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Parallels between *Afro-Atlantic Histories* (São Paulo) and *Méditerranées* (Marseille) narratives

The weight of Global North curatorship along the meridian

Juliana Felix Xavier

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The weight of Global North curatorship along the meridian

Master's thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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For Sidney Amaral, A Tribe Called Quest, and for Olga, my spouse.

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Declaration of Honour

I hereby declare that this thesis/dissertation/report is of my authorship and has not been used previously in another course, degree, curricular unit or subject, at this or any other institution. References to other authors (statements, ideas, thoughts) scrupulously respect the rules of attribution and are duly indicated in the text and bibliographical references, in accordance with the rules of referencing. I am aware that the practice of plagiarism and self-plagiarism is an academic offence.

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[São Paulo, September 27, 2025]

Juliana Felix Xavier

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Resumo

Mais do que meras vitrines de manifestações culturais, esta tese investiga o papel dos museus como espaços que preservam conglomerados ideológicos, isto é, instituições que salvaguardam determinadas visões de mundo em detrimento de outras. Embora teoricamente abertos ao público, esses espaços mantêm seu acesso regulado por barreiras de acesso das mais diversas, sendo frequentados predominantemente por uma minoria com capital cultural.

Para uma melhor compreensão do museu contemporâneo, este trabalho elege duas narrativas em especial como objetos de estudos de caso: a exposição *Histórias Afro-Atlânticas* (MASP e Instituto Tomie Ohtake, 2018, São Paulo, Brasil) e a exposição permanente *Méditerranées*, do MuCEM (Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations, Marselha, França).

Com base nos conceitos-chave de Françoise Vergès em *Decolonizar o Museu* (2024), o estudo tem como objetivo central problematizar o conceito de "museu universal" como instrumento de *hard power*, perpetuado por instituições como o Museu do Louvre (França), e examinar como essa lógica se mantém mesmo em mostras que procuram promover uma "desordem total", nos termos propostos por Frantz Fanon (1965, 2005). A análise fundamenta-se em uma pesquisa autoetnográfica realizada em diferentes momentos em ambas as exposições.

Por fim, a tese se apoia em reflexões em aberto sobre quais tipos de desordem são efetivamente possíveis nessas estruturas, seja nas narrativas curatoriais, nas escolhas artísticas, na composição das equipes ou nas políticas de acesso. Vale ressaltar que há mais perguntas que respostas no cenário atual, ecoando a assertiva de Jota Mombaça (2019) de que a situação colonial, fundada e mantida até hoje em novas formas de assimetria e violência, não permite conciliação, apenas novas hierarquias para acomodar arranjos “pacíficos”.

Palavras-chave: arte diaspórica, estudos pós-coloniais, museu universal, desordem total

Abstract

This thesis seeks to examine museums not merely as showcases for cultural expression, but as institutions that preserve ideological frameworks, actively safeguarding certain worldviews while marginalising others. Although ostensibly open to the public, these spaces maintain regulated access through various means and remain frequented primarily by a minority with the economic and social capital to engage in cultural consumption.

To better understand the dynamics of the contemporary museum, this study focuses on two case studies: the exhibition *Afro-Atlantic Histories* (MASP and Instituto Tomie Ohtake, 2018, São Paulo, Brazil) and the permanent exhibition *Méditerranées* at the MuCEM (Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations, Marseille, France).

Drawing on key concepts from Françoise Vergès's *Decolonizing the Museum* (2024), this thesis aims to critically examine the notion of the "universal museum" as an instrument of *hard power*, exemplified by institutions like the Louvre Museum (Paris, France), and to investigate how this logic persists even in exhibitions that claim to promote what Frantz Fanon (1965, 2005) termed "total disorder". The analysis is supported by auto ethnographic research conducted during multiple visits to both exhibitions.

Finally, the thesis engages with open-ended reflections on what forms of disruption are genuinely possible within these institutional structures, whether through curatorial narratives, artistic selections, team composition, or access policies. It acknowledges that the current context presents more questions than answers, echoing Jota Mombaça's (2021) assertion that the colonial condition, sustained through evolving forms of asymmetry and violence, permits no reconciliation, only the reconfiguration of hierarchies under the guise of so-called "peaceful arrangements".

Key-words: diasporic art, postcolonial studies, universal museum, total disorder

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Introduction

This thesis emerges from the intersection of a personal trajectory of upward social mobility, an exceptional circumstance among nonwhite Brazilians who remain disproportionately affected by systemic barriers to economic advancement, and the contrasting access to cultural institutions in São Paulo and Europe. My gradual class ascension, facilitated by inclusion policies such as racial quotas, allowed for visits to museums in São Paulo that would otherwise have been inaccessible due to ticket prices, transportation costs, or simply not feeling welcome in buildings that can feel oppressive to those without inherited social capital.

Yet, as noted by curator Amanda Carneiro (2024, p. 51), such spaces remain markers of class distinction in Brazil, where lower class and black populations are often present as a majority working on service staff. This reality underscores how even individual social mobility does not necessarily translate into institutional belonging or cultural democratisation, particularly in spaces historically designed for elite cultural consumption.

This personal narrative is framed by two broader historical moments: the impactful deaths of George Floyd[1] and João Alberto Freitas[2] in 2020, which intensified global and Brazilian debates on structural racism. These events underscore the violent inequalities that persist even amid individual progress.

In 2023, my journey expanded geographically through enrollment in an Erasmus Mundus Master's programme, enabling comparative perspectives into European

[1] Dyson, Eric Michael. 2021. The prophecies of George Floyd. The New Yorker [website]. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-prophecies-of-george-floyd Accessed: 12 July 2025

[2] Chagas, Gustavo; Neto, Alberi. 2024. Caso João Alberto: 4 anos após assassinato no Carrefour, processo teve motivação racial afastada pela Justiça. Available at https://g1.globo.com/rs/rio-grande-do-sul/noticia/2024/11/19/caso-joao-alberto-4-anos.ghtml. Accessed: 14 July 2025

museums. Central to this analysis is the landmark exhibition *Afro-Atlantic Histories* (MASP, 2018 – São Paulo, Brazil)[3], which offered a powerful counter-narrative to universalising museum models. By juxtaposing this show with European case study such as *Méditerranées*[4], a permanent exhibition at the Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (MuCEM – Marseille, France), this thesis investigates how museums and art institutions could produce, sustain, or challenge cultural hierarchies imposed by the widespread notion of *universal museum*, as Françoise Vèrges points out (2024, p. 8).

This research is grounded in the understanding that museums such as the Louvre (Paris, France), the British Museum (London, UK), or the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA, New York, US) maintain their relevance by adhering to frameworks established centuries ago, particularly through France's substantial investment in art institutions as representations of so-called "revolutionary ideals". Since then, museums and galleries across much of the West have positioned themselves as "repositories of the universal, guardians of a patrimony of humanity — spaces to be cared for, protected, and shielded from contestation"[5] (Vergèr, 2024, p. 8).

In response, this study connects autoethnographic research with postcolonial theories, particularly Frantz Fanon's notion of "total disorder"[6] (1965, 2021), to question what inclusive and decolonial museum practices might entail within both Brazilian and French contexts.

On the scope of the subjects aforementioned, some questions are to be answered:

- Is it possible to present dissident narratives within spaces maintained and regulated by the parameters of the "universal museum"?

[3] MASP [website]. Available at: https://masp.org.br/en/exhibitions/afro-atlantic-histories. Accessed: 22 May 2025
[4] MuCEM [website]. Available at: https://mucem.org/en/expositions/mediterranean/. Accessed: 27 May 2025
[5] Translated by the author
[6] Readopted concept by Jota Mombaça. 2021. In: *Ñ vão nos matar agora.* Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

- If so, to what extent can these narratives break through the art world's insularity and introduce elements that point toward a total reordering?

- Ultimately, can exhibitions conceived and produced by black Brazilian artists and curators or by non-European Mediterranean artists and curators (even if not the case in *Méditerranées*) suffice to propose new worldviews?

These questions will not be fully resolved, given both the inherent limitations of a master's dissertation and the recognition that discourse, the primary material under examination, is as mutable as ongoing historical events.

Nevertheless, several theoretical frameworks will support a deeper understanding of the tension between universal museum ideology and the possibilities of total disorder. This analysis requires a brief examination of the distinct historical contexts in which MASP and MuCEM were founded.

For MASP, this entails exploring the sociopolitical climate of 2018 in Brazil[7] and investigating how these factors continue to inform its permanent collection choices. In the case of MuCEM, a historical overview of the museum's establishment and the demographic and immigration context of Marseille is essential. This is particularly relevant given the institution's stated goal to function as a multidisciplinary space that offers a holistic vision, integrating anthropology, history, archaeology, art history, and contemporary art to present the multiple facets of the Mediterranean world and its ongoing dialogue with Europe[8].

Building on both local contexts, an interdisciplinary approach is adopted throughout the thesis, juxtaposing postcolonial concepts with discourse analysis, sociology, and

[7] Folha de S. Paulo [website]. 2018. Bolsonaro chega à véspera da eleição com 55% dos votos válidos. Available at: https://datafolha.folha.uol.com.br/eleicoes/2018/10/1983786-bolsonaro-chega-a-vespera-da-eleicao-com-55-dos-votos-validos.shtml. Accessed: 07 July 2025

[8] MuCEM [website]. 2025. Available at https://mucem.org/en/about-mucem/. Accessed: 28 June 2025

issues of identity and territory. Using a wide range of secondary literature, both case studies will be analysed through their official catalogues and the narrative strategies they employ.

Therefore, this thesis is structured in two main parts. Part I focuses on the exhibition *Afro-Atlantic Histories*, drawing on autoethnographic fieldwork conducted during two distinct periods, specifically 2018 and 2025, as well as the broader literature review. Part II examines *Méditerranées*, an exhibition that, according to official texts, seeks to deconstruct the European imaginary imposed on the vast Mediterranean region and its 22 countries across three continents[9]. In both cases, a range of supporting texts are used to enable a deeper comparative analysis. These include exhibition materials, special articles by experts, historians, artists, and art critics, along with official catalogues.

As a starter point on both case study analysis, the autobiographical ethnographic methodology was adopted, incorporating personal experiences that aim to describe, analyze, and deep dive into cultural practices related not only to the exhibition *Afro-Atlantic Histories* and *Méditerranèes* as the primary focus of study but also to the overall art institution environment.

During the analysis, several key questions will be explored: Who is the researcher in relation to one of the largest museums in Latin America in the MASP case? And who is the researcher in relation to an European art institution? What was the main composition of the audiences? What were the main perceptions from the specialized media? In what ways do the narratives presented in the museums support or disrupt the concept of the *universal museum*? As an investigative method, this analysis will draw on the notion of *autoethnography* as articulated by researcher and sociologist Silvio Alves dos Santos:

[9] MuCEM [website]. 2025. Available at: https://mucem.org/en/expositions/mediterranean/. Accessed: 22 June 2025.

> Autoethnography is a method that relies on a 'triadic model' based on three orientations: the first is a methodological orientation, which is ethnographic and analytical in nature; the second is a cultural orientation, grounded in the interpretation of a) lived experiences (from memory), b) the relational aspect between the researcher and the subjects (and objects) of the research, and c) the social phenomena under investigation; finally, the content orientation, which combines autobiography with a reflective character. This emphasizes that reflexivity plays a crucial role in the autoethnographic research model, as it necessitates the researcher's constant awareness, evaluation, and reassessment of their own contributions, influences, and forms of intersubjective research, as well as the resulting implications of their investigation[10].

Thus, the defining characteristic of this dissertation's methodology is the inclusion of the researcher as a subject within both case studies and throughout the analytical process. Elements such as personal memories, reflections on lived experience, proximity to or distance from the themes presented, and the literal and metaphorical shifts encountered during visits to MASP and MuCEM will be explicitly examined. This reflexive approach will help construct a critical narrative evaluating how each institution and its exhibitions relate to the concept of the *universal museum*, as embodied by its foremost exemplar, the Louvre Museum in Paris (France).

Finally, to examine the connections and divisions along the conceptual meridian between São Paulo and Marseille, this study employs a framework that evaluates institutional openness to *total disorder.* The central question guiding this inquiry explores what new worlds might genuinely emerge within highly regulated institutions that are, by design, dedicated to preserving selective fragments of history. These include narratives shaped by victors rather than the vanquished, curated ideological storylines, glorified depictions of war, and even the human remains of non white peoples, among other contested legacies of colonial violence. As the historian Françoise Vergès observes, "the [universal] museum is a vast tomb where anonymous dead remain unburied[11]" (Vergès, 2024, p. 32).

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[10] Santos, Matheus Alves Silvio. 2017. The method of autoethnography in sociological research: actors, prospects and challenges. Translated by the author. USP, São Paulo (Brazil). Available at: https://www.redalyc.org/journal/6497/649770014013/html/. Accessed on 21 May 2025

[11] Translated by the author

These issues must be reexamined starting from what historian Vergès identifies as point zero, a fundamental rethinking centered on restitution and reappropriation within contemporary museums and art spaces. As she argues, "Just because a thief has taken good care of the object they stole from me does not mean we should let them keep it. This emotional attachment to the object cannot override the attachment of those whose ancestors created and venerated it.[12]" (2024, p. 97).

[12] Translated by the author

Methodological approach and theoretical framework: between the “universal museum” and *total disorder*

Cultural phenomena in contemporary societies are characterised by their high complexity and rapid transformation. This difficulty in analysing and explaining them is identified by Portuguese sociologist Sousa Santos (2000) in his hypothesis of the "waste of experience," which indicates the insufficiency of available theories and methodological tools to capture the full scope and complexity of social phenomena.

The comparative analysis of different scenarios and perspectives from specific regions and countries lends greater depth to academic research (Stephanou, 2005; Correa, 2012), incorporating sociocultural and economic variables particular to local contexts while examining how these contexts are simultaneously impacted by global phenomena. Faced with these challenges, employing a comparative perspective between different regions and countries yields fruitful results for understanding the influence of the "universal museum" ideology through the analysis of two contemporary museum exhibitions in Brazil and France.

Furthermore, it seeks to understand how these exhibitions engage with the proposition of *total disorder* (1965; 2019) created by Frantz Fanon and revisited by contemporary thinkers and artists.

This study draws on both international reports from institutions and research networks focused on comparative multidisciplinary studies (such as UNESCO and IBGE – Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), and theoretical frameworks from diverse fields including anthropology, sociology, history, art history, philosophy and economics. Beyond these specialised areas, it also references concepts developed by scholars of comparative literature like Iranian-American Hamid Dabashi and Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano.

The development of a specific comparative methodology, involving the refinement of techniques and detailed reading of indicators, is essential to this process. When

comparing different units – whether regions, countries, or processes of change – two paths emerge: increased complexity due to existing cultural differences and variable configurations, or the identification of parallels and similar situations, which has been partially the case with *Afro-Atlantic Histories* and *Méditerranées* as demonstrated in this dissertation.

This plurality of authors from different disciplines suggests the existence of multiple methodological approaches (Muchielli, 2001), though all imply at least two main forms of reasoning: deductive thinking, inspired by Durkheim's postulates, which positions theoretical viewpoints prior to empirical analysis; and inductive thinking, following Max Weber's approach, which formulates theoretical propositions from empirical evidence.

Given the complex nature of social phenomena, particularly in artistic manifestations, it is necessary to analyse them through their causal breadth, where different combinations of factors produce specific outcomes in each case. In sociology and human sciences generally, causal analysis constitutes one possible approach, providing a foundation for comparative analysis, which remains fundamental in social sciences.

Through comparative reasoning, it becomes possible to identify regularities and transformations, or to construct models and typologies of phenomena, which form the methodological background of this thesis. Another objective of the comparative method is interpreting significant historical phenomena: understanding historical phenomena as processes of social change enables analytical overviews of collective action, social movements, and the role of such actors in structural transformations of societies (Vidal, 2013).

In addition to comparative methodology, autoethnography serves as a fundamental discipline in analysing different narratives proposed by exhibitions across different global contexts and historical moments. As briefly outlined in the introduction, the autoethnographic approach organised itself around three orientations: a) methodological, relying on scientific, ethnographic and analytical methods; b) cultural, aiming to correlate lived experiences between researcher, subjects and research

objects; c) investigation of social phenomena through autobiography and reflections mapped throughout the methodology (Santos, 2017).

Thus, the comparative methodology applied through autoethnography as an investigative thread enabled the comparisons identified in both case studies, not only by situating the exhibitions in relation to the problematic of the "universal museum" concept but also by positioning them within this moment of historical revision of art institutions' roles.

In recent years, comparative studies have reached their peak, with research on phenomena or institutions within single countries or across multiple countries and regions becoming increasingly essential not only in fields like political science, for analysing the causes and concrete outcomes of specific public policies, but also in social sciences and humanities, for examining processes of social transformation and recently prominent phenomena. Thus, comparative studies have become fundamental to contemporary decolonial and multidisciplinary theories, while cultural expressions such as "dissident art" or "decolonial art" have gained increasing prominence.

Regarding these latter topics, we can observe a radical paradigm shift in recent years that has rendered the very discipline of art history subject to epistemological changes. Discussing this transformation, Adriano Pedrosa, artistic director of MASP, starts from a critical point: "the discipline of art history, with its profoundly european roots, structures and model, is the most powerful and enduring apparatus of imperialism and colonisation" (2022, p. 130)[13].

Consequently, the repertoire of so-called "art history" has become, over recent centuries, a numerous catalogue of books and texts, biographies and monographs, essays and articles, all copiously illustrated, published, translated, circulated and taught in Western universities and schools and exported to their former colonies (*ibid.*). However, art history – understood as a unique history of civilisation, that which was

[13] Pedrosa, Adriano. 2022. Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia. MASP, São Paulo (Brazil). Translated by the author

officialised through images and written records – would also require a tangible instrument described by Pedrosa as follows:

> To impose its vigorous task, the museum emerges as something tangible. A repository of objects of the plastic arts, the art museum developed an elaborate system both to propagate and to feed the canon of art history, based on its collections, but also multiplied and disseminated through exhibitions as well as publications, catalogues, labels, explanatory texts, guided visits, lectures, classes, courses, seminars and, more recently, audio-guides, websites, videos and social media, which in turn are constructed by an army of curators, researchers, museologists, conservators, interns, fellows and more.[14]

Throughout history, museums have reconfigured themselves according to society's demands, the complex imposed socio-political panorama, the state and its investors. Thus, the museum as an institution has become an object of study for historians like Françoise Vergès in her book *Decolonising the Museum* (2024). In this fundamental supporting work for the present study, Vergès addresses central historical questions and how manifestations of soft and/or hard power underlie the logics of "universal museums".

Given that museums are not institutions separate from history or the society in which they are embedded, a constant residing in their core functioning is the question of colonial structural racism, which inevitably resurfaces to "introduce itself into law, literature, arts, politics and the European mentality" (Vergès, 2024, p. 23)[15].

On the other hand, in recent decades, contemporary art productions from outside Europe and the United States have been increasingly exhibited in various museums and biennials, "and the so-called contemporary global model of art exhibitions has been the norm since the 1990s" (Pedrosa, 2022, p. 15)[16].

[14] Pedrosa, Adriano. 2022, p. 14. Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia. MASP, São Paulo (Brazil). Translated by the author
[15] Translated by the author
[16] Translated by the author

Faced with centuries of domination and regulation safeguarded in European and American museums, other points of questioning emerge that touch upon the very existence of these museums as "ideological weapons" (Vergès, 2024, p. 24). Perhaps one of their most prominent manifestations has been to position themselves as guardians of the "universal museum".

In a public manifestation, a conglomerate of institutions launched the "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums," formalised in 2002, with support from the Art Institute of Chicago (Chicago, US), Alte Pinakothek and Neue Pinakothek (Munich, Germany), State Museums (Berlin, Germany), J. Paul Getty Museum and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, US), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York, US), Museum of Modern Art (MoMA, New York, US), Opificio delle Pietre Dure (Florence, Italy), Prado Museum and Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza (Madrid, Spain), Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam, Netherlands), Hermitage Museum (St Petersburg, Russia), British Museum (London, UK) and others (Icom, 2002)[17].

In the declaration, the hard power of the "universal museum" becomes explicit:

> Indeed, the objects and monumental works installed for decades, or even centuries, in the museums of Europe and North America were acquired under conditions that cannot be compared with those of today. Over time, the acquired works – through purchase, donation or sharing – have become an integral part of the museums that have preserved them and, by extension, of the heritage of the nations that house them. Although we are particularly careful today about the question of original context, we cannot lose sight of the fact that the museum also offers a pertinent and valuable context for objects that were removed from their original environment long ago [...]. While each case must be examined individually, we are obliged to recognise that museums are not at the service of the inhabitants of one nation, but of the citizens of all. Mediators of cultural development, they have the mission of facilitating knowledge through a constant process of reinterpretation in which each object participates. For this reason, restricting the field of museums possessing diverse and multifaceted collections would harm all visitors.[18]

[17] International Council of Museums [website]. Available at: https://ia804501.us.archive.org/11/items/cmapr4492/20030000%20Information%20Declaration%20on%20the%20Importance%20and%20Value%20of%20Universal%20Museums.pdf. Accessed: 03 July 2025

[18] *Ibid*.

By assuming that other cultural apparatuses – institutions not part of the select group of the declaration – lack the fundamental conditions (physical space, relocation, maintenance and other criteria) capable of protecting their own heritage, the arguments presented there naturalise manifestations of colonial violence. Furthermore, it displays once again who holds the monopoly on violence and its varied uses. As Jota Mombaça problematises, "the monopoly of violence is a fiction of power based on the promise that it is possible to forge a neutral position from which to mediate conflicts" (2019, p. 45)[19]. Thus, state apparatuses like the justice system serve to neutralise social conflicts, managing all tensions within the limits of a reduced network of institutions, supported by "myths represented as neutral by hegemonic narratives" (*ibid.*).

Simultaneously with these power gestures surrounding the "universal museum", contemporary art productions from outside Europe and the United States have been increasingly exhibited in various museums and biennials, "and the so-called contemporary global model of art exhibitions has been the norm since the 1990s" (Pedrosa, 2022, p. 15)[20].

Although this movement has reverberated through the contemporary art world, bringing to light exhibitions like the case studies, other questions must be raised beyond the limits of which histories are being continually perpetuated – setting aside the need to delve into canons, european art schools and academies – and which new proposals are emerging, challenging the historical silence of museums and bringing forth new histories, themes and narratives, besides styles, movements and aesthetics beyond the history of Renaissance and Baroque, Impressionism and Expressionism, abstraction and figuration, Constructivism and geometry, Pop Art, Minimalist or Conceptual Art (ibid.).

[19] Mombaça, Jota. 2019. Ñ vão nos matar agora. Cobogó Edition, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Translated by the author

[20] Pedrosa, Adriano. 2022. Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia. MASP, São Paulo (Brazil). Translated by the author

In narrative terms, *Afro-Atlantic Histories* and *Méditerranées* converge because they emerge from a conjuncture of themes that revisit, in their own way, canons, representations, myths, symbols, amplifying vast histories that redraw territories and historical periods. However, can we say that these case studies escape the rule of Eurocentric inflections in which the Western art universe is embedded? As projects, it is safer to assume that, due to their scope (addressing the Mediterranean in both metaphorical and literal terms; addressing the Afro-Atlantic course similarly), they are fated to incompleteness, fragmentation and partiality (Pedrosa, 2022, p. 15)[21].

As explained by one of the directors of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), proposing an exhibition like *Afro-Atlantic Histories* means entering ambivalent experimental terrain: while such an exhibition proposes a continuous process of investigation and speculation, "learning, unlearning and experimenting during the process" (*ibid.*), one of MASP's banners is being the possessor of what is "considered the most important collection of European art in the southern hemisphere" (*ibid.*).

Is it therefore its role to question canons? How does one question canons while offering them residency and a stage? The question of subalternity is also present in decolonial studies. As Jota Mombaça points out, "this problem [of subalternity] is not resolved through local adjustments in the structurally unequal economy of the world as we know it, but through the global abolition of the subalternity-dominance binary" (2019, p. 25).[22]

These power mechanisms are maintained today in diverse forms. One of them, as Vergès indicates, is European states demanding that Global South states build museums according to their norms to indebted them or create institutions that, ultimately, they will not have sufficient resources to maintain, thus creating an infernal circle of debts and shortages (2024, p. 53).

[21] Pedrosa, Adriano. 2022. Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia. MASP, São Paulo (Brazil). Translated by the author

[22] Mombaça, Jota. 2019. Ñ vão nos matar agora. Cobogó Edition, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Translated by the author

In an explicit manifestation of hard power, the "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums" illustrates this mechanism of subalternity, relegating museums outside the list to conform with the notion that they do not perform the function of being at the service of "citizens of many nations," therefore not being fit to receive the heritage that was once stolen and looted by these same European museums and collectors. In this sense, the exhibition Méditerranées – Inventions et représentations proposes to transcend

> Oppositions and borders in order to rediscover the shared cultures and histories of the 42,000 kilometers of the Mediterranean coastline. Ultimately, the exhibition aims to show to what extent the invention of a Mediterranean cultural patrimony has influenced the way the territory is imagined and represented.[23]

In some ways, the notion of the Mediterranean is indeed amplified, but the body of researchers and curators officially present in the catalogue remain 100% European. That is, Asian and African figures from the Mediterranean were left out.

This ambivalence exposes a larger and recurring question in different fronts of decolonial studies. As the Brazilian art curator and researcher Amanda Carneiro explains:

> Much has been announced and debated about the colonial origin of museums and their relationship with economic and political elites, which is why their decolonisation is also demanded. The meaning of this condition, both in theoretical and practical terms, is in question, under construction and in dispute. It is possible, for example, to resume discussions around the looting of arts and material culture objects and repatriation in the context of the colonial situation, whose focus is directed at ethnographic museums. However, museums of modern and contemporary art have not been oblivious to the logics of accumulation, conservation and exhibition that, safeguarding specificities, can exercise an analogous function. Generally, denouncing this link takes as its starting point the need to break with the permanence of colonial structures.[24]

[23] Production MuCEM, 2024

[24] Carneiro, Amanda. 2024, p. 51. Negros na piscina. Fósforo Edition, São Paulo (Brazil). Translated by the author

In this sense, scholars have increasingly questioned what is valued (and consequently devalued) in traditional museology – with the traditional being implicit in the "universal museum" – and what can emerge from there. As a disputed territory and also a laboratory of experimentation, this thesis is supported by the possibility of reordering based on the concept of total disorder, coined by Frantz Fanon and reinterpreted in numerous ways by contemporary artists. This notion systematically considers what must be rethought, reconsidered, restructured, or dismantled to create new lenses and possibilities through cultural experiences, as pointed out by Jota Mombaça:

> In The *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon asserts that decolonisation is a project of total disorder, since its radical goal is the destruction of all regimes, structures, and political effects established by colonisation. It is not a matter of finding consensus, adjusting the world, and conforming colonial differences into a peaceful arrangement. The colonial situation does not allow for reconciliation, because it is always asymmetrical; it is based on the violence of the coloniser against the colonised peoples and is sustained by the establishment and maintenance of a fundamental hierarchy in which the colonised can only exist below the coloniser.[25]

Is it possible, then, to think of total disorder in the case of museums, and more precisely, in case studies such as *Afro-Atlantic Histories* or *Méditerranées – Inventions and representations*? If one of the brutal consequences of colonisation and late racial capitalism is the continuous maintenance of asymmetries and the machinery of exploitation, is it possible to conceive of a radical imagination and practice to displace museums from their basic role?

As Vergès points out, "to believe that public or private tax-exempt cultural institutions can at any time infringe on the criminal policy of the state, because they depend on the state and were never conceived as bodies to control the action of the state. This basic observation clearly shows the structural impossibility of art subverting the state apparatus" (2024, p. 132)[26].

[25] Mombaça, Jota. 2019, p. 57. Ñ vão nos matar agora. Cobogó Edition, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Translated by the author

[26] Translated by the author

Museums, therefore, serve as symbols of power that, in many ways, reinforce this asymmetrical functioning. Throughout european history, particularly after the era of Napoleon, museums became essential as nations recognised the political influence they could exert as drivers of artistic production (McClellan, 1994, p. 135). Consequently, it would be naive to believe that two specific exhibitions could be responsible for redressing this asymmetry. However, their efforts to narrate stories from alternative perspectives do not go unnoticed.

Hints of the relevant literature have been provided in these introductory chapters, with a more substantial discussion to follow throughout the dissertation. This approach is visible: it allows readers to encounter the most important scholarship *in situ*, facilitating a deeper understanding of academic debates as they are compared with the practical application of our mobilized concepts, empirical experiences and non-academic sources.

Furthermore, the decision to not strictly adhere to all academic canons is a rational one, intentionally imbued with a hint of disorder.

PART 1: FROM HAM'S CURSE TO *AFRO-ATLANTIC HISTORIES*, WHERE ARE THE BLACK PEOPLE?

1. The *Afro-Atlantic Histories* exhibition: reception at MASP and the Tomie Ohtake Institute

Self-entitled as the "first modern museum in the country, [MASP is] a private, non-profit institution founded in 1947 by the Brazilian businessman Assis Chateaubriand"[27], along with the Tomie Ohtake Institute – another renowned private cultural centre in São Paulo – hosted the exhibition *Afro-Atlantic Histories*, in 2018 or 130 years since the end of slavery in Brazil as Ricardo Ohtake, the manager of the Institute, noted in an official article included in the exhibition anthology:

> The complex network created by the mercantilism of modernity, which linked enslaved labour to human trafficking, was established upon a vast sequence of "discoveries", occupations, and dominations carried out by Europeans over territories in the Americas, the Caribbean, and Africa. Such processes have generated scars that remain open to this day. It is on these scars that "Afro-Atlantic Histories" focuses, traversing the realm of art and creation, but starting precisely from the anniversary of the liberation of enslaved individuals in our country[28].

Two euphemisms particularly stand out in the above excerpt: the "processes" that produced scars and the "anniversary" of liberation. Primarily, referring to colonisation in Brazil as a mere "process" diminishes the accountability of the systemic domination exercised by Portugal (and other European nations) over Brazilian territory, the consequences of which remain evident to this day. Consequently, the magnitude and devastating impact of the ongoing violence characterising these "processes" have been somewhat downplayed. Nevertheless, Ricardo Ohtake acknowledges that one of the outcomes of this historical context is the emergence of a fertile ground for art and creation following nearly a century and a half.

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[27] MASP [website]. 2025. Available at: https://masp.org.br/sobre. Accessed: 17 June 2025

[28] Translated by the author from Ricardo Ohtake in: *Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia*. 2022, p. 09. MASP, São Paulo, Brazil

The second euphemism pertains to the use of the term "anniversary" to denote the years that have passed since the promulgation of the Áurea Law in Brazil (1888), which formally ended slavery in the country. As various contemporary historians and scholars in post-colonial studies indicate, this law, among its many repercussions, was merely a "delayed" convention, particularly in terms of the global economy, given that Brazil was one of the last countries to abolish slavery.

According to Jota Mombaça, a multidisciplinary Brazilian artist, one of the most questionable fictions regarding Brazilian history is the utopia of racial overcoming. This notion suggests that, in a country as mixed as Brazil, racism — coupled with the relentless degradation stemmed from capitalism — was abruptly interrupted with the updates to the anti-slavery laws of the 19th century.

> As a utopian promise of a post-racial world, Brazil is better understood as an anti-Black and anti-Indigenous dystopia, where the representations of a carnival-like freedom express not a break from all norms, but rather an excess of them. Brazil, this colonised and recolonised fiction, submissive to and perpetuating imperialism, has never genuinely served the purpose of the ongoing struggles for the liberation of the territory and the bodies subjugated in its formation[29].

This perspective highlights the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in Brazil's dominant narratives. Art, as a distinctive form of cultural expression, serves multiple purposes and acts as a mirror or echo of the socio-historical transformations that precede it. It unveils the contexts of its productions and ultimately reshapes futures — whether conforming to the status quo, advocating for change, or adopting a contemplative stance. The possibilities are numerous, and it is not the main goal of this particular essay to dissect each one. The key point is that artistic productions are closely intertwined with the chronology in which they are created and, for this reason, are far from neutral.

[29] Translated by the author from Jota Mombaça in: *Ñ vão nos matar agora.* 2022, p. 80. Editora Cobogó, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Prestigious institutions such as the Louvre, the British Museum, and even MASP illustrate that both temporary and permanent exhibitions can interpret the history of colonisation, showing the dynamics between winners and losers in various processes of exploitation. They also portray black and indigenous individuals through lenses that may be degrading, enlightening, exoticising, or focused on bodily representations.

Furthermore, these institutions can — and have indeed overlooked — black and indigenous artists who create "craft" or "naïve art", hindering their ability to lead significant artistic movements — an opportunity often reserved for their white counterparts throughout history. In the Western artistic context, Europe is represented in various ways: as an epistemological school, a universal reference, the cradle of "the arts," an antagonist to the productions of the Global South, or even as the overarching canon against which non-Western artistic works are measured.

This continuum of dominant cultural narratives is evident in how history is shaped by these prevailing art forms, with Europe and the United States consistently producing artists and movements that have attained canonical status. As art historian Steve Edwards notes, "the canon is a structural condition of the history of art" (Edwards, 1999). This notion extends beyond the realm of art; it is deeply rooted in history and intertwined with the structural mechanisms of coloniality. Regarding this point, Hamid Dabashi, Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University (US), summarizes:

> Coloniality, not just colonization, has a long history. It began to take shape in the sixteenth century, in the North and South Atlantic, but led by the North of course. The South also participated, by force, through the Atlantic slave trade and the dismantling of the civilizations in Mesoamerica and the Andes (Aztecs, Mayas, Incas) and the "Indian" genocide. It was not just brute force that made all of this possible. It was the control of knowledge that justified the demonization and dehumanization of people, civilizations, cultures and territories. People who are ontologically inferior human beings are also epistemically deficient. The panorama has changed in the past five hundred years, but only on the surface[30].

[30] Dabashi, Hamid. 2015, p 18. *Can Non-Europeans Think?* Zed Books edition, London, UK

If canons in this context are indeed a product of colonial history, have they transformed over time, or do they still rely on the same references? Furthermore, with the rise of post-colonial studies across various cultural fields (art being one of them), can we assert that new narratives have found space in major museums? Guilherme Terreri, a Brazilian professor and communicator in Language, Literature, and Cultural Studies, corroborates Dabashi's perspective on how art can reflect dominant structures:

> When a regime decays and comes to an end, and bourgeois revolutions occur around the world, many developments were already taking place in the arts. For instance, consider Johannes Vermeer, the Dutch Renaissance painter who created 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' (Vermeer, 1665) and also painted 'The Little Street' (Vermeer, 1657 – 1658), which depicts a small street with a two-story house. At that time, such paintings represented a revolution. Acquiring paint and canvas was extremely costly. Gaining technical skills in painting and attending an arts conservatory… What would be painted in this context? Kings, queens, royal families, battles, and saints. Culture and artworks crystallise the values and meanings of a people at a given time, but they also — as Adorno points out — provide a substrate of culture and society that has already settled and matured[31].

It goes without saying that Brazil's historical legacy of slavery is far from neutral itself. As noted by the historian Lilian Schwarcz and the artist Dalton Paula, of the more than 12 million Africans who were forcibly removed from their continent, only 10 million arrived alive in the Americas. Of these, 4.8 million had Brazil as their final destination beginning in the mid-16th century. Brazil thus received nearly half of these forced migrants, dispersing them throughout its territory. “Moreover,” Schwarcz argues, “it so thoroughly naturalised forced labour that it became a form of language: a language of hierarchy, and for that reason, silent in the racism that permeates and structures it” (Schwarcz; Paula, 2023).

[31] Translated by the author from Guilherme Terreri interview in: *Tempero Drag* YouTube Channel [website]. 2025. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lvzuk5Q0H38. Accessed: 18 June 2025

1.1. The *whitening* gaze: erasure and ideology in Brazil's colonial narratives

Understanding the historical context of Portuguese colonization in Brazil requires revisiting the interplay between slavery and property laws in the 19th century, as these laws still pose challenges in evaluating their lasting impacts today.

The laws that led to the end of slavery in Brazil evolved over time, shaped by both international pressure (particularly economic demands from England), and national abolitionist movements. The first significant legislative change occurred in 1850 with the Eusébio de Queirós Law, which officially prohibited the trafficking of enslaved people. However, this prohibition did not effectively halt the trade and faced considerable resistance from Brazilian elites.

Just two weeks after the Eusébio de Queirós Law, the Brazilian Senate passed the Land Law (1850), which guaranteed property rights to those who had titles registered with a notary's office — essentially, those who could afford to buy land. This meant that while farmers could lose movable property (enslaved people), their immovable property (land) remained protected. Consequently, the price of slaves increased, and internal trafficking grew (Bezerra, 2025)[32]. This new legal framework facilitated the mass importation of European workers to meet new economic goals, alongside social objectives, including the whitening of the Brazilian population (Cancian, 2025)[33].

To illustrate this particular process, one can reference the emblematic painting *Ham's Redemption* (1895), created by Spanish artist Modesto Brocos.

[32] Bezerra, Juliana. 2025. In: *Toda Matéria* [website]. Available at: https://www.todamateria.com.br/lei-eusebio-de-queiros/. Accessed: 04 July 2025

[33] Cancian, Renato. 2025. In: *Abolição da escravatura - Brasil demorou a acabar com o trabalho escravo* | UOL - História do Brasil. Available at: https://educacao.uol.com.br/disciplinas/historia-brasil/abolicao-da-escravatura-brasil-demorou-a-acabar-com-o-trabalho-escravo.htm. Accessed: 04 July 2025



Figure 1 - *Ham's Redemption* (1895), Modesto Brocos

Source: Copy of a reproduction from Wikipedia [Website][34]. The original is displayed on Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil).

This work is visibly representative of the social need for the whitening of the Brazilian nation. As anthropologist and historian Tatiana Lotierzo points out, even the title of the painting is self-explanatory in its racism: it explicitly references the biblical myth of Noah's curse upon his son Ham (Lotierzo, 2018)[35]. Briefly, the story recounts how Noah punished Ham's son, Canaan, designating him a "servant of servants" after Ham mocked his father while he was drunk and naked. Notably, some versions of biblical texts depict Canaan and Ham's descendants as black.

[34] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ham%27s_Redemption. Accessed: 29 June 2025
[35] Roncolato, Murilo; Lotierzo, Tatiana. 2018. In: A tela "A Redenção de Cam" e a tese do branqueamento no Brasil |Nexo [website]. Available at: https://www.edusp.com.br/mais/a-tela-a-redencao-de-cam-e-a-tese-do-branqueamento-no-brasil/. Accessed: 03 July 2025.

This myth is ultimately reinterpreted by Brocos, who suggests, in accordance with the European Christian theories of the time, that the salvation — or "redemption" — of Ham's descendants would come through their extinction, as a result of whitening (Roncolato, 2018)[36].

Alongside with this policy, it was mandated that land would no longer be distributed by the Portuguese Crown as it had been extensively during previous centuries, particularly through the Sesmarias system. From that point onward, the purchase of unoccupied land (not belonging to the public domain, for example) could only occur through "payment upfront, in cash, and at high prices" (Angelo, 2025)[37].

In this context, what would become of the former enslaved individuals, who were now classified as "free workers" in light of the Eusébio de Queirós Law? They were denied any possibility of compensation (social, economic, or political) for the labor performed under the slave regime and were no longer regarded as the preferred workforce by landowners. Consequently, the prospect of purchasing land "upfront, in cash, and at high prices" was also out of the question.

Among these laws, the material and immaterial cultures born from the innumerable Afro-Atlantic intersections were already well established. This is to say that the people who arrived in Brazil by force were not resigned to mere survival. As Lilia Schwarcz and Dalton Paula point out, there also took root "material and immaterial cultures, religions, modes of dress, techniques and technologies, rituals, cosmologies, scientific knowledge, visual models, philosophies, ceramics, customs and values" (2023, p. 22). Furthermore, Afro Brazilian networks of sociability also formed, "from practices, cults and cartographies recreated in exile (*ibid.*)."

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[36] Roncolato, Murilo; Lotierzo, Tatiana. 2018. In: A tela "A Redenção de Cam" e a tese do branqueamento no Brasil |Nexo [website]. Available at: https://www.edusp.com.br/mais/a-tela-a-redencao-de-cam-e-a-tese-do-branqueamento-no-brasil/. Accessed: 03 July 2025.

[37] Angelo, Vitor Amorim de. 2025. In: Lei de Terras - Lei de 1850 contribuiu para manter concentração fundiária | Uol Educação [website]. Available at: https://educacao.uol.com.br/disciplinas/historia-brasil/lei-de-terras-lei-de-1850-contribuiu-para-manter-concentracao-fundiaria.htm. Accessed: 03 July 2025.

Within this wide vision of an *Afro-Atlantic Brazil,* diverse forms of knowledge combine to create an unique cultural and social fabric, "a distinct diction, resulting from the many African nations united by an immense and unjust diaspora. These populations were enslaved by circumstance, not by origin. After all, no one was a slave in the past" (*ibid.*).

1.1.1. To what extent are contemporary art narratives of black Brazil histories?

From the painting *Ham's Redemption* to the political achievements in Brazil in the early 2000s — particularly highlighting the collaborative efforts of various black movements alongside president Lula's first term in office, which culminated in Law 10.639, introduced in 2003 and making the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture mandatory in the country's educational systems (MEC, 2025)[38] — the realm of the arts has been intricately connected to these social transformations.

Supported by post-colonial theorists, scholars, black curators, and artists, there is a growing recognition that artistic expressions should be viewed not only as reflections of social changes within a specific historical period but also as a language capable of articulating tensions of domination, appropriation, and belonging.

An example of this is the flag *Onde estão os negros?* ("*Where are the black people*?"[39]), produced by the activist group Frente 3 de Fevereiro, which was displayed on the facade of the MASP on Avenida Paulista during the *Afro-Atlantic Histories* exhibition. In an official statement regarding the banner, curator Amanda Carneiro highlighted the "interest in resonating with important discussions about the presence of black individuals in the Brazilian art scene. Therefore, the intervention by Frente 3 de Fevereiro on Paulista, a central space, aims to facilitate new reflections and we hope it will inspire actions that recognise the contributions of the Afro-Brazilian population" (Carneiro, 2018)[40].

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[38] Ministério da Educação Brasileiro. 2025. In: Lei nº 10.639/2003 completa 22 anos de promulgação [website].Available at: https://www.gov.br/mec/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2025/janeiro/lei-no-10-639-2003-completa-22-anos-de-promulgacao. Accessed: 04 July 2025

[39] Translated by the author

[40] Rocha, Gessyca; Carneiro, Amanda. 2018. In: *Faixa no Masp promove reflexão sobre a participação dos negros na arte* | G1 [website]. Translated by the autor. Available at:



Figure 2 - *"Onde estão os negros?"*, Frente 3 de Fevereiro (2018)

Source: Felipe Néri | G1 [website][41]

The intentionality in the official messages regarding the exhibition makes it clear that the focus is on promoting the plurality and diversity of the artworks, which included "over 400 pieces from Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe, spanning the 16th to the 21st centuries, organised in a non-chronological manner across eight sections" (Pedrosa; Martins, 2022, p. 11).

However, it does not take long for the dubious disclaimer of "anniversary" regarding the end of slavery system to reappear. Pedrosa and Martins point out that "Afro-Atlantic Histories coincides with the 130th anniversary of the Golden Law, one of the last laws established by the Empire of Brazil (1822-1889), which officially abolished slavery in the country" (*ibid*.). Once again, "anniversary" arises in this context, where the blowing out of candles and the cake become, at the very least, questionable.

https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2018/07/24/faixa-no-masp-promove-reflexao-sobre-a-participacao-dos-negros-na-arte.ghtml. Accessed: 06 July 2025

[41] Available at: https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2018/07/24/faixa-no-masp-promove-reflexao-sobre-a-participacao-dos-negros-na-arte.ghtml. Accessed: 02 July 2025

Regarding its official documentation and the scope of these narratives in the context of the contemporary world, official content serves as a starting point for a broader understanding, as noted by MASP curators Amanda Carneiro and André Mesquita:

> The discomfort that accelerates the current moment is one of cruel uncertainty. Thinking of Afro-Atlantic histories as ever-present vectors, operating over contested territories, prompts us to revisit a discussion raised in this anthology about the remnants, traumas, and continuities provoked by structural racism and the colonial and capitalist violence that endure and instrumentalise the lives and bodies of marginalised populations – from *favelas* and prisons to refugees and immigrants – amid global waves of genocides and large-scale erasures administered by an actively operational death policy[42].

In light of the ongoing acts of domination and violence throughout history, is it secondary or even naive to question the role of museums in Brazil and globally? More fundamentally, in a world marked by constant turmoil, where the state of war is increasingly normalised, can the role of museums be appropriately challenged? History reveals that wars have served as avenues for acquiring artworks, while the illegal market resulting from trafficking circulates vast sums of money and remains continually denounced (Vergès, 2024, p. 26).

If wars are still used to appropriate and subsequently fortuitously exhibit artworks in prestigious museums, somehow these institutions serve as ideological tools. As such, they have appropriated and continue to appropriate mechanisms of displacement and discharacterisation, leading to both epistemological and material erasures related to concepts of possession and ownership recognition (Kilomba, 2021, p. 49). This raises a central question that will recur, both directly and indirectly, throughout this essay: who benefits from the narrative that memory is linked to an alleged appreciation of the arts of various peoples?

[42] Carneiro, Amanda; Mesquita, André. 2022. In: *Histórias Afro-atlânticas: antologia*, p. 20. Translated by the author. MASP, São Paulo, Brazil

The criteria for defining a prestigious museum which serves as a cultural framework of different peoples, and how such institutions should operate are far from arbitrary. The Western conception of a respected institution encompasses its architecture, public image, institutional communications, legacy-building, leadership hierarchies, curatorial appointments, exhibition design, and even the expected behaviour of visitors. Ultimately, this framework traces back to one paradigmatic model: the Louvre. This institution is central to understanding the concept of the *universal museum*, not only due to its historical context but also regarding how "the arts of the world" should be presented.

It is important to note that the Louvre is described as “the child of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment” (Vergès, 2024, p. 136). In other words, a portion of its collection originated from confiscations and thefts, much like the majority of prestigious Western museums. However, there is one particularity in this case: the looting was condoned in the name of revolutionary principles.

Returning briefly to historical facts, the Louvre gained prominence and popularity during the 18th century in an Europe that championed distinctions over its colonies. In this sense, the consolidation of the idea of "whiteness" was concurrent with the emergence of influential museums that persist today; the notion of a "European continent" was solidifying as a power, and these elements collectively contributed to the systematic positioning of this ideological tool as an example of "neutrality" and, therefore, a model to be emulated (Vergès, 2024, p. 138).

Yet to engage critically with the notion of the *universal museum* is to confront the Louvre’s origins and the colonial processes that shaped it. Its collections are built upon centuries of systematic theft, looting, and the displacement of objects, artefacts, and human remains—a practice that persists in various forms today. Centuries of systematic theft, looting, and the displacement of objects, artifacts, and human remains underpin its collections, a practice that persists in various forms today. As Vergès underscores, the 18th century marked the rise of the museum as a

self-proclaimed "universal sanctuary". Since then, wars have continued to serve as a field for the acquisition of artworks, fuelling illegal markets through which absurd amounts of money circulate, a reality that is constantly denounced (Vergès, 2024, p. 26).

1.1.2. Cultural frontlines: colonial art practices parallels to the Palestinian issue

It is within this "sacred aura" promoted by high level art institutions that Palestinian artists have encountered exclusion and boycotts from some European organizations and major sponsors throughout the development of this thesis. These actions did not go unnoticed, despite opposition from pro-Israel sponsors. A notable case is that of the Royal Academy of Arts (London, UK), where, in 2024, approximately 750 artists signed an open letter condemning the institution for "anti-Palestinian censorship" after it removed two artworks related to the Israel-Gaza conflict from its Young Artists' Summer Show. In response, the Royal Academy stated that the works were taken down following a letter from the Board of Deputies of British Jews expressing concerns about their content (Adams, 2024)[43].

Beyond censorship, it is crucial to acknowledge the Palestinian artists who have been and continue to be systematically victimised during the ongoing genocide in Gaza (Bouattia, 2024)[44]. These situations exemplify the practice described by Françoise Vergès as "using cultural institutions to conceal support for the occupation of Palestine" (2024, p.24).

In yet another case of multi-layered violence in human history, the destruction, displacement, and erasure of Palestinian art, forms part of a broader contemporary debate. This discussion begins from the premise that we must not only acknowledge

[43] Kendall, Adams Geraldine. 2024. In: *Artists criticise Royal Academy for 'anti-Palestinian censorship'*| Museums Association [website]. Available at: https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2024/08/artists-criticise-royal-academy-for-anti-palestinian-censorship/#. Accessed: 07 July 2025

[44] Bouattia, Hannah. 2024. In: *2024 was a year of anti-Palestinian censorship and active art rebellion*|Al Jazeera [website]. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/12/30/2024-was-a-year-of-anti-palestinian-censorship-and-active-art-rebellion. Accessed: 07 July 2025

the colonial origins of museums and their ties to political and economic elites, but also recognise the urgent need for decolonial reinterpretations, and new frameworks — enabling different kinds of cultural institutions to emerge from these tensions. As Amanda Carneiro notes, "modern and contemporary art museums have hardly been exempt from the logics of accumulation, preservation, and display which — allowing for certain specificities — can fulfil a role analogous [to universal museums]" (2024, p. 51)[45].

If the norm is not what is named – and therein lies its privilege – then the dominant understanding of what constitutes art, and how its institutions should be preserved, is precisely what "secures its ontological comfort, its ability to perceive itself as the norm and the world as its mirror" (Mombaça, 2022, p.52)[46]. This core assumption has allowed a particular museological pattern to storytelling in order to proliferate as a global standard across both Global North and South, transforming major museums into architects of fiction. As a consequence, institutions like the Louvre, British Museum, Guggenheim, Tomie Ohtake Institute, or MASP have become custodians of these manufactured narratives – authorised narrators of history, a single one.

Within their frameworks, selective historical accounts are perpetuated: there are villains and heroes, twists of fate, clear winners and losers. Yet beneath this specious logic lies the insidious pretext that “every history must be told, must be represented in the museum to exist [...]. We accept that our memories, our objects, our dreams, our angers must be subjected to codes that pacify them" (Vergès, 2024, p. 71)[47].

1.2. The true cost of museums access

It is important to note that access to these shared historical memories is generally not free. Currently, the standard admission fee for MASP is around 12 euros, with discounts

[45] Carneiro, Amanda. 2024. Negros na Piscina. Fósforo Edition, São Paulo (Brazil). Translated by the author

[46] Mombaça, Jota. 2019. Ñ vão nos matar agora. Cobogó Edition, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Translated by the author

[47] Vergèr, Françoise. 2024. Decolonizar o museu. Ubu Edition, São Paulo (Brazil). . Translated by the author

available for teachers, students, and seniors (aged 60 and above). Additionally, Nubank, one of Brazil's largest banks, offers two subcategories with discounts: "premium" clients (those with high salaries and an investor profile, for example) receive the same discount as students, paying around 6 euros for admission (MASP, 2025)[48].

Regarding the topic of free admission programs, MASP provides free access for children aged 10 years or younger, as well as for "groups from public institutions, third sector organisations, social projects, and programs, aimed at expanding access to the museum's programming for diverse audiences" (MASP, 2025)[49]. However, these visits are limited to specific options, available only "from Wednesday to Saturday, except for the first Thursday of each month, at 10:15 AM, 11:15 AM, 2:15 PM, or 3:15 PM" (MASP, 2025)[50]. Free access also extends to individuals with disabilities and a companion. Additionally, in recent years, the museum has opened its doors for free to the general public every Tuesday from 10 AM to 8 PM, and on Fridays from 6 PM to 8 PM, "subject to prior reservation of tickets through our online box office" (*ibid.*)[51].

There is also a category of regular user at the museum called “Friend of MASP,” which consists of a subscription with different pricing tiers (student/teacher; seniors aged 60 and above; individual and family). For amounts ranging from 25 to 82 euros, individuals can become beneficiaries of the institution, enjoying benefits such as unlimited and queue-free entry during the subscription period, discounts at the museum's café/restaurant, and free access to other cultural institutions, such as the Afro-Brazil Museum (São Paulo, Brazil), the Soccer Museum (São Paulo, Brazil), the Museum of Tomorrow (RJ, Brazil), and the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro (MAM-RJ) (*ibid.*)[52].

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[48] MASP [website]. 2025. Available at: https://www.bilheteria.masp.org.br/pt-BR/tickets/db788f92-3856-4ed0-b951-ba48957b5793?tracking_token=bfcd2c02-7029-45bf-b104-f4ca56d11a38. Accessed: 13 July 2025

[49] MASP [website]. 2025. Available at: https://www.bilheteria.masp.org.br/pt-BR/tickets/db788f92-3856-4ed0-b951-ba48957b5793?tracking_token=bfcd2c02-7029-45bf-b104-f4ca56d11a38. Accessed: 09 July 2025

[50] *Ibid.*

[51] *Ibid.*

[52] *Ibid.*

While it cannot be claimed that these free admission initiatives alone pluralise access to museums and make them less elitist institutions, MASP, compared to most museums in the Global North, offers, in some respects, an easier way for visits to be accessible to a larger portion of the population. There is a kind of attempt to include other audiences. However, it is important to note that free access refers only to admission to the museum and does not include transportation costs, which also represent significant barriers to accessibility.

Although São Paulo is not currently one of the cities with the highest transportation fares in the world — the cost of the basic fare is around 70 dollars per month, while the average monthly income of the population is approximately 568 dollars — this monthly expense weighs heavily on average Brazilian families (Mobilize Brasil, 2025)[53]. To exacerbate the situation, there has been a substantial decline in the purchasing power of Brazilians over the last decade. According to recent research, it was possible to buy meat, milk, beans, rice, and other essential food items for about 50 euros in 2013. Today, with the same amount, one can only purchase 1 kg of meat, bread, and coffee (LCA Consultores, 2025)[54].

In a multicrisis context, what do purchasing power, public transport costs, and accessibility have to do with museums? Quite a lot. The concept of "access" cannot be confined to isolated free initiatives offered by these institutions, particularly when considering special discounts available to certain privileged clients of a particular private bank. These urgencies transform into various challenges within a reality characterised by a range of inequalities, which is especially prevalent in countries of the Global South. While entry is free on Tuesday and Friday evenings, the reality is that the benefits and perks provided to paying visitors are disproportionate compared to those offered to free entrants.

[53] Mobilize Brasil [website]. 2025. Available at: https://www.mobilize.org.br/estatisticas/60/tarifa-de-transporte-publico-x-renda-em-varias-cidades-do-mundo.html. Accessed: 12 July 2025

[54] Nicoceli, Artur; LCA Consultores. 2024. In: Poder de compra do brasileiro cai 5% em 10 anos. G1 [website]. Available at: https://g1.globo.com/economia/noticia/2024/01/23/poder-de-compra-do-brasileiro-foi-corroido-quase-que-pela-metade-em-10-anos-entenda.ghtml. Accessed: 12 July 2025

An illustrative example is that there are two distinct pathways for visitors: one involves a queue where those seeking free entry must wait and organise themselves one behind the other, in addition to waiting for their turn to enter; the other is an unobstructed path for "Friends of MASP" club members. In the latter case, these visitors do not have to queue and can access the museum quickly. So, how does this dynamic differ from that established by the Louvre and the British Museum? Is having one or two annual exhibitions that deviate from the norm sufficient to shift the ideological frameworks of Western museums that operate under a Eurocentric model?

Similarly, the exhibition *Méditerranées* has received attention from specialized media for its ability to "pose fascinating questions about the traces of antiquity in the various countries bordering the Mediterranean. It also interrogates the societies that make up this region, along with their wealth and traditional know-how" (Boyer, 2024)[55].

In conclusion, dissecting the ideological effects of the *universal museum* and exploring how to organise different perspectives for new storytelling approaches will rely on two specific case studies aforementioned: i) the exhibition *Afro-Atlantic Histories* and its current permanent collection at MASP, which includes works exhibited in the 2018 exhibition; and ii) the permanent exhibition *Méditerranées* at MuCEM.

1.2.1. Locating black Brazilian artists and curatorship: reflections on visibility (2018-2025)

Afro-Atlantic Histories made a significant impact on both Brazilian and international art circles. The exhibition was led by a team of organizers that included artistic director Adriano Pedrosa, researcher Hélio Menezes, historian Lilia Schwarcz, visual artist Ayrson Heráclito, and key institutional player Tomás Toledo (MASP, 2025)[56]. It quickly

[55] Boyer, Guy. 2024. In: *Exhibition in Marseille: Images and Fantasies of the Mediterranean at the Mucem* | Connaissance des arts [website]. Available at: https://www.connaissancedesarts.com/arts-expositions/marseille/exposition-a-marseille-images-et-fantasmes-de-la-mediterranee-au-mucem-11192268/. Accessed: 14 July 2025

[56] MASP [website]. 2025. Translated by the author. Available at: https://masp.org.br/exposicoes/historias-afro-atlanticas. Accessed: 17 July 2025

gained recognition for its political significance during a pivotal year marked by the assassination of the politician and activist Marielle Franco and the election of Jair Bolsonaro (Martí, 2018)[57]. Consequently, 2018 became a landmark year in the arts, remembered for transformative shifts.

These shifts, as presented in the exhibition, were recognized by national media as "one of the largest and most ambitious exhibitions ever held by MASP (*ibid.*)[58]". The exhibition undertook the significant task of reassessing "centuries of black presence in the arts since slavery, revealing how racial violence shaped the visual canon of the West" (*ibid.*)[59]. However, even in front of a visible public acceptance, a critical question arises: Can a show that aimed to depict "the flows and reflows between Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe" (MASP, 2025)[60] truly transcend the role of museums as instruments of ideological dominance?

Historically, MASP and Tomie Ohtake Institute have engaged with dissident narratives over the past decades, often without the explicit involvement of black creators as artists, curators, or in other roles. Furthermore, it may be overly simplistic to assume that merely representing the Brazilian black population is enough to transform their portrayal into something fundamentally different from another ideological tool. At first glance, amplifying voices and images that have been historically erased is a significant step for a museum of such prominence. However, can it be claimed that this single exhibition can truly create a new balance of power within this framework of representation?

Far from providing a simple and straightforward answer, this question has sparked considerable debate both within and outside the art world. As Amanda Carneiro points out, the 21st century has been characterized by an intersection of decolonization processes and the decolonial turn, culminating in greater visibility for artistic practices

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[57] Martí, Silas. 2018. Translated by the author. In: *Em ano tórrido, artistas negros dominam e a cena indie se firma.* Folha de S. Paulo [website]. Available at: https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2018/12/em-ano-torrido-artistas-negros-dominam-e-a-cena-indie-se-firma.shtml. Accessed: 13 July 2025

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] *Ibid.*

[60] MASP [website]. 2025. Translated by the author. Available at: https://masp.org.br/exposicoes/historias-afro-atlanticas. Accessed: 28 July 2025

that have found space to express long-standing invisibilization processes. However, from a more radical perspective — returning to the idea of total disorder as a new order in relation to the universal museum — “the regime of visibility and representation is 'violently peaceful' in the face of the potential to shake the very foundations of museums, universities, and art history books” (Carneiro, 2024, p.52)[61].

The "pacified violence" of representations, however, did not prevent me from feeling deeply moved by an emblematic artwork displayed at the Instituto Tomie Ohtake during the *Afro-Atlantic Histories* exhibition. The impact of this encounter was truly overwhelming, highlighting the certainty that Brazil's history could have been represented in *Ham's Redemption* (Brocos, 1852), but it would continue through Sidney Amaral's *Inconvenience* (2014).



Figure 3 - *Inconvenience, Sidney Amaral (2014)*

Source: Isabella Matheus | ARTE!Brasileiros [website][62]

Among the more than 400 works exhibited in the *Afro-Atlantic Histories* exhibition, Sidney Amaral’s *Inconvenience* (2014) was prominently positioned in the centre of one of the visible walls of the Tomie Ohtake Institute, following a specific curatorial

[61] Translated by the author from Carneiro, Amanda. 2024. *Negros na Piscina.* Fósforo Edition, São Paulo (Brazil)

[62]ARTE!Brasileiros (2025) [website]. Photograph of artwork *Incovenience* in the permanent collection of the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo. Available at: https://artebrasileiros.com.br/arte/artigo/sidney-amaral-entre-a-afirmacao-e-a-imolacao/. Accessed: 07 July 2025.

chronology. The work was part of a broader narrative, whose objective was to bring portraits of black people — an essential aspect of Amaral's work — and also to refute the notion that the history of Brazil can only be told from the perspective of Portuguese colonisation, as if there were no possible stories to be told from the point of view of indigenous peoples and, later, from the perspective of the enslaved who syncretised their view of culture and artistic production with what was imposed by the elites (local and Portuguese).

Sidney Amaral, who died prematurely, belonged to one of the populations most affected by violence in Brazil: impoverished black men. Key data is essential for understanding the dynamics of systemic violence in Brazil: being a black person in the country presents a 2.7 times greater risk of becoming a homicide victim compared to a non-black person (Atlas da Violência, 2025)[63].

These social markers are evident throughout his work, and Inconvenience is an example of this. From a reading perspective proposed by the lecturer and visual artist Claudinei Roberto da Silva, the presence of drawings and watercolours by 19th-century European travellers (such as Debret and Rugendas) reveals depictions of black people in vulnerable situations. However, the humiliation of the enslaved black man, depicted shackled on the far left of the scene, is somewhat mitigated by the portrayal of other enslaved black men engaged in discourse with white men (Chiarelli, 2018)[64].

At the center of the work is a celebration of Afro-Brazilian culture, of which black people are both heirs and protagonists. To the left, there is a portrait of a pregnant woman that signifies redemption not through whitening, but in regard to the future of the black population in Brazil.

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[63] Moura, Bruno de Freitas. 2025. In: Risco de negro ser vítima de homicídio é 2,7 maior no Brasil. Agência Brasil [website]. Translated by the author. Available at: https://artebrasileiros.com.br/arte/artigo/sidney-amaral-entre-a-afirmacao-e-a-imolacao/. Accessed: 23 July 2025.

[64] Chiarelli, Tadeu. 2018. In: Sidney Amaral: Entre a afirmação e a imolação. ARTE!Brasileiros [website]. Translated by the author. Available at: https://artebrasileiros.com.br/arte/artigo/sidney-amaral-entre-a-afirmacao-e-a-imolacao/. Accessed: 23 July 2025

> Another possible interpretation of the work views it as a narrative akin to that of a *samba* school: In the “front commission” of the piece (the first panel), the enslaved Black individuals present the "inconvenience" of slavery through their problematic interactions with white men; next comes the equally uncomfortable apotheosis, showcasing the great icons of Black identity in Brazil and various representations of Black women understood as the backbone of society; finally, the last panel anticipates the future through the pregnant woman and the children.[65]

Standing before a work that has the same magnitude as the *Mona Lisa* was a turning point in my experience as an amateur art enthusiast. While there was relief in witnessing a portrait of Brazil and its black people in worship, confrontation, celebration, and looking toward the future, questions arose about why it took so long for this exhibition to take center stage. Additionally, the concept of a "visit to the museum" seemed to have been hijacked by the exclusion of those who should have access to that world and its cultural capital. Visibly, the work highlighted a “type of Brazilian history,” perhaps the least taught in schools and the least present in the popular imagination, but it would be overly optimistic to expect that this alone could overcome the barriers necessary to achieve a sense of total disorder.

Unlike most cultural spaces in Brazil, entry to the Tomie Ohtake Institute is free. However, the neighborhood in which it is located has undergone severe gentrification over the past few decades and is now characterized by a business-oriented environment and a high cost of living. The average household income is around 1,200 euros per month (Imprensa Loft, 2025)[66], and it has the lowest percentage of black residents in the city, with approximately 7.3% of the population identifying as black (IBGE, 2010)[67].

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[65] Chiarelli, Tadeu. 2018. In: Sidney Amaral: Entre a afirmação e a imolação. ARTE!Brasileiros [website]. Translated by the author. Available at: https://artebrasileiros.com.br/arte/artigo/sidney-amaral-entre-a-afirmacao-e-a-imolacao/. Accessed: 23 July 2025

[66] Imprensa Loft [website]. Translated by the author. Available at: https://portal.loft.com.br/newsletter/10-03-2025/. Accessed: 23 July 2025

[67] São Paulo Diverso - Fórum de Desenvolvimento Econômico Inclusivo Report. 2010. Translated by the author. Available at: https://drive.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/cidade/secretarias/upload/igualdade_racial/arquivos/Relatorio_Final_Virtual.pdf. Accessed: 25 July 2025

In contrast, the area with the highest proportion of black residents is Parelheiros, where 57% of the population self-identifies as black (IBGE, 2010)[68]. This neighborhood is situated not only in the geographical periphery of São Paulo but also within a socially marginalized and ostracized framework shaped by racism and inequalities, akin to most impoverished neighborhoods in Brazil. In terms of lethal violence, a rate of 10 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants indicates endemic violence according to the Atlas da Violência 2025; Parelheiros exceeds this threshold (São Paulo Public Security Department – SSP, 2025)[69].

These contrasting realities and points of view were also visible, in a way, in the 2018 exhibition. In the same space, works such as *The Negro Scipio* (Cezanne, 1866/68) and the emblematic image *Other Carnivals: Strike by Rio de Janeiro Street Collectors* (Mídia Ninja, 2015) coexisted side by side.



Figure 4 - *The Negro Scipio, Paul Cézanne (1866/68)*

[68] *Ibid.*
[69] Lutfi, Camila. 2025. Qual o bairro mais perigoso de São Paulo? B.News São Paulo [website]. Available at: https://www.bnewssaopaulo.com.br/noticias/politica/bairro-mais-perigoso-sao-paulo.html. Accessed: 26 July 2025

Source: Reproduction of the original artwork displayed at MASP[70]



Figure 5 - *Other Carnivals: Strike by Rio de Janeiro Street Collectors*[71] *(2015)*

Source: Mídia Ninja[72]

Shifting the focus so that The Negro Scipio (Cezanne, 1866/68) is one of the protagonists of a wider history, rather than french painter Paul Cézanne, is a way of disrupting the established order. Another way is to place Cézanne on an equal footing with a moment of social unrest, where class and race are starkly evident in the street cleaners' strike.

In terms of representation, *Afro-Atlantic Histories* was an emblematic moment, indicating that until 2018, the underrepresentation of Afro-Brazilian artists and works was the norm. This norm still holds true today. However, representation is also a performance. As Françoise Vergès illustrates, the cultural power mechanisms of the state involve "the appropriation-expropriation of social struggles by the state to

[70] Wikipedia [website]. 2025. Available at: https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Noir_Scipion. Accessed: 26 July 2025
[71] Original title translated by the author
[72] Mídia Ninja [website]. 2014. Available at: https://medium.com/@MidiaNINJA/outros-carnavais-6098e4a9f3e0. Accessed: 26 July 2025

neutralize them and transform them into attractive images, slogans, and commemorative dates that absolve it from addressing its role and responsibilities in perpetuating violence" (2024, p. 34).

Therefore, celebrating the representations and historical significance of the exhibition may seem naive, as there is no clear intention to disrupt the established order. Instead, it reinforces the idea that, with the support of the state and key sponsors, the narrative being conveyed suggests a present that is better than the past and thus warrants celebration. However, the present is also marked by social barriers that remain largely unaddressed, including the high rates of violence in predominantly black peripheral neighborhoods in São Paulo.

1.2.2. Presence in absence: between agency and portraying of black actors in Afro-Brazilian arts

In any case, the curatorial intentions behind *Afro-Atlantic Histories* resonated profoundly with me, as well as with both specialized and public debates. The exhibition prompts a critical examination of the black individual's position within art history — a position that has historically oscillated between that of a creative subject and a represented object. Within the Western canon, black people have overwhelmingly been relegated to the status of objects: reduced to portraiture, exoticised poses, aestheticised figures, or mere elements within a landscape. One must also not forget the insidious legacy of what Lilia Schwarcz and Dalton Paula have termed the "visual archive of slavery" (Schwarcz; Paula, 2023, p.23).

This iconographic tradition recurrently portrayed the black population in situations of subalternity. Consequently, even today, the presence of black individuals as subjects and agents within art historical narratives remains exceedingly rare.

All these elements, whether concerning a certain standard of representation or a recurrent underrepresentation, connect to a broader issue in art history. Art historian

Anne Lafont pinpoints this issue as follows: “no one [neither artwork nor artist] dies anymore” (2023, p.63). Within the context of this case study, Lafont’s assertion can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it suggests that the artists and works canonised within Western art are treated as timeless — a status intrinsically linked to a presumed universalism. Secondly, it implies that those artists and works previously marginalised by dominant art history can now be actively inscribed into it.

In this sense, *Afro-Atlantic Histories* is more than a project of representation; it is a significant intervention in contemporary art history. The exhibition constructs a narrative that places *Other Carnivals* in direct dialogue with, and on an equal footing to, canonical figures like Paul Cézanne. In doing so, it successfully recounts alternative stories of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora.

However, this notion of endless continuity upheld by Western art history seems to disturb some guardians of established norms in subjectivity and artistic practice, such as Claire Barbillon, the current historian and director of the Louvre School. In a recent interview, Barbillon expressed concern over the absence of the so-called “formalist art historians”; those who limit their analysis of artistic phenomena to formalistic or aesthetic concerns (Lafont, 2023, p. 173). What emerges from this discomfort is the understanding that, when considering contemporary critical perspectives on art history, it is no longer feasible — or at least is what a range of scholars, academics, and advocates of black movements strive to demonstrate — to observe or treat an artwork solely as an object without acknowledging the potential violence surrounding its creation.

In contrast, Ayrson Heráclito, an artist and one of the curators of the exhibition under analysis, affirms the intention of inverting hierarchies, stating that "undoubtedly, the exhibition addresses a production in which the black individual is no longer seen as an object, but as a subject. Black artists are the protagonists, creating their own

narratives" (Heráclito; Cavalcanti, 2018)[73]. The manner of recounting stories was conceived with an unusual approach, distinct from the "Louvre school of exhibitions." According to Heráclito, "the artistic languages themselves traverse the historicity within the artworks. We have various temporalities and their strategies for artistic materialisation, ranging from more traditional techniques of fine arts to contemporary and technological languages. This is positive, as it deconstructs stereotypes and expectations about Afro-Atlantic arts (*ibid.*)[74]".

It is important to note that this essay does not aim to delve into the concept of Afro-Atlantic arts, nor to simplify the case study through a singular analytical lens. The exhibited *Afro-Atlantic Histories* were organised according to specific curatorial lines that consider multiple narrative possibilities – a feature which was pivotal to highlight, even as recently as the 2018 exhibition, given its significant repercussion. Consequently, what was presented, either explicitly or implicitly, consists of a series of possible stories resulting from forced diasporic displacement. It is therefore evident that a single exhibition cannot truly "recount" the pernicious consequences of contemporary global racial capitalism.

This inherent impossibility of a complete historical recounting inside the walls of a museum was, to a certain extent, consciously integrated into the exhibition's curatorial framework. Here, the term "impossibility" denotes what is fundamentally unattainable, rather than what is "denied"—the latter implying a refusal of an acknowledged truth (Oxford Languages, 2025)[75]. This conceptual distinction is powerfully illustrated in the work *Space to Forget* (2014) by the contemporary North-American artist Titus Kaphar, who was also exhibited at the Tomie Ohtake Institute.

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[73] Cavalcanti, Amanda; Heráclito, Ayrton. 2018. In: Exposição 'Histórias Afro-Atlânticas' traduz a subjetividade negra em imagens. Vice Brasil [website] Available at: https://www.vice.com/pt/article/exposicao-historias-afro-atlanticas-traduz-a-subjetividade-negra-em-imagens/. Accessed: 22 July 2025. Translated by the author

[74] *Ibid.*

[75] Oxford Learner's Dictionary [website]. Available at: https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/impossibility. Accessed: 27 July 2025



Figure 6 - *Space to forget*, Titus Kaphar (2014)

Source: Reproduction of the original piece displayed at National Gallery of Art (Washington, US)[76]

Just as the "universal" aspect of the canonic museums of the West continues to be celebrated, the notion of "whiteness" as normative is manifested in the absence childs in the artwork. As Hanna Stamler points out, this work challenges "the notion that presence alone is restorative (2015)[77]". Furthermore, the figure of absence is an outline without race, although their dominant positions in these intentionally outdated constructs suggest they are white.

Although the particularities of slavery and race relations in the US and Brazil present significant contrasts that cannot be addressed here, this analysis identifies a point of convergence in the Afro-Atlantic world: the construction of "universal" ideas. The examination of museums as ideological tools reveals how they propagated a specific and dominant version of universality, which similarly sustains contemporary structures of white supremacy, even if that person is a faceless outline. Curiously, the

[76] Interminable Rambling reproduction [website]. Available at: https://interminablerambling.com/2022/07/28/artwork-from-the-nmaahcs-reckoning-and-the-national-gallery-of-arts-afro-american-histories-exhibits-part-ii/. Accessed: 28 July 2025

[77] Stamler, Hannah. 2015. Frieze [website]. Available at: https://www.frieze.com/article/titus-kaphar. Accessed: 28 July 2025

“humanising” part of this story is the representation of the black person in an obvious position of servitude.

1.2.3. The "super living” of MASP

As the researcher and curator Hélio Menezes states, “each exhibition is a world” (Menezes; Hirszman, 2018)[78]. This was certainly true during my second visit to MASP in mid-September 2018. I attended as an ordinary visitor to engage more deeply with the *Afro-Atlantic Histories* exhibition, and it felt like entering a potential world contained within another; a world that asserted itself fiercely beyond the confines of the art institution.

This visit occurred against a specific political backdrop: Brazil was on the eve of Jair Bolsonaro's first-term presidential victory (Mazui, 2018)[79]. The early ideological symptoms of the far-right's ascendancy were already highly visible, even before the election result was confirmed. Furthermore, the mechanisms of *necropolitics* not only persisted as the norm but were being openly endorsed by the incoming administration. A stark example of this is found in the data concerning those killed by the Military Police of São Paulo State: in 2018, 6 out of every 10 victims were black (Portal da Transparência da SSP, 2018)[80].

A brief contextualisation of the meaning of *necropolitics* is necessary, as it is a structural and effective method of state control in Brazil. The concept was developed by the historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe. In broad terms, *necropolitics* encompasses the exercise of necropower. This refers to the imposition of parameters that legitimise the subjugation of life to death, moving beyond the mere administration of life discussed by Michel Foucault in his concept of biopower.

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[78] Hirzman, Mariana; Menezes, Hélio. 2018. ARTE!Brasileiros [website]. Translated by the author. Available at: https://artebrasileiros.com.br/arte/exposicoes/uma-arte-plural-diversa-e-militante/. Accessed: 29 July 2025

[79] Mazui, Guilherme. 2018. G1 [website]. Available at: https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2018/noticia/2018/10/28/jair-bolsonaro-e-eleito-presidente-e-interrompe-serie-de-vitorias-do-pt.ghtml. Accessed: 29 July 2025

[80] Martins, Leonardo. 2019. Uol Notícias [website]. Translated by the author. Available at: https://noticias.uol.com.br/cotidiano/ultimas-noticias/2019/03/04/60-pessoas-mortas-pm-sao-negras-sao-paulo-2018.htm. Accessed: 30 July 2025

Therefore, *necropolitics* is not limited to letting die through omission. It actively involves making die, and in doing so creates in Mbembe terms "death worlds". These are contexts in which certain population groups have their lives subjected to a constant risk of death, thereby becoming social "living dead" (Santos, 2022)[81]. It goes without saying that in the Brazilian context, these population groups are defined by race, class, gender, and other social markers. These are the groups that frequently become targets of the military police, the state, and local elites.

The disparity between the social "living dead" and the "super-living" exposed in *Afro-Atlantic Histories* also speaks to a life-or-death question concerning Afro-Brazilian and diasporic art itself, both of which were protagonists in one of Latin America's largest museums. Ultimately, on the matter of its very existence versus its centuries-long erasure, the artist and curator Emanoel Araújo addressed this ambivalence surrounding the meaning of Afro-Brazilian art more profoundly. He spoke to it not only as art on display but also as a new artistic mode.

> *Afro-Brazilian* art exists through these examples, which are almost historical artefacts today. Yet one cannot deny that an artist like Estêvão Silva (1844-1891), an academic and classical painter who was the son of enslaved people, or many others such as Manoel da Cunha (1737-1809), who was himself enslaved, allowed something connected to Africa to show through in their work. However, the Africa we know is invented for us; it is not the real Africa on the other side of the Atlantic. Estêvão Silva has a warm palette, and we can attribute certain aspects of this to his origin, among other factors. But this does not mean his art is Afro-Brazilian. It is the warm art of a Black artist, imbued with the characteristics of his own lived experience.[82]

It is worth noting that this analysis does not seek to comprehensively collect, analyse, and systematise the diverse range of concepts surrounding Afro Brazilian art. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that, as highlighted by Hélio Menezes, the definition of Afro Brazilian art is far from self evident. On the contrary, its designations are varied (2018, p. 698). Broadly speaking, the extensive debate around defining 'Afro Brazilian

[81] Santos, André Almeida. 2022. Necropolítica: biopoder, soberania, estado de exceção, política de morte. UFSB (Universidade do Sul da Bahia). Translated by the author. Available at: https://revista.unitins.br/index.php/humanidadeseinovacao/article/view/7372. Accessed: 30 July 2025

[82] Araújo, Emanoel; Menezes, Hélio. 2022, p. 697. Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia. MASP, SP. Translated by the author.

art' points to a widespread dissensus, which at times takes on essentialist, discriminatory, or clearly problematic contours.

Within this dissensus, the notion of total disorder also functions as an overarching framework that challenges established orders and power structures. The concept of "black art", for instance, has been critically examined by anthropologist Kabengele Munanga. He argues that the whole idea of black art "should be abandoned in favour of a broader, non ethnicised, and non politicised understanding of Afro Brazilian art" (Munanga; Menezes 2018)[83], as the norm rather than the exception. This same line of thought can be applied to so called "queer art", "feminist art", "dissident art", and "art of Indigenous peoples", which have gained popularity in recent years in museums and galleries across the global North South axis.

However, a more critical perspective could be assumed that when social markers are used to qualify art and the artist a priori, the work risks being perceived as "biologised", "homoaffectivised", or "non-white", among other reductive categorisations. This framing tends to position such art primarily in opposition to established traditions — such as Renaissance, Impressionism, Surrealism, or Modernist art — rather than engaging with its inherent artistic substance and practices.

In recent discussions on contemporary Afro-Brazilian art, an emphasis on its highly political nature can also reinforce an essentialist viewpoint. This approach is illustrated in press coverage; for example, one review states that exhibitions "attempt to break down barriers to black presence in the visual arts", describing "Afro-Atlantic Histories" as "the high point of this gradual process" (Rangel, 2018)[84]. Similarly, another article notes that "This is rarely taught: an exhibition examining African-Atlantic History" (Smith, 2022)[85]. Such a perspective reductively assumes that the primary purpose of

[83] Munanga, Kabengele; Menezes, Hélio. 2022, p. 698. Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia. MASP, SP. Translated by the author.
[84] Rangel, Daniel. 2018. Folha de S. Paulo [website]. Available at: https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2018/09/exposicoes-tentam-romper-barreiras-a-presenca-negra-nas-artes-visuais.shtml. Translated by the author. Accessed: 30 July 2025
[85] Smith, David. 2022. The Guardian [website]. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/apr/18/afro-atlantic-histories-national-gallery-of-art. Accessed: 30 July 2025

the black Atlantic art is to address the wounds of racial capitalism, implicitly confining Afro-Brazilian artists to roles of visibility and denunciation. This limited framework overlooks more complex and varied artistic histories.

Similarly, it fails to acknowledge that there were Brazilian black painters in the 19th century who specialised in still life but were systematically erased from art history. It ignores the possibility that black sculptors may have mastered European fine art techniques, even if they were excluded from its institutions. It also neglects the existence of contemporary black artists whose work transcends the racialised roles imposed upon them. Ultimately, this viewpoint disregases the fact that displaying a still life by a white european artist in the permanent collection of institutions like the MASP, the MuCEM, the Louvre, or the British Museum is itself a political choice. The danger of the "universal" museum lies in this very reductiveness: under the guise of displaying *world art*, it continues to elevate works that fit a dominant paradigm — european schooled, white, and academically trained.

Nevertheless, the significant impact of the *Afro-Atlantic Histories* exhibition within both artistic and academic circles can be attributed to its nuanced and central engagement with race, gender, class, sexuality, and geography. Its distinctive quality lay in its refusal to present a single narrative. Instead, the exhibition embraced a multiplicity of perspectives that traverse the Atlantic in varied and often non-linear ways.

By explicitly rejecting the possibility of a singular history, it brought to light the countless intersections that characterise the *Black Atlantic*. Ultimately, the exhibition succeeded in adopting new historiographical approaches and innovative modes of retelling Afro-diasporic artistic production. This shift is necessary to disrupt the dominant, linear mode of storytelling, which often reduces history to a binary framework: winners versus losers, or canonical figures versus ordinary people.

1.2.4. The political viewpoints behind two Afro Atlantic modernists

Assuming the impossibility of recounting a past experience with exhaustive precision, the artworks selected above serve to illustrate specific instances that contribute to a broader critical understanding of the themes explored in the exhibition. These works demonstrate how such themes culminate in a larger notion of political and social 'disorder' — a concept manifested through the subject matter itself, the spatial arrangement within MASP's environment, the supporting curatorial texts, and the demographics of the visitors.

It is evident that these analyses were informed by a particular, undeclared autoethnographic experience, one that encompasses both explicitly objective and subjective elements. After all, art exhibitions engage with both material and immaterial displays. For the average visitor, this sensation would be no different, especially considering the inherent difficulty in articulating the powerful sense of individual representation.

This feeling was fostered not only by specific artworks but also by the demographic composition of the visitors themselves. Although the architecture of MASP imposes a vertical perspective through its structure and its access via a series of steps reflecting a foreign modernist vision, the prevailing impression was of a significantly higher number of non white visitors present on that occasion. It was also noted that the staff (including security personnel, cafeteria waiters, and some educators) was predominantly non white.

Given the many ambivalences that became the norm in 2018, a state which continues into 2025, the opportunity to view the works of black modernists close at hand was particularly striking. The modernism presented there was being displayed in new packaging, that of *Afro Atlantic Modernism*. From a technical viewpoint, monochrome, a painting technique that relies on the representation of a single colour, is a fundamental part of this school. It is present in both the work *Emblema* (1968, Valentim) by the Brazilian Rubem Valentim and the work *Untitled* (1975) by the North-American Howardena Pindell.

Both artists were contemporaries, operating within similar historical moments, and they also share a common manipulation of the colour white in a distinct manner, at least when compared to what was typically understood as monochromatic examples explicitly associated with Modernism (Sur Conectas, 2025)[86].

The religious representation embedded within the work *Emblema* warrants particular consideration. Afro-Brazilian religious symbolism manifests through the symmetrical construction of the *oxê* symbol, the double-edged axe of Xangô. This deity belongs to the pantheon of orixás in Candomblé, an African-derived religion with centuries-old ritual traditions in Brazil.

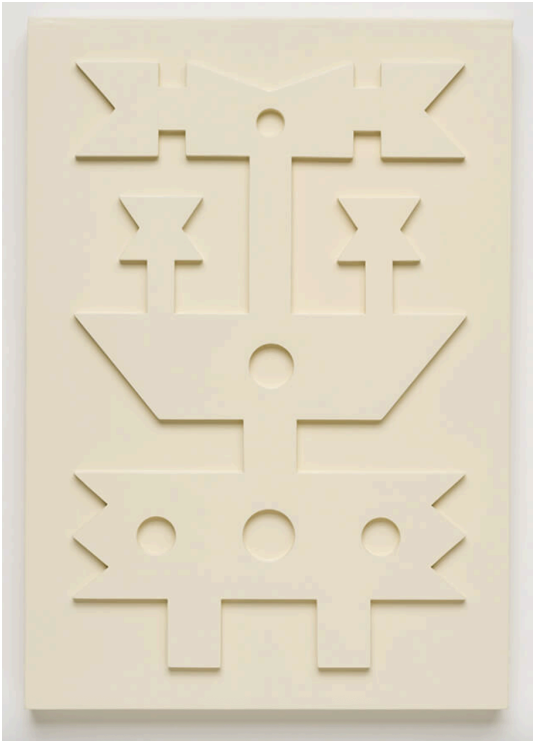


Figure 7 - *Emblema*, Rubem Valentim (1964)

Source: Reproduction of the original piece displayed at MASP, São Paulo[87]

[86] Sur Conectas [website]. Available at: https://sur.conectas.org/en/afro-atlantic-histories/. Accessed: 31 July 2025

[87] Image reproduction from Sur Conectas [website]. Available at: https://sur.conectas.org/en/afro-atlantic-histories/. Accessed: 31 July 2025

Within the visual repertoire of the orixás, popular imagery commonly associated with Xangô, Iemanjá, Iansã, and many others is typically explicit, humanised, and possesses a distinctly heroic aspect. From Valentim's perspective, the symbols of these belief systems underwent a significant reinterpretation. This innovation manifested in two key ways: through the manipulation of the images themselves, and through the subversion of established conventions within the prevailing modernist tradition. In his own manner, Valentim introduced his interpretation of nationalism, a key concept of the Brazilian Modernist school, by embracing the cosmology of candomblé (Cardoso, 2022)[88].



Figure 8 - *Orixás*, Lambuja (2023)

Source: Reproduction of the original illustration available at Superinteressante[89]

A further political aspect evident in Valentim's work is his decision to make candomblé and its deities a primary source of inspiration and representation. This is particularly significant given that this work was produced during the years of Brazil's dictatorship, a period when persecution and violence, including religiously motivated violence, were

[88] Cardoso, Rafael. 2022. A reinvenção da Semana e o mito da descoberta do Brasil. Translated by the author. Available at: https://www.scielo.br/j/ea/a/Cm4BLN6hXMvwJjrpK9WY8YL/?lang=pt. Accessed: 01 August 2025

[89] Image reproduction from Superinteressante [website]. Available at: https://super.abril.com.br/sociedade/os-orixas-mais-populares-do-brasil/. Accessed: 01 August 2025

institutionalised. It is also worth noting that, according to recent data, only 1% of the population follows Candomblé or Umbanda (IBGE, 2022)[90]. The majority of the population is distributed between Catholicism, at almost 57%, and Pentecostal practices, at approximately 27% (*ibid.*)[91].

Howardena Pindell's *Untitled* (1975) demonstrates a similarly subtle but successful strategy for subverting modernist conventions. The artist presents a deliberately asymmetrical canvas, from which a fragment is missing. Upon closer inspection, the initially dominant white surface recedes, becoming a background for raised textures of coloured dots (Sur Conectas, 2025)[92].



Figure 9 - *Untitled*, Howardena Pindell (1975)

Source: Image reproduction of the original piece displayed at White Cube, London (UK)[93]

[90] Paulo, Paiva Paula; IBGE. 2025. G1 [website]. Translated by the author. Available at: https://g1.globo.com/economia/censo/noticia/2025/06/06/participacao-de-umbanda-e-candomble-triplica-espiritismo-cai-diz-ibge.ghtml. Accessed: 01 August 2025
[91] *Ibid.*
[92] Sur Conectas [website]. Available at: https://sur.conectas.org/en/afro-atlantic-histories/. Accessed: 31 July 2025
[93] White Cube [website]. Available at: https://www.whitecube.com/artworks/howardena-pindell-untitled.Accessed: 31 July 2025

For comparative purposes, it is noted that the celebrated canons of modernism in that context included figures such as Tarsila do Amaral, painter of the famous *Abaporu* (1928), and Grant Wood, author of *American Gothic* (1930). Given the widespread recognition and direct association of these works with modernism, their graphic reproduction in this thesis is unnecessary. This very omission demonstrates the soft power and omnipresence these works hold within the canonical imagination that consecrated them. In contrast, as an art enthusiast, I only became acquainted with the work of Rubem Valentim after two decades, even though the 1922 Modern Art Week and the painting *Abaporu* were part of the Brazilian regular school curriculum. Furthermore, the work and trajectory of Howardena Pindell were revealed to me only during the visit to the exhibition in 2018.

1.2.5. From *Afro-Atlantic Histories* to the permanent collection

During another visit to MASP, undertaken intentionally as a core component of the autoethnographic methodology of this study, I observed the works and the state of the museum's permanent collection in April 2025. I paid the full price of 37 reais (approximately 5 euros), which included a 50 percent student discount. As previously stated, unlike the pricing policies of most european museums, student discount eligibility in Brazil is not subject to an age limit.

Regarding the most visible changes, it is worth noting that seven years later, MASP inaugurated the 'Pietro Mari Building', a new structure adjacent to its most popular venue, the 'Lina Bo Bardi Building' (Paiva; Tito, 2025)[94]. The new building is named after Lina Bo Bardi's husband, Pietro, who was of Italian origin, and responsible for founding the museum alongside the Brazilian journalist Assis Chateaubriand. The permanent

[94] Paiva, Deslange; Tito, Fábio. 2025. G1 [website]. Available at: https://g1.globo.com/guia/guia-sp/noticia/2025/03/28/masp-abre-novo-predio-para-o-publico-nesta-sexta-veja-detalhes-do-projeto.ghtml.Translated by the author. Accessed: 02 August 2025

collection in question remains housed in MASP's historic building, although the admission ticket grants unrestricted access to both buildings.

Most of the time, I shared the visit with groups of hundreds of students from various public schools in São Paulo. The students were teenagers, and based on my initial impression, the majority were black.

A Brazilian socio-economic particularity that is worth noting for greater contextual understanding involves certain contrasting demographic data, such as school dropout rates. According to recent data from UNICEF, Brazil has 993,000 children and adolescents, aged 4 to 17, who are out of school. Of this total, 55% are boys and 67% are black or indigenous. More than half of the total live in the poorest 20% of households nationwide (Agência Brasil, 2025)[95]. Therefore, the presence of a majority-black group of students on an ordinary Thursday (a visit day with a fee) to MASP, as part of a state school educational programme, itself represents a significant outlier in contrast to the broader Brazilian reality.

The permanent collection is housed on the second floor of the older building. At the time, the temporary exhibition dedicated its basement level to *LGBTQIAP+ Histories*, under the following premise: to bring together "works that thematize queer topics or that are made by LGBTQIA+ artists, activists, and researchers. The show celebrates the richness and multiplicity of queer creativity in the visual arts, aligned with MASP's mission, which defines the museum as diverse, inclusive, and plural" (MASP, 2025)[96].

Beyond the stated intentions of inclusion, plurality, and diversity in the temporary exhibitions, the second floor was reached. This space was noticeably emptier than the one dedicated to *LGBTQIAP+ Histories*. Attention was turned to the initial impressions of the layout of the works throughout the hall, where artworks are displayed on row upon row of easels. Each row contained a horizontally arranged sequence of

[95] Agência Brasil [website]. 2025. Translated by the author. Available at: https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/educacao/noticia/2025-07/mais-de-300-mil-criancas-voltaram-para-escola-em-8-anos-diz-unicef. Accessed: 02 August 2025

[96] MASP [website]. 2025. Translated by the author. Available at: https://www.masp.org.br/exposicoes/historias-lgbtqia. Accessed: 02 August 2025

approximately twelve works, and the first row was composed almost entirely of black artists, including Jaime Lauriano, Rosana Paulino, Rubem Valentim, Abdias Nascimento, Yêdamaria, Flávio Cerqueira, Melvin Edwards, Tomás Santa Rosa, Heitor dos Prazeres, Maria Auxiliadora da Silva, and Senèque Obin.



Figure 10 - MASP permanent collection

Source: photo taken by the author, April 2025

Several of these works were also featured in the *Afro-Atlantic Histories* exhibition, such as *Okê Oxóssi* (1970) by Abdias Nascimento, Composição 12 (1962) by Rubem Valentim, and *A Permanência das Esculturas* (2017) by Rosana Paulino. There was one exception in this row regarding demographics: the artist Pedro Figari, a Uruguayan painter who was white but whose extensive work was dedicated to Afro-Uruguayan representations, including scenes of daily life and cultural manifestations such as candombe.

Once again, the act of racializing — or not racializing — an artist, of determining who is granted creativity, who belongs in an art movement, or who consistently occupies museum walls, remains significant. This is especially true given that the norm remains

a visual archive that is persistently whitewashed with the disguise of universality. Within these reductive frameworks, attempts at disorder often become, in effect, more domesticated or reformist. Nevertheless, the particularities of Latin American colonization and key artists who were/are not black yet still contributed to expanding new imaginaries cannot be ignored. This is evident in the work of Pedro Figari and the Argentine artist Carybé, for instance, with his representations of black identities in Bahia (Brazil). Problematizing the opportunism or structural racism in these and many other artists would lead to another discussion beyond the intended scope of this thesis.

Regarding the choices behind the exhibited artworks from the permanent collection itself, it did not take long for the work *Amnésia* (2015), by Flávio Cerqueira, to appear among the rows. The presence of the sculpture was noticeable even before reaching it. At that moment, it was the most photographed piece by visitors – maybe for its dimensions (almost 140 cm in height), maybe because it became somehow in a canon. This same sculpture was also part of the *Afro-Atlantic Histories* exhibition. Beyond its technical mastery, it was one of the emblematic works of 2018 and is an evidently political piece. In its own way, it revisits the figure of *Ham's Redemption* (Brocos,1895) and makes explicit the violent process of whitening among Brazilian peoples.

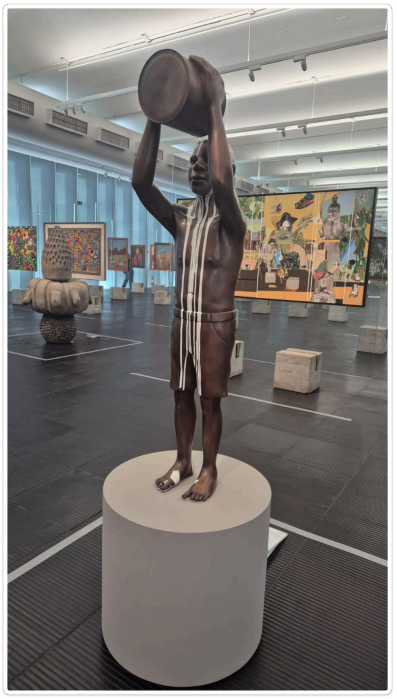


Figure 11 - *Amnésia*, Flávio Cerqueira (2015) in the permanent collection of MASP

Source: photo taken by the author, April 2025

Beyond this focal point, the rows are arranged in a temporal order and/or by specific schools. The second row features white contemporary female artists such as Leda Catunda. From the fourth row onwards, the display includes renowned white 20th-century artists, such as the Italo-Brazilian modernist Alfredo Volpi and Brazilian Ione Saldanha, alongside the German sculptor Ernesto Di Fiori.

The fifth row highlights key works by the Brazilian Neo-Realist Candido Portinari and another key referent in realist muralism, the Mexican artist Diego Rivera.

It is worth noting that, beyond the artworks themselves, there did not appear to be a clear curatorial criterion — at least not one discernible to this viewer — for determining which artists' works were accompanied by supporting texts with brief biographies. For instance, the German artist Max Ernst's work *Bryce Canyon Translation* (1946) included a biographical note, as did Diego Rivera's *The Sowers* (1947). Returning to the black artists in the first row, Abdias Nascimento's work *Okê Oxóssi* (1970) was also accompanied by a biography, as was Rosana Paulino's *A permanência das estruturas* (2017). Others, such as Tomás Santa Rosa and Carmélia Emiliano, had only descriptive labels for their exhibited works, with no accompanying biographical context.

Although the permanent collection includes these acquisitions, it still positions them in a dialogic relationship with the so-called Western canons, sharing the same visual and conceptual space. This is consistent with MASP's ambition to exhibit "universal" art and secure its position in the global museum circuit. The holdings of Matisse, Modigliani, Picasso, and Monet are clear evidence of this tendency.

Furthermore, the giant painting in the centre at the back of the collection room acts as a counterpoint to the narratives centred on black artists in the front row or on a few indigenous artists, such as those from the MAHKU movement (Huni Kuin Artists Movement).

However, Nicolas Poussin's classic work, *Hymenaios Disguised as a Woman During an Offering to Priapus* (1634-1638), is imperative to the collection. Its importance is underscored by its prominent placement at the centre of the room, albeit on the far wall; it is impossible to visit the collection without noticing its presence. This significance stems not only from its visually dominant size, it measures 167 cm in height and 376 cm in length, but also because it materialises and acknowledges the relevance of one of the "great classical masters of French painting" (Artchive, 2025)[97]. This remains a crucial statement even within an insistently Brazilian collection, and despite the work's embeddedness in the Western mythological canon.



Figure 12 - *Hymenaeus Disguised as a Woman During an Offering to Priapus*, Nicolas Poussin (1634-38) displayed at the permanent collection of MASP

[97] Artchive [website]. 2025. Hymenaios Disguised as a Woman During an Offering to Priapus (c.1634 – 1638) by Nicolas Poussin. Available at: https://www.artchive.com/artwork/hymenaios-disguised-as-a-woman-during-an-offering-to-priapus-nicolas-poussin-c-1634-1638/. Accessed: 02 August 2025

Source: photo taken by the author, April 2025[98]

This prominence creates an out-of-ordinary curatorial juxtaposition. To begin the collection room with Jaime Lauriano's *Pedras Portuguesas #2* (2017) and to conclude with Poussin is to actively fragment the narrative of history. This far from random choice forces a dialogue on how history can be retold from a Brazilian perspective and, ultimately, on whether this perspective reinforces or challenges the museum's traditional role as an archive of the victors.



Figure 13 - *Pedras Portuguesas #2*, Jaime Lauriano (2017), displayed at the permanent collection of MASP

Source: photo taken by the author, April 2025[99]

[98] Original piece displayed at MASP permanent collection [website]. Available at: https://masp.org.br/en/collections/works/hymenaeus-disguised-as-a-woman-during-an-offering-to-priapusAccessed: 02 August 2025

[99] Original piece displayed at MASP permanent collection [website]. Available at: https://www.masp.org.br/acervo/obra/pedras-portuguesas-2. Accessed: 02 August 2025

Regarding the problematic that positions the concept of 'total disorder' as a parameter, and the extent to which this disorder was, in fact, achieved in exhibitions such as Afro-Atlantic Histories, the present work remains without answers to these questions. This is also due to an inability to gain full clarity on historical events that are still unfolding, which clouds any analysis of the whole. It is not fitting, therefore, to state definitively that Afro-Atlantic Histories proposed the breaking of certain dogmas, even though it happened with strong black protagonism — evident in the presence of a curatorial body, for instance.

This is not to say there were no Afro-Brazilian curators before. To claim so would erase the legacy of the artist Emanoel Araújo, the driving force behind the Afro-Brasil Museum (São Paulo, Brazil) and other pivotal contributions to discussions on race and black movements throughout his life. However, *Afro-Atlantic Histories* exhibition broke out of the art world bubble for a number of already stated reasons: it occupied two major art institutions in the city, made concerted efforts to create roundtables and courses on themes of Afro-Brazilian art throughout its run, and opened amidst Brazil's stark political polarization and the rise of the far-right.

Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that, even so, at the core of these institutions' operational maintenance, “European states demand that Global South states build museums according to their norms in order to put them into debt or create institutions they will not ultimately have sufficient resources to maintain, thus creating an infernal cycle of debt and scarcity” (Vèrges, 2023, p. 53).

This barrier, although theoretically implicit, is made explicit in the organisation of the narrative presented in MASP's current collection, for instance. Furthermore, the discursive power of museums cannot be overlooked, as highlighted by Hélio Menezes in *Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia* (2018, p. 702):

> Exhibitions articulate histories; they translate narratives through the arrangement of objects and images within a given space, (re)creating discourses through what they choose to display, as well as what they conceal. They are short-lived, impermanent events whose effects, however, can extend far beyond their immediate duration. It is

also understood that exhibitions and museums, through their selection criteria, are not merely spaces for displaying art. They are creators of discourses about art and powerful sources in establishing the names, works, and styles characteristic of a certain type of production within the art market.[100]

[100] Menezes, Hélio. 2018. Exposições e críticos de arte afro-brasileira: um conceito em disputa. In: Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia. MASP, São Paulo. Translated by the author.

PART 2: WHO INVENTED THE EUROPEANS WHO 'INVENTED' THE MEDITERRANEAN?

2. First views of the Mediterranean

Building upon a perspective that seeks an openness to total disorder within museums — an understanding that the most widely held concept of the museum and its intended purpose, if not yet clear, serves the ideology of both universal subject and culture, where "universal" is synonymous with white and european—the third autoethnographic visit, conducted as a methodological component of this research, concluded in Marseille, France. More precisely, at the MuCEM, as previously indicated.

It is important to note that this autoethnographic approach differs somewhat from the intimate and familiar perspective adopted in the observation of the *Afro-Atlantic Histories* exhibition. Here, I explicitly assume my foreign gaze upon Mediterranean issues. It was, in fact, my first visit to a majority-Islamic region in France. For the first time, the imaginary divide between "Western and Eastern" was laid out before me so literally, framed by the Mediterranean Sea. It was the first time I experienced the realization: *"Look, on the other side of this sea is North Africa"*.

Amid this ambivalence between excitement and the pursuit of greater technical precision, the literature revisited here serves as the guiding thread that stitches together the similarities and differences between the museums and the narratives they exhibit.

Officially, the visit took place in April 2025 and cost 11 euros[101]. It is worth recalling that, although a student, I was beyond the age limit imposed for purchasing a discounted ticket. However, even before reaching the ticket counter, a brief overview of the museum's surroundings is necessary. The MuCEM is located where the city meets the Mediterranean Sea at the entrance of the historic *Vieux Port*, within the 2nd arrondissement. It sits adjacent to Le Panier, one of the oldest districts of Marseille.

[101] MuCEM [website]. 2025. Available at: https://billetterie.mucem.org/fr-FR/produits?famille=1703237789240300000. Accessed: 06 August 2025

Like many global tourist zones, Le Panier has been undergoing a process of gentrification, resulting in an influx of newcomers and rising property prices. In terms of citizenship, official data from 2021 indicates the following composition: 25.1% of inhabitants are immigrants, while 74.9% are French (City Population, 2025)[102].

Upon first observation, the surroundings of the MuCEM were indeed occupied by a majority of the French public. Even before the museum came to feature as part of the view of the "new" port, the Cathédrale La Major dominates the landscape as a Roman Catholic monument, constructed in the 19th century by the architect Léon Vaudoyer under the orders of Napoleon Bonaparte (Cathédrale La Major, 2025)[103]. Somewhat unorthodox in relation to the imagery most commonly associated with contemporary Catholic aesthetics, certain aspects of its design, although officially drawing from Roman-Byzantine references, nonetheless function as a form of memorabilia of Napoleonic dominations in the East.

The East and the West, moreover, remain largely ideological frontiers that underpin the racial essentialisms persisting within global racial capitalism. The reverberations of these complex dynamics, which sustain a frequent narrative of dominators versus the dominated (that is to say: all are racialized, but with a majority negatively discriminated against and a minority positively discriminated), return us to a central question within the field of arts, one articulated deftly by Amanda Carneiro: “If identity and cultural and artistic heritage do not proceed in a direct and uninterrupted line from some fixed origin, how can different sites of creation and production that are representative and inclusive be inscribed within the field of the arts?” (2018, p. 719)[104].

Assuming the arts to be a living, open field — that is to say, one that does not conclude in itself, as it also serves as a historical fragment and mirror — it has also fallen to art to remind us that the continent considered the ‘cradle of civilisation’ was, and continues

[102] City Population [website]. 2025. Available at: https://www.citypopulation.de/en/france/marseille/admin/marseille_2e_arrondissem/132020204__panier/. Accessed: 07 August 2025
[103] La Major Cathedral [website]. 2025. Available at: https://cathedralelamajor.fr/histoire_la_major/. Accessed: 07 August 2025
[104] Carneiro, Amanda. 2018. Histórias afro-atlânticas: algumas questões. In: Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia. MASP, São Paulo. Translated by the author.

to be, a violent construction. In a brief historical digression, the Brazilian philosopher and researcher Renato Araújo recalls that even the

> […] children of the racist Portuguese and Spaniards [who colonised the Americas] were not, in fact, descended from 'pure' parents, since these were themselves 'expatriated' Europeans—whether due to the spectre of the nearly eight hundred years of Moorish (why not say Black?) invasion of the Iberian Peninsula (711–1492), or earlier, because of the 'racial insecurity' that the Pax Romana had failed to resolve among the 'barbarian' Lusitanian and Iberian peoples since the ancient era of Gnaeus Cornelius Scipio Calvus (218–201 BC)[105].

In addition to this, it is crucial not to lose sight of the fact that the process of consolidating contemporary African states is also a recent historical phenomenon that occurred largely from the 1960s onward. These years, therefore, mark the "genesis of what we understand as contemporary Africa" (Silva, 2018, p.722)[106]. Far from generalising independence processes into a single narrative — which would, once again, resort to essentialism as a feasible conceptual justification — the insurgencies of new African states were also driven by the "need to (re)construct emerging memories and identities, and for reparations, in a process of violent transitions involving new social, political, and cultural arrangements and accommodations that continues to march forward as determined by history" (*ibid.*)[107].

These new arrangements and accommodations form a process in continuum; simultaneously, they constitute the raw material that shapes territories — both literal and ideological — which are in constant dispute and mutation. This tension is also transposed into the field of the arts, for, as has been argued, "art is language, and language is a constitutive element of the world" (Britto, 2018, p.727)[108].

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[105] Araújo, Renato. 2018, p. 739. Histórias afro-atlânticas: algumas questões. In: Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia. MASP, São Paulo. Translated by the author.
[106] Silva, Claudinei Roberto da. 2018. Histórias afro-atlânticas: algumas questões. In: Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia. MASP, São Paulo. Translated by the author.
[107] *Ibid.*
[108] Britto, Glauce Helene de. 2018. Histórias afro-atlânticas: algumas questões. In: Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia. MASP, São Paulo. Translated by the author.

2.1. The MuCEM's architectural design: for whom is it built, and who truly feels welcome?

Inaugurated in 2013, the MuCEM represented a distinctive local ambition for Marseille, an approach that has since been replicated in various French cities. That year, the city sought to establish itself as the *European Capital of Culture*, and the opening of a major new museum was considered imperative to this goal. Beyond the symbolic aspiration, however, the cultural capital title also entailed aggressive financial investment. To meet the expectations associated with the designation, Marseille-Provence allocated an operating public-private budget of approximately 160 million euros specifically dedicated to the construction of the museum (Kiraly, 2025)[109].

Furthermore, from its inception, the museum's collection was marked by controversy. It incorporated holdings transferred from the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires in Paris, which closed in 2005, officially due to declining attendance and shifting cultural priorities (Roux, 2005)[110]. This transfer occurred amid growing critical scrutiny regarding what legitimately constitutes so-called folk art.

Notably, the original Parisian building, an austere black structure, is now slated to become the Maison LVMH (Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton Arts Talents Patrimoine), a new cultural centre focused on French craftsmanship, exhibitions, and artistic training (Larrochelle; Vouser, 2017)[111]. It is worth emphasising that this repurposed venue will belong to the world's largest luxury conglomerate, whether measured by revenue, brand portfolio, or overall market presence (Westberg, 2024)[112].

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[109] Kiraly, Barbara. 2015. Le Moniteur [website]. Available at: https://www.lemoniteur.fr/article/mucem-des-couts-de-construction-trop-eleves-et-un-mauvais-ppp.534244. Accessed: 09 August 2025

[110] Roux, Emmanuel de. 2005. Le Monde [website]. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2005/06/22/le-musee-des-arts-et-traditions-populaires-ferme-ses-portes_664921_3246.html. Accessed: 09 August 2025

[111] Larrochele, Jean-Jacques; Vulser, Nicole. 2017. Le Monde [website]. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/architecture/article/2017/03/08/lvmh-va-transformer-le-musee-des-arts-et-traditions-populaires_5091031_1809550.html. Accessed: 10 August 2025

[112] Westberg, Peter. 2024. The 13 Largest Luxury Companies in the World. Quartr [website]. Available at: https://quartr.com/insights/company-research/the-13-largest-luxury-companies-in-the-world. Accessed: 10 August 2025

Returning to the case study itself, the MuCEM's official communication states that the institution aims to function as a multidisciplinary space. Through both its exhibitions and cultural programming, it seeks to offer a holistic vision that integrates anthropology, history, archaeology, art history, and contemporary art. Its stated objective is to present the many facets of the Mediterranean world and its ongoing dialogue with Europe[113].

The building's exterior alone presents a striking vision from a particular perspective. Its architecture was led by Rudy Ricciotti in collaboration with Roland Carta, both French architects and engineers from the region. The location is also strategic, connecting the museum to the 12th-century Fort Saint-Jean by means of a 115-metre pedestrian footbridge. Among the museum's standout features is its cube-like structure, clad in lace-like panels of ultra-high-performance, fibre-reinforced concrete — a design that illustrates key Mediterranean motifs such as "sea spray."



Figure 14 - One of the external views of the MuCEM

[113] MuCEM website. 2025. Available at: https://mucem.org/en/about-mucem/. Accessed: 11 August 2025

Source: photo taken by the author, April 2025

These architectural ambitions form part of a broader institutional goal. According to its mission statement, the art institution seeks to position itself as a translator of a deeper understanding of the Mediterranean: “In Marseilles, the MuCEM is one of the places, on a national and international scale, where it is possible to better understand the Mediterranean”[114].

With visible efforts to mitigate the extensive and violent history of French domination over the very idea of the Mediterranean, the MuCEM thus makes clear its historical role mostly as a narrator, and not as a constituent agent of that history. Its board of key directors has remained entirely French since 2013, with appointments safeguarded by curricula featuring prestigious institutions, such as Pierre-Olivier Costa’s tenure at the Centre Pompidou[115]. This homogeneity persists both in terms of ethno-racial diversity and cultural repertoire. Bruno Suzarelli was the founding president until his retirement in 2014. Jean-François Chougnet succeeded him, serving eight years as the museum’s director. Today, the aforementioned Pierre-Olivier Costa holds the position of president.

2.1.1. From Hervé Di Rosa's prominent display to the discreet first-floor entrance of the Méditerranées exhibition

A queue at the museum's main entrance revealed a clear racial division: a predominantly white audience waited to be processed by a majority non-white staff. This dynamic was immediately evident during the mandatory bag check, where a non-white security guard impatiently directed visitors with backpacks, myself included, to a table for a swift inspection.

[114] MuCEM website. 2025. Available at: https://mucem.org/en/about-mucem/. Accessed: 11 August 2025

[115] Les Rencontres Économiques. 2025. Available at: https://www.lesrencontreseconomiques.fr/intervenants/pierre-olivier-costa/. Accessed: 11 August 2025

Once inside, the first major section housed the gift shop, ticket desk, and a café. To the right, corridors and a lift connected the museum's floors, while an entrance at the far end led to the temporary exhibition of French artist Hervé Di Rosa. His presentation was notably paradoxical; the official museum website described him as both "created on the highlands of Amadoua in Cameroon" and as "a humble son of the proletariat," noting his father was "an SNCF [Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Français, the French state-owned railway company] employee [who] spent much of his free time sculpting and coloring decoys for duck hunting."[116]



Figure 15 - *Un Air de Famille* exhibition entrance, Hervé di Rosa (2025)

Source: Photo of Julie Cohen (MuCEM)[117]

2025 is not so distant from 2019, and the MuCEM has seemingly chosen to overlook serious accusations of racism against Di Rosa concerning one of his works previously

[116] MuCEM [website]. 2025. Available at: https://mucem.org/en/expositions/herve-di-rosa/. Accessed: 12 August 2025
[117] *Ibid.*

exhibited at the French parliament in Paris. This oversight serves as another example of the risk of essentialism; Di Rosa is not exempt from racial scrutiny, despite being the son of a proud SNCF proletarian and having been raised in Cameroon. His mural, intended to "commemorate" the anniversary of the 1794 abolition of slavery in France, was characterized as humiliating and dehumanizing by scholars including Mame-Fatou Niang of Carnegie Mellon and French author Julien Suaudeau, who launched a petition calling for its removal[118].

As a central premise of this essay, the reproduction of the aforementioned mural is deemed unnecessary. Within a framework oriented toward critical disorder, the amplification of racist artworks is considered inappropriate, even though the historical controversy was structured around two predominant debates: one concerning subjectivity (e.g., is the work racist? Is it primarily a product of its historical context? And if so, does that justify its exhibition?), and the other concerning a perceived “risk” to artistic freedom.

These were indeed the overall lines of argument adopted by Di Rosa in his public response. At the time, he invoked concerns about a growing threat to artistic freedom — and, by extension, to democratic expression itself, often contextualized within France’s longstanding revolutionary ideals — as well as the potential for "censorship." He asserted that critics such as Niang and Suaudeau were “allowing themselves to accuse me of racism [and] have the nerve to act as spokespeople for the millions of victims [of slavery] and want to censor the work” (Crisafis, 2019)[119].

This is not the first instance where artists, curators and art historians have raised questions that reinforce the urge of a binary separation between art and the artist — as if art itself were detached from its time or, worse, produced in a vacuum, simply guided by a kind of spiritual inspiration within great minds. Against these disingenuous

[118] The Observers [website]. 2019. Available at: https://observers.france24.com/en/20190412-french-national-assembly-criticised-mural-depicting-racist-stereotypes. Accessed: 12 August 2025

[119] Crisafis, Angelique. 2019. The Guardian [website]. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/12/academics-launch-petition-against-racist-mural-in-french-parliament. Accessed: 12 August 2025

arguments, Amanda Carneiro reminds us of the museum's role as a foundational and inherently conservative institution, in the literal sense of "conserving":

> As an intrinsically conservative institution, the museum has at its core a principle called conservation, which is often accompanied by the concepts of safeguarding, restoration, and documentation. The interests of collecting and displaying have frequently been linked to national projects, associative groups, and civil society — whether private or public — and until very recently (with the emergence of critical museology and community museums), they almost always reflected the taste or symbolic capital of dominant political and economic minorities. Related organisations, such as art galleries and cultural spaces, are not exempt from reproducing these same hegemonic interests[120].

In this matter, the MuCEM, MASP, and Instituto Tomie Ohtake are, ambivalently, institutions that conserve not in an intrinsic manner, but in a way that is intimately aligned with local elites, even if, on occasion, space is reserved for the peoples of the Mediterranean or Afrodiasporic cultures. This ambivalence is inherent to the very nature of coloniality, as sociologist Aníbal Quijano argues: “coloniality is a matrix of power that produces racial and gender hierarchies at local and global levels, operating in tandem with capital to maintain a modern regime of exploitation and domination” (Quijano, 1992; Carneiro, 2024)[121].

Making several broad historical leaps to better contextualize the present moment and the object of study itself, we have been, and here we encompasses the Global South, the East, the Global North's peripheries, and all such imagined divisions, in many ways, both victims and witnesses of a broad universalizing project. From Christianity to secularism, from progress to development, “scholars of decoloniality have identified the beginning of the 19th century as the period of the collapse of a westernizing project that, nevertheless, reveals its most vicious facet, neoliberal globalization” (Carneiro, 2024)[122].

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[120] Carneiro, Amanda. 2024, p. 52. Violentamente pacífica: arte, decolonialidade e inserção institucional. In: Negros na Piscina. Fósfora Edition, São Paulo. Translated by the author.
[121] Carneiro, Amanda; Quijano Aníbal. 2024, p. 53. Violentamente pacífica: arte, decolonialidade e inserção institucional. In: Negros na Piscina. Fósfora Edition, São Paulo. Translated by the author.
[122] *Ibid.*

It is within this complex framework that racial neoliberalism states practice the politics of "at the same time"—a literal translation of the expression “en même temps”, which became notable in the rhetoric of Emmanuel Macron, the current President of France. On this matter, Françoise Vergès argues:

> Neoliberals do not seek the destruction of the state, but its submission—its transformation into an active and central tool for manufacturing subjectivities, social relations, and collective representations. They effortlessly sustain simultaneously contradictory objectives, as illustrated by Macron's rhetoric of "en même temps." For example: while he gives speeches defending women's rights, he approves laws that make them more vulnerable to poverty and violence (especially racialized women).[123]

Equipped with the perspective of "en même temps," I proceeded to the first floor and made my way to the rear of the building, where the object of study in question was exhibited. To maintain control over the paid ticket, a museum staff member was stationed at the entrance of each exhibition, as the general admission fee of 11 euros did not grant unrestricted access to the entire MuCEM. Fortunately, the *Méditerranées* exhibition was included in this fee.

Before delving into the narrative of the aforementioned exhibition, a final crucial point is the parallel between the French political slogan "en même temps" and the sophisticated co-optation mechanisms of racial neoliberalism in both Brazil and France. It would be naive to assume that inclusion policies — even those ostensibly aimed at increasing the presence of racialized majorities in art spaces — genuinely align with initiatives grounded in total disorder.

Certain shifts toward greater inclusion of nonwhite populations also serve to expand the consumer market by increasing the number of individuals with purchasing power. In other words, the more black people are positioned "at the top" and integrated into the workforce, the larger the consumer base becomes.

[123] Vergès, Françoise. 2024, p. 138. Decolonizar o museu. Ubu Edition, São Paulo (Brazil). Translated by the author

Overall, such inclusive initiatives have proven effective to some extent as reformist measures, yet they remain intrinsically ineffective as radical mechanisms for racial reordering. On this point, Vergès dissects:

> Neoliberalism permits the presence of Arab, Asian, or queer faces, but only after a rigorous selection process. This form of anti-racism produces desires and ways of thinking that, in turn, generate consent for extremely individualistic policies. These policies contribute to the resocialisation of Black and racialised people, moulding them into spokespersons for the possibility of finally being represented and recognised. A study of these policies reveals the subtle shifts in meaning operated over decades by the business world, and the confidence with which it now co-opts slogans and phrases of protest to expand its market and select the 'enlightened ones'. Extraction, expropriation, and exploitation also bear down upon cultural, musical, and artistic creations—upon culture and the arts, which have always been instruments of bourgeois and capitalist hegemony.[124]

2.2. Perspective suggestions and curatorial disclaimers: first impressions of Méditerranées

At first glance, a preview of the permanent collection is visible through a circular open frame. This frame highlights a few statues of apparent Greek origin – at least within the imaginary propagated by universal museums – alongside some textile pieces and a painting featuring an incomplete landscape.

[124] Vergès, Françoise. 2024, p. 74. Decolonizar o museu. Ubu Edition, São Paulo (Brazil). Translated by the author



Figure 16 - ***First glimpse of Méditerranées – Inventions et représentations***

Source: Photo taken by the author, April 2025

In front of the circular structure, the first sample of the exhibition's perspective is presented: its introductory curatorial text, provided in both French and English. It is notable that no languages from the apparent 22 countries surrounding the Mediterranean's geography and metaphor, apart from French, were available on the MuCEM's walls. Although there is an allusion to the Mediterranean as a colonial invention, the intentions behind the curatorial choices remain inconclusive.

For instance, the subsequent text does not disclose the origins of the artists and scholars who became obsessed with the very invention of the Orient during the 17th century. It states: "The exhibition *Méditerranées* takes as its starting point the plural and elusive nature of the Mediterranean worlds, particularly those that have been of interest to artists and scholars since the 17th century" (Production MuCEM, 2024).

Given this absence, even of an implied subject, the attribution of responsibility for Western predation and domination remains vague.

Another segment of the exhibition's introduction draws my attention. While it is undeniable that cultural exchanges have occurred between Spain, Monaco, France, Italy, Greece — all of which are on the same continent and share Mediterranean coastlines—the curatorial logic becomes unclear. If the criterion for this grand European invention, termed *Méditerranées*, is indeed based on geography and cultural exchange (whether through historic violent domination or contemporary predatory tourism), why were other linguistic translations not made available? Why exclude Arabic, not to mention other dialects from African and Asian nations such as Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Syria, or Turkey?

To illustrate the disparity between what is explicit, what is implied, and who or what has been omitted, the final paragraph of the initial curatorial statement is presented below:

> This approach seeks to transcend oppositions and borders in order to rediscover the shared cultures and histories of the 42 000 kilometers of the Mediterranean coastline. Ultimately, the exhibition aims to show to what extent the invention of a Mediterranean cultural patrimony has influenced the way the territory is imagined and represented. Contemporary artists, notably Théo Mercier, who has been invited to present work in the exhibition spaces, offer the perspectives of this common heritage and shed light on the way it is thought and experienced today.[125]

On this particular wall, as on the MuCEM website and in the exhibition catalogue, Théo Mercier was the only name explicitly highlighted by the curatorial team (Costa, 2025)[126]. More precisely, he was the only artist mentioned by name by the museum's president, Pierre-Olivier Costa. It is also worth noting that the artist was selected by the museum's own board of directors for a residency programme. He was granted

[125] Production MuCEM, 2024

[126] Costa, Pierre-Olivier. 2024, p. 07. Méditerranées – Inventions et représentations. Grand Palais Rmn Éditions. Translated by the author.

carte blanche, as stated in official communications, to infiltrate the *Méditerranées* exhibition as he saw fit[127].

It is important to reiterate that this essay does not aim to provide a technical assessment of Théo Mercier's (or other artists') credentials, repertoire, or practice. Instead, it seeks to conduct a discursive and narrative analysis to assess whether the *Méditerranées* exhibition engages meaningfully with a structure of total disorder.

However, the presence of the only artist nominally cited by the MuCEM curators must be taken into consideration.



Figure 17 - *Photo of the artwork Archeologycal Prostetic Personnages Sans Histoire, Théo Mercier (2024)*

Source: Photo taken by the author, April 2025

This piece contains several important premises that challenge the constructed imaginary of the Mediterranean. As the accompanying curatorial text mentions, these

[127] @mucem_officiel; @theomercier_officiel_. 2024. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7jubumoeO1/. Accessed: 13 August 2025

sculptures were specially produced for the narrative on display, utilizing raw materials collected by MuCEM itself and by DRASSM (the French Ministry of Culture's Department of Underwater and Subaquatic Archaeological Research). The intention was to create sculptures from "neglected fragments and objects that haven't been officially classified by heritage or cultural institutions, thus giving them a second life. Like constellations of histories in the making, they have been assembled and installed to become new fictions."[128]

Regarding Théo Mercier's background, the artist describes himself as "a French sculptor and stage director, who was born in Paris and currently lives and works between Paris and Marseille (France). Claiming formal freedom, Théo Mercier sets out to deconstruct the mechanisms of history, objects and representations, in which he recreates harmonious contradictions. By turns explorer, collector and artist, his work is at the crossroads of anthropology, geopolitics, tourism and landscape."[129]

Yet, beyond the intention to give Mediterranean history a second life of formal freedom – or, at least, a potential form of freedom according to Mercier's vision –, one must question whether it is the role of a French artist to rewrite it. Could the French artist not have advocated for other narratives beyond his own, particularly at such a crucial historical moment as the ongoing genocide in Palestine, a region also bordered by this same sea?

In contrast, and more modestly, MuCEM's official communications highlight its participation in the PAUSE programme, a national art initiative supported by the Collège de France and the French Ministry of Higher Education, through which the museum has strengthened its support for artists in exile. According to its official website, MuCEM collaborated with Aix-Marseille University to host Palestinian artist Mohamed Abusal.[130]

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[128] Production MuCEM, 2024

[129] Théo Mercier [website]. 2025. Available at https://theomercier.com/en/about/. Accessed: 15 August 2025

[130] MuCEM [website]. 2025. Available at https://mucem.org/en/residencies-and-research-contracts/. Accessed: 15 August 2025

These were not the museum's only recent efforts related to the Palestinian cause. Considering the urgent crisis in Gaza — a paramount example where atrocities are repeatedly documented and disseminated globally by ordinary citizens on platforms like TikTok[131] — it is pertinent to explore further on the potential role of contemporary museums as active witnesses to war, rather than mere conservative collections.

2.2.1. Reflections and "meditations" on curatorial choices

Immediately following the introductory curatorial text for the exhibition, a disclaimer is available to visitors before they begin their tour. Titled "Written and Oral Cultural Meditations," it is detailed: a. the nature of certain works, representations, and connotations, which are "now recognised as offensive"; b. the decision to display such content nonetheless, as part of a proposal aimed at fostering critical debate "aimed to deconstruct these stereotypes and the mechanisms that gave rise to them"; c. an invitation extended to so-called "experts from all around the Mediterranean" to share their perspectives "in the form of wall texts."[132]

Following a video artwork by the Belgian artist Francys Alÿs, titled Miradores, détroit de Gibraltar Maroc-Espagne (1959), the exhibition presents a series of classical-style pieces, columns, ceramics, and statues. The curatorial framework positions this display as a fundamental component of the modern identity of European states, which collectively proclaim themselves the safeguards of so-called "classical values" and heritage[133].

[131] TikTok Genocide [website]. 2025. Available at https://tiktokgenocide.com/locations/gaza. Accessed: 17 August 2025
[132] Production MuCEM, 2024
[133] *Ibid.*



Figures 18 & 19 - *Example of curatorial choices (descriptive text and disclaimer from a Mediterranean expert)*

Source: Photos taken by the author, April 2025

The exhibition's disclaimers do acknowledge the role of museums in perpetuating this "classical model." However, they fail to explicitly recognise that the very narrative of a "modern identity" is itself a construct. As Brazilian visual artist Tiago Sant'anna argues, this construct "elevates Europe as the centre of the world, eclipsing or eradicating those projects and forms of life that deviated from a Eurocentric model" (2018, p. 743)[134]. He further notes that this social formation "legitimised the european fantasy of black [and non-white 'Eastern'] people with a supposed social, racial, and intellectual superiority—which would justify processes of enslavement and violence" (*ibid.*).

Sant'anna also reminds us that, despite recent efforts, there has never been a genuine sharing or restitution of the structures that were looted (*ibid.*). This raises critical

[134] Sant'anna, Tiago. 2022. Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia. MASP, São Paulo. Translated by the author

questions about the limits of institutional accountability. Can a formal apology or a disclaimer at the start of an exhibition ever suffice? Would the alternative be to reproduce classical pieces without critical thinking as the majority of universal museums? Or does it risk relegating racialised artists solely to the role of explicating centuries of exploitation as their only possible artistic language?

These questions not only guide the case studies examined here but also remain subjects of ongoing debate among decolonial theorists, researchers, and artists. They may be nearly impossible to resolve within the current framework of racial neoliberalism. Yet, as the pendulum of history demonstrates, centuries of domination, cultural erasure, and reappropriation have not occurred without simultaneous resistance and political struggle, encompassing both organized and non-organized movements.

2.2.2. The discourses and the voices behind the exhibition catalogue

Although the exhibition's official disclaimer raises pertinent questions about the recurring narratives of the "classical" invariably associated with Greco Roman heritage, and eventually Latin culture also forged in Europe, the official *Méditerranées* catalogue does include critical perspectives on how these histories have been perpetuated over time. However, among the 16 invited experts, and it is not a matter of questioning the credentials or academic curricula of the authors, 14 are French. Some teach at prestigious French universities, while others are anthropologists holding respected positions in major art institutions or government bodies.

The exceptions are Luan Rama, presented as an "Albanian writer, naturalised French" and ambassador of Albania to France, Portugal, and Monaco; and the Greek historian Aliki Tsirgialou, responsible for the photographic archives at the Benaki Museum in Athens.[135] Significantly, the only specialists with explicitly highlighted national origins were non-French Europeans. According to official records regarding exclusively the catalogue, no Asian or African scholars were invited to contribute their perspectives.

[135] Méditerranées – Inventions et représentations. 2024, p. 205. Grand Palais RMn Éditions, Marseille (France). Translated by the author

This composition again underscores what has been "invented" and what continues to be implicitly reinforced through such omissions. It is precisely these absences that perpetuate the "universal" and enable the reinterpretation of an exclusionary history. As Hamid Dabashi argues,

> Darwin was right to observe that skin color is irrelevant in the classification of races. In spite of that, it is a dominant factor in the public sphere. It comes perhaps from Kant's ethno-racial tetragon. Following Linnaeus' classification, which was basically descriptive, Kant added a ranking among them and connected racism with geopolitics: Yellows are in Asia, Blacks in Africa, Reds in America and Whites in Europe. The trick is that the classification is enacted on the basis of the exclusive privilege of the White race, whose actors and institutions were located in Europe, their language and categories of thought derived from Greek and Latin, inscribed in the formation of the six modern/colonial European languages: Italian, Spanish, Portuguese (dominant during the Renaissance), German, English and French (dominant since the Enlightenment).[136]

While the selection of experts for the catalogue may be questionable at first glance — particularly when compared to the Afro-Atlantic Histories: Anthology, which featured over 50 authors and thinkers beyond the core curatorial team, including texts by North-American writer Audre Lorde, Brazilian-Cameroonian anthropologist Kabengele Munanga, and María Iñigo Clavo, an associate professor at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya specializing in curatorship and the production of otherness with a focus on Brazilian art[137] — the perspective presented in the *Méditerranées* curatorial texts does contain open critiques of the role museums play in perpetuating a "universal" history. It is a difficult task to spontaneously consider the "heart of Europe" without associating it with statues and sculptures. As noted in the exhibition texts:

> Since the time of the Renaissance, no art collection has been considered complete without an original masterpiece of ancient sculpture. Museums and universities further promulgated this shared artistic vision of the past by assembling collections of

[136] Dabashi, Hamid. 2015, p. 11. Can non-europeans think? Zed Books, London, UK
[137] Iñigo, Clavo Maria. 2025. UOC [website]. Available at: https://recerca.uoc.edu/investigadores/882674/detalle. Accessed: 21 August 2025

> plaster copies of classic sculptures. An aesthetic canon was created that became central to the training of artists and artisans in Modern Europe.[138]

The exercise of power that remains in the catalogue choices cannot be characterized as "soft." Eurocentrism, as Dabashi (2015, p. 33) observes, is fundamentally *blasé* owing to its explicit and unselfconscious obviousness. Within this paradigm, particular faces and bodies have been systematically elevated to canonical status. It is unsurprising, then, that the Statue of David serves as an archetype of austere beauty, making any further illustration of it superfluous. Its image is already indelibly imprinted across countless cultural imaginaries. Similarly, it is noteworthy that even the most westernized portrayals of Jesus Christ may be interpreted as variations of the same aesthetic paradigm.

From a european and eurocentric perspective, incorporating alternative viewpoints appears unnecessary. This stance stems from a legacy of multiple, now extinct, empires and an entrenched belief that their particular philosophy constitutes "philosophy" itself, and their specific mode of thinking represents "thinking" as a universal category. All other traditions are relegated, in the words of the European philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, to "dancing" (*ibid.*).

[138] Production MuCEM, 2024



Figure 20 - ***Copy of the Bust of Laocoön. Original marble circa 40 BCE (?), based on a lost bronze model, Vatican Museums (Italy)***

Source: Photo taken by the author, April 2025[139]

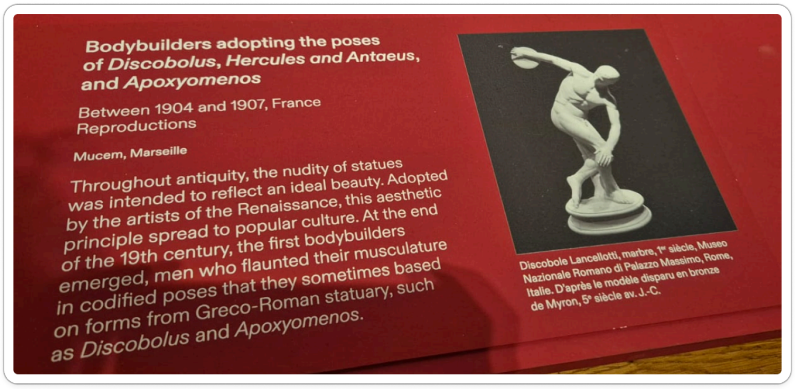
Copying the bust of *Laocoön* exhaustively since 1506 is therefore not an arbitrary act. Similarly, displaying a copy of the *Laocoön* bust in 2025 with a disclaimer, which states that it was "studied, reproduced in drawings and engravings, and copied in plaster and bronze. As a result, the image of the figure spread throughout Europe",[140] is also not arbitrary. Including it in the present essay is equally intentional. It represents another attempt, perhaps a cynical one, to illustrate what countless decolonial theorists have

[139] Original piece displayed at Vatican Museums and Pio Clementino Museum, Rome, Italy.
[140] Production MuCEM, 2024

tirelessly articulated over recent decades: yes, eurocentrism is undoubtedly *blasé*. And precisely because it is *blasé*, it is treated as universal.

Beyond sculptures regarded as masterpieces of european artistic craftsmanship, whole-body statues soon emerged as representatives of ideals of beauty. These ideals continue to be reproduced exhaustively throughout the West in various forms; examples in this regard are plentiful. Even if a radical decision were made to ostracize or destroy such statues, they have already fulfilled their role in perpetuating fixed stereotypes, unaffected by the mixing of cultures and peoples.[141]





Figures 21 & 22 - Depictions of bodybuilders in statuary, imagery, and curatorial texts at MuCEM

[141] Production MuCEM, 2024

Source: photos taken by the author, April 2025

2.2.3. The journey of Abebe Bikila at the MuCEM: navigating the 'en même temps' paradox

Positioned among Greco Roman and Latin columns and statues, a video installation is situated on a wall opposite displays of posters and engraving techniques, intended for an attentive audience. No explicit signs direct visitors toward it. A screen loops a 29 minute piece continuously; two headphones provide audio, and two square wooden blocks serve as makeshift seating.

On screen, the journey of a black athlete unfolds, his identity gradually revealed throughout the video: the Ethiopian runner Abebe Bikila during the 1960 Rome Olympics. Bikila was the first black African to win a gold medal, setting a new distance record while running barefoot. Like a mantra revisiting a foundational narrative, the narrator repeats: *"I replay, I replay, I replay the footage of Abebe Bikila"* (Fischer & El Sani, 2017-2018). Archival footage intertwines with scenes of a lone runner moving through both antique and contemporary Rome (Italy), passing iconic sites such as Piazza Venezia.



Figure 23 - *Freedom of Movement* film still, Nina Fischer & Maroan el Sani (2017) at MuCEM

Source: Copyright of both movie and still frames belongs to the artists.[142]

The artwork is by Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani, both German artists in their sixties. The accompanying text describes:

> The Palazzo della Civilità Italiana or the "Square Colosseum" is a Fascist-era monument inspired by classical architecture that celebrates Italians as conquering migrants. It was inaugurated in Rome in 1940 when Italy was occupying Ethiopia. Here, the artist associate images of young immigrants running around outside the structure with the Ethiopian athlete Abebe Bikila's victory in the marathon at the 1960 Olympic Games.[143]

Recontextualizing this work within the current historical moment, particularly the ongoing genocide in Palestine, invites reflection on Germany's official stance regarding the war. Recently, Germany has clearly supported Israel, even though Chancellor Friedrich Merz recently announced a partial suspension of arms deliveries. In the same statement, Merz made clear that Germany "will continue to support Israel in its right to defend itself" (Tamsut, 2025)[144]. Correlating this with the work exhibited in *Méditerranées*, no subtext softens the reference to the 1940s "Fascist-era", whose legacy continues to recycle through history.

Furthermore, nothing in this artwork, throughout its nearly 30 minute duration, is arbitrary. Nearby, at Palazzo Venezia, Mussolini announced the declaration of war against Ethiopia and its occupation in 1936. As Christine Werner notes:

> Black and white newsreel footage shows the 24-meter-tall granite stele of the fourth-century Obelisk of Axum before it was looted by Mussolini and shipped to Rome

[142] Fischer, Nina; Sani, Maroan el. 2017. Freedom of Movement. Nina Fischer & Maroan el Sani [website]. Available at: https://www.fischerelsani.net/film/installations/freedom-of-movement/. Accessed: 03 August 2025

[143] Production MuCEM, 2024

[144] Tamsut, Felix. 2025. DW [website]. Available at https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-merz-defends-partial-weapons-halt-to-israel/a-73592487. Accessed: 13 August 2025

> to stand at Porta Capena Square in front of the Ministry of Italian Africa, announcing the conquest of Ethiopia and an attempt to establish a "new Roman Empire". The archival projection transitions back to color film footage from a bird's-eye view of the same setting as Bikila passes the Obelisk during daytime.[145]

In this way, the classical architecture of Rome and its canonical monuments blend with a new proposal of fiction. Here, one may substitute fiction for "narratives," "stories," or even "historical facts"; when it comes to epistemological domains, these words are synonymous with the exception of fiction itself, because in this latter case, there is a clear distance, a priori, from facts considered 'verisimilar'. The artists' sequence ultimately leads the viewer to footage of the Obelisk of Axum, spanning from the Italian invasion to the obelisk's restitution to Ethiopia in 2008 (Werner, 2025).

As for the athlete, Bikila returns home as a conquering hero a mere 25 years after Ethiopia defeated the Italian invasion. From there, it is not long before another image takes centre stage: Feyisa Lilesa, another victorious Ethiopian runner (now from the more recent 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics in Brazil), crosses his wrists in protest after crossing the finish line and winning the bronze medal. At the time, the athlete claimed he risked death for publicly protesting against the threat to democratic rights in his country (BBC, 2019)[146].

Beyond historical facts, the video itself explicates racial issues embedded in the core of racial neoliberalism throughout history. These issues are carefully transformed into political agendas, especially in public pre campaigns in Europe, which typically signal three main positions: the anti immigration stance, the conditional pro immigration stance, which imposes a series of requirements, and the inclusionist stance. This last option often comes at the cost of total acculturation to the host country. Among the innumerable arbitrary measures that are both a remnant and a result of the colonial project, the question of European citizenship remains opaque and invariably surfaces.

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[145] Werner, Christina. 2025. Roots & Routes – Research on visual cultures [website]. Available at: https://www.roots-routes.org/freedom-of-movement-and-impero-dei-segni-by-nina-fischer-and-maroan-el-sani/. Accessed: 15 August 2025

[146] BBC [website]. 2019. Ethiopian Olympic protest runner Feyisa Lilesa finally rewarded. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47879919. Accessed: 15 August 2025

More broadly, meaning not solely focused on this specific work, an excerpt from a catalogue essay by Raphaël Boris and Marie Charlotte Calafat proposes to revise the categories imposed by the "european gaze":

> Studying Europe's gaze upon the Mediterranean implies confronting the categories and divisions defined by Europeans, beginning with the notion of the Mediterranean itself. In the first half of the 19th century, it was the object of a 'scientific invention' particularly associated with colonial initiatives. The Mediterranean was thus conceived simultaneously as a synthesis and a frontier between North and South, and between East and West. The invocation of all cardinal points underscores the vague and fluctuating nature of the established geographical distinctions. It was also seen as a divide between Islam and Christendom, and between civilization and barbarism.[147]

The decision to feature perspectives from specialists across the Mediterranean in curatorial texts is both welcome and paradoxical. While inclusive in intent, it nevertheless reinforces a "Europe *versus* others" framework. This is exemplified by the sole named contributor: a French artist, highlighted for his role as an "infiltrating" guest resident offering his viewpoint. As previously noted, the curatorial authority remains exclusively European, particularly within the catalogue. In contrast, the video installation *Freedom of Movement* persistently affirms an alternative perspective: "We come from nations of poets, of artists, of heroes, of saints, of scientists, navigators and migrants" (Fischer; Sani, 2017).

Taking the aforementioned artwork as an alternative to the current notion of art as a "universal" language, one must not forget that it often exists within a political framework where, like most Western nations, many European countries revisit fascist rhetoric to consolidate distinctions. The most obvious is perhaps the distinction between refugee or migrant and citizen, a deceptive historical logic implicit in our language that continues to separate states from their former colonies (Werner, 2025)[148].

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[147] Bories, Raphaël; Calafat, Marie-Charlotte. 2024, p. 13. Méditerranées – Inventions et représentations. 2024. Grand Palais Rmn Éditions, Marseille (France). Translated by the author

[148] Werner, Christina. 2025. Roots & Routes – Research on visual cultures [website]. Available at: https://www.roots-routes.org/freedom-of-movement-and-impero-dei-segni-by-nina-fischer-and-maroan-el-sani/. Accessed: 15 August 2025

The efforts to universalize differences — categorizing cultures into binaries such as West *versus* East, North *versus* Global South, or Afro-Atlantic heritage *versus* both universal and colonized representations — function to legitimize theft, plunder, and cultural reappropriation. Through museums, art and culture are leveraged as weapons of power (Vergèr, 2024, p. 29). This process inextricably binds the history of museums, particularly secular universal institutions, to the urgent need for restitution and reparation (Vergèr, 2024, p. 40). To advance this perspective, it is crucial to recognize that "European museums are repositories of stolen goods, and colonization was an unparalleled opportunity to commit plunder with total legitimacy" (*ibid.*).

It is from these questions that another work exhibited in *Méditerranées* deserves attention, both for its representation and for its proposed "treasure hunt" — and, crucially, for who was permitted and sponsored to undertake this search for artifacts buried at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea.



Figure 24 - *Excerpts of Maré blanche (2021-2024), Théo Mercier in collaboration with Filipe Ortega and his team. White onyx, display case at MuCEM*

Source: Courtesy of the artist and mor charpentier, Paris (France). Photos taken by the author at Mucem, Marseille

Moreover, it is essential to consider what is implicitly conveyed by the idea of a "treasure hunt" in a representation of the Mediterranean and its implications within a racial neoliberal context. The curatorial text accompanying the aforementioned work explicitly states: “It 's not always ancient treasures that archaeologists unearth from the seabed. These onyx sculptures imitate the trash that an underwater diver might bring ashore. Is it possible to imagine these sorts of objects entering a museum one day?”[149]. Theo Mercier, the invited resident artist, was tasked with exploring this possibility in *Maré blanche* (2021–2024).

Beyond a technical assessment of the artistic merit of this work — a deep dive into the artistic practice itself falls outside the scope of this essay — one of the central questions raised here, which aligns MASP and MuCEM, is the problematization of absence *versus* presence in contemporary museums: Which presences resonate most powerfully? Which absences speak the loudest? To what extent can contemporary exhibitions and their narratives challenge the universal imaginary — or, in service of it, how far can certain pointers actually be moved?

Within this problematic, the role of imagination itself is noteworthy. Briefly, regarding the imaginative capacity embedded in an onyx tire or a banal treasure made of noble materials, the perspective of curator Thiago de Paula on Brazilian philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva’s thought is relevant:

> [...] While writing her book *Homo modernus: para uma ideia global de raça* (2022), Denise Ferreira da Silva realized that the critical tools available to dismantle the world we live in are part of the same universe we seek to combat. Thus, we must attempt to imagine another ethical-political configuration capable of breaking with the persistent violence that surrounds us. In other words, only a prolonged period of recreating new ethical codes and social structures would make it possible to dismantle the terror in which we live. This is why Ferreira da Silva has spoken about the ‘end of the world as we know it’—which, in her words, would not be ‘a task, a project, or an end, but a

[149] Production MuCEM, 2024

> wager that would lead to other possibilities and paths we cannot yet anticipate, though the first step must be taken.[150]

Denise Ferreira da Silva's point of view, which could encompass both the Mediterranean and the Afro diasporic Atlantic realities, interrogates the operation of raciality as a continuum. This persists even when curatorial frameworks ostensibly place european perspectives alongside those of experts "from all around the Mediterranean." Given that new world making possibilities will not emerge from the MuCEM's current perspective, this task falls to thinkers, researchers, artists, and activists from the "Other" side, whose work to create new worlds is already underway.

[150] Souza, Thiago de Paula; Silva, Ferreira Denise de. 2024, p. 86. Negros na piscina in: E se…? Caminhos de recusa: a arte como reinvenção de futuros. Fósforo Edition, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Translated by the author

Conclusion

As demonstrated by the comparative case studies, contemporary museums continue to operate within a structurally colonial framework, even when they endeavor to host decolonial or dissident exhibitions. The examination of *Afro-Atlantic Histories* and *Méditerranées* reveals a nuanced tension between representational progress and institutional inertia. In revisiting the core questions that guided this inquiry, an objective assessment requires acknowledging the inherent ambivalence built into institutions situated along the meridian of global power:

- **Is it possible to present dissident narratives within spaces maintained and regulated by the parameters of the *"universal museum"*?**

Far for presenting simple or generic answers, as identified in the study cases, yes, it is possible the presentation of dissident narratives, but qualified. *Afro-Atlantic Histories*, for instance, successfully brought narratives of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora to the forefront through artworks, curatorial choices, and the inclusion of black scholars and artists. Similarly, *Méditerranées* included critically engaged artworks, such as *Freedom of Movement*, which challenged european narratives of conquest and migration. However, this possibility is intrinsically mediated by the very power structures that regulate these spaces, including the state, investors, and the core institutional models of the Global North. These narratives operate within museum walls that are fundamentally dedicated to preserving selective fragments of history, often shaped by victors rather than the vanquished.

- **If so, to what extent can these narratives break through the art world's insularity and introduce elements that point toward a total reordering?**

The extent to which these narratives can introduce elements pointing toward a total reordering is fundamentally limited. While exhibitions like *Afro-Atlantic Histories* spurred important debates and institutional reflection in Brazil, they function primarily as reformist measures rather than mechanisms for radical reordering. Remembering Jota Mombaça's total-disorder-oriented approach, this project requires the total

abolition of the subalternity-dominance binary itself[151]. The inclusion of black or non-european narratives often risks becoming a form of "pacified violence" or sophisticated co-optation by racial neoliberalism, transforming protest slogans into tools for market expansion and the selection of "enlightened ones". This "multiplication of privilege" was evident in MuCEM's approach, where curatorial disclaimers coexisted with an exclusively European roster of intellectual contributors in the official catalogue.

- **Ultimately, can exhibitions conceived and produced by black Brazilian artists and curators or by non-European Mediterranean artists and curators (even if not the case in Méditerranées) suffice to propose new worldviews?**

The evidence suggests that such exhibitions do not suffice on their own to propose new worldviews when anchored within the existing ideology of the *universal museum*. Although *Afro-Atlantic Histories* demonstrated the profound significance of black protagonism in challenging the visual canon of the West, the institutional core remains subject to prevailing models concerning access, the regulation of state, investors and so on. In the case of *Méditerranées*, the persistent eurocentric inflection was clear, as the body of researchers and curators officially present in the catalogue remained 100% european, excluding african or asian perspectives from the Mediterranean. The maintenance of this asymmetry reinforces the notion that the museum, as a stakeholder in social structures, is not indifferent to the configurations of racist and patriarchal state power. New world-making possibilities, therefore, fall primarily to thinkers, artists, and activists operating outside these constraints.

Crossing the meridian line

With an eight year gap between *Afro Atlantic Histories* (including the current composition of MASP's collection) and *Méditerranées*, the practice of otherness manifests differently in each case. For instance, MuCEM's official communications

[151] Mombaça, Jota. 2019, p. 27. Ñ vão nos matar agora. Cobógo Edition, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Translated by the author

position it as a reference on the Mediterranean, even though it is physically located in only one of the three continents bordering the sea that bears its name. The fact that Marseille is France's second most populous city, with a significant Maghrebian origin population, including some 70,000 residents of Algerian descent, adds another layer to this dynamic[152]. Yet, as discussed throughout this essay, it would be an overstatement to claim that an Algerian majority could single handedly reshape MuCEM's institutional logic to produce new forms of curatorship, museology, and new cultural experiences.

In contrast, *Afro Atlantic Histories* did not conclude as a self contained event. It sparked ongoing debates, roundtables, and courses focused on artistic practices originating in the Afro Atlantic universes. Dissident narratives were brought to the forefront. Yet, years later, even as MASP hosted exhibitions such as *LGBTQIAP+ Histories*, the institutional core of these museums remains subject to the universal museum model in terms of access, visitors, investors and so on. Paradoxically, however, major museums, as public showcases, continue to play a significant role.

It is within this ambivalence that a few perspectives notably coexist. The first relates to what Jota Mombaça identifies as the political economy of white alliances:

> According to the political economy of white alliances, sharing privilege is always, contradictorily, a formula aimed at multiplying privileges rather than abolishing them as a fundamental structure in the reproduction of inequalities.[153]

The second is emphasised by Vergès and the so-called neutrality of the ideology of the "universal museum". On the contrary:

> The museum is not indifferent to the configurations of racist and patriarchal state power. It is immersed in a visual culture that has not simply represented or mirrored economic operations, nor been a mere product of them; rather, it is a stakeholder in

[152] World Population Review [website]. 2025. Available at: https://worldpopulationreview.com/cities/france/marseille. Accessed: 21 August 2025

[153] Mombaça, Jota. 2019, p. 27. Ñ vão nos matar agora. Cobogó Edition, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Translated by the author

> economic structures that have transformed and continue to transform black lives into commodities.[154]

It is within this complex contemporary framework that we can observe genuine openings for black, indigenous, queer, and other dissident curators, artists, and thinkers, particularly in Brazil. *Afro-Atlantic Histories* demonstrated notable success in this regard. However, returning to the example of *Méditerranées*, we must avoid the naïveté of believing such initiatives alone can generate structural transformation. History reminds us that even as the far right ascended to the Brazilian presidency in 2018, *Afro-Atlantic Histories* not only coexisted with this political climate but actively catalogued new narratives. Thus, in a qualified sense, the presentation of dissident perspectives remains possible, even when mediated by various power structures including investors, the state, and Global North museums.

Moreover, within the particularly challenging context of ongoing multiple wars and crisis, what role might exhibitions and art institutions play in actually generating new worlds? Is it possible to create new worlds while remaining bound by the conservative logic of universal museums?

The ongoing project of the SAHAB Museum

Who is this new and emerging subject of art? Are they becoming a subject or an object? From where do they speak?

Questions such as these are being repeatedly raised and revisited in contemporary decolonial debates. They are central to Stuart Hall's reflections on cultural identity and diaspora:

> Practices of representation always imply the positions from which we speak or write — the position of enunciation. Recent theories of enunciation suggest that, although we speak, so to speak, "in our own name," about ourselves and from our own experience,

[154] Vergès, Françoise. 2024, p. 97. Decolonizar o museu. Ubu Edition, São Paulo (Brazil). Translated by the author

> the speaker and the subject being spoken of are never identical, never exactly in the same place. Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we assume. Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an accomplished fact, something that new cultural practices represent, we should consider identity as a "production" that is never complete but always in process, always constituted from within, rather than from outside, representation. This perspective problematises the very authority and authenticity that the term "cultural identity" seeks to assert.[155]

Hall's observation that "the speaker and the subject being spoken of are never identical" takes on urgent meaning in the context of the ongoing genocide in Palestine, where historical erasure is weaponised to silence entire populations. It is from within this reality that the SAHAB Museum Community existence is anchored in one main question: *How can you imagine a museum in Gaza, without it being about power?*[156]

As an "imaginary institution", SAHAB organizers states:

> It will reflect a new image of Gaza's heritage and history. The Sahab Museum will be a virtual space for the exploration of ideas and art. It will be shaped around virtual reality technologies to allow all visitors from Palestine and the entire world to walk through it, from wherever they are based. A Museum without borders. Even if virtual, the form of the museum was designed by taking inspiration from Gaza's old town: by the style and architecture of buildings and houses in that region. As such, for example, a courtyard will occupy the center. Each detail reflects a value period of Gaza. From this architectural inspiration, came the concept and the form of sedimentation[157].

For a brief context, SAHAB Imaginary Museum exemplifies a critical shift. Conceived by the Hawaf Collective as a virtual, borderless space, SAHAB emerges from the absolute material impossibility of a physical institution in Gaza, acting instead as a prototype.

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[155] Hall, Stuart.1989, p. 112. Identidade, cultura e diáspora in: Histórias Afro-Atlânticas: Antologia. MASP, São Paulo (Brazil). Translated by the author

[156] SAHAB Museum [website]. 2025. Available at: https://sahabmuseum.community/concept/. Accessed: 15 August 2025

[157] SAHAB Museum [website]. 2025. Available at: https://sahabmuseum.community/concept/. Accessed: 15 August 2025

This project asserts Palestinian identity as an active and ongoing production, preserving heritage and generating new historical records in direct counter to annihilation.

Conceived by the Hawaf Collective in response to the material impossibility of a physical institution in Gaza, SAHAB — "cloud" in Arabic — functions as a virtual site of archival, creative, and communal resistance. The collective envisions this digital institution not as a replacement but as a prototype, one that might eventually inspire a physical museum should circumstances ever allow[158].





[158] Index Foundation [website]. 2025. Available at: https://indexfoundation.se/talks-and-events/sahab-museum-how-to-build-a-museum-in-gaza. Accessed: 18 August 2025

Figures 25 & 26 - Examples of artworks and experiences proposed at the SAHAB Museum Community

Source: SAHAB Virtual Museum [website][159]

The Hawaf Collective, currently comprising founding members Mohamed Abusal and Sondos El-Nakhala in Gaza, Mohamed Bourouissa in Gennevilliers, and Salman Nawati in Sweden, alongside later additions such as Paris-based researcher Andres Burbano and Marseille-based anthropologist Marion Slitine, began its work through remote collaboration in 2021[160]. This geographically dispersed structure is central to the SAHAB Museum's enunciative power, forging a diasporic movement that remains intrinsically linked to Gaza. This configuration enables the project to articulate perspective from within conditions of profound disruption while maintaining engagement with international solidarity networks.

Therefore, unlike the previously examined case studies, the SAHAB Museum does not merely represent Gaza, it constitutes a voice from within it, asserting Palestinian identity as an active and ongoing production. It is a sustained endeavour to counter annihilation by preserving heritage and generating new historical records, thereby challenging dehumanising external narratives and exemplifying Stuart Hall's theory that identity is forged through multiple ways of representation, particularly under conditions of existential threat.

Ultimately, a reordering of art and its institutions is possible, even against the normalisation of barbarism. The new worlds envisioned by the cited thinkers and artists are already emerging, an ongoing effort described by Jota Mombaça as "the struggle of decolonisation is always a struggle for the abolition of the coloniser's point

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160 SAHAB Museum [website]. 2025. Available at: https://www.spatial.io/s/Sahab-Museum-66744fbe468b25a00be9a863?share=2555492886581745170. Accessed: 19 August 2025

of view and, consequently, a struggle for the end of the world—the end of a world. The end of the world as we know it."[161]

[161] Mombaça, Jota. 2019, p. 57. Ñ vão nos matar agora. Cobogó Editions. Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Translated by the author.

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