

Being Affected

Shifting Positions at the Ethnological Museum of Berlin

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On 22 October 2013 approximately 200 people gathered at the Werkstatt der Kulturen to hear talks about the Humboldt Forum, a new cultural centre to be built on Berlin's museum island.¹ In the event's introduction Arnim Massing and Kien Nghi Ha called the plans for the museum 'particularly uninspired and unimaginative', 'revisionist' and 'lacking any kind of sensibility when it comes to dealing responsibly with one's own colonial history'.² Frequent ironic laughter from the audience accompanied the discussion, and people murmured when the moderator introduced Peter Junge, a curator at the Ethnological Museum of Berlin, which along with the Museum of Asian Art would become part of the Humboldt Forum in the reconstructed Berlin City Palace when it opened. Junge was the only representative from the planned Humboldt Forum—he was responsible for the Africa department's exhibition as well as managing the liaison between the Ethnological Museum and the Humboldt Forum—to accept an invitation from the Werkstatt der Kulturen. Visibly nervous, Junge tried to explain his position. He expressed his gratitude for being invited and highlighted the need for dialogue. He foregrounded the work done in the Africa department at the Ethnological Museum and mentioned his practical work on exhibitions for the Humboldt Forum. He emphasised the discrepancy between how the Humboldt Forum was publicly perceived and what it would actually do, which he described as 'breaking with the colonial past'. A day before the event, during lunch at the Museum canteen, Peter Junge had reassured himself: 'We have everything they want: collection history, contemporary art, visible storage'. But at the event the anthropologist Larissa Förster asked him why the museum had not been more outspoken in recent discussions of colonialism:

You know the collections and its histories best, the problematic as well as the unproblematic parts. Where is your expert's voice correcting the cultural politics you are criticising? Why don't you take the chance to position yourself in the debate, taking the controversies as an opportunity?

Junge responded diplomatically. He stressed his work at the Museum while refusing to take a critical stance.

The next day, in the Museum canteen, staff said to Junge that he had been 'skewered' (*aufgespießt*) by the critics. He vehemently denied it: 'I would never let myself be skewered!' Nevertheless, for the audience members at the Werkstatt der Kulturen event, he was the face of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (*Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz*, henceforth: SPK), which was the owner of the Ethnological Museum's collections and represented the Humboldt Forum. 'This event was about exposing me, not about dialogue. It's like in 1968, but', he sighed and then continued: '[s]till, it is important not to dial in (*abhaken*) these kinds of events. Even if they are only a minority, and even if this kind of event dampens our mood'—the others seated at the table laughed again and seemed to agree—'we have to remain in dialogue with them. These are the only people who are interested in the Forum, apart from the conservatives who want to rebuild the Palace! Ten years ago, no one questioned the origin of the objects. Today you are asked about it at every guided tour. That's why these people are important.'

In this chapter, I examine what it means to work in an organisation mired in anti-colonial controversy, between 2013 and 2015. In doing so, I use Jeanne Favret-Saada's notion of 'being affected' to support the study of these contested collections and to contribute to the understanding of the curatorial struggles that were underway at that time.

My thinking about Favret-Saada's reflections on affect began when I co-curated the exhibition *Object Biographies*, which explicitly dealt with the colonial provenance of the Ethnological Museum's Africa collection.³

Monitoring my own affects allowed me to pay particular attention to the emotional dimension of curatorial work, which is only rarely considered in museological literature. From my earliest work in the field, I described the general mood and emotions in my notes with observations such as 'is enraged', 'feels desperate', 'describes as draining' and 'feels accused of colonial crime'. Also, I myself was confronted with recurring feelings of unease, discomfort and malaise. Taking these emotions as analytical clues, below I discuss the curatorial responsibility to 'appropriately' address Germany's colonial history in a polarised climate while considering signs of colonial violence in the Ethnological Museum's past. Part of that responsibility is to make knowledge and information accessible, to respond to the politics of representation and exclusion and to avoid reproducing the mechanisms inherent to colonial collections and governance.

The Humboldt Forum, anti-Humboldt activism and German colonialism

In June 2013, Berlin city officials held a foundation stone ceremony for the Berlin Palace. Described as a 'little act of state' by the press, the ceremony included federal ministers and members of parliament who were joined via video by the British Museum's director, Neil MacGregor, and the former US Foreign Minister Henry Kissinger (Haubrich 2013). Under beautiful skies, shouts of 'bravo' for the Palace's most prominent initiators were accompanied by encomiums praising the Humboldt Forum as 'an opportunity for the whole of Europe' (MacGregor). A journalist wrote that '...a new phase begins' and 'the time of ideological struggles is over'. 'Construction is finally underway' (Schaper 2013). For some, more than two decades of dissent seemed to end with the beginning of construction work.

While the joyful event was taking place, however, members of a newly formed coalition known as No Humboldt 21! had gathered in protest. The purpose of the coalition was to stop the construction of the Humboldt Forum, which they considered ‘Eurocentric’ and ‘restorative’, ‘a direct contradiction to the aim of promoting equality in a society of immigrants’ (No Humboldt 21! 2013, 21). Whereas the journalist had pronounced the end of ‘ideological struggles’, No Humboldt 21! refocussed the discussion from debates about Germany’s socialist past—triggered by the demolition of the GDR-era Palace of the Republic—to Germany’s colonial history.

The physical separation between the festive foundation stone ceremony and the activists demonstrating outside the construction perimeters created a set of seemingly insurmountable binary oppositions: between an organisation that perpetuated colonial modes of conceiving the world and one that opposed such worldviews, between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the Museum, between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, between the Humboldt Forum and the activists.

No Humboldt 21! and the anti-Humboldt Forum campaign

The coalition’s resolution was signed by 82 organisations, most of them located in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany. Their specific objectives differed, but most were engaged in de-colonial, anti-racist and feminist missions and some represented diaspora groups and their interests.

The logo for the No Humboldt 21! campaign merges the image of the Humboldt Forum Foundation in the Berlin Palace (*Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss*) and that of the SPK. The difference is the eagle, which is crying and whose tears seem to morph into blood. The point was to signal which objects belonged to its critique—the building, its content, its name—and which did not (the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and the Berlin State Library).

3.1 Logo of the ‘No Humboldt 21!’ initiative. Reproduced courtesy of No Humboldt 21!

3.2 Logo of the *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*. Reproduced courtesy of the *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*.

3.3 Logo of the *Stiftung Berliner Schloss*. Reproduced courtesy of the *Stiftung Berliner Schloss*.



**Stiftung
Preußischer Kulturbesitz**



The activists focused their criticism on the publication ‘The Humboldt Forum: “To Be in Touch with as Much of the World as Possible”: The Goal and Significance of Germany’s Most Important Cultural Project at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century’. Authored by the SPK’s president Hermann Parzinger in 2011, the brochure was consid-

ered its *de facto* 'concept'.⁴ The No Humboldt 21! campaign drew on international museum practice and recent scholarship as they identified five particular points of critique. First, the activists challenged the idea that museums were 'the legitimate owners of their holdings'. In view of the colonial origins of the museum's collection, they called for the 'disclosure of the ownership history', adherence to a UN resolution in favour of repatriation and 'dialogue' with the 'descendants of the artists and the legal owners of the exhibits'. Second, they accused the Humboldt Forum of 'redeeming Berlin's colonial past', and demanded that no objects acquired during colonial times be exhibited in the Berlin Palace. Third, they denounced a politics of representation in which 'the cultures of the world are discriminated against, marked as "strangers" and "other"'. They pointed to the Forum's particular position on the Museum Island, and noted the separation between the 'classical collections' (*Altes Museum, Bodemuseum, Museum für Islamische Kunst, Alte Nationalgalerie*) and the 'Non-European' ones. Fourth, they criticised forms of knowledge production from the 'era of discovery'. In their opinion, Alexander von Humboldt, the German naturalist and one of the Forum's eponyms, embodied 'colonial dominance' and was thus not 'an appropriate person to name an intercultural centre after'. Fifth, they focused on the politics of access, criticising the way in which cultural goods remain unequally available to populations around the globe. They demanded that cultural goods in the Global North be permanently returned to their countries of origin in the Global South.

Neither the SPK, the Ethnological Museum nor the Humboldt Forum had released an official statement or position paper on German colonialism. But the statements they did publish didn't allay and even added to the activists' criticisms. SPK representatives relativised the impact of German colonialism on the collections by comparing it with those of other European colonial powers. Official representatives stated in 2001 that '([i]n contrast to the typical colonial countries Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain, etc. where selected objects reached the European motherlands as spoil, German collectors and scientists developed systematic and—astonishingly modern—databases in Humboldt's tradition' (quoted in König 2013: 33). Hermann Parzinger offered a similar argument in 2010, stating that 'concerning the collection's genesis, Germany has...a colonial past, but it is not like other European powers' (Hermann Parzinger [2010]; quoted in V. König 2012: 56). The SPK focused on the accuracy and scientific rigour of collecting and research practices, and downplayed the role of German colonialism in the museum's collections (Parzinger 2011: 31–32). Another argument put forward was that only a small portion of the collections was shaped by colonialism; most of it, like Berlin's Royal Cabinet of Curiosities, was of a 'precolonial' provenance. This argument overlooks that era's contested politics of acquisition and representation (von Bose 2016, 128–29).

These statements reflected a then-common understanding of Germany's colonial history and national politics. Since the early 2000s, German diplomacy had neglected or circumvented its colonial past and the crimes related to it (Lutz and Gawarecki 2005; Eckert 2007; Eckert and Wirz 2013; Zimmerer 2013). At the same time, the statements of the SPK ignored the latest academic research on the relationship between anthropological museums and colonialism in general⁵ and Berlin's collections and German colonialism in particular.⁶

The activists' campaign received a boost from the German Green Party *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*⁷ and the left-wing party *Die Linke*,⁸ who in local governments and in the Bun-

destag vowed to investigate the colonial origins of the Museum's collections, in particular the human remains they contain. Support for the critique of the Humboldt Forum, therefore, had become entrenched among activists, politicians and academics, at the grass-roots level and in local and national political arenas.

Inside the Ethnological Museum—complicating the picture

I started my research at the Ethnological Museum of Berlin in October 2013. I focused on the past, present and future of selected objects from the Africa collection as part of a larger ethnographic study of processes of transformations underway in ethnological museums in Europe. My archival and field research concentrated on practices related to the planned new permanent exhibition, which was to include the museum's Africa collections for the Humboldt Forum.

When I started my work, I sympathised with many of the arguments of the No Humboldt 21! activists. At that time, it was difficult not to. After the Forum's foundation stone ceremony, activists organised a variety of public events, such as the travelling exhibition 'Anti-Humboldt Box'⁹. They coordinated conferences,¹⁰ published articles and edited volumes.¹¹ Meanwhile, the SPK, the SMB and the Ethnological Museum remained silent about the collection's colonial past. In the autumn and winter of 2013, outsiders frequently voiced their frustration with the organisations' behaviour.¹² The work at the Humboldt Forum took place behind closed doors, despite a provisional three-storey exhibition space known as the Humboldt Box located at the Forum's construction site. The Humboldt Lab Dahlem (henceforth: HLD) organised exhibitions and 'experiments' to accompany the Forum preparations. With a budget of more than 4 million euros, the Humboldt Lab was perceived as the Humboldt Forum's showcase, yet it too had not taken a public position on German colonialism in the autumn of 2013.

Yet on my first day at the Museum, the seemingly clear-cut opposition between outside activist and museum insider collapsed. A Museum staff member referred to the Humboldt Forum as 'an ultra-conservative project led by old white men'.¹³ That view was no exception among staff members. Throughout the duration of my research, museum staff routinely criticised the Forum. Part of their problem, they often said, was the absence of a stated programme and a clear idea of who would define it. 'No one wants to work for a project that is at the centre of criticism', I wrote in my fieldnotes. 'Museum staff lack identification with the Forum.'¹⁴ Some were unaware of the brochure 'The Humboldt Forum: "To Be in Touch with as Much of the World as Possible"', highlighting the disconnect between experts working closely with the collections and those representing the Forum. I realised then that the SPK's leadership had not only *not* responded to the activists; they had not communicated effectively with their own staff. Neither did they seem to then have heeded the recommendations of the Forum's international advisory board for the Ethnological Museum's and Museum of Asian Art, made in 2011, that the organisation address colonialism and its latter-day repercussions (Heizmann and Parzinger 2012). The Museum's Africa department curators, however, *had* defined colonialism as a central topic of their research and exhibition plans as early as 2008.¹⁵

Behind the scenes at the Ethnological Museum, then, were numerous opinions and positions, not a single unified view. My work at the Museum complicated the idea of a straightforward binary opposition—one between those denying Germany's colonial past and those facing up to it, between those against and those for the Humboldt Forum, between the postcolonial and the neo-colonial.

Being affected: making *Object Biographies*

In December 2013, HLD approached me and Verena Rodatus, the museum apprentice (*Volontärin*) working in the Africa department, to ask us whether we would like to curate an exhibition on 'looted art' (*Beutekunst*). The HLD was under pressure to present critical voices and reflect the current state of the academic literature on German colonialism and provenance. Verena Rodatus and I would occupy a kind of insider–outsider position. We would both be temporarily employed, we were new to the field, and we were not on staff at the Ethnological Museum. As one of the HLD's leaders explained to us, it was 'obvious to everyone' that the provenance of cultural artefacts needed to be addressed, but no official 'proactive position' was likely in the near future. Neither the Ethnological Museum nor the SPK had the personnel and funds to deal with those questions because their curators were in the final stages of determining their object lists for the Humboldt Forum. The HLD, by contrast, had enough resources at its disposal to fund such work.¹⁶

Initially, we were unsure whether to accept the offer. We worried that the Museum or the SPK would distance itself from our criticisms because we were temporary employees, limit the project's critical scope or take over the project without changing their general stance. Working within the organisation, and being associated with the Humboldt Forum would restrict our room to maneuver. Going from anthropologist and museum apprentice to public curators felt like a risk, one that could possibly drive a wedge between us and our immediate peers. We later noted our concern that we would be 'discredited by critics because of our institutional affiliation' (April 2014).

Our concern was not unjustified. The HLD's first efforts had received bad press (*Probebühnen*, March, June, September 2013),¹⁷ and it underwent an external review. The evaluators found that HLD had ignored or inadequately addressed the general expectations of ethnological museums and the Forum's critics in particular, and the news had started to leak (Mörsch et al. 2014). The HLD's projects had been met with hostility even by museum staff, some of whom criticised the HLD as 'appropriating the objects for a second time'.¹⁸ Some associated with the HLD found their experience emotionally challenging. 'I'd better do a good job so as not to lose my friends', one curator said in a meeting. Another recounted how she had been publicly faced with 'overt hostility, simply because I was working for the Humboldt Forum.' One person reported crying when a friend refused to say hello to her on the street. 'It's not nice when everyone turns away, like that', someone else said.¹⁹

Nevertheless, we decided to accept the offer in the hope of helping change the system from within. We developed the exhibition, titled *Object Biographies*, in conversation with the Africa department's curators. A crucial issue for the exhibition was provenance research, which we had already conducted for the Humboldt Forum as part of our in-

dividual work. Our objective was to address the Museum's ties to German colonialism head-on by taking the collection's history and the trajectories of specific objects as the exhibition's starting point. We were interested in which stories had *not* been told, who and what was absent or rarely visible in the Museum's own story. With the help of contemporary voices and research, both from Europe and Africa (von Oswald and Rodatus 2017), we wanted to arrive at a more expansive understanding of the Museum's collections. It would be the first show at the Ethnological Museum to put the violent history of German colonial rule on centre stage.

From participant observation to observant participation

When I decided to co-curate the exhibition, my position changed from being a scholar and stipend recipient to a curator, from being a 'participant observer' to being an 'observant participant'. Becoming a 'participant' changed my conception of 'distance' and 'scientific objectivity' in the field.

Jeanne Favret-Saada's notion of affect in her work on witchcraft in rural France has helped me think through the particularities of my situation (Favret-Saada 1977). The field of museum anthropology is obviously very different from that of witchcraft in France—not to mention, less deadly. Still, Favret-Saada's idea that researchers are affected by their work challenges the relationship between 'observation' and 'participation' in a way that was also useful for my field. Favret-Saada argues that earlier accounts of witchcraft are usually written from the perspective of anthropologists who were interested in observation, rather than participation. She recalls that academics had long reduced witchcraft to an 'accusation' and depicted it as 'a medicine for the illiterate and ignorant people' (Favret-Saada 2012). By contrast, she describes that the people she encountered wanted her to become a 'partner'. They would only communicate with her once she too had been, as she put it, 'taken'. She describes the feeling of participating in the field as 'being affected', without knowing whether or not she was actually bewitched herself.

Being affected and affecting the field

Although metaphors like being 'taken' were not unknown in my field—the former museum director Clémentine Deliss once asked me if I had been 'turned' by 'museum anthropology', as in 'turned like a zombie'²⁰—the field of ethnological museums is also shaped by binary oppositions like those that Favret Saada describes in her field.

Favret-Saada argues that participation can be an instrument of knowledge. To understand the 'intensities' that come when working within a field, one must experience them (Favret-Saada 2004: 4–5). Researchers participate in and contribute to developments in the field: they are both affected by the objects of study and affect them. Being affected also means that one loses control over how one is positioned in the field. In conventional 'participant observation', the researcher can remain 'just' an anthropologist. Not so in the polarised atmosphere of Berlin, where the mere fact of collaborating with this state

organisation meant being assigned a position. Unlike empathy, Favret-Saada argues, being affected tells the researcher about her own feelings and not necessarily the feelings of those who are the subject of research (Favret-Saada 2012; 1977). Being affected means becoming the person about whom the anthropologist is ultimately writing. In this way, the anthropologist's own doubts, instabilities and anxieties become tools for analysis. Here, what Sharon Macdonald describes as the 'anthropological approach'—the 'commitment to trying to see and experience life-worlds from the point of view of those who live them and within the context of which they are part' (Macdonald 2013: 9)—becomes the personal, physical experience that is the researcher's own 'life-world'.

My approach to the field changed as I sought ways to exhibit the Museum's objects publicly while balancing a complicated mixture of political and marketing interests, decision-making processes, legal regulations and professional convictions. As an insider, I began to look at the work of museum curators differently. Instead of focusing solely on identifying 'mistakes'—like many external critics of exhibitions in ethnological museums—I became more in tune to their complexities and contradictions.

Curating contested collections

At the Ethnological Museum the curators of colonial collections were aware of the expectations to respond to activist critique and recent academic research, and the relationship between German colonialism and anthropology, in particular. For decades, researchers, archivists and curators had worked on the history of colonial violence and theft. The difficulty lay in collaboratively addressing that history in a politically explosive climate.

Did our project challenge or perpetuate the museum's role as a 'colonial instrument' (Boast 2011)? *Object Biographies* addressed not only *what* was being told but *who* was telling the story. Who was allowed to speak, and from which position and how? This also concerned the composition of our team and what has been called the 'delegation of interpretative sovereignty' (*Deutungshoheit abgeben*) and the politics of representation more generally.

I often felt defensive and apologetic when working on and writing about the exhibition. I was worried about being *perceived* as perpetuating colonial injustice and of *actually* perpetuating colonial injustice from within a contested organisation.²¹ Ambivalent feelings continued to accompany me as I tackled the collection's colonial legacy and the question of how best to discuss and exhibit that legacy from my privileged position within the Museum.

As questions of colonial provenance and restitution garnered more and more public attention, those publicly representing the HLD and the Ethnological Museum found the SPK's silence on those issues increasingly difficult. In January 2015, in response to a parliamentary inquiry by the Green Party, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, announced that 'the government, including the SPK, defends the position that no unlawfully acquired objects should be kept within the collections of the State Museums Berlin, regardless of the time period from which they stem'. It was, in other words, an official guarantee that every object displayed in the Humboldt Forum would undergo provenance research and that this research would be 'made

transparent' (Deutscher Bundestag 2015: 2–3). The government position marked a shift in public and political debate that set the *legality* of collections against the *legitimacy* of owning them. The shift, in turn, was closely related to activist activities, including a long correspondence between activist organisations and the SPK (Prosinger, Mboro, and Kisalya 2013; Kathmann 2014; Prosinger and Mboro 2014; Parzinger 2014), and the sudden cancellation of a public event at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, which *No Humboldt 21!* interpreted as a refusal of Humboldt Forum representatives 'to dialogue' with them in public (*No Humboldt 21!* 2014a). In December 2014, *No Humboldt 21!* published a press release containing a list of the human remains and 'war loot' (*Kriegsbeute*) (*No Humboldt 21!* 2014b) in the museum collection.

Critique and complicity

In *Object Biographies*, we addressed Germany's colonial history by narrating different stories of the objects' provenance. We decided to focus on the violent history of two figures from the historic kingdom of Kom, located in present-day Cameroon. We understood that when provenance research identifies illegitimate modes of acquisition, the political consequences can be significant. What does it mean to display colonial loot within an organisation that has yet to take an official position on colonialism? The question points to a paradox that often confronted me in my work: the constant risk of legitimising or strengthening a contested organisation when working within it, even when that work is critical. The fear of involuntary complicity accompanied me as I prepared *Object Biographies* and thought about the possible public response.

In March 2015, HLD managing director Agnes Wegner wrote an email to the SPK's legal department (*Justizariat*) saying that she was 'troubled'. She described her unease at a public event.²² Seated below several *No Humboldt 21!* posters asking 'Ever seen looted art?', she found it hard to justify the presence of war trophies in the museum collections, though she felt institutionally bound to do just that. 'I often reach my limits, and words fail me.' She asked for advice and legal consultation and attached the exhibition texts of *Object Biographies*, to inquire about the communications strategy for the exhibition.²³

With regards to ownership and restitution, the common ground at the SPK consisted in arguing that the collection had been legally acquired within the framework of international colonial-era law,²⁴ and that any claims on artefacts would be beyond the statute of limitations. Accordingly, restitution could occur only 'from an ethical, political or moral point of view.' The duty of the museum was to uphold the principles of 'keeping, conserving, making accessible'. 'If we give the objects to non-museum contexts, we are breaking the law. For better or worse, the museum perspective is: What has once entered the museum stays in the museum'.²⁵

This position expressed the legal limbo that objects acquired in the colonial era often find themselves. 'Law, by its nature, crystallizes the general consensus at a particular time', Lyndel Prott writes. 'There was no consensus on the (il)legality of colonization before 1960', when the United Nations Resolution on Decolonization was adopted (Prott 2009: 103; see also Schönberger 2016). And it was clear that legality at the time of acquisition was the decisive legal standard applied by the SPK. For instance, in 2012, Hermann

Parzinger stated that ‘what was right then cannot be wrong today’ (‘Was damals Recht war, kann heute nicht Unrecht sein’) (Parzinger 2012). The problem for the SPK and the Humboldt Forum, however, was that the legitimacy of the legal argument had now come under public scrutiny.

3.4 Ever seen looted art? Poster by No Humboldt 21!²⁶, Creative Commons Licence.

3.5 Prussian cultural heritage? Poster by No Humboldt 21!²⁷, Creative Commons Licence.



The difficulty of drawing a clear line between legality and legitimacy became evident when we received the wall texts from the SPK’s communication department, ten days before the exhibition was scheduled to open. As we learned, the *Justizariat* and the Humboldt Forum’s communication department had the right to control and eventually amend every text that had a possible ‘link with restitution’ (*Restitutionsbezug*).²⁸ Words and entire sentences were missing; others were added new. For example, in the phrase ‘unknown and sometimes problematic histories’, the SPK deleted ‘and sometimes problematic’. It also expunged the question ‘Which histories are told, and which ones are silenced?’ In the introductory text, we claimed to shed ‘critical light on the museum’s networks and practices’. The new version read that “we are taking a new look at the Ethnological Museum, which has long confronted itself with its own collection history and will not only be showing objects in the Humboldt Forum, but also presenting the history of those objects.”

Needless to say, I was not happy with the result. I talked with Agnes Wegner, who thought it best if she and the two Africa curators jump into the fray. In their communications with the SPK, they argued that our texts were scientifically correct, and that the

exhibition project had been approved by the Museum's and HLD's directors with the explicit aim of making the Museum's collection histories 'transparent'. They also noted that SPK was out of step with academic scholarship, which in the 1990s had begun to identify looted art in the collection. A denial or concealment of that information risked exposing the Humboldt Lab Dahlem to ridicule.²⁹

After several exchanges, Wegner and the two Africa curators were able to reverse almost all the changes. But the process had shed a spotlight on the hierarchical nature of the SPK and its difficulty to take a public stand on the histories of its colonial collections and the issues of ownership and restitution. The emotional rollercoaster of the ordeal—I went from feeling outraged to feeling deprived of authorship—had left me exhausted.

Being affected helped me to understand the curators' difficult position: how emotionally draining it was to engage critically with an organisation while having to defend it, especially one so complex and hierarchical, and the resulting lack of control over the final results, authorship and public communication.

Collaboration and control

While planning the exhibition, we repeatedly reminded ourselves of our privileged role in the museum. As part of an evaluation workshop, we invited the scholars Friedrich von Bose and Nora Sternfeld to comment on our team. They recommended that we rethink the team's composition in order to break with conventional modes of representation. In particular, they pointed out that we failed to include a person of colour who would be 'critical of reproduction (*reproduktionskritisch*) and able to address appropriation (*Aneignung*) from a Black, anti-racist and activist position.'³⁰

After discussing their recommendations, we decided not to change our curatorial team. Instead, we invited two art historians with academic experience in the field, Mathias Alubafi and Romuald Tchibozo, to provide a written statement (Alubafi) and contribute to a larger research project on *bocios* in Benin and Berlin (Tchibozo). Romuald Tchibozo raised difficult questions about our position in the 'decolonisation of research'. We examined different power asymmetries present in the project. These included the ability to acquire a visa and travel, the restricted access to the collections and the inability to move the objects beyond the walls of the museum. The control of the exhibition authorship and its products was defined by the organisation, while the budget lay in our hands (Tchibozo 2015; Oswald and Rodatus 2017: 218–19).

Our curatorial duo also contributed to maintaining the power asymmetry. We were only partly committed to giving up our privileged position within the project and to opening up the process (Oswald and Rodatus 2017: 218). In Bernadette Lynch's words, despite 'a commitment to the contact zone', in terms of both encounter and 'coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict' (Mary Louise Pratt quoted in Clifford 1997:192), 'we somehow continue to face the Other with fear, and work hard to exercise control' (Lynch 2014: 6). Neither Alubafi nor Tchibozo was part of the curatorial team; they had joined the project after we had defined its general concept. And though we aimed for a particular understanding of collaborative museology for the project, in which the collaborator is defined 'as expert in a knowledge not present in the museum,'

we afforded insufficient space to this ‘right to co-determination’ (Landkammer 2017: 278). Hence, despite our efforts, we risked repeating, reproducing or reinscribing colonial mechanisms and power structures. Addressing past injustices does not mean that one is sure to avoid reproducing similar injustices in the present.

Reflexivity and performance

Verena Rodatus and I published an article on *Object Biographies* that pondered the challenges of decolonising research and exhibition-making. Consider the following representative passage:

We agree with Nora Landkammer, who argues that ‘decolonisation should concentrate on organisational development and on understanding community engagement as an all-encompassing practice for institutions (Landkammer 2017: 278).’ This would include prioritising and institutionalizing access to the collections and to the exhibition space for those who have been denied access, contribution and co-production in the making of the museum (Oswald and Rodatus 2017: 219).

This is all well and good, but we failed to consider that this kind of self-reflective writing about the exhibition served *us* as a curatorial team by facilitating our own positioning especially with regards to the exhibition’s aftermath and academic reception. By contrast, those who had contributed from Benin, in particular those who were unable to travel—such as David Gnonhouévi, Romuald Tchibozo’s student who had organised the research trip to Benin—stood to gain little.

Looking back, I feel ambivalent about our observations. Writing can be a highly performative act of self-reflexivity meant to divert responsibility. Friction and conflict remain because the consequences of such reflections are rarely taken seriously. What would ‘prioritising and institutionalising access’ mean for those who have been denied access?

The ambivalence lies in the fact that appropriation goes hand in hand with defensiveness, apology, reflexivity—and holding on to power. Could gestures of ‘inviting’ and ‘collaborating’, as long as they come from *within* the confines of a museum’s structures and practices, be anything other than patronising? Is it possible to avoid paradoxical appropriation? Would the alternative be to *not* engage in these debates, to leave one’s place to others, or to listen? Is there a possibility of sitting with and enduring these moments of fragility?

Conclusion

Being affected enables reflection on how the colonial is imbricated in the present. Through it, I noticed how elements of our exhibition maintained and reproduced asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South despite our efforts to address them explicitly. The exhibition confronted us with the presence, reappearance, effects and continuities of the colonial past in our everyday practice and decision-making.

Being affected and using it as a research tool complicate the research of curatorial practice. In the case of *Object Biographies*, being affected shifted the analysis beyond binaries, and pointed to the paradoxes, tensions and ambivalence of working with colonial collections from within a contested organisation. By being implicated and being part, I could grasp how and why people grew weary and became defiant. I was confronted with the effects of organisational hierarchies, the anticipation of critique, the uncertainty of how my work would be publicly received and my contributions to reproducing the structures and mechanisms I was critical of. At root were questions of curatorial agency and change. When does one become complicit? When is it possible to contribute to political and organisational change?

Shortly after the exhibition's opening, the SPK published its long-awaited statements on the 'treatment of human remains' and 'non-European collections' (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz 2015a; 2015b). It confirmed the SPK's focus on provenance research and the deployment of shared heritage. Critics understood 'provenance' as a way to delay questions of restitution³¹ and interpreted 'shared heritage' as a tactic of avoiding returns (No Humboldt 21! 2015). Then, in May 2015, Hermann Parzinger shifted course and published an article about the Humboldt Forum titled 'Berlin's Rebuilt Prussian Palace to Address Long-ignored Colonial Atrocities' (Scaturro 2015). Announced as a 'collaborative project' a month later, the Museum's curators would put into practice the abstract and undefined notions of 'shared heritage' and 'provenance'.³²

Between 2013 and 2015, a process of negotiation emerged in which politicians, organisations and activists sought to identify and forge a moral consensus on German colonialism. Through this process, the behaviour of the SPK was, like the resulting consensus itself, more reactive than proactive, and often at odds with the Ethnological Museum staff. Meanwhile, the debates around the collections' fate increased awareness of Germany's colonial history (Koalitionsvertrag 2018).

I close these reflections by asking about the role that I can take as a white, privileged academic from within the Ethnological Museum, an organisation shaped by colonial ideology? To what extent can I bring about change from this position? As I have argued, curatorial struggles tend to centre around tensions: critique and complicity; collaboration and control; reflexivity and performance. Within complex organisational structures and mechanisms, which side becomes predominant will forever be uncertain and ambiguous. Balancing and withstanding the inherent contradictions is a central (emotional) challenge in curating contested collections. As Nanette Snoep, then director of the Ethnographic Collections of the State of Saxony, stated in 2016: 'It is not enough to talk a little bit about colonial history, put it in a small showcase, and that's it. The malaise stays.'³³

Acknowledgements

This chapter was written as part of the *Making Differences: Transforming Museums and Heritage in the Twenty-First Century* project, at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH), funded by Sharon Macdonald's Alexander von Humboldt Professorship. I would like to thank Verena Rodatus and Agnes Wegner for their

reflections and remarks on different versions of this text. I am grateful to the museum staff at the Ethnological Museum who agreed to be part of this research. My gratitude also goes to Sharon Macdonald for her many comments and thoughts and for the helpful edits of this chapter. This text is a result of innumerable conversations about curating with Christine Gerbich, who has my gratitude for her helpful and critical point of view. Finally, I would like to thank Patrick Wielowiejski, Aida Baghernejad and Francis Seeck for discussing white guilt, tears and fragility with me.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on the chapter entitled 'Being affected. A methodological approach to working through colonial collections', in the book 'Working Through Colonial Collections. An Ethnography of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin', Leuven University Press, 2022.
- 2 The following quotes are transcriptions from the video recording of the event *Preußischer Kulturbesitz? Postkoloniale und entwicklungspolitische Perspektiven auf das Humboldt-Forum – Zum Umgang mit Kulturgütern und Human Remains aus der Kolonialzeit* (Prussian Cultural Heritage? Postcolonial Perspectives and Perspectives from Development Policies on the Humboldt-Forum – Dealing with Cultural Assets and Human Remains from the Colonial Era) at the Werkstatt der Kulturen, 22 October 2013, organised by members of *No Humboldt 21!* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEojPEqZDSY> (accessed 20 February 2020).
- 3 The point of view expressed in this chapter is solely mine, even if I sometimes use 'we' to describe Verena Rodatus' and my curatorial ambitions and approach with regard to *Object Biographies*.
- 4 The German title is 'Das Humboldt-Forum. "Soviel Welt mit sich verbinden als möglich." Aufgabe und Bedeutung des wichtigsten Kulturprojekts in Deutschland zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts'. The brochure was available in German and English, <https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/en/newsroom/media-library/documents/document-detail/article/2013/11/27/media-the-humboldt-forum-to-be-in-touch-with-as-much-of-the-world-as-possible.html> (accessed 23 May 2019).
- 5 Examples of key literature on the relationship between museums and colonialism include Clifford 1988; Thomas 1991; Karp and Lavine 1991; Coombes 1997; Clifford 1997; and Gosden and Knowles 2001.
- 6 The works of the historians Andrew Zimmermann and Glenn Penny analyse the relation between colonialism, anthropology, and museums in the Berlin collections (Zimmerman 2001; Penny 2002).
- 7 'Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Clara Herrmann (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) vom 28. Juni 2013 (Eingang beim Abgeordnetenhaus am 01. Juli 2013) und Antwort (Postkoloniale) Auseinandersetzung mit dem Humboldt Forum', Drucksache 17 / 12 360, <http://www.clara-herrmann.net/sites/default/files/AnfrageKolonialisierung.pdf>, published 28 June 2013, (accessed 20 April 2018).
- 8 'Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Niema Movassat, Christine Buchholz, Sevim Dagdelen, Annette Groth, Heike Hänsel, Inge Höger und der Fraktion Die Linke.

Weiterer Umgang mit menschlichen Gebeinen aus ehemaligen deutschen Kolonien und anderen Überseegebieten', <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/18/000/1800010.pdf>, published 23 October 2013, (accessed 20 April 2018).

- 9 a The exhibition 'Anti-Humboldt-Box' was organised by *Artefakte//anti-humboldt* (Brigitta Kuster, Regina Sarreiter, Dierk Schmidt) and *AFROTAK TV cyberNomads* (Michael Küppers-Adebisi) in cooperation with Andreas Siekmann and Ute Klissenbauer, and was exhibited in different locations.
- 10 For more information on the organised events, see the association's website, <http://www.no-humboldt21.de/programme2/> (accessed 25 April 2019).
- 11 A special issue of the internet journal *darkmatter*, edited by *Artefakte//anti-humboldt*, was released in October 2013. 'Afterlives' brought together discussions and scholarly analysis regarding the politics of representation, restitution and historiography regarding the Humboldt Forum.
- 12 Several participants at a conference in Dahlem voiced this frustration (fieldnotes from 10 December 2013).
- 13 Extract from my field diary, 14 October 2013.
- 14 Extracts from my fieldnotes, from 8 November 2013, 11 November 2013 and 2 December 2013.
- 15 Plans for the Africa department exhibition going back to 2008 note the presence of colonial war loot in the collection (König 2012: 24). An early concept of the permanent exhibition—introduced by Paola Ivanov in 2012—states that colonial history will occupy a central role in the exhibition. This position was repeated in the exhibition plans published by Peter Junge and Paola Ivanov in 2015 (Ivanov 2012; Ivanov and Junge 2015).
- 16 Fieldnote from 11 December 2013.
- 17 Examples include Pataczek 2013; and Fuhr 2013. However, while the exhibitions received relatively little attention, some reviews were positive and encouraging (Wulff 2013; and J. König 2013).
- 18 Fieldnotes from 23 February 2013.
- 19 Personal communications and conversations with the author. Fieldnotes from 23 February 2013, 17 March 2014 and a conversation in 2016.
- 20 Discussion of the author's presentation of her PhD project at the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac as part of the seminar 'Ecologie des collections', on 7 May 2017.
- 21 Mary Elizabeth Moore describes her feelings about white privilege in similar terms, fearing that her acting 'would be perceived as a racist act and could well *be* a racist act' (Moore 2019, 254 highlighted in original; see also DiAngelo 2018).
- 22 10 March 2015, 'Blind Spots: Berlin' (Blinde Flecken: Berlin), <https://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de/programm/pdetail/gespraech-blinde-flecken-berlin/>, consulted 02.05.2019.
- 23 10 March 2015, 'Blind Spots: Berlin' (Blinde Flecken: Berlin), <https://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de/programm/pdetail/gespraech-blinde-flecken-berlin/> (accessed 2 May 2019).
- 24 For an extensive review of the legal frameworks for requesting returns, see Splettstößer 2019: 57–71.

- 25 Fieldnotes from 08 October 2014. The representative explained the legal situation to Verena Rodatus and me during a meeting about communication strategies for *Object Biographies*.
- 26 www.africavenir.org/de/projekte/projekte-deutschland/dekoloniale-einwaende-gegen-das-humboldt-forum.html
- 27 www.africavenir.org/de/projekte/projekte-deutschland/dekoloniale-einwaende-gegen-das-humboldt-forum.html
- 28 Email from legal department, 12 March 2015.
- 29 Resumé of email exchanges from 12–17 March 2015.
- 30 Notes from a workshop, 19 June 2014, Ethnological Museum of Berlin.
- 31 See for example Häntzschel 2018; and Zimmerer 2019.
- 32 In the following years, the Museum's Africa curators continued to initiate further research and curatorial projects with organisations and individuals in Tanzania, Namibia, Angola, and Cameroon.
- 33 This is a retranscription of an interview with Nanette Snoep at Leipzig's Grassi Museum für Völkerkunde, 19 April 2016.

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