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Heritage in Practice: Cultivating Critical Reflection and Intercultural Communication in Bonaire

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Abstract

A critical turn in heritage studies that integrates nonexpert (including colonial) voices presents significant didactic and educational challenges. How do we teach heritage practices in an intercultural, and previously colonial, context? The project Making Bonairean Heritage Together was designed as a showcase to equip students with essential skills for engaging in collaborative, intercultural heritage practices, particularly through cocreation and collaboration with external partners and communities in an international context. These skills are crucial in an increasingly decolonizing field of practice. This article outlines the students' intercultural experiences and the project's structure, objectives, and lessons learned. By analyzing students' voices in developing intercultural competencies, cultural reflexivity, and awareness of intercultural heritage practices, we seek to contribute to research on heritage education in an intercultural and decolonial context.

Keywords: Intercultural learning, heritage in a colonial context, Bonaire, community-engaged learning, museology

In an increasingly complex and globalizing society, numerous professional fields must address complex, "wicked," and even contested issues. Collaboration, or at least the integration of other (non-Western) voices, is central to this endeavor. Consequently, academic training for future professionals necessitates a paradigm shift to adequately prepare them to confront contemporary challenges within their respective disciplines and to function as "critical global citizens" within varied collaborative environments (Biesta, 2022; Kummeling et al., 2023).

For heritage and museum studies programs preparing students for a career in heritage management and curation, this challenge is especially salient. Museums and heritage organizations must be increasingly equipped to manage difficult or contested heritage within transdisciplinary, national, and international contexts (Meskell, 2015). This is especially the case in the so-called Global North in the context of decolonization and addressing the "darker side of Western modernity" (Mignolo, 2011), such as slavery and exploitation. Furthermore, the heritage sector as a whole is increasingly coming to terms with a "critical turn" where reflexivity, justice, and political awareness have become cornerstones of the new practices. However, teaching decolonial awareness and training students to position themselves in the political arena that is heritage curation, is notoriously challenging.

In this article we showcase how community-engaged learning as a method can be a tool for empowering future professionals to collaboratively address contested heritage and decolonial challenges with cultural sensitivity, reciprocal collaboration, and engagement with non-Western voices. This article explores the practical implementation of the essential knowledge and skills that are needed in answering cross-cultural challenges through the Making Bonairean Heritage Together project.

The Making Bonairean Heritage Together project was established as a community-engaged learning (CEL) initiative, involving students and faculty from Utrecht University, staff from the Terramar

Museum on Bonaire, and members of the local Bonairean community. Within this community-engaged didactic framework, students learned to work collaboratively on societal issues, integrating their theoretical knowledge with practical questions. In this case, students were invited by the Bonairean museum to develop an exhibit concept that bridges international state-of-the-art museological practices around slavery with local narratives and needs.

In this experimental course, we provided students with academic knowledge of Bonairean history, critical heritage studies, and postcolonial museum studies, as well as skills related to positionality, project collaboration, intercultural communication, self-reflection, and mutual knowledge sharing. This article addresses whether the participating students developed intercultural competencies, whether the students' personal and social formation in cultural reflexivity was fostered, and whether their awareness of intercultural heritage practices in international collaborations was enhanced.

By examining students' reflections during a 10-week tutorial in collaboration with a cultural heritage partner on Bonaire and drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Deardorff (2006) and Agar (1994a, 1994b) on intercultural learning, as well as Onosu (2020) on transformative learning, we explore how intercultural learning in heritage education contributes to the development of intercultural competencies, cultural reflexivity, and awareness of decolonial and intercultural heritage practices among students. This approach aligns with Deardorff's view of intercultural learning experiences as highly meaningful, Agar's identification of *rich* moments in this learning journey, and Onosu's argument that such experiences lead to a positive transformation in students.

Community-engaged learning in an international context proves to promote not only local commitment, but also a deeper understanding of the interrelatedness of communities and societies across the world (Biagi & Bracci, 2020, p. 9). All partners—students, teachers, and community members—were regarded as both teachers and learners. Given that cocreative collaborations with diverse practitioners and the public will often be integral to the professional lives of cultural heritage students, this educational format is highly relevant.

For the partners involved—in this case, the museum, several other Bonairean cultural and heritage organizations, and the Bonairean community—this collaboration provided a theoretical and historical foundation for the exhibition concept, new ideas as well as an external perspective through suggestions from students, recognition of the importance of local cultural institutions and identity, and strengthening of both local and national networks.

Teaching Critical Heritage Studies

The project was organized within the framework of the Cultural History and Heritage program at Utrecht University, a master's program bridging the gap between cultural history and critical heritage studies. Until the 2000s, heritage education predominantly focused on institutional knowledge and technological skills needed to preserve objects, sites, and buildings. Similarly, within history, the subfield of public history largely focused on skills needed to communicate history effectively to the public.

Over the past two decades, the academic approach to cultural heritage has evolved. Seminal contributions by scholars from decolonizing settler societies have compelled cultural heritage scholars to acknowledge the cultural beliefs and competing political discourses encoded in heritage (Harrison, 2012; Smith, 2006). Collaborative approaches have shifted from doing history for society (top-down) toward a grassroots approach where history is written or preserved with and through society. A guiding approach here is "sharing authority" across different stakeholders (Frish, 2011). In the development of heritage experiences this approach means ensuring the inclusion of local insights and valuations so that exhibitions transcend the often Global North expert point of view. This shift in perspective required heritage practitioners to develop an intersubjective understanding of those key relevant heritage communities.

Such an emancipatory approach to history and heritage has expanded with the decolonization of the heritage sector. Increasingly, heritage practitioners must operate as community facilitators, ensuring an inclusive cocuration of the past with stakeholders from former colonial settings (Fahlberg, 2023). We cannot decolonize heritage or address contested museum holdings in isolation in the Global North, even if we put introspection and critical reflection at

the center of our action. Each decolonizing setting is unique and asks for a tailored collaboration where authority is shared (Clifford, 1997, p. 210). Unfortunately, too many projects intended to set up decolonial conversations around heritage and museums end up reproducing neocolonial power relationships with descendant communities (Boast, 2011).

Although the academic debate might have undergone a critical turn, little research has addressed the urgent educational challenge at the core of heritage studies today. A rich theoretical literature describes the sociopolitics of heritage and public history. In contrast, a suite of ethnographies showcase how carelessly planned heritage projects can exacerbate already fraught intercultural relations. Discussing theories and examples in a classroom setting might trigger reflection, but practicing decolonial heritage requires skills and experience. So, how do we train students to listen, speak, and collaborate in cocreation with former colonized stakeholders and thoroughly understand their political connections to heritage?

The scant research published about critical heritage pedagogy firmly underlines that hands-on courses "doing critical heritage" hold great educational potential (Taylor, 2018). Pioneering pedagogical research from Canada shows that encouraging students to engage with decolonization and the multitude of actors involved goes beyond providing them with a deeper understanding of remembrance practices and institutions (Murray, 2018). Critical heritage education can play a wider role in higher education to teach about decolonization, intercultural conversation, and the enduring Eurocentrism/coloniality in society.

We contribute to this literature that values "doing critical heritage" by presenting a demonstrator to teach students intercultural decolonial heritage practices in connection with local communities. This article shows a reciprocal CEL-based approach to teaching cultural heritage in the decolonizing 21st century, exploring how to teach heritage and decolonial history in collaboration with societal partners. In the next sections, we describe the context of our project, and we analyze how students learned intercultural competencies, cultural reflexivity, and awareness of heritage practices in an intercultural setting.

The Project: Outline, Objectives, Participants

The master's program in Cultural History and Heritage at Utrecht University is a one-year curriculum designed to train future cultural historians and heritage experts by studying "the culture of the past and the use of history in the present" (Utrecht University, n.d.). The program is structured into four 10-week teaching blocks. In the first block, students engage in a theoretical course, a course on participatory public history, and a sources and methods course. During the second block, students select three tutorials, which are small-scale seminars where they conduct research within the lecturer's area of expertise. The third and fourth blocks are dedicated to a guided internship and the completion of an MA thesis. Key elements of the program include the handling of heritage, such as addressing the legacy of slavery and colonialism, and considering the role of local communities in heritage.

In the academic year 2023–2024, one of the tutorials was developed in collaboration with the Terramar Museum in Kralendijk, Bonaire. Bonaire is a small Caribbean island of around 25,000 inhabitants off the coast of Venezuela. As a former dependency of the Colony of Curacao, the island has been under Dutch control since 1634. When the island was largely operated as a protoindustrial salt production hub (Antoin & Luckhardt, 2023) with a minor plantation economy focusing on extensively cultivated crops (Bakker, 2024), slavery defined life on Bonaire. Until 1953, Bonaire—together with five other Caribbean islands—was formally a colonial holding, after which Bonaire became part of the Dutch Antilles, an independent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Although independent, the relationship with the former metropole always remained fraught with contention and characterized by neocolonial power relations (Oostindie, 2022).

The museum's mission is to display and promote Bonaire's history and archaeology, facilitate related research, and raise awareness about the island's heritage (Terramar Museum, n.d.). In 2022, the museum initiated a project to engage local communities more deeply with Bonaire's heritage and integrate them into the museum's permanent collection and activities. Seeking academic support, the museum reached out to the

master's program to assist in development of an exhibition concept integrating best practices in participatory museology and decolonial heritage practice. They wanted this state-of-the-art methodology integrated in a blueprint for an exhibit, selection of objects, and integration of community voices. This request overlapped with the goals of the program to bridge practice and theory and train students in public history. The relationship between the museum and university mirrored the client-content designer dynamic typical for the museum and heritage sector.

Six students participated in this experiential learning project. In addition to these students, the collaborative team included Jude Finies (director of Terramar Museum), Maya Narvaes (project manager of Terramar Museum), and Gertjan Plets and Christianne Smit (Utrecht University).

The first 6 weeks of the tutorial (November–December) were two-sided: Once a week, the six enrolled students discussed literature on Bonaire and the Caribbean's history, the island's colonial past, and theories on museum studies and heritage, guided by both instructors. This process developed a historical and theoretical understanding of the project's context. The second weekly session focused on learning through dialogue by discussing Bonaire's colonial past and cultural heritage with museum practitioners and community members. During these meetings, which were partly in person and partly online, students, teachers, and partners spent time getting to know each other and working to build a bond of trust and understanding. This dialogue led to the cocreation of a foundational concept: the "Who/for Whom—Where—Why—What" of the museum collection's renewal, which was designed in close collaboration with the museum director and project manager. During the meetings at the home university, substantive issues regarding the theory and practice of heritage, decolonization, and museum studies were discussed. Additionally, significant attention was given to personal positionality and the intercultural context in which activities were conducted. All students had been born and raised in the Netherlands, but they had intercultural experiences to share, as not all of their parents had grown up in the Netherlands, and a few students had lived, studied, or traveled outside Europe. In preparation for the week of fieldwork, methods of observation and interviewing were also addressed.

These learning trajectories set the stage for a week of fieldwork (January), where students, museum workers, and lecturers traveled to Bonaire to address heritage-related challenges in situ, conduct interviews, and immerse themselves in the local community. To gain deeper insights into the backgrounds of the exhibition concept, the students engaged with direct stakeholders; relevant heritage organizations and institutions; leaders of community groups, secondary schools, and churches; as well as musicians, artists, and their networks. During this visit students gained firsthand experience with building relationships with heritage communities and mapping local needs. More importantly, students were confronted with their own positionality as Dutch-based students interacting with descendants of enslaved communities. This fieldwork culminated in four museum object proposals, each combining academic research with local knowledge. Terramar Museum decided to utilize these proposals for renewing their permanent exhibition.

This experiential course was divided into learning objectives related to academic discipline, general academic skills, and personal and social development. The first category included gaining knowledge of Bonaire's history, critical heritage studies, and postcolonial museum studies, as well as conducting historical research, disseminating disciplinary knowledge, and project collaboration. These objectives were assessed through pitches and written proposals for museum objects. The second category focused on initiative, self-efficacy, openness, democratization of knowledge, and societal relevance. Positionality, understood as one's relation to various social identities such as gender, race, and class, was a third part of the formational learning objectives to train students to engage with themselves and others in an intercultural context. This aspect aimed for the development of intercultural competencies and cultural reflexivity. Students were encouraged to document their experiences and reflections in an optional logbook with semistructured questions.

All six participating students chose to document their experiences. They actively maintained their journals and wrote weekly reports, using broadly formulated questions as a starting point while also including observations beyond the scope of these

questions. During the lecture weeks, four reports were written (400–800 words), and two longer observation reports (each approximately 1,000 words) were produced: one during the fieldwork week, and one after the course ended.

Participation in writing logs was voluntary and had no academic consequences. By integrating a community-engaged learning approach in an international context; collaborating with a heritage partner, local stakeholders, and the community; and encouraging students to reflect on the collaboration, intercultural aspects, their own positionality, and their professionalism as heritage experts, this project piloted a transdisciplinary, experiential learning approach.

Research Questions

This research is embedded in several foundational questions: How can we effectively teach decolonial heritage practices within the framework of critical heritage studies? Which models, collaborations, and feedback mechanisms are most effective in preparing students to serve as intercultural mediators in a globalized world? And how can we collaborate with cultural heritage practitioners and communities in a reciprocal way and offer students a transformative learning experience in cultural heritage studies? Although these questions are of vital relevance, they cannot be fully addressed through the experiences garnered from the Bonaire project alone. We do raise these questions, as they can be seen as both the larger societal and didactic background of this project, and as suggestions for further research.

This article specifically explores the learning trajectory in intercultural competencies and heritage practices within this project. Given the broader educational significance of imparting intercultural competencies and engaging with external partners on societal issues in higher education, especially for future heritage practitioners, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how students develop intercultural competencies through real-world engagement, and how such development can inform pedagogical strategies for decolonial heritage education. Based on literature research in the fields of heritage and intercultural learning (Agar 1994a, 1994b; Deardorff, 2006; Onosu, 2020; Taylor, 2018), we defined four elements for analysis in the students' logbook texts:

- Misunderstanding and confusion caused by intercultural contact
- Rich and meaningful learning experiences resulting from intercultural meetings, leading to "rich points"
- Awareness of one's own frames, fostering personal and social transformation regarding bridging the gap between "you" and "them"
- Awareness of decolonial and intercultural heritage practices

Based on the results of these questions, we will suggest recommendations for teaching decolonial heritage practices in an international collaboration.

Data

The data for this research were collected through the analysis of voluntary logbook entries submitted by the enrolled students over a 6-week teaching period, during a week of fieldwork, and upon the completion of the fieldwork. These reflections were not compulsory, in order to ensure that it remained an individual and personal activity (Tight, 2024). Students were encouraged to reflect on the disciplinary knowledge acquired through literature review, class discussions, and knowledge transfer from practitioner guest lecturers, with particular emphasis on colonial history and heritage practice. Additionally, the students were asked to reflect on aspects of personal and social formation in relation to their positionality within the decolonial and intercultural framework of heritage studies that characterized the project.

Guiding questions were provided to structure reflection (Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 28); however, students were given the autonomy to either adhere to these questions or to compose their own reflective narratives, thereby promoting differentiation and freedom in their logbook entries. At the start of the course, students were informed about the potential use of their logbook entries for research purposes, as well as their right to grant or withdraw consent at the end of the course without any repercussions regarding course completion. No feedback or grading of the entries was administered during or after the course. During the final meeting, students were given the option to retain their logbook entries for personal use; however, all students opted to share their entries with the research team (Smit

and Plets). This process was reviewed and approved by the Utrecht University Humanities Ethics Assessment Committee.

In this study, two research methods were used. First was close reading, a methodology rooted in the humanities. Close reading involves a careful analysis of the language, content, structure, and patterns in the logbook texts, to analyze the meaning, implications, and connections to broader contexts. The narrative analysis of the logbooks focused on identifying key elements related to experiencing intercultural differences, acquiring intercultural competencies, and developing intercultural reflexivity, alongside an awareness of intercultural heritage practices. This approach allowed for a deep engagement with the texts, enabling recognition of not only the explicit content but also the nuanced reflections and insights conveyed by the students. Second, a content analysis was used, to systematically organize the analysis. For that, the logbook entries were coded based on our four research questions and categorized in four categories:

- Misunderstanding and confusion
- Rich learning moments and intercultural competencies
- Personal and social development through reflexivity on interculturality
- Awareness of professional growth as intercultural heritage practitioners

The following paragraphs present the findings derived from the close reading and content analysis of the texts.

Findings

Misunderstanding and Confusion

Drawing upon Michael Agar's concept of "language shock," it is evident that learning in an intercultural environment can lead to "misunderstanding and confusion." Intercultural mistakes, wherein communication errors occur, precipitate awareness of existing cultural frames. These mistakes bring these frames to consciousness, prompting the building of new frames, until the communication gap is bridged (Agar, 1994b, p. 242). Throughout the project, students did encounter misunderstanding and confusion in several areas. Based on their logbook entries, students feared that they lacked sufficient expertise, skills, and theoretical background, particularly concerning the history and culture of Bonaire, and to a lesser extent, concerning the inadequate appreciation of Bonaire as a distinct island within the Dutch Caribbean. As one student remarked, "It is difficult to comment on someone else's cultural heritage, and I repeatedly wondered if I would completely miss the mark."

Regarding the fieldwork experience, stepping out of their comfort zones and taking initiative rather than adopting a passive stance proved challenging, as stated by one of the students: "I have always been someone who prefers to observe first, but on Bonaire, the intention was to initiate contact first. This definitely pushed me out of my comfort zone." Collaborating with people from different cultures brought anxiety about general misunderstandings and potential disagreements. As academics, students worried about being overly theoretical and using excessively academic language and approaches: "When I see some of us conducting interviews or asking questions, I get the impression that our way of speaking is too academic. In some conversations, I felt that this might have intimidated our interlocutors a bit."

They were also concerned that their Dutch values and norms, characterized by directness and efficiency, might disturb the collaboration or even lead to conflicts, as illustrated by one student: "What I repeatedly discussed with [the] other students is that we were immensely confronted with how Dutch we are—and how comfortable or uncomfortable we sometimes feel about that. By Dutch, I mean our way of communicating and our efficiency."

Above all, most of the students' positions as "former colonizers" raised discomfort regarding their relationship with the local community and the colonial past, and fear for "the imperialist in themselves." Additionally, students noted that on Bonaire, there existed differing perspectives on the colonial past, and that many Bonaireans engaged with this history in ways that diverged from the Dutch decolonization debate, as illustrated by this entry:

> I also thought that slavery and the contemporary debate about it were more or less the same everywhere, and that we, as Dutch people, were always seen as conquerors. However, on Bonaire, they mostly spoke about the conquest that a certain group of Dutch people are currently carrying out on the island.

Another important cause of confusion was the working methods of Terramar Museum, with broadly defined goals and assignments, a lack of strict directives, and diffuse collaboration with other heritage institutions on the island. Their Dutch perspective caused the students to frame this way of operating as difficult to deal with and unprofessional. This perception made the students feel insecure: "The collaboration and meetings . . . in recent weeks were, to be honest, often more confusing than enlightening at first."

In short, discomfort about the relationship to the Bonaireans was a recurring theme for the students: They regularly felt "uncomfortable" and "uneasy" participating in a project that would impact the Bonairean heritage sector, "without having the right or deserving it." This uneasiness prompted significant self-reflection, stressing the importance of intercultural experiences as a way to question existing cultural frames and to develop new intercultural frames.

Rich Learning Moments and Intercultural Competencies

Michael Agar's and Darla Deardorff's frameworks on intercultural learning emphasize the significance of "rich" moments and highly meaningful intercultural competencies. Moments when language and culture intersect and when students become puzzled, as they do not understand the meaning or context within an intercultural setting, are considered to be rich points. These points become "rich" in association and connotation, prompting students to reflect on the cultural confusion or differences they encounter, thereby examining their own perspectives. These reflections stimulate the creation of new frames of interpretation and understanding (Agar, 1994a, 1994b), which forms the basis for developing intercultural competencies: the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Deardorff, 2006).

According to their logbook entries, students did encounter several key learning moments that align with these frameworks during the project. On a personal level, they reassessed their own talents, knowledge, and roles; learned to handle setbacks and build resilience; and became more aware of the importance of soft skills. In general, according to one of the students, "We learn a great deal about ourselves as individuals, as academics, and as students. We learn to recognize our pitfalls but also where we can contribute effectively in a collaboration." But they also learned in relation to their academic discipline. One student realized how important "soft skills" are and that the experience changed future expectations: "I had long thought that in history, I would mostly be stuck in books and might miss the human aspect. I did not expect to be so involved in analysing and sensing situations and people while creating an exhibition."

Interculturally, they adapted their communication styles to suit different situations, despite the difficulties, as one student shared: "I found it quite challenging to let go of my own communication style." They also became more aware of Bonaire's diverse culture, including local perceptions of the Netherlands and the behavior of newly arrived Dutch individuals on the island. They questioned their own views on the island, as well as the roles of decolonization and the history of slavery, as one student acknowledged: "By talking to people in Bonaire, you get to hear how they think about the Netherlands, how they view their own culture, and how they perceive the legacy of slavery."

In terms of collaboration, they aimed to listen and communicate respectfully without making assumptions, striving to overcome shyness and reservations. They navigated boundaries in working with fellow students, instructors, and external partners, as one student noticed:

> I feel that in this project I was treated more as a (junior) partner than a student, and I am very happy about this. It really feels like I am already working within an organization and participating on an equal footing. This has been incredibly motivating and inspiring throughout the entire project because, for once, I feel like I am truly contributing to the world rather than just engaging in theoretical work.

Finally, the fieldwork activities enabled them to link theory to practice; develop skills in networking, interviewing, and processing oral information; and integrate local experiences into their academic work. As one student noted:

> In this course, I have learned more about myself and my abilities than

> in any other course in my academic career. In Bonaire, for instance, I discovered that I could use my theoretical background knowledge to delve deeper into conversations rather than sticking to a superficial explanation. Additionally, I realized that experiential knowledge and academic knowledge can be well combined, which I will definitely take with me in my further career.

In general, the students adopted a more open attitude, enhancing their cultural knowledge and receptiveness to criticism, and began to focus on commonalities rather than differences, as noted by one of them: "Due to the accessibility and mutual trust in the collaboration, I stopped focusing on the major differences between our positions and instead sought out the similarities."

In conclusion, the students' encounters with "rich" intercultural moments underscored the essential role of intercultural competencies in academic and professional development. These experiences not only enhanced their self-awareness and resilience but also demonstrated the value of integrating theoretical knowledge with practical, culturally responsive approaches in their future careers.

Personal and Social Development Through Reflexivity on Interculturality

Cultural immersion, as emphasized by Onosu (2020), can facilitate personal and social formation, as well as intercultural reflexivity and transformation. Particularly when students thoroughly prepare for intercultural encounters, immerse themselves intensively, and engage in reflective practice, effective transformation can occur. In our pursuit of teaching decolonial cultural heritage practices and fostering personal and social development within an intercultural context, cultural reflexivity emerges as the most effective outcome.

According to the logbook entries by the students, personal development involved realizing and contextualizing one's culturally determined norms and values through intercultural collaboration, which allowed for the reevaluation of Eurocentric perspectives and provided new flexibility and insights (cf. Byram & Porto, 2017, p. 157). Students were aware of these differences, as one remarked: "[There is] always a difference in cultural values in a collaboration like this, because everyone has their own background with their own values, views, or expectations." They were searching for strategies to overcome gaps in the collaboration: "In my opinion, it is important not to present oneself as the 'all-knowing' one. The intention is still to treat the culture and the community with respect, and through the collaboration, hopefully, enrich each other in knowledge."

Students learned to overcome the fear associated with their perceived superiority and White Dutch identity, as well as associated guilt, through dialogue that exposed Dutch blind spots. One of them realized:

> I have learned a great deal about sensing people's feelings and being aware of my own assumptions and position. Additionally, it was an eye-opener to realize how difficult it is to bridge some differences. Initially, I thought this would be a piece of cake for an empathetic (left-wing) history student, but I have realized that was quite naive of me.

They realized that intercultural communication demanded a critical view of their own position and behaviors, fostering a humble and respectful attitude. Generally, they gained a deeper understanding of their talents by learning in a different environment and manner, which necessitated vulnerability, an open attitude, and consideration for and adaptation to others.

Engaging in dialogue enhanced their awareness of their own cultural frameworks, as one of the students noted: "I became increasingly aware of my Dutch way of acting and thinking each day on Bonaire." This awareness led to deeper realizations:

> We got the idea that engaging in dialogue is essentially a healing practice for everyone, a practice that helps us better understand the relationship between the Bonaireans and the Dutch and gives the Bonaireans a louder voice than they are usually given.

This conclusion emphasized the importance of listening and dialogue, and of allowing Bonaireans to voice their perspectives within the museum project, thus preventing any suggestion of academic omniscience.

Besides personal development, social development appeared to be equally significant in this project. Practical learning on Bonaire underlined the island's uniqueness and the "complex dynamics" of its diverse perspectives, showcasing alternative ways of working, such as "trying to remain as neutral as possible." Another student noticed the transformations: "Even while we were already in Bonaire, that perspective [of Bonairean culture] changed several times."

The local stance on the colonial past made students aware of the Eurocentric nature of current debates on colonial and slave history in the Netherlands. All students observed that on Bonaire, these discussions focused on acknowledging historical inequalities while emphasizing present-day improvements and the discovery of a distinct identity, aiming to move beyond the past. One student remarked, "This course has heightened my awareness of how we address these themes in the Netherlands and how we sometimes unjustly expect other parts of the world to engage with them in the same way." For one of the students, a statement during an interview appeared to be crucial: When the interviewee stated, "We share a history together, so we also share a future," the student noted: "This made me realize that I had been reinforcing my positionality regarding academic status, based on how I experienced it in the Netherlands."

Avoiding Eurocentrism involved viewing Bonaire independently rather than as a colonial extension. As one student stated, Eurocentrism could be avoided by "listening carefully to the wishes of the museum and the local population" and "not viewing the island as something 'discovered' by Europeans."

In conclusion, the students' engagement in cultural immersion and reflective practice facilitated significant personal and social development, enhancing their intercultural competencies. They became aware of the necessity of preserving and exhibiting one's culture and heritage and of involving the Bonairean community and enabling them to narrate their own stories to "showcase and celebrate the island and its culture." Finally, they discerned the critical importance of decolonizing cultural heritage practices through the valuation of local perspectives and the cultivation of respectful, dialogue-based collaborations.

Awareness of Professional Growth as Intercultural Heritage Practitioners

Sharing authority is not only a gold standard in the field of public history (Frisch, 1990); within the decolonization of museums, it is often invoked as a key concept to underline the importance of collaboration and coproduction in heritage (Clifford, 1997; Smith, 2006). By the term "sharing authority," we understand the collaborative method wherein professional historians or curators see their role as more than willingness to engage with societal stakeholders relevant to the history or collection of concern. Sharing authority transcends merely listening to nonexpert voices; it necessitates actively integrating the community, even if doing so forces the expert to question deeply seated notions or norms (Golding & Modest, 2013). As Boast (2011) appositely argued, full sharing of authority is never possible, especially in decolonizing contexts, since museums and historical institutions in general are themselves Western products of modernity based on asymmetric power relations and expertise. Although full sharing of authority is unachievable, we should view it as a noble (if elusive) goal on the horizon. Thus, heritage professionals not only need to strive for sharing of authority through actively setting up transdisciplinary, intercultural collaboration, they also need to be aware of uneven and even irreconcilable power relations intrinsic to every heritage project. Only through getting our hands dirty can we achieve an unachievable intercultural sharing of authority.

This hands-on experience has deepened understanding of the sector's intricacies and operational dynamics, significantly enhancing professional knowledge and substantial insights into the cultural heritage sector, as well as enthusiasm for the field. As one student stated:

> One of the most important experiences I gained during this course was a first introduction to the field of heritage work. . . . I was never quite sure what the potential next steps after my studies would involve. This tutorial has truly helped me get a sense of what the heritage world looks like and how the skills learned during my studies can be applied.

The intercultural fieldwork underscored the necessity of first acquiring contextual knowledge. As one of the students stressed:

> A great deal of knowledge is required for this [project], and I believe it is crucial for every project. Learn extensively about local customs, the historical context that can clarify the present, the political situation, people's feelings and opinions, as well as practical conditions on the island such as demographics, climate, location, ecological conditions, and changes. The more knowledge you acquire about the island, the better you can empathize with the local situation and understand it. Combine all this knowledge and then present your findings to others, so you can also learn from them.

The complex conditions on Bonaire revealed distinct methods of working and collaborating, influenced by political factors such as networking, personal interests, and competition. These insights highlighted the need for sensitivity to local contexts and practices. One student remarked:

> This project was an intriguing first introduction to the complexity of the heritage sector; collaboration in this sector, in the case of the Terramar Museum and other local (cultural) institutions, turned out to be a political process of networking, influenced by personal interests and mutual competition.

And another student remarked: "It makes me realize that collaboration is a luxury in some cases."

In addition, the fieldwork experience reinforced recognition of the critical need for involving local communities in heritage projects: Inclusive collaboration emerged as a key factor in this process. Integrating local knowledge not only enriched the project but also helped to diminish hierarchical structures. Academic expertise was contributed upon request, showing the students they were able to add significant value, and letting them realize their potential. It also fostered a sense of both student and colleague roles, as was underlined by one of the students: "Throughout the project, I felt both like a student and a colleague. This made me feel very engaged with the project, and I experienced the responsibilities we were given as enjoyable and educational challenges."

A critical aspect of the project was avoiding the reproduction of neocolonial power dynamics. Initially, students felt an imbalance in relationships, which heightened awareness of their positionality. Halfway through the project, one of them noticed: "It still feels a bit off to me that we get to have a say in an exhibition about the history of Bonaire from the local perspective, while we, as Dutch people, represent the former colonial rulers."

However, the realization that diverse goals and perspectives within the frame of power relations could significantly enhance outcomes emerged as a valuable lesson. Through dialogue and local research, attempts were made to address and potentially rectify unequal power relations, though these endeavors were not always successful, as observed by one student:

> The power dynamic between the Netherlands and Bonaire—and between us and the Bonaireans—remains. We are educated, wealthier, and have come to Bonaire to gather information. However, by attempting to engage in dialogue on equal footing, we found it possible to break the pattern we expected to fall into. On Bonaire, this was mostly the case, although there were a few who found us disrespectful or refused to engage with us due to the shared history of our countries, the Netherlands and Bonaire.

Nevertheless, the project contributed significantly to the awareness of professional growth of, and the notion of shared authority by, the students within the field of intercultural heritage, as one of the students convincingly concluded:

> This [project] has affected how I now view my societal role. Initially, I thought that, given my location in the Netherlands, I could never participate in current societal debates about slavery and its lasting effects. Now, I have hope that, despite my location, I can participate in these debates. For example, in my internship, I will again address the history of slavery and its impact on the present. If I hadn't gone to Bonaire, I would have been less able to explain to stakeholders what I have to offer and why I approach things

> the way I do. Now, I feel that I can do this not just from a researcher's perspective, but from a societal role as well, by demonstrating professional skills.

In conclusion, the Bonaire project profoundly enhanced the students' awareness of their professional growth as intercultural heritage practitioners, highlighting the importance of sharing authority and integrating local voices in heritage work. This experience not only deepened their understanding of the complexities within the heritage sector but also reinforced the critical need for reflexivity and collaboration in addressing and navigating power dynamics in intercultural settings.

Discussion

The Making Bonairean Heritage Together project showcases the potential of community-engaged learning (CEL) as a method for equipping students with "heritage wit"—a term coined by the Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam) to describe the competencies, skills, and political awareness needed to navigate the often competing narratives embedded in heritage, as well as the emotions encoded in collections, buildings, and practices. This project provided students with a unique decolonial context that facilitated shared authority and genuine collaboration with community voices.

Through hands-on engagement, students developed key intercultural skills necessary for their roles as future heritage practitioners. The data from this project demonstrate that collaboration between former colonizers and descendants of enslaved communities—when grounded in community-engaged decolonial heritage practices—can foster intercultural competencies, reflexivity, and critical awareness of ongoing colonial structures. Furthermore, the experiential nature of international CEL strengthens both academic curricula and community engagement initiatives beyond the classroom, demonstrating that critical heritage studies can serve as a vehicle for decolonization and intercultural learning in the Global North.

More specifically, four lessons learned emerged, aligning with the conclusions drawn from this study. The first lesson was the importance of learning through misunderstandings and discomfort. Engaging in intercultural collaboration inevitably led to discomfort, misunderstandings, and moments of tension. These challenges stimulated students to question their own cultural assumptions, confront Eurocentric perspectives, and recognize the complexities of intercultural communication.

The second lesson was the possibility of acquiring intercultural competencies through reflexivity. Our findings show that reflexivity was essential in reevaluating students' roles within historical and societal contexts. By actively engaging with local communities, students enhanced their ability to navigate cultural differences, develop cultural sensitivity, and foster adaptability. This process encouraged them to critically reflect on their positionality as Dutch students in a postcolonial context, mirroring the broader power dynamics of heritage work.

The third lesson was that bridging theory and practice can be accomplished through hands-on learning. Immersive fieldwork played a crucial role in bridging the gap between academic knowledge and practical application. Students learned to integrate theoretical insights from critical heritage studies with the lived realities of community stakeholders. By adapting their communication styles and engaging in dialogue with local partners, students enhanced their ability to work respectfully and collaboratively in diverse settings. This process reinforced the importance of cultural responsiveness and showed how theoretical knowledge can lead to meaningful, community-driven outcomes.

Finally, it can be stressed that awareness of professional growth came into being through shared authority. Effective collaboration in heritage projects requires balancing academic expertise with local knowledge to address historical inequalities. Although achieving full shared authority may be unattainable, striving toward this goal fosters inclusive, respectful, and impactful heritage practices. A crucial factor in achieving this awareness was the step-by-step structure of the course, which gradually prepared students for fieldwork and real engagement with heritage communities. The introductory weeks at the home university helped students build the confidence to take on leadership roles, design heritage experiences, and engage stakeholders. Ultimately, this work contributed to a deeper awareness of their positionality and the value of community collaboration, shaping their professional identity as intercultural heritage practitioners.

One significant limitation of this study, which focuses on student intercultural learning within collaborative heritage practices, is that the data collection did not adequately capture the voices of the community. Although the study was situated in a decolonial context, the data primarily reflect the students' perspectives rather than those of the community stakeholders. Future research should prioritize methods that center the community's voice, engaging stakeholders more directly to provide a balanced and comprehensive view of the collaborative decolonial heritage process.

Conclusion

Our study contributes to a growing body of literature emphasizing hands-on pedagogical methods for "doing decolonial heritage" from an intercultural and critical perspective. Central to our approach was the framework of international community-engaged learning, which involved students working on a concrete project for a nonacademic partner to tackle a societal project. In our case, a museum in a former Dutch colony served as the client, and Dutch students from the metropolis the contractors. This unique and layered power relationship fostered students' critical reflection on decolonial power dynamics and their own positionality.

The course structure included 7 weeks of classes, 1 week of fieldwork on site, and 1 week of individual coursework. During the classes, students engaged with theories and concepts from critical heritage studies and applied them through continuous meetings with the client, online and in person. This approach not only facilitated the practical application of theory but also helped students develop intercultural communication skills. A week of fieldwork practice entailed diving into Bonairean culture, heritage practice, and community engagement.

Our exploration of student engagement revealed professional and personal transformations across four areas: learning through misunderstanding and confusion, acquiring intercultural competencies, personal and social development through reflexivity on interculturality, and awareness of professional growth as intercultural heritage practitioners. On all four fronts, students experienced both professional and personal transformations. Across these modes of learning, two overall skills were acquired. First, through hands-on work, students became aware of the positionality of their profession and the inescapable Eurocentrism in many elements of existing heritage practices. Second, through active engagement and conversation, they learned to understand the context of the client better and gained insights into ongoing colonialism in the Netherlands.

Even as the Making Bonairean Heritage Together project provided a rich and transformative learning experience, it also presented several challenges related to program administration, long-term impact assessment, and the sustainability of intercultural learning initiatives. The intensive involvement of lecturers, as well as the financial and logistical demands of international travel, highlight the need to explore alternative teaching models for decolonial heritage education. The unique relationship between Bonaire and the Netherlands—allowing Bonairean colleagues to regularly participate in classes—was instrumental in the project's success, but similar initiatives in other postcolonial contexts may require alternative approaches to ensure continuity and accessibility.

One area for future research involves systematically identifying which pedagogical interventions most effectively fostered student engagement, reflexivity, and transformation and therefore would best help strengthen the link between specific learning activities and student outcomes. Additionally, there is an opportunity to conduct a rigorous long-term study of impact. Although students demonstrated significant short-term personal and professional transformation, little is known about the long-term effects of their participation. Future research could explore whether graduates pursue roles advocating for decolonial heritage—either in Bonaire or in similar global contexts—thereby assessing the project's lasting influence on professional trajectories.

Another important direction for future inquiry arises from a key limitation of this study: the underrepresentation of community voices in the data. Although the project was situated in a decolonial context and aimed to foster intercultural collaboration, the findings primarily reflect student perspectives. To ensure a fuller and more balanced understanding of intercultural heritage work, future studies should prioritize participatory approaches that center the experiences and perspectives of local community stakeholders.

Finally, exploring the potential of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as a supplement or alternative to international fieldwork could help determine whether digital learning environments can provide a comparable intercultural learning experience. Developing innovative virtual collaboration models could make decolonial heritage education more inclusive, scalable, and sustainable while maintaining the experiential depth that was central to this project.

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