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Provocative Objects and the Remaking of Cultural Memory

1 Introduction

Narratives about the past do not fully contain the past. Put together through a process of concomitant remembering and forgetting, they are authorized and shared to sustain a political status quo. But they are also challenged and transformed. "In explaining how collective narratives change," Ann Rigney states poignantly, "it is useful to recall that remembering and forgetting always go hand in glove. Not only because memory needs to be selective to be meaningful, but also because the sense of a shared past and shared present can only be created if people are prepared to paper over historical cracks" (2022, 12). In our time, the cracks that have been covered by conventional narratives through which European societies organize the cultural memory they live by are becoming conspicuously visible. So far neglected and 'forgotten' past occurrences and experiences, those related to legacies of slavery and colonization for instance, are pushed to the fore in the context of calls for more inclusive histories.

Critical work on cultural memory acknowledges not only the extent to which nineteenth-century nationalism and historicism were co-constitutive, yielding a 'cultivation of the past' that naturalizes the nation as given. It also calls "to move memory studies itself beyond methodological nationalism" (De Cesari and Rigney 2014, 1–2), pushing scholars to study collective remembrance from a transnational angle. Doing so, the point is to discern, from the cracks in national narratives, new possibilities for narrating and remembering a past that "is no longer understood as a single story" (Troelenberg et al. 2021, 3). Awareness of the fundamental entanglements of Western and other societies in the wake of colonization, evangelization, trade, and military power opens up a deeper and broader sense of the past that challenges colonial aphasia and makes room for other memories brought forward by people marginalized by dominant national narratives. I see it as an important task for researchers across the humanities to join forces so as to better understand how cultural memory is remade in crucial moments when nation-centered narratives are challenged. As targets of conflicting political-aesthetic meanings, objects, such as statues heroizing perpetrators of colonial violence or – the focus of this essay – items assembled as part of colonial collections in ethnological and other museums, play a key role in this process. For this reason, they offer an apt methodological and conceptual entry point into the study of mnemonic change.

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2 Provocative objects

Memory studies pays ample attention to how monuments, memorials, artefacts, and sites are made to operate as the centerpieces through which cultural memories are constructed. Such constructions achieve an aura of factuality by turning material forms into unequivocal signs of a real past. In order to be able to critique how such material signs – be it memory sites or cultural heritage items – are naturalized, the collective narratives that make them meaningful and valuable must be deconstructed. But how far should deconstruction go? After all, objects are not mere targets of human intention and passive vehicles of the significations they are to naturalize. Prompted by new materialism, scholars apprehend objects as actors that influence how their users and beholders relate to them. This view replaces a misguided modernist view of humans as wielding dominance over objects by a relational understanding of humans and objects in networks or assemblages. Working from this angle myself (Meyer 2012), I find it nonetheless important not to exaggerate the agency of objects to such an extent that humans become their passive targets. What is the role of meaning-making narratives, which I see as a practice limited to humans, in such assemblages? How to develop a viable balance between an acknowledgement of the agency of objects *and* of the constructive effects of meaning-making?

In her article "Things and the Archive: Scott's Materialist Legacy" (2015b), Rigney engages explicitly with new materialist thinkers such as Jane Bennett, so as to open up a space for an intellectual appreciation of Scottish writer Walter Scott's "keen awareness of the materialized presence of the past in the physical environment" (2015b, 13). In this remarkable piece, Rigney introduces Scott as a writer *and* collector who, in collecting objects from, for instance, the battlefield of Waterloo, and exhibiting them in his mansion, developed a "fundamentally materialist imagination" (15). Taking objects as "agents with a capacity to trigger emotion and memories in the humans who react to them" (17), Scott prefigured new materialist thought, while also adding a "mnemonic dimension to Bennett's discussion of the vibrancy of matter" (18). Important here is the capacity of objects to "mobilize memory, provoke story-telling, and cause people to act" (18).

This leads Rigney to the insight "that the power of objects to provoke a longing to know more is ultimately dependent on the power of words to release their potential meaning; to set them vibrating" (23). This elegant phrasing presents an integrated perspective on how the powers of objects and of words intersect. I very much like the idea of the object that provokes by signaling a limit of understanding it within a dominant narrative, yet also calls forth a new story that releases a new or dormant meaning. The figure of the provocative object is crucial for identifying the turning points through which collective narratives and mne-

monic regimes change. As signs of something that is not yet clearly spelled out through a narrative already told, objects are crucial for the re-making of cultural memory. This methodological insight dovetails with my own approach to religion from a material (rather than mentalistic) angle (Meyer 2012). In order to uncover alternative ways to narrate dimensions of the past that have largely been subdued, as is the case with the memory of colonialism, provocative objects are an apt beginning.

3 Uncomfortable presences

This special power of objects to provoke becomes immediately clear when we consider current calls to remove or destroy contested statues. Cracking mainstream understandings of the past opens up alleys into alternative histories written from a subaltern angle. Rigney aptly calls this memory work "unforgetting" (2022). Next to such conspicuously present provocative objects in public spaces, there are artefacts assembled in the context of colonialism and taken to ethnological and other museums where they are on display or have long been stored away in the depot. Currently, colonial collections are in the limelight of public debate about legacies of colonialism,[1] yielding research on their provenance and claims for restitution to the states in which the descendants of their initial makers and users live. The restitution of looted art such as the much-discussed Benin bronzes and the return of ancestral remains are gaining much attention. Looking at these items from the angle of memory studies with Rigney, the question arises which memories they evoke and, in the process, which narratives they disturb, and possibly enable.

As there is a broad array of items with multiple provenance histories, it is best to address this question through a detailed case. Together with a team of researchers from Ghana, Togo, Germany, and the Netherlands, I am involved in a research project on a collection of about two hundred and fifty items assembled by Protestant missionary Carl Spiess among the Ewe around 1900 in the area currently known as south-eastern Ghana and southern Togo.[2] As a missionary of the

1 See the research program Pressing Matter: Value, Ownership and the Question of Colonial Heritage in Museums in which I co-direct a subproject on missionary collections: https://pressingmatter.nl.

2 We conducted a pilot study with the team in the Übersee-Museum Bremen in September 2022, for a report see: https://religiousmatters.nl/the-legba-dzoka-project-tracking-and-unpacking-the-collection-carl-spiess-ubersee-museum-bremen/. The project is funded by the Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste/German Lost Art Foundation.

Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft (NMG) Spiess sought to evangelize the Ewe and make them turn away from their spiritual practices. Items such as *dzokawo* ("charms" and "amulets") and *legba*-figures ("idols") were to be discarded and burnt, or taken to what is today the Übersee-Museum Bremen. For our team, this collection (See Fig 1) is a time capsule that can tell us not only about a missionary worldview that took such items as "idolatry" and a colonial-ethnological view that saw them as instances of *Zauberei* (magic). Clearly, the items were taken as evidence of "heathendom" and of a lower stage in the evolution of religion, and thus made to sustain an interrelated, partly overlapping narrative about the primacy of Christian monotheism and about Europe as pinnacle of cultural development, legitimizing missionization and colonization.

Figure 1: Dzokawo, "Collection Spiess", Übersee-Museum Bremen, Photo by the author.

This unpacking is certainly important, especially in a country as Germany where the colonial past has only recently become publicly acknowledged as another uncomfortable national memory next to fascism. Yes, it is clear that the items – I tend to eschew the term "object" for its instrumental slant which affirms the objectifying regime of the museum, yet is not adequate to convey an indigenous Ewe view on items vested with spiritual powers – have more to "say." How could they, to invoke Rigney, "mobilize memory, provoke story-telling, and cause people to act"? Kept in a German museum for more than hundred and twenty years,

they are not directly available to the descendants of their initial makers and users, many of whom, in addition, identify as Christians and may look at them with some suspicion. Until recently, the presence of this collection was barely remembered in Germany, let alone in Ghana and Togo. When I told Ewe priest Christopher Voncujovi, who runs the Afrikan Magick Temple in Accra, about this collection he proposed that the spirits inhabiting these artefacts may have pushed me to act as their messenger. While I had conducted extensive research on the activities of the NMG among the Ewe, it was only after I had developed a material approach to religion that I seriously thought about the Übersee-Museum as a crucial node to unpack so far neglected colonial-missionary entanglements of the Ewe people and Germany. Clearly, once one places material forms at the center of attention, entirely new provocative questions arise.

Our team is not only multidisciplinary and transnational, with scholars from Ghana, Germany, the Netherlands, and Togo, but also includes two Ewe priests. Having just embarked on this joint endeavour, it is our wish to bring our respective scholarly knowledge and positionality as well as alternative modes of knowledge production to bear on our research on this amazing and disturbing collection. Doing so as a joint effort will allow us to let these artefacts provoke story-telling about dimensions that are not immediately obvious to secular Western beholders. From the priests' point of view and based on their use of the Ifa-oracle, the collected items are not mere objects, but are alive and hungry, wishing to cause people to act so as to be fed, and possibly returned (Meyer 2024). Further research in Ghana and Togo, where our team will present images of the collection to the local people, may trigger memories of missionization and indigenous powers beyond the usual path, possibly yielding a recognition of these artefacts as cultural assets worth to recognize as Ewe heritage. Time will tell which insights and consequences this collaborative research will yield. What is clear to me already is that the questions posed by Rigney have great value to assess the potential of such a collection of material items to provoke new narratives that change how people, here and there, think and act, remaking cultural memory.