivalence. Such ambivalent attitudes are of particular significance for this research project. Discrepancies between expressed beliefs (e.g., “contemporary colonialism must be overcome”) and observable behaviour (e.g., the use of racist language) may be equally informative.[1]

Attitude functions concern the underlying needs or purposes fulfilled by particular attitudes or their expression. Commonly distinguished functions include the knowledge function (organising information into evaluative categories), the utilitarian function (maximising benefit or utility), the social-adjustive function (e.g., facilitating group belonging or acceptance), the ego-defensive function (protecting self-esteem), and the value-expressive function (expressing central

1 Refer to Kleinschmidt (2021, p. 5) on the question of whether macro-level attitudes (such as the dismantling of colonial structures) may come into conflict with micro-level attitudes (such as manifestations of everyday racism).

personal values). While more detailed questionnaires or qualitative interviews may be required to identify such functions with greater precision, analysing them can assist in refining the conceptualisation of individual historical sense-making. In summary, we consider these functions of attitudes particularly relevant, as the subjects of colonial history and postcolonialism raise questions of positioning and positionality with an intensity rarely matched by other historical or societal issues.

While analyses of attitude structure offer insights into the consistency or inconsistency of attitudes, and functional analyses explore their aims and roles, the investigation of attitude strength sheds light on their temporal stability, resistance to external influence, and potential behavioural consequences. Attitude strength also tends to correlate positively with knowledge about the attitude object. However, it is important to note that knowledge acquisition itself may be strongly mediated by pre-existing attitudes. The connection between knowledge and attitudes – particularly in the context of engaging with colonial history and its contemporary societal discussion, which we conceive as an interpretive challenge – will be discussed in greater depth later on.

The issue of appropriate measurement instruments is closely linked to questions regarding attitudinal strength and its variance. Among the most well-established and widely used measures is the Likert scale, which relies on the aggregation and averaging of item responses. The Likert format presupposes explicit attitude measurement, requiring respondents to provide direct statements of their evaluations, opinions, or stances with regard to the respective attitude object. In contrast to more inferential or indirect methods (e.g., the semantic differential), it facilitates the modelling of self-reported attitudes with greater clarity.

4 Methodological design and preliminary findings

Accordingly, Likert scales – primarily five-point bipolar Likert scales in our case – constitute the core of the extensively pre-tested questionnaire instrument. The survey was conducted among a sample of 2,000 individuals aged 18 and above residing in Germany. Data were collected through a self-administered online questionnaire (valid cases only). The polling institute *forsa* ensured the intended representativeness of the study by implementing appropriate sampling procedures and applying statistical weighting factors (*iterative proportional fitting*).

The 60 items – four of which were open-ended questions – were developed by the project team and reviewed by a group of experts from academia and civil society.[2] These items can be categorised into the following analytical dimensions: perceived relevance and interest; personal affectedness; historical interpretive and explanatory patterns; contemporary perceptions of the impact of colonial structures; and political implications. It is evident that these dimensions are interrelated, and, therefore, cannot be viewed in isolation.

At this early stage, with only the raw data at hand, a comprehensive analysis cannot yet be presented. Moreover, the study has yet to be embedded within the broader academic research discourse. Nevertheless, an initial descriptive-analytical review of the data yields insightful preliminary observations. Some of these will be outlined concisely in the following section. The presentation is confined to four noteworthy observations or findings, each of which integrates a range of individual results.

4.1 General awareness of Germany's colonial past and interest in the topic

A substantial proportion of German citizens (91%) are aware that Germany once held colonies. This knowledge is somewhat less prevalent among respondents who have received lower levels of formal education. However, both interest in and engagement with the topic of German colonialism and (post)colonialism remain generally low. A mere 12% of the participants report being very or strongly interested in the subject, while 41% indicate a moderate level of interest. Almost half of the respondents (46%) report little or no interest at all. Supporters of the Left Party (*Die Linke*) are slightly more likely than the general population to express a strong interest (23%).

2 We are grateful to numerous experts for their support and constructive, thoughtful feedback. We would like to extend special thanks to Philipp Erdmann, Johannes Meyer-Hamme, and Sahra Rausch for their contributions to a multi-day methodological workshop within the project; to Bebero Lehmann, Rahab Njeri, Serge Palasie, and Gifty Wiafe for serving as members of the advisory board of an exhibition project linked to our surveys; and to Merisa Duranović, Linus Hüsken, Andreas Johannes, and Sebastian Lange for their dedicated and valuable work as student and/or research assistants on the project. We sincerely thank all of them.

While the initial items of the questionnaire were designed to evaluate prior interest and points of contact with Germany's colonial past and its contemporary societal engagement, they also reveal a pattern: a significant proportion of respondents appear to become aware of the scope and relevance of the topic only through the process of engaging with the questionnaire. As the survey progresses, interest appears to increase, or is at least stimulated, as respondents encounter the complexity and multidimensionality of the subject. This interpretation is supported by the responses to the final, open-ended item, which invited the participants to share any concluding thoughts on the topic of "Germany's colonial past and how it is addressed today". Many respondents acknowledged that it was only through the questionnaire that they could gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue's scope and significance.

4.2 (Foundational?) Historical knowledge

In order to ascertain the extent to which German citizens possess at least basic factual knowledge about Germany's colonial past, a set of knowledge-based multiple-choice questions was included in the survey.

A large majority of respondents (82%) accurately identified Africa as the geographical focus of the former German colonial empire. However, considerable knowledge gaps became evident with more specific questions. For instance, less than a third (31%) of respondents could correctly identify the decade in which the German Empire began acquiring its colonies (Correct answer: 1884; Incorrect options: 1792, 1815, 1902, 1929). Furthermore, only 13% correctly identified Lothar von Trotha as the key figure responsible for the genocide of the (Ova)Herero and Nama in present-day Namibia, as opposed to Kaiser Wilhelm I [sic], Adolf Lüderitz, Otto von Bismarck, or Hermann Göring. One-third (33%) provided an incorrect answer, while 55% left the question unanswered. In a similar vein, inconsistent levels of knowledge were observed in responses to questions on, for instance, the restitution debate and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Beyond the findings themselves – namely, that basic historical knowledge in this field is not widely disseminated – the implications of these gaps present a methodological challenge in questionnaire design that is not uncommon. At both the early and later stages of the questionnaire, knowledge-based items led to disproportionately high dropout rates. Without seeking to overinterpret, we nonetheless regard this as a finding to be taken seriously. Consequently, the knowledge questions underwent a process of revision and simplification through extensive rounds of pretesting and refinement. Ultimately, the number of such items was reduced, and their placement was shifted to roughly the second quarter of the questionnaire.

While individuals' attitudes towards historical topics are, of course, valid regardless of their ability to answer factual questions correctly, there is no doubt that a basic level of historical knowledge could be advantageous, especially when forming more complex historical value judgments.

4.3 Abstract and concrete forms of responsibility

In addressing the question of historical responsibility, which is deliberately distinguished in the questionnaire from the notion of historical guilt, a noteworthy pattern emerges. At an abstract level, statements calling for expressions of responsibility – which we consider initially rather symbolic – receive moderate to moderately high levels of agreement. These include, for example, proposals to establish a National Day of Remembrance for the victims of German colonialism or to erect a memorial in their honour.

In contrast, the respondents expressed considerably more reluctance when it comes to acknowledging present-day responsibility or supporting concrete political measures in relation to Germany's former colonies. Nearly half of all respondents (48%) believe that the Federal Republic of Germany should not be held responsible for the current challenges faced by the regions of former German colonies. Slightly more than one-third (34%) support the proposal that Germany should take greater responsibility in addressing those problems, such as through increased development cooperation. Even fewer respondents support financial compensation for crimes committed during the colonial period (20%) or the easing of immigration for people from former colonies (14%).

4.4 How should we approach racially charged terminology?

Departing from the predominant use of Likert scales and the limited number of open-ended items included due to time constraints, a small set of questionnaire items presented respondents with specific "cases" or controversies related to the survey's topic and invited them to take a position on these issues.

Such a case concerns the contemporary handling of racially charged terminology in children's literature. One notable example is the term "Negerkönig" in the German translation of Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* (*Pippi Langstrumpf: Pippi in Taka-Tuka-Land*), as well as place names like "Mohren-Apotheke" (literally: "Moor Pharmacy"). Only a small share of respondents (7%) support changing such terms. By contrast, 38% advocate retaining them without restriction, while 33% support retaining them, albeit with the incorporation of a historical contextualisation. A further 15% of the respondents expressed the opinion that such decisions should depend on the specific circumstances of each case.

This item is of particular interest, as it reveals significant demographic and ideological divisions within Germany – along East-West lines, political orientation (left–right), age, gender, and educational background. Older respondents are significantly more likely than younger ones to support the unconditional retention of such terminology. This tendency is also more pronounced among men compared to women. Furthermore, respondents from the so-called "new federal states" (eastern Germany) express significantly greater support for this unconditional retention than those from the western states. Finally, individuals with lower levels of formal education are more inclined to favour such retention than those with higher educational attainment (e.g., A-levels or higher). Among supporters of political parties, those identifying with the right-wing extremist AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) are most in favour of keeping terms that are now widely perceived as racist (70%), whereas 13% of Green Party voters (*Die Grünen*) expressed the same opinion.

Using a serial approach, this population survey instrument is also being applied (in a modified and group-specific form) to pupils in history education, students preparing to become history teachers, and practising history teachers in North Rhine-Westphalia. Among respondents from eight universities where those future history teachers were surveyed, not a single person chose the option of retaining such terms without modification. On average, the student respondents whose data have been collected thus far favour retention with historical explanation (27%), support changing the terms (31%) or argue that the issue should be considered on a case-by-case basis (43%).

5 Perspectives

The findings presented in this succinct project report represent only a small part of the collected survey data and the variables derived from them. Nevertheless, two key points have already been highlighted: first, even an initial descriptive-analytical examination reveals significant potential and leads to results that are, in our view, worthy of further discussion. Second, the application of inferential and multivariate statistical methods – specifically correlation, regression, factor analysis and segmentation – will be required to further explore the data's potential for insight. These methods are expected to enable a more detailed understanding of the discursive complexity inherent in how colonial history is currently dealt with in German society.

Additionally, the results of the *forsa* survey will be compared with those from other strands of our mixed-methods research design. As previously stated, we are currently (as of June 2025) conducting additional surveys in schools and universities in North Rhine-Westphalia. These include a questionnaire similar to the one used in the *forsa* study, as well as follow-up interviews across all participant groups. A distinctive feature of our research design is that respondents at a later stage are also asked to reflect on selected results from the *forsa* study that were partially presented in this paper.

As a fifth strand of data collection, alongside the representative population survey and the surveys of students, teachers and university students, qualitative interviews with experts from academia and civil society are being conducted. These expert interviews serve to interpret and contextualise all of our earlier findings.

When comparing our results (specifically those based on items developed for the *forsa* instrument) with existing international survey data, several connections become apparent. To illustrate, in 2024, the opinion polling institute *YouGov* conducted a survey in the United Kingdom as well as in regions of the former British Empire. This survey included seven items, asking for example about pride or shame in relation to the colonial past; whether people would have supported the continued existence of colonial rule in a counterfactual scenario; whether respondents believe that life in former colonies is better today than it was during colonial rule; or in what way the history of the British Empire should be taught in schools (Smith, 2025). These questions allow for a meaningful comparison with our current representative dataset, which similarly addresses these aspects and partially extends them by including qualitative data.

But even beyond comparisons and the application of complex statistical methods, it is the descriptive evaluation of our own data that already highlights some important areas for further discussion: Two items on the Likert-scale stood out with particularly high levels of agreement. More than one third of respondents (36%) agreed with the statement: "After more than 100 years, we need to draw a line under the memory of Germany's colonial past." The following statement was endorsed with even greater conviction: "I feel that this topic is often used today to make us feel guilty" (43%).

Interestingly, these two items were also frequently mentioned in respondents' open-ended final comments, in which they were invited to share any further thoughts on the survey and its topic. Numerous respondents emphasised statements such as: "I am not right-wing at all", "I don't want to be put in the right-wing corner" or "I am very critical of our history". Many of these responses, which notably reflect complex and bidimensional attitudes, continued with a "but". The combination of these two quantitative items, together with the related qualitative comments, underscores the necessity and significance of a more sensitive and non-prejudiced public dialogue. From a didactic perspective, they point to a great need for social discussion and to historical teaching and learning opportunities that should be urgently exploited.

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Review

This miniature has been reviewed by the editors of the HTCE journal.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical statement

Ethical approval was not sought for our study, as the research was based on an anonymous and voluntary survey of adult participants. The study was conducted in cooperation with *forsa*, a recognised professional research and survey institute and in accordance with applicable ethical standards and data protection regulations. No personally identifiable or sensitive personal data were collected, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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Decolonizing the capuchin monkey?

Salzburg's cabinet of art and curiosities and its (post-)colonial heritage

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Abstract

This article explores the colonial dimensions of Salzburg's cultural heritage by examining the early modern Cabinet of Art and Curiosities in the former residence of the prince-archbishops. The collection serves as a case study tracing historical global entanglements of European colonialism and to critically assess museal practices. Drawing on both archival sources and secondary literature, we reflect on the historical creation and contemporary exhibition, as well as its framing and persistent Eurocentric narratives and imaginaries of non-European cultures and nature. We argue that, due to Salzburg's historical special position within the Holy Roman Empire and ideological heritage, the decision to preserve, rather than transform, the Cabinet has become central for the current form of the exhibition.

Keywords

Cabinet of art and curiosities, museum collection, postcolonial studies, early modern history, eurocentrism

1. Perspectives on (post-)colonial histories in Salzburg

Colonialism has left significant traces not only in the former colonies but also in Europe: monuments, street names, or museums and their collections form part of a colonial topography that often goes unrecognized. Due to the loss, destruction, or alteration of records, the provenance of objects obteined from former colonies can be difficult to determine. Moreover, colonial references and terminology in public spaces—and the historical contexts in which they were created—have either been forgotten or, in some cases, deliberately disregarded (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2019, p. 40). Addressing these legacies is an urgent and transnational concern, relevant not only to former colonial powers and empires such as France, Britain, or Germany, but also to smaller countries like Austria and cities like Salzburg that carry traces of a colonial past. While largely overlooked in public debates, this aspect has become increasingly prominent in academic scholarship over the last two decades (see, inter alia, Burton, 2021; Burton & Kuhn, 2022; Feichtinger et al., 2003; Hirschhausen, 2021; Judson, 2021; Molden, 2015; Sauer, 2011; Sauer, 2014; Sauer, 2017; Scheutz & Strohmeyer, 2008; Schölnberger, 2023).

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In this article, we seek to examine the connections and effects of European colonialism in the city of Salzburg, with a particular focus on the early modern Cabinet of Art and Curiosities (*Kunst- und Wunderkammer* in German).[1] Housed in the former residence of the prince-archbishops, now part of the museum complex *DomQuartier*, this collection serves as a case study to uncover how colonial histories are embedded within Salzburg's cultural heritage. Our objective is twofold: We are concerned with both a historical investigation of the collection reflecting time-specific colonial and global interactions as well as a public examination of (post-)colonial history using the example of the present exhibition, where objects, narratives, and interpretations from Eurocentric contexts persist to this day. By drawing on approaches from postcolonial studies, global and regional history, as well as public history, we call for a critical approach to historical culture and encourage new debates regarding how Salzburg's (post-)colonial past is remembered in public spaces, using the Cabinet of Art and Curiosities and its institutional setting as a lens to explore broader issues of Eurocentric representations in historical memory (e.g. Conrad et al., 2013; Eberth & Röll, 2021; Jeismann, 1992; Kühberger, 2015; Kühberger, 2025; Procter, 2022; Said 1995/1978; Veracini, 2023).

2. The cabinet in context

Early modern cabinets of art and curiosities are considered encyclopedic universal collections that sought to encapsulate the entire knowledge of the time through microcosmic arrangements of objects, mainly accessible to members of the social elite (Beßler 2012; Daston & Park, 1998; Eming et al., 2022; MacGregor, 2008). The 'golden age' of these cabinets is generally dated to the European Renaissance and Baroque eras, although they had Medieval predecessors. Following the Enlightenment period in the mid-18th century and the scientific revolution of the 19th century, various objects from these collections found their way into systematized holdings of specialized museums (Rosenke, 2019).

The contemporary categorization process typically adhered to four primary taxonomies: *naturalia* encompassed the objects of the natural world—including gemstones, minerals, and conchological specimens,—while *artificialia*, by contrast, comprised human-made artistic creations such as sculptures, vessels, and paintings. The *scientifica* (or *technica*) reflected the cabinets function as laboratories for emerging scientific disciplines, housing machines, astronomical timepieces, and other instruments. Concurrent with European overseas expansion since the late 15th century, this era marked the inception of material appropriation of non-European artifacts, resulting in the incorporation of *exotica*—such as materials, flora, or fauna from tropical origin—into European cabinets of art and curiosities (Collet, 2007; Lemaitre, 2016).

However, the notion of *exotica* was not limited only to objects and animals: Indigenous people and communities, particularly from Africa and the Americas, were forcibly taken to Europe and presented in public and the courts. This dehumanizing practice persisted throughout the colonial period and onwards into the "Age of Empire" (Hobsbawm, 1989/1987), leading to the creation of ethnological expositions and so-called 'human zoos' in the 19th century (Brändle, 2023; Dreesbach, 2005; Windischbauer, 2026). In early modern collections, these individuals, frequently categorized as *monstra*, were objectified alongside animals and artifacts, thus reflecting the asymmetrical power dynamic between the collectors and the collected. This practice sought not only to evoke visitors' curiosity towards the unfamiliar exhibit, but primarily to demonstrate the global dimensions of authority and cultural domination claimed by Europe's collecting potentates (Procter, 2020; Smith, 2021).

In this respect, the Cabinet of Art and Curiosities in Salzburg stands as a compelling example of this phenomenon, its genesis intertwined with the ambitious vision of the rulers of the ecclesiastical principality and state of Salzburg (see Krampl & Kühberger, 2016, for a similar perspective on Hellbrunn Palace). Dating back to the 17th century, this collection owes its establishment to prince-archbishop Guidobald von Thun (1616–1668), who initiated an expansion of his residence's representative rooms by aligning the façade of Saint Peter's Abbey with the palace, culminating in the creation of the Great Gallery (for the history of the construction see Hiller, 1981; Juffinger et al., 2008; Watteck, 1981). This architectural feature not only united both the residence, the abbey, and the Salzburg Cathedral, but also provided a space for the archbish-

1 Although the *DomQuartier* refers to the Cabinet as the "Chamber of Art and Curiosities" on the English version of its website, we will consistently use the term 'cabinet' throughout this text.

op’s growing collection of art and curiosities. Since the end of the Thirty Years’ War in 1648, the prince-archbishop of Salzburg—being the highest-ranking member of the ecclesiastical princes—has held the honorary title of *primas germaniae*, while also acting as the Emperor’s deputy at the Imperial Diet in Regensburg since 1662. Due to this exceptionally prominent position within the Holy Roman Empire, the establishment of a Cabinet of Art and Curiosities became an almost necessary asset for demonstrating the power of the prince-archbishop in the heart of his territory. The presence of European leaders and dignitaries—among them the prince-elector Ferdinand Maria of Bavaria (1636–1679) in 1659 and Emperor Leopold I (1640–1705) in 1665—must be considered in this context (Heinisch, 1988, p. 223). However, the Great Gallery and the Cabinet were only completed by his successor Max Gandolph von Kuenburg (1622–1687) around 1668, who is believed to have installed twelve glazed wooden showcases, seven of which have been preserved in place to this day (Ramharter, 2011, pp. 340–342; Watteck, 1975, p. 10; Watteck, 1981, p. 28).

As mentioned before, during diplomatic envoys, visits to the court or other representative occasions, the potentate could present his possessions from the alleged imagination from “all over the world” (Watteck, 1975, p. 9) displayed in these cabinets. It has been emphasized that the Great Gallery was not merely a passageway or corridor, connecting one part of the Cathedral complex with another, but rather a deliberately designed space intended to exhibit objects. According to Wagner (1983, p. 47), their purpose was to initiate or facilitate conversations or negotiations whenever high-ranking guests visited the prince-archbishop. Therefore, the Cabinet created a space where the prince-archbishop could not only engage with the intellectual currents of the time, but also reinforce his social status on both a local and European scale (see also Gollhammer, 2016). Eming and Münkler (2022, p. 4) highlight the importance of “performative elements”—such as the objects in cabinets—serving as instruments of “self-fashioning” among European princes, who engaged in a dynamic competition with one another for prestige and political legitimacy.

The Salzburg Provincial Archive (Salzburger Landesarchiv, SLA) still preserves three inventories of the Cabinet: The earliest surviving record dates from 1717 (SLA, GA XXIII, 69), followed by another from 1776 (SLA, GA XIII, 97), and the latest from 1805 (SLA, GHK XXVI, 7b). Together, they provide insight into the inventory of the collected items, the division and arrangement of the objects in the showcases, as well as the changes to the collections over time up until the secularization of the archbishopric and the resulting dispersal of holdings to Florence, Paris, Vienna, and Munich during and after the Coalition Wars (1792–1815) against the French Empire and its client states (Ramharter, 2011, p. 373, p. 377; Wagner, 1983, p. 47). Consequently, the precise provenance of the objects on display remains unclear. Only those items that can be directly traced from the inventories and are still preserved in institutions such as the Palazzo Pitti in Florence or the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien (Vienna Museum of Art and History), for instance, can be identified with certainty (see for these objects Ramharter 2011, pp. 340–376).

The present arrangement is the result of an unconventional and ambitious restoration carried out by Eleonora (*Nora*) Watteck (née Borri; 1901–1993) in the mid-1970s on the occasion of the creation of the Cathedral Museum, which has been part of the *DomQuartier* since 2014 (Wagner 1983, p. 47; see for the biography of the curator Zaisberger, 1995, pp. 869–870). Based on the inventories and the remaining black wooden cases, Watteck acquired early modern items from the art trade or borrowed them from private collections and the neighboring Archabbey of Saint Peter to reconstruct the Baroque style of the exhibit using the collections of Ambras (Tyrol) and Kremsmünster (Upper Austria) as examples (Watteck, 1975, p. 11). At the same time, she composed the cases along her personal interests by featuring, for instance, numerous rosaries and Marian crowns in the first showcase (Watteck, 1981, p. 30), which are notably absent from the historical inventories.

Although the archival records indeed reveal object groups made of various materials, such as minerals (Showcase II), technical devices (III), ivory works (IV), shells (V), rock crystals (VI), and ibex horns (VII), none of the original showcases are specifically dedicated to certain materials or item categories as in seen in today’s exhibition (see for the arrangement and the designations of the display cases the virtual tour of the DomQuartier, 2025). This distinction becomes even more apparent in the last two displays, which assemble a diverse range of unusual items under the categories of Seafaring (VIII) and Curiosities (IX), reflecting a more interpretative collection based on maritime themes and different ecosystems.

Figure 1: Showcase VIII: Seafaring

Figure 2: Showcase IX: Curiosities

In the following chapter, our focus will center on these two showcases and the objects situated in their immediate vicinity—placed atop of the showcases, on the walls, and ceilings, as well as between the window ledges—intending to establish a connection to the overarching themes presented in the Seafaring and Curiosities vitrines. Rather than examining individual objects and their provenance in detail, our analysis will prioritize the collection as an integrated whole, contextualizing it within broader frameworks of acquisition, representation, display, and labeling practices through a postcolonial lens.

3. Beyond curiosity: objects, animals, and the ‘Other’

“The renewed presentation of the Cabinet of Art and Curiosities must stylistically adhere to the conventions of the 17th century” (Watteck, 1981, p. 26). This statement by Watteck remains foundational to the current exhibition, shaping both the presentation of the objects and the curatorial interpretation of their historical context. This approach calls for a critical examination from both historical and postcolonial theoretical standpoints, raising questions about its implications for contemporary museological practices.

Both showcases are deeply connected with European expansion since the 16th century. In both the virtual tour and the onsite description, the Seafaring (*Seefahrt* in German) display is described as “dedicated to world discovery” (DomQuartier, 2025). In this context, the Mexican historian Edmundo O’Gorman opens one of his most fundamental works, *The Invention of America* (1958), with a striking provocation. Simulating the voices of indigenous communities upon the arrival of Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) in the Americas in 1492, O’Gorman states: “At last, someone has come to discover me!” (O’Gorman, 1958, p. 18). With this sarcastic yet philosophically meaningful statement, he underscores the significant distinction between Columbus’s belief that he had reached Asia and the subsequent European reframing of his voyage as the ‘discovery’ of an entirely ‘new’ continent. Therefore, this narrative is not an objective historical fact but rather a retroactive European interpretation of a fact that universal historiography has uncritically replicated for centuries in the form of the ‘discovery of America’. The inherent absurdity to which O’Gorman alludes in the erasure of the peoples of the Americas, who had existed long before European arrival, yet only became part of the European worldview through this so-called act of discovery. This exposes the profoundly Eurocentric nature of historical narratives, wherein the Americas are rendered effectively nonexistent until they are appropriated and named by Europeans. The Austrian-born American anthropologist Eric Wolf (1982) later captured this notion, highlighting how non-European societies have been systematically marginalized in the writing of world and global history.

In this sense, the showcases perpetuate the idea of the ‘discovery’ by displaying objects like globes, telescopes, and sundials, which emphasize the scientific enterprise underpinning European expansion around the world. Through the acquisition, categorization, and presentation of these artifacts, the prince-archbishop not only curated knowledge but also established a “connection to the events of the wider world”, as Watteck (1975, p. 9) stated, positioning himself as a scientific collector and agent of early modern global ambitions. The heroicized portrayal of Europeans crossing the oceans is reproduced in a similar vein, drawing on Watteck’s endeavor to reconstruct a 17th century presentation of objects in a Cabinet of Art and Curiosities. Therefore, the exhibition engages with multiple temporal layers: the *past*, *history* as a constructed narrative of that past, and the *present*—a division that amplifies its analytical rigor when examined through the critical framework of postcolonial studies.

This becomes particularly evident in the exhibition of taxidermied animals or parts of their remains. As expected, the Seafaring display features maritime specimens, including a pufferfish, a starfish, and parts of a sawfish. The Curiosities showcase consists mainly of so-called ‘exotic’ animals, such as a small crocodile, an armadillo, a parrot, a turtle, and a ray staged as a “dragon-like creature at the back” (DomQuartier, 2025). According to the inventory of 1717, some of these *naturalia* had already been part of the collection and on display at the beginning of the 18th century. The records list three different species of crocodiles (“Drey underschiedliche sorten von crocodiln”), one armadillo described as an “armoured mouse” (“Ain indiänische geharnischte maus”), one pufferfish (“Ain ausgebalter meerfisch”), and a fragment of an elephant’s tusk (“ein stuck von stain, ainem großen zahn gleichend”) (SLA, GA XIII, 97). These objects are similarly documented in the 1776 and 1805 inventories and remain part of the current exhibition (SLA, GA XIII, 97; SLA, GHK XXVI, 7b). Notably, a taxidermied zebra is specifically mentioned in the 1805 inventory but is absent from the modern display (see also the virtual tour of the DomQuartier, 2025).

Natural objects or animal-derived materials were often artistically transformed or incorporated into other artifacts, for instance, as drinking cups or furnishings. Notable examples include numerous items crafted from ivory, objects made of tortoiseshell, a coconut encased in fine silverwork (“Ain becher von ainer india-nischen nuß, mit ainem luckh in silber gefaßt”), as well as artifacts fashioned from coral or shell. In particular, narwhal tusks displayed as “unicorn horns” are consistently listed across all three inventories. While the 1717 inventory lists two large specimens (“Zway große ainkhürn-horn”) alongside another separate entry, totaling three horns, the

1805 inventory provides a precise physical measurement, describing them as seven to nine feet long ("von 7 – 9 schuh lang"). The earlier inventories even specify their exact placement atop ("Auf denen kästen") or adjacent to the showcases ("Ausser den kässten"), whereas the 1805 inventory omits such locational details. However, its introductory notes mention the collection's transfer to another room, indicating a complete relocation for safekeeping amid the political upheavals and the repeated changes of rule during the Napoleonic Period (SLA, GHK XXVI, 7b).

It is worth noting that a significant number of objects unrecorded in the inventories are present in the current exhibition, especially those placed atop, around, and close to the showcases. Yet some of them correspond with the designated themes, such as a painting of a fish from 1599 displayed over the Seafaring showcase, a stuffed fish suspended from the ceiling, as well as two turtle shells positioned on the walls in immediate proximity to the displays (see Habersatter, 2016, on the depiction of animals in Hellbrunn Palace with reference to the fish paitings). On top of the Curiosities showcase, a peacock is placed in the center, accompanied by two birds on its left and right. However, certain objects diverge from the thematic coherence of their assigned showcases: for instance, a small leopard-like feline and a capuchin monkey clad in an ornate cape rise above the Seafaring display.

Figure 3: The capuchin monkey on top of the Seafaring showcase

While their provenance remains undocumented, their placement likely reflects Nora Watteck's 1970s reinterpretation of the collection, which recreated a Baroque-era vision of 'the exotic', 'the curious', and, more broadly, 'the Other', perpetuating ahistorical fantasies of non-European landscapes (Watteck, 1981, p. 27). Although monkeys had already been domesticated as "expensive high-status" companions and were "widely available in Western Europe from the twelfth century" onwards (Walker-Meikle, 2012, p. 13), capuchins—originating from South America—only reached Europe in the 17th century to serve as living *exotica* in courtly menageries and subjects of anatomical research (Kahlow, 2018, p. 94, pp. 96–100). The Habsburg court of Emperor Rudolf II (1552–1612) at Ambras Castle, for instance, maintained two monkey houses alongside other prized animals like guinea pigs and lions (Kahlow, 2018, p. 93), suggesting that the prince-archbishops of Salzburg might have similarly kept primates despite the lack of documentary traces. This assumption is supported by artistic depictions found at Hellbrunn Palace, the prince-archbishops' summer residence, where monkeys appear both as woodcarvings from around 1750 in the Mechanical Theater and as a chained monkey in the fresco of the banquet hall (Grillitsch & Hannesschläger, 2016, p. 74). Strikingly, the capuchin's absence from historical records becomes pivotal and reveals its symbolic function within the exhibition: lavishly costumed and fitted with a small bell that audibly rendered its presence, the monkey embodies a dual exoticization—initially as a domesticated colonial animal import from the 'the Americas', and subsequently as a curated artifact in Watteck's baroque-like Cabinet of Wonders. Thus, the capuchin monkey now emerges as both a scientific specimen and an allegory of otherness.

As theorized by Edward Said (1995/1978), the construction of 'the other' is also evident through the Egyptian artifacts—a small mummy as well as several miniature statues and stone figurines—that, although absent from the inventories of 1717, 1767, and 1805, entered the collection in the 19th century or even as late as during the period of Watteck's reconstruction. Their presentation can be interpreted as a manifestation of an exotic imaginary constructed through a Eurocentric perspective and interpretation of cultures along the Middle East and North African region. As such, it embodies the orientalist framework identified by Said, wherein non-European cultures were appropriated, aestheticized, and recontextualized to affirm European notions of cultural supremacy and fascination with the 'exotic other'.

Finally, questions concerning the classification, documentation, and provenance of the exhibited objects arise. As noted earlier, not all objects currently on display in Salzburg's Cabinet of Art and Curiosities were part of the original collection, such as the Egyptian artifacts, tools used in agriculture, along with ceramics or objects featuring decorative designs.

Figure 4: Insights into the Curiosities showcase

Figure 5: Insights into the Curiosities showcase

The specific circumstances of their acquisition—whether through purchase, exchange, or under conditions shaped by asymmetrical power relations, such as forced appropriation in a colonial context—are often difficult, if not impossible, to determine. This raises the question of how such objects should be handled today. Museums across Europe are increasingly examining the colonial contexts of their collections, especially when individuals from the Global South encounter, often for the first time, objects belonging to their ancestors or cultural heritage, which are now held and interpreted by European cultural institutions. In 2023, an international advisory committee appointed by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Arts, Culture, the Civil Service and Sport recommended "supporting research into the participation of the Habsburg Monarchy in pan-European colonialism" and suggested in particular to look on how collections from colonial contexts are handled within Austria's federal museums (Federal Ministry for Arts, Culture, the Civil Service and Sport, 2023, p. 24).

4. Conclusion

What exactly distinguishes the Salzburg Cabinet of Art and Curiosities? Returning to Watteck's initial assertion, the collection remains anchored in Baroque tradition, although many objects typically associated with early modern cabinets, such as alchemistic and technical instruments, were absent from the original display except for two clockworks (Ramharter 2011, p. 341). Strikingly, these alongside maritime and 'New World' objects now occupy prominent places in dedicated showcases, highlighting the juxtaposition between the historical objects of the time and the contemporary curatorial reconstruction. One plausible explanation for this distinctive composition lies in the elevated position of the archbishops of Salzburg within the Holy Roman Empire—a status they sought to manifest externally through their prestigious collection as a form of political self-fashioning. Yet, the Salzburg Cabinet emphasized "regional distinctiveness" (Wagner, 1983, p. 44) over universal encyclopedic themes, setting it apart from regional counterparts like Ambras Castle. Notably, the Cabinet resisted its transformation towards a place of study (*Lehrkammer*) in the spirit of the European Enlightenment (Dolezel et al., 2018; Eming & Münkler, 2022, p. 3), favoring a path of preservation that can also be seen in today's exhibition. Watteck's 1970s curatorial work initially appears to offer a tangible connection to this past, trying to rebuild and conserve the baroque identity of the Cabinet, but it does not accurately represent the exhibition of the time. Instead, Watteck merely provides a particular interpretation of an early modern cabinet of art and curiosities, one that reflects contemporary assumptions about the Baroque era and embodies a preconceived, Eurocentric image of the past.

Finally, the challenge today lies in examining both the potential and the institutional responsibilities entailed in hosting a cabinet of art and curiosities and the presentation of its objects. For example, how can a highly constructivist exhibition format, such as the one currently on display in Salzburg, be reimagined or reshaped as a site of information, reflection, and become a space open for a critical deconstruction of the Eurocentric narratives and visual impressions it conveys? Rather than merely preserving a curated projection of the past, such a space can serve as an invitation to interrogate how knowledge production, cultural hierarchies, and practices of collecting are discussed in public. This calls for ambitious curatorial approaches that not only acknowledge the constructed nature of the display but also actively promote critical engagement with the colonial legacies embedded in the exhibition itself, including Austria's still underexplored colonial past.

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Ethical statement

Our institution does not require ethics approval for reporting individual cases or case series.

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How to use image interpretation scaffolds in history classrooms

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Abstract

Images, particularly photographs, are ubiquitous in history education, offering opportunities for fostering historical reasoning. However, adolescents often engage with images passively and superficially, rather than thoroughly and critically examining them. This article introduces two image interpretation scaffolds – sequenced and flexible – that can support adolescent students in the analysis and interpretation of visual historical sources. Connecting integration of the scaffolds to didactical frameworks, this overview discusses how they can promote active inquiry and critical reasoning. Further, this article shows the complementary role of internet search and AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) in fostering deeper engagement during the analysis and interpretation with the scaffolds. Practical recommendations are provided for history educators to use the sequenced and flexible image interpretation scaffolds effectively, enabling students to view reasoning about and with images not merely as a passive process but as an active inquiry of the past.

Keywords

Image interpretation, image analysis, internet research, historical reasoning, classroom teaching

1. Introduction and aims

In history education images are popular, on average three per lesson are shown (Bernhard, 2017). Used images are photographs, reconstruction drawings, historical images, art works, cartoons, and posters. Among these, photographs are the most used. This aligns with the rise of digital photography, where taking, editing and sharing images online is part of everyday life. Especially adolescents not only produce but inform and communicate through photographs (Külling-Knecht et al., 2024).

Given the prevalence of photographs in adolescents' lives, one would expect that critical analysis and interpretation skills would be emphasized in the history classroom. Uncontextualized or edited images can mislead students, creating distorted perceptions of the past and present (Krammer, 2008). Current AI tools intensify this problem, because they not only allow for image editing but can also generate entirely new images (Spengler, 2024). To counter this, developing competencies of historical reasoning by connecting the past to the present and future through questioning, analyzing, and interpreting sources is one of the major aims of history education (Schreiber et al., 2006; Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008).

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However, research shows that critical image analysis and interpretation skills are rarely cultivated in history classrooms: Adolescents often inspect images superficially and struggle to contextualize them (Bernhardt, 2007; Wolfrum & Sauer, 2007). Looking at classroom practices reveals that textbooks and teachers seldomly assign tasks that require a thorough examination of images. Instead, images are often used for illustrative purposes rather than for discussion and contextualization (Bernhardt, 2023). Hence, this may hinder students' active engagement with images and possibly foster cognitive shortcuts leading to confirmation/explanation bias (McCullagh, 2000). These biases occur when individuals rely on perceived or sought-after information that corresponds with their prior experiences and beliefs, limiting their capacity to critically evaluate new perspectives (Wolfrum & Sauer, 2007).

To help students when learning with images, image interpretation scaffolds were developed (Ormond, 2011). Although image interpretation scaffolds can foster adolescents' historical reasoning (Van Loon & Waldis, 2024), their integration into classroom settings requires further discussion. This article aims to explore how to use these scaffolds in history classrooms to engage adolescents actively in critical historical reasoning with images.

2. Image interpretation scaffolds

2.1 Reasoning about and with images

Reasoning historically about and with images is challenging and includes complex processes such as perception, analysis and interpretation (Rouet et al. 1996; Van Loon et al., 2024). Lange (2011) showed that these individual processes overlap and may therefore occur simultaneously. However, to facilitate students' learning with images, these processes can be trained separately with the support of image interpretation scaffolds and might improve the transition from analysis to interpretation (Van Loon & Waldis, 2024).

When reasoning about images students need to critically analyze the source and assess the value and the limits of its information in an objective way, including the recognition of the author's perspective and aims as well as the context in which the source was produced. Image interpretation scaffolds guide students during the analysis, as shown by Van Loon and Waldis (2024). However, the process of critical historical reasoning does not stop with the analysis. A thorough analysis forms the foundation and must inherently aim toward interpretation as its ultimate purpose (Hamman, 2007; Schreiber, 2007).

When reasoning with images students select relevant information from the source to address their research question, constructing explanations that connect the past to the present with justified subjective positions (Van Loon et al., 2024). The benefits of the scaffolds for the interpretation are inconsistent and might depend on the type of image and the information available or found on the internet (Van Loon & Waldis, 2024).

Besides analysis and interpretation, training students' visual skills should be a complementary goal when learning with images and scaffolds (Bernhardt, 2018). Research shows that students often focus on central, striking, or familiar elements, such as faces, while overlooking finer details (Bauer & Schwan, 2018; Labischová, 2018). To address this, students need strategies for identifying image details and understanding overall composition, e.g., by scanning images holistically rather than focusing on specific elements.

2.2 Sequenced and flexible image interpretation scaffold

The most common image interpretation scaffolds in history education are based on guidelines by the art historian Panofsky (1939/2018), who differentiates between three sequential steps (see table 1 from a history textbook, Aeby et al., 2017, p. 104): Pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconological interpretation (Hamann, 2012). In Panofsky's scaffold, image description focuses on the denotation (what is shown), and iconographical analysis refers to the connotation (how something is shown, considering cultural conventions). Iconological interpretation addresses the image's broader cultural meaning, including the ideas, beliefs, and feelings of that period (Pfisterer, 2020; Schmidt-Maiwald, 2018). Panofsky's sequenced scaffold has an easily applicable step-by-step structure. This might be why this approach still occupies a prominent position in education (Schmidt-Maiwald, 2018). Through time, Panofsky's scaffold

has been adapted and extended by several authors from history education by maintaining its progressive steps and including didactic questions (Fink, 2023).

Table 1: An example of sequenced image interpretation scaffold

Evaluate an image source in three steps	
1. Describe the picture:	• Note all the people, objects, and symbols depicted in the picture. • How are the people dressed, how are they behaving? • What is in the foreground and what is placed in the background? • Are there people or objects that are in a special light? • What questions do you have when you look at the picture?
2. Explain the content:	• What do you know about the event, the people in the picture, and the artist who created the picture? • When was the picture created? • If symbols are shown, what do they mean? • Where is the picture shown (newspaper, church...), and to whom is it addressed? • Where is the picture shown (newspaper, church...), and to whom is it addressed? • Tip: If you don‘t already have this information, find it out on the internet or in the library.
3. Interpret the picture:	• Now combine the information from the first and second step. • Write down the statement that you wanted to make with this picture. • What is the meaning of the colors in the picture? What feelings should be conveyed? • Are there objects or creatures that represent something? Why did you choose these repesentatives?

To support self-structured image interpretation and critical reasoning, a flexible scaffold was developed. This scaffold is based on guidelines for art historians to inspect and analyze images (Bätschmann, 2009), and has been adapted by Van Loon and Waldis (2024) (see figure 1). The developed flexible scaffold consists of two circles. The inner image circle describes questions as guidelines for visual inspection. The outer context circle suggests questions about information not visible in the image that require further research. With the circular structure, the flexible scaffold aims to give students more autonomy than with the sequenced scaffold: They decide with which questions, and at which circle they start their analysis. Importantly, the flexible scaffold supports critical reasoning by emphasizing the context of the image. It engages students in linking an image to a historical event/phenomenon and its present relevance while prompting critical analysis of trustworthiness and historical accuracy.

Flexible Scaffold

Inner image circle = conclusions through visual inspection (what you can see)
Outer context circle = conclusions through additional information (what you cannot see > research)

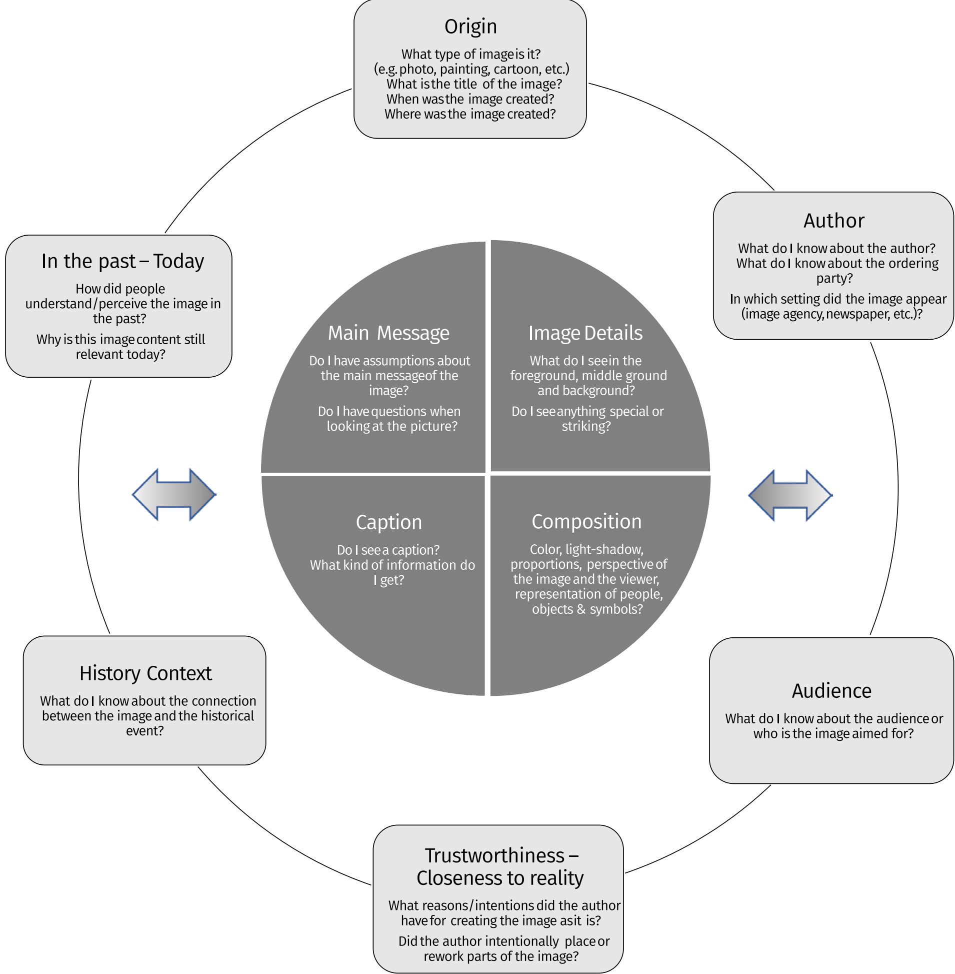

Figure 1: Flexible image interpretation scaffold

When comparing the sequenced and flexible scaffolds, each offers benefits and addresses specific challenges. Van Loon and Waldis (2024) and Van Loon et al. (2025) explored their differences, respective strengths and weaknesses in detail. Instead, this article focuses on examining the didactical framework within which these scaffolds can be effectively utilized for analysis and interpretation in the history classroom. First, general findings on learning with images are presented. Second, possibilities for implementing scaffolds in combination with digital media and historical writing are discussed.

3. Practical applications

3.1 Inquiry learning with images

Inquiry learning (Van Boxtel et al., 2021) engages students in historical reasoning by making them responsible for actively investigating document sets of multiple historical sources. This

approach mirrors historians' disciplinary practice, as students ask questions, analyze sources as evidence, and interpret them with arguments (Monte-Sano & De La Paz, 2012; Van Boxtel et al., 2021). Research suggests it positively impacts historical reasoning, enhancing students' analysis and interpretation of sources (Britt & Aglinskas, 2002; Wiley & Voss, 1999).

The opportunity to combine visual with text sources seems promising for learning, because it can motivate and deepen students' understanding (Mayer, 2005; Prangsma et al., 2008). However, it might also be challenging for learners to use visual and text sources, because they need elaborate competencies including image and text comprehension skills (Van Loon et al., 2024). Thus, the integration of both might be overwhelming and hinder learning, especially for weak learners or students with low prior knowledge (Renkl & Scheiter, 2017). Further, students tend to ignore visual in favor of text information (Van Loon & Waldis, 2024; Wolfrum & Sauer, 2007).

Few studies have used images in document sets, and those mostly illustrate text content rather than serve as independent sources (Van Loon et al., 2024).

3.1.1 Single- and multi-image document sets

Selecting historical images for document sets that prompt inquiry, rather than just illustrate events, is challenging. Simple images may be overlooked; overly complex ones can overwhelm students or lead to misjudgments (Bernhardt, 2006). One solution is using "images within images" (e.g., posters or propaganda) to encourage closer inspection (Van Loon & Waldis, 2024). Captions in teaching materials are often incomplete (Bernhardt, 2017; Kaufmann, 1992), but treating images as primary sources requires including author, type, origin, and format (Bernhardt, 2023). Editing choices, like cropping, should also be noted to avoid misrepresenting historical moments (e.g., the 1972 photo of Kim Phúc by Nick Ut; see Paul, 2005).

To reduce complexity, document sets could include only one primary historical image. Nonetheless, research shows that students struggle to analyze and interpret a single image without supplementary information (Bernhardt, 2023). This can be provided through explanatory texts, for example from history (online) textbooks. Yet in everyday life, adolescents often encounter images without access to contextual information. It is therefore crucial that they learn to critically analyze images and apply these skills independently, even without scaffolds.

Another opportunity to train students' image interpretation skills is the use of document sets with at least two or more images (Sauer, 2000). When using more than one image, the chance that students perceive an image as a "window to the past" can be reduced (Buntz & Erdmann, 2004). Having multiple perspectives of the same event evokes the question of truth and will lead to a closer inspection of the images by identifying similarities and differences. For example, there exist several print graphics showing different perspectives on the beheading of Charles I. of England of 1649 (Kaufmann, 1992, p. 662); or the comparison of election posters with pro and contra arguments. Through investigating these images, students discover that authors' perspectives are shaped by diverse intentions and motivations, revealing a more complex truth than initially assumed (Bergmann, 2016). This shows the power of images, particularly photographs, which can be wielded to manipulate beliefs due to their rapid production and dissemination. While working with document sets containing two or more images appears promising, further research is needed to assess their potential for fostering image interpretation skills.

3.2 Integrating image interpretation scaffolds with digital media

Effective image analysis goes beyond using scaffolds, it also requires an information literacy, especially when engaging with digital media. Both image interpretation scaffolds encourage searching information about the image context. This demands extra information and given that digital media are omnipresent in adolescents' lives, they should be prompted to seek relevant content independently (Scheiter, 2021). Research suggests that internet-based inquiry enhances student motivation, which can foster deeper engagement with images (Mares et al., 2020). However, the ability to navigate the internet successfully depends on an elaborated information literacy. This encompasses not only discovering and understanding information but also critically evaluating its credibility and relevance (Dolničar et al., 2020). Despite its importance, Dolničar et al. (2020) highlight challenges in adolescents' ability to assess the trustworthiness of information, particularly in online searches.

In history education, studies indicate that adolescents rarely evaluate the reliability of either historical sources or online sources such as websites (Van der Eem et al., 2024). This lack of evaluation skills affects their ability to contextualize images accurately, which can lead to

incorrect inferences which hinder a successful interpretation. Therefore, addressing the challenges of source evaluation is crucial for fostering students' information literacy, as it is closely linked to critical thinking and historical reasoning competencies (Luís & Rapanta, 2020; Tirado-Olivares et al., 2023).

Evaluating information is relevant not only in academic settings but also in everyday life. Adolescents frequently encounter information through messengers and social media (Külling-Knecht et al., 2024), where visual content, images and videos, attracts more attention than text and enhances the perceived credibility (Cao et al., 2020; Newman & Schwarz, 2024). Due to these characteristics, images, particularly photographs, are often manipulated or misused to spread disinformation. They can be digitally altered or generated by AI, repurposed in a misleading context, or accompanied by false claims (Cao et al., 2020). Additionally, photographs are often embedded in text-based narratives, requiring critical viewers to analyze not only the image itself and its context but also the accompanying textual information (Newman & Schwarz, 2024).

Given these challenges, image interpretation scaffolds alone may not be sufficient to foster students' critical historical reasoning. Wineburg's (1991) *corroboration* heuristic (comparing the content of the source with other sources) could complement image interpretation scaffolds. For example, by comparing images, as multiple photographs of the same event may be available today or by investigating the relationship between images and the accompanied text (Newman & Schwarz, 2024). Also, the extension of corroboration, the *lateral reading* strategy (cross-referencing internet sources for reliability) by Wineburg and McGrew (2017) can be resourceful when contextualizing the image using the internet.

Van der Eem et al. (2024) suggest that evaluating skills are transferable across contexts, whether evaluating historical sources or internet sources. Future research should explore whether image interpretation skills developed through scaffolds transfer to broader contexts, such as evaluating photographs in everyday digital environments (e.g., social media). If so, history educators should integrate diverse image types from both academic and informal contexts to strengthen students' critical literacy skills. For example, analyzing and interpreting social media images might enhance students' awareness of the necessity for critical reasoning, thereby supporting its transfer to historical images.

The advent of AI and large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT further underscores the importance of evaluating trustworthiness. ChatGPT's human-like interactions and rapid access to information can lead to overtrust and a lack of critical scrutiny (Lalot & Bertram, 2024; Virvou et al., 2024). Users must be aware that AI tools can generate/perpetuate inaccurate, biased, or false information, known as AI hallucinations, and should therefore develop an understanding of how LLMs function and recognize their limitations (Mondal & Mondal, 2023). Nevertheless, using ChatGPT for image analysis can be beneficial: Instant access to information enhances students' motivation and encourages them to engage in more thorough research and critical examination. This, in turn, could help train adolescents' visual skills when AI is used as a learning assistant. Xie et al. (2021) suggest that AI and chatbots hold promise for educational learning processes. Regarding image analysis, ChatGPT can function as a learning assistant, providing just-in-time feedback and individualized coaching based on an image interpretation scaffold, potentially fostering students' critical thinking (Suriano et al., 2025; Walter, 2024). This could be achieved through interactive student engagement during AI-assisted discussions, prompting learners to ask comprehensive questions and consider different perspectives (Mierwald, 2024). For example, ChatGPT could be utilized in an interactive role-play where the AI takes on the role of a historian guiding the student through an image analysis. A potential prompt for such a role-play could be:

> Hello ChatGPT. We are doing an interactive role-play where I am the student, and you are the historian playing the role of the learning assistant. Together we will analyze the image of *The Louisville Flood* by Margaret Bourke-White based on the uploaded scaffold. You will answer my questions about the image analysis and adapt your responses accordingly, using Socratic questioning to guide me without providing direct solutions. Additionally, please inform me about the sources you reference so I can verify and extend my research. Further, ask only one question at a time and provide feedback if my answers are incomplete or incorrect.

Although this role-play approach with ChatGPT appears promising for well-documented images, AI tools are likely to be less effective for analyzing previously unresearched images. This limitation, together with AI hallucinations risks, highlight the continued need for human critical thinking and historical reasoning skills in image interpretation.

3.3 Consolidating learning through historical writing

History students are rarely assigned writing tasks that promote deep reflection on images (Bernhardt, 2017). Writing helps slow down rushed analysis and supports more thoughtful interpretation. This aligns with the writing-to-learn approach, which sees writing as a problem-solving process that engages students in deep inquiry and can enhance both learning and academic performance (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2004).

Historical writing involves evaluating sources and developing evidence-based arguments through how and why questions, fostering historical reasoning rather than just collecting facts (De la Paz et al., 2017; Van Drie et al., 2015). Research showed that writing has positive effects for the domain of history (Boscolo & Mason, 2001; Voss & Wiley, 1997). Thus, implementing image interpretation scaffolds in combination with writing tasks seems promising: Whilst analyzing an image with an interpretation scaffold, students can make notes on the scaffolds by answering the inherent questions. For the interpretation, students can write their own meaningful essay by including the results of analysis.

AI tools like ChatGPT can further support students' historical writing. Research shows that ChatGPT facilitates and supports writing processes when planning, writing or revising text by correcting sentences/paragraphs or making suggestions for improvement (Imran & Almusharraf, 2023). Additionally, studies by Tirado-Olivares et al. (2023) and Kindenberg (2024) demonstrate that ChatGPT outperformed students in writing argumentative essays, having higher scores in historical reasoning. Nonetheless, historical writing is not about outsourcing work or meaning-making to AI; it requires active and critical engagement with sources to understand the past, and its relevance to the present (De la Paz et al., 2017).

Therefore, history educators should design tasks where AI serves as a supportive tool, helping students structure arguments and refine writing, while ensuring that independent historical reasoning and critical engagement with sources remain central. To preserve originality, students should draft independently before using ChatGPT and treat its output as a revisable draft (Lingard, 2023). They can also instruct ChatGPT to retain their own wording. To further refine and personalize AI-generated responses, students can use incremental prompting, providing multiple, iterative prompts to guide the AI toward more precise or context-specific results. However, this process requires domain-specific knowledge to critically evaluate the output, a skill that students may not yet possess (Lingard, 2023). Thus, guiding students in the responsible, effective use of AI tools in historical writing is a key responsibility for educators (Crawford et al., 2023), as well-used AI can deepen students' historical understanding and writing proficiency (Kindenberg, 2024; Levine et al., 2024).

Overall, especially in interpretation, AI can meaningfully extend image interpretation scaffolds by supporting students' historical writing with images. This allows them to focus more on content, argumentation, and critical thinking rather than being burdened by the cognitive load of writing demands (Avello et al., 2024; Sweller & Chandler, 1994).

4. Conclusion: Image interpretation scaffolds in history classrooms

By integrating scaffolds with digital tools and historical writing, educators can transform how students engage with images. These scaffolds provide a framework for moving beyond surface-level observations, encouraging students to critically analyze and interpret images through structured and active inquiry. Digital resources, such as internet research and AI tools like ChatGPT, can amplify this process by offering immediate access to contextual information, fostering deeper engagement, and supporting critical evaluation of sources.

AI holds potential for enhancing historical writing. Tools like ChatGPT can guide students through the writing process, offering real-time feedback, suggesting improvements, and alleviating cognitive load by assisting with structural and linguistic challenges. This allows learners to focus on the substantive aspects of historical reasoning, such as constructing arguments, evaluating evidence, and connecting the past to the present. By complementing scaffolds with AI, students might not only develop stronger analytical skills but also gain the confidence to articulate their interpretations in more nuanced and reflective ways.

Integrating these approaches shifts image interpretation and historical writing from passive activities to dynamic, inquiry-driven processes. Together, they can foster critical thinking, historical reasoning, and information literacy. Future research should explore how this integration impacts learning outcomes and engagement across diverse educational contexts, ensuring that students are well-equipped to navigate the complexities of history and its images.

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Teaching history beyond borders

Contextualizing international history teacher training focusing on heritage, moral aspects, inclusion and emotion networking

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Abstract

This article explores the development and outcomes of an international history teacher training course initiated by researchers from Germany, The Netherlands, and Sweden. The course, part of the European University consortium *EUniWell*, aims to enhance teacher students' international experiences and knowledge by facilitating encounters between students from European countries. The course focuses on heritage as a central theme, theoretically framed by moral aspects, inclusion, and emotion networking in heritage and citizenship education. Through online seminars and one on-site week, held in Cologne, students engaged in international groups, visited heritage sites, and developed teaching materials. The course emphasized the importance of multiperspectivity, critical thinking, and cultural reflection in history education. Evaluations revealed positive student experiences, highlighting the value of international collaboration and the impact of heritage on learning. The findings suggest that integrating moral perspectives and inclusive practices in history education can foster democratic citizenship and enhance educational outcomes.

Keywords

History teaching, heritage, moral perspectives, inclusion, emotion networking

1 Introduction

History teaching is mainly a national issue and there are certain differences between countries. Besides, history teaching has often been used for fostering students in nationalistic ways, which is still the case in some countries (e.g. Bellatalla et al. 2022; Hutchins 2016; Jaskułowski et al. 2018;). In spite of different traditions and different school systems, European countries are parts

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of a European heritage and share in many ways common values and identity. When it comes to higher education, the European Union's ambitions of collaboration between countries have been raised during the last 20 years in terms of the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area.

However, internationalization is not prominent in teacher education because of national differences and teacher students seldom encounter or experience other school systems or teaching practices outside their own countries. To increase teacher students' international experiences and knowledge, three History didactics researchers from Germany, The Netherlands and Sweden met in 2022 and decided to establish a joint course with the purpose to facilitate encounters between teacher students from European countries in order to increase knowledge about teaching challenges and each other's school systems. The course was developed within the context of the European University Initiative consortium EUniWell, *European University for Wellbeing*. In the EUniWell consortium teacher education is a prioritized arena.

The main theme for the course and the collaboration was chosen against the backdrop of the challenges and threats in present time. In several European countries there are tensions related to migration, (failed) integration, extremist political movements and a distrust in institutions and democracy. The societal "contract" seems to be questioned. Accordingly, a theme with potential to stimulate engagement and discussions about the past and relations to the present could be a way to develop teaching about narratives and objects, relevant for Europeans. The topic Heritage was chosen as the theme of the course. By exploring national and European heritage, common and varying narratives and different interpretations can be discussed (Logtenberg et al. 2024). Heritage could also help understanding identity and perceptions in other countries as one way to make meaning in teaching and learning.

In this miniature, we present and discuss the theoretical frameworks of the international course. The focus is on moral aspects, inclusion, and emotion networking as educational practices in heritage and citizenship education. We will also report on learning outcomes and students' reflections on international collaboration when exploring history education through heritage.

2 Week in Cologne

So far, the seminars have been held twice in Cologne with students from Germany, The Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain, Sweden and Ukraine. In order to make the internationality a reality, groups were formed in online sessions before the actual meetings, with the aim of creating groups that were as heterogeneous as possible. This applied to both nationality and level of experience. A special feature of the work was that students in the early stages of their studies took part in the course alongside those who already had teaching experience and were pursuing postgraduate studies. It was therefore a 'novice-expert setting' in which not only the intercultural perspective was taken into account, but also the perspectives of the other group members and their needs at their respective levels of experience. The joint work was characterised by working together on a cultural phenomenon of remembrance and developing tasks that would work in all countries. The aim was for international and diverse groups of student teachers to design lessons or learning tasks that incorporated international heritage, fostered historical reasoning around moral issues, and promoted the inclusion of all learners. In particular, questions of a 'common and shared heritage' were taken up and reflected upon where specific regional conditions were discussed. In addition to the classic seminar work, local heritage sites were visited, such as the NS Documentation Centre in Cologne, a former Gestapo prison that is now a memorial and cultural institution, or monuments linked to 'dark histories' such as the Monument of the Grey Busses (van der Heide & Wilkening 2025). The programme also included a day trip to Amsterdam, where the Maritime Museum was examined from a post-colonial perspective, focusing on power structures in European societies.

3 Moral perspectives

Heritage sites and narratives are often manifestations of special occasions, agents, activities or memories with a focus on success or tragedies – what was considered good or bad, and what could still be considered good or bad. The narratives or expressions of heritage make meaning

to people, in different ways (Colby, 2008; Foster and Yeager, 1998; Löfström, 2014). Encounters with heritage provide possibilities for reflections, and also to feel related to something or to distance from it (Grever et al. 2012). People are fascinated by difficult or contested pasts with moral aspects involved. This is perceived as meaning-making and relevant, because it touches upon and challenges human perceptions and interpretations (Ammert et al. 2020). It is important to underline that moral perspectives do not mean to moralize or to judge people or societies in the past from a present point of view, it means to reflect on what message the heritage sends and how it could be interpreted. Moral perspectives can facilitate encounters with another time and with different ways of treating people (Ammert et al. 2022). Heritage as traditions, rules of conduct, concepts and experiences are mediated and made comprehensible in encounters between temporal dimensions, the past, the present and perspectives on the future (Rüsen, 2004). Milligan et al. (2018, p. 470) argue that "for example, when students assess historical actions, when they seek to understand others' perspectives, or when they consider how best to move forward from the past, they move into the practice of ethics". Situations when moral values or acceptable conduct have been challenged or violated, increase interest in the past and provide opportunities for interconnections between time layers. Teachers must be prepared and have skills to organize teaching and to help pupils perceive and interpret moral reflections and reactions in relation to heritage.

4 Inclusion perspectives

Another central focus laid on reflecting upon and developing inclusive educational settings. Again, an international perspective was extremely important, as there are big differences in the implementation of inclusion across Europe. In some countries, there is still an exclusionary school system, such as in Germany, where a narrow understanding of inclusion—namely the issue of integrating children and young people with disabilities into schools—remains the primary focus. Meanwhile, in many other countries an inclusive school system has already been widely implemented and the focus is rather on questions of a broad understanding of inclusion. Representative for such broad approaches are general questions about the development of offers for the diverging needs of all students (Haug, 2016; Schwab, 2020). The teaching materials developed in the course were also considered in the light of this broad understanding of inclusion, which addressed diversity in general. With a particular focus on heritage education, inclusion also means countering the international increase in social polarisation and the spread of exclusionary ideologies. In this respect, there is indeed a didactic gap. There have long been calls for heritage education to expand educational offers for children and young people — both in and out of school, with and without special needs — while considering their full range of skills and capabilities. However, little is known about the effectiveness of such inclusive actions. Particularly in the context of a heterogeneous society and inclusive demands, the question of how heritage institutions can make their offerings accessible to a broad public is also of great importance, as it is unclear whether all groups are always reached. The materials available to date are therefore often in a testing phase (Barsch & Nitschke, 2023). Nevertheless, inclusive thinking was at the heart of the seminar's work. How can access to cultural heritage be designed so that all students, with their individual abilities and skills, can benefit from it? What scaffolding and universal design of learning measures are needed? A particular challenge of these approaches was to think not only about common differentiation measures on different levels, but also more fundamentally about how to design shared learning environments in inclusive settings (Smets, 2024; Steinbock & Dibbits, 2023; Barsch, Rein & Wilkening, 2025).

5 Emotion networking as an educational practice in heritage and citizenship education

Besides other learning activities such as discussions and lesson design, we applied the educational practice of emotion networking. When being confronted with sensitive or contested heritage like monuments, 'places of memory', objects, or symbols, this practice offers the possibility to create an inclusive learning space and to share both emotions and knowledge about heritage in a structured and protocolled way.

Emotion networking was developed around 2020 by Hester Dibbits of the Amsterdam Reinwardt Academy and Marlous Willemsen of the Amsterdam Institute ImagineIC (Dibbits, 2023). It was inspired by network approaches like the Actor Network Theory (ANT) in which agency is attributed to both human and non-human objects like heritage in our case, and the approach of Ulf Hannerz in his book Exploring the City: Inquiries Toward an Urban Anthropology (1983). The grid of the emotion network was created after the example of the 'Circumplex Model of Affect' by the American psychologist James Russell (1980).

Emotion networking as an educational practice shows the complexity of different individual emotions and prevents the sometimes persistent bipolarity of collective emotional stances towards the heritage object or cultural use of a symbol. At the same time, it conveys that emotions may change by interacting and adding multiple perspectives. As such, emotion networking provides insights into the interactions both between the participants, and between the participants and the heritage item, showing a network of emotions (Dibbits, 2023).

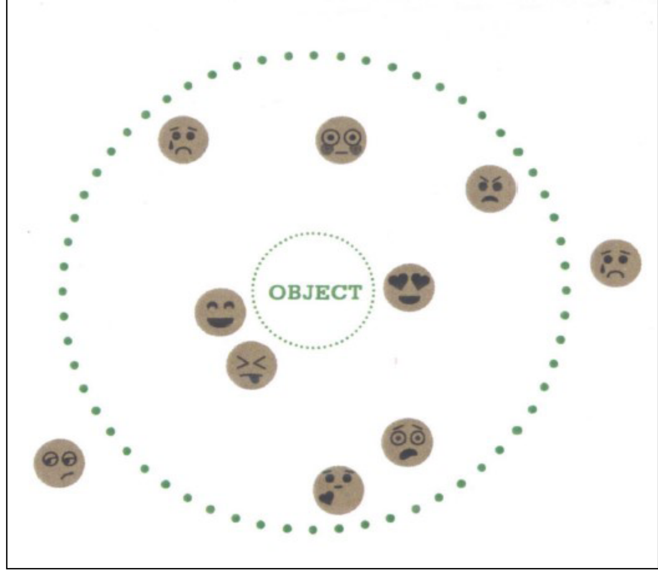
The method of emotion networking can be interpreted as an operationalization of the concept of dynamic heritage, as coined by the late historian Willem Frijhoff (2007). In this respect, heritage is not mere a collection of past vestiges but has a fluid and dynamic meaning as it is defined by people and societies and framed in a cultural and political setting. The meaning of heritage is thus a product of a negotiation process. This concept of dynamic heritage sustains historical thinking skills in an educational setting (Grever & Van Boxtel, 2014), like the awareness of historicity, presence, and empathy with various perspectives.

The practice of emotion networking provides people to deal with the complexity that surrounds heritage, and to supply them "with the tools they need to take a meta-perspective when engaging with the past" (Dibbits 2023). The overall goal is – in the words of the developers Dibbits and Willemsen – to become "heritage wise", acquiring "a competence that enables people to critically relate to heritage and discuss it, by paying attention to the social dynamics surrounding heritage and their own and others' position in relationship to it" (Dibbits, 2020; Nordgren, 2016). In the context of our course, also moral and inclusion perspectives are addressed.

Emotion networking can be organized both on paper and in space. When emotion networking on paper, participants position their emotion(s) as a point in a circle along two dimensions of valence and arousal. When emotion networking in space (like in a classroom or in a public space), the participants gather around the object, showing their stronger or weaker emotion by choosing a relative position towards the heritage object. The point of a personal emotional stance can be made visible by stepping forward or backward, or by putting images of emojis in front of them.

In October 2024, a group of 20 international students in our course, visited the Monument of the Grey Buses in Cologne which commemorates the victims and perpetrators of the T4 action organized by the Nazi regime between 1940 and 1941. The grey buses transported victims to places where the disabled victims were systematically murdered (Hamm, 2005). Students were asked to stand around the object to position themselves emotionally. Strong(er) feelings were expressed by choosing a spot more near the monument, whilst weak(er) feelings were expressed by choosing a spot more distanced from the monument (image 1) (van der Heide & Wilkening, 2025).

Figure 1: A hypothetical or schematic image of participants' positions, centered around an object. Dibbits (2023).



We then asked the participants, following the protocol of the method, to voluntarily share and explain their position and feelings. One student responded that the experienced emotion was strong, because of the hard concrete the bus is made from, and that this represented in her eyes the harshness of the historical event where it referred to. Another student riposted that indeed the size of the windows of the bus reflected the personal scale of the victims, as was the phrase that is carved in the stone in the midst of the bus: 'Wohin bringt Ihr uns?' [Where are you taking us?]. Another student expressed weak feelings towards the heritage object, not feeling any particular emotion in front of a – in her opinion – log and unwieldy concrete bus. Yet, most of the students felt affected by the senses when looking into the aisle down the middle of the bus, which is actually split in two parts. Striking and causing emotion for some students was that this particular aisle is suitable for wheelchairs, which made the connection of the disabled of past and present heartfelt. The particular geographical position of the monument did raise the eyebrows, questioning the symbolical meaning of the perfect 'see through' from the aisle of the monument on the Cologne Cathedral (van der Heide & Wilkening, 2025).

While the participants share their emotional arguments about the question why they have chosen a particular spot around the heritage item, interruption is not allowed, as emotion networking is an exercise in listening to each other. After the exchange of emotions and arguments, the method of emotion networking requires that knowledge is added by means of information about various stakeholders that are involved in the particular heritage. In a classroom setting, this knowledge is usually added by showing information sheets or slides or showing short videos of different people who represent multiple perspectives (Dibbits, 2023).

When emotion networking in space, like at the Monument of the Grey Buses, information about stakeholders can be communicated by telling. In this case the used stakeholders were the disabled victims of the "euthanasia" policy of the Nazi regime, the relatives of the disabled victims of the "euthanasia" policy, the perpetrators like the managers of the psychiatric hospitals and doctors, the Nazi regime as such, the German population as such in wartime and post-war period, and the disabled patients and their relatives nowadays (van der Heide & Wilkening, 2025). After the sharing of knowledge by means of stakeholders to get a multi perspective view, the students can adjust their emotional position if their feelings have been changed. Again, positions and arguments are then exchanged without interruptions from other participants. The 'subtext' question is: has the awareness of multiple perspectives redirected the emotions? Finally, to conclude the method of emotion networking, a short discussion can be instigated about the question "What has this exercise taught you about (this particular) heritage?" (Dibbits, 2023).

Whether the central item in your history class is a monument in public disability history, or any sensitive theme in heritage or citizenship education, both individual norms and emotions and an epistemological framework of multiple perspectives are addressed and are balanced by the structured form of the method of emotion networking.

6 Outcomes and students' reflections

The learning outcomes and experiences after the seminar in Cologne were evaluated using a questionnaire that combined open questions (learner report) with closed questions targeting specific parts of the course (lectures, learning activities, site visits). In total, 30 responses were collected from participating students (2023, p. 18; 2024, p. 12). The answers to the learning reports were analyzed by categorizing and summarizing the quotes. After asking for a general impression and requesting a grade between 1 and 10 (*M* = 8.3), participants were presented with the following questions.

Please finish the sentences: in this course I learned about

- history education that…
- use of heritage that…
- moral issues how…
- inclusive education how…

The summary highlights some common perspectives:

When asked for a general impression, most students mention that they enjoyed and learned a lot from talking about international perspectives and the activating learning activities. Students mentioned the site visits and learning about different school systems. Some students expressed a need for more teacher led instruction and focus on the course content, however students were positive about what they learned from discussing within groups; some examples of students' remarks are:

> What most surprised me was how open the people were on the course and the knowledge you could gather by only talking and discussing with people. (Student 14, 2023)

> I have really enjoyed the course as I had the opportunity to work with people with other experiences and backgrounds; it made it much easier to work and learn not only with them, but also from them. The program has also been well scheduled with interesting activities that can be used to our work, but for me, the most important part of them would be the reflection we had to do afterwards, so you couldn't just experience it, you had to think about what you saw and share your thoughts with the group. That leads to notice things you didn't before and discuss different topics. (Student 9, 2023)

> The exchange of ideas with people from different countries and backgrounds has been an valuable asset in the development of a wider perspective. (Student 1, 2023)

Students reported that they learned that history education in Europe varies greatly from country to country, both in content and in teaching strategies. While there are shared goals — such as developing critical thinking and historical awareness — some approaches are different and the students learned new teaching strategies for their own classrooms. Many students emphasize the importance of multiperspectivity, actively engaging students, and using history as a bridge or a tool for cultural and moral reflection. Students also acknowledge that education is not neutral, and that a critical approach to the past is essential for the development of citizenship. Examples of students remarks about what they learned about history education are:

> …it differs from country to country, but the aim of the students (or to-be-teachers) was often similar, but we had different approaches on how to get there. (Student 6, 2024)

> …it's different depending on which country you're from, not only to the structure of the education itself but also the content of the subject. For example, in Sweden we learn a lot about global history while it might be considered more important to learn about national history in other countries. (Student 4, 2024)

> …everything changes depending on the perspective you are viewing. As a result, it is important to show a variety of them from different but similar teaching styles. Also, how important are the tasks and questions we propose as teachers to orient the learning towards a single vision of history or to a multiperspective one. (Student 8, 2023)

Students wrote that heritage is a powerful educational tool. According to some of them it helps learners to understand their own culture, history, and identity, while fostering critical thinking and perspective-taking. Students think the use of heritage in the classroom can make learning more meaningful and engaging. Heritage is also seen as a bridge to broader social themes such as inclusion, diversity, shared memory, and political awareness. Examples of quotes are:

> We can understand the past thanks to it. That questioning about what the objects of the past say is key to knowing past events. Also, thanks to the critical use of the sources, students can also deconstruct historical stereotypes. (Student 8, 2023)

> You have to approach it from different perspectives. How did we think about it in the past, how do we think about it now and are there different points of view nowadays? (Student 2, 2023)

> Monuments, museums and memorials can be used to integrate normal lessons with some practical activities that can better stimulate students' reflections and questions. (Student 7, 2024)

> The emotions heritage produces in us are important and can be used as a point of inflection. (Student 8, 2024)

Students recognize that moral issues help students reflect and view situations from different angles. Open dialogue in a safe classroom environment is essential, as moral topics can be sensitive. Teachers play a key role in guiding discussions while being mindful of their own values. Cultural sensitivity is necessary due to student diversity. Finally, sharing experiences and working in diverse, international groups enhances students' insight into complex moral questions and has strengthened their learning process.

> They can be approached by allowing students to share in open discussions, critically analyze sensitive topics and create a respectful and safe environment where students and teachers are allowed to debate without imposing personal opinions. (Student 11, 2024)

> In this course you will learn that moral issues in the classroom are key to developing ethical and responsible students. Addressing them fosters respect, empathy and conscious decision-making. Teachers should promote an atmosphere of open dialogue to reflect on values. (Student 5, 2024)

> Some of us are more sensitive to certain topics than others. I don't like to say it but we MUST plan to include anti-racism work in the curricula at universities everywhere, otherwise we as teachers are not able to navigate the classroom and also protect possible victims of racism properly. (Student 10, 2023)

Students learned that inclusive education demands continuous effort from teachers. Students mentioned that accessibility — both physical and pedagogical — is vital for inclusion. Students also noted that true inclusion reaches beyond the classroom, addressing broader societal inequalities.

> I learned about inclusive education how you could implement a system of individual learning in a group of students with and without special needs. (Student 6, 2023)

> … it's possible to make education accessible for everyone, even though it might be difficult at times. We talked about this when discussing the accessibility to history for everyone and how such a small change as putting a ramp in a museum makes education more inclusive for someone in a wheelchair or with a physical disability that makes it difficult for them to walk. The inclusivity does however also mean that the education itself should be inclusive, for example making the topic in question easier to understand by explaining it in a simpler way (Student 8, 2024)

Summarizing, students reported a large variety of learning experiences and outcomes, stressing the impact of international exchange around history education, the use of heritage, moral issues and inclusive education. The most common reflections were about the fact that students

learned a lot from the international exchange. It was also surprising to see that they learned a lot from each other and did not need much input from the course leaders to keep on discussing and questioning their ideas.

7 Discussion

The ambitions and the aims to develop a joint course with the purpose to facilitate encounters between history teacher students from different European countries and to increase students' knowledge about teaching challenges and each other's school systems have been successful. The collaboration between students with different experiences has been even more fruitful than we had expected. Students have co-worked in a respectful way and with open minds tried to challenge their own knowledge and their own experiences. It seems as if the theoretical history didactics perspectives framing the course have opened the eyes of the students. They reflect on the need of studying moral perspectives in relation to history and the need to be aware of inclusion, emotions and content knowledge as natural ways to make participation, learning and citizenship possible for everyone. Working with heritage was perceived as a powerful tool to learn and reflect on culture, identity and history. Even if teacher education is still different in different countries because of the school systems, there are important possibilities and advantages with international collaboration with concrete subject studies as the main content.

To problematize our findings and results, teachers' and student teachers' ideas are not always easy to transform and apply in practical teaching. One obstacle is that moral perspectives might be problematic for history teachers as well as for historians. Traditionally the ideal at universities and in schools was not to interfere the supposedly "objective" view of history with moral reflections. However, it appears obvious that it has never been possible to isolate historical studies from expressions of moral values and what has been regarded as right or wrong and good or bad. The students seem to argue that moral aspects do not mean to moralize, but to reflect and make interpretations. Moral perspectives are too important to be excluded in history teaching and learning.

With regard to an inclusive approach, it can be cautiously stated that students generally addressed the need to take into account social diversity. In terms of political attitudes towards the value of history education as a shared heritage in Europe, the gap between nationally oriented history teacher training and a European challenge may be reinforced. This is, of course, not unproblematic or easy, as teacher education, for all its transregional aspirations, continues to be negotiated and shaped at the national level.

Our experiences and data described in this miniature are still of an explorative nature. Further research could delve into questions on how internationalization and intercultural learning in history teacher education can contribute to teachers' beliefs about multicultural and inclusive education in history education. Learning and experiencing how dialogues with multiperspectivity in time, stakeholders and nationality can create transformative experiences for teachers (Clarke, 2005). However, what is needed to make these experiences more sustainable in order to prepare teaching history in challenging and uncertain times?

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Review

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Ethical approval was not sought for the present study because the answers are anonymous and no personal data was collected. The informants are adults.

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