Working Through Colonial Collections

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Introduction

My fieldwork on ethnological museums started with a major conference in the summer of 2013. ‘The Future of the Ethnographic Museum’, hosted by the University of Oxford and its Pitt Rivers Museum, was the culmination of a major five-year-research project funded by the European Commission. Representatives of its eleven partaking ethnological museums, as well as pioneers in the field of museum scholarship and practice were present. The conference’s organisers Clare Harris and Michael O’Hanlon, both curators and anthropologists, stated in an accompanying article that ‘the ethnographic museum is dead’. Reflecting voices from the field, they wrote that ‘[The ethnographic museum] has outlived its usefulness and has nothing more to offer in pursuance of its historic mandate as a location for the representation of “other” cultures’ (O’Hanlon & Harris, 2013, p. 8). The provocative statement reflects what characterised the field at that particular moment: ethnological museums were facing what was described as an ‘identity crisis’ (O’Hanlon & Harris, 2013, p. 9). The demands that people – not only in academia, activism, and the field of art and cultural production but also in politics – addressed to the museum were manifold. Linked to the ethnological museums’ constitutive relation with the European colonial project, the moment was shaped by enquiries into their mission, authority over representation, and ultimately, the collection as rightful property of European museums.

These demands were far from new. In 1998, the French anthropologist Jean Jamin polemically asked whether ethnological museums should be burnt. Within the discipline, anthropologists had debated on the authority over cultural representation in both writing and exhibiting practices, ownership, and repatriation since at least the 1980s.¹ Restitution had been put and erased from the political agenda (von Paczensky & Ganslmayer 1984; Savoy 2021). What marked this particular moment in 2013, however, were
processes of fundamental transformation in ethnological museums across Europe, which requested museums take stance with regard to these queries.

Most major museums holding ethnological collections in European capitals had gone through or were preparing name modifications, changes in leadership, the radical restructuring of permanent exhibitions, and the construction of new buildings for their collections. In the context of these museums’ transformations, their renaming reflected their search for a place within Europe’s museumscape. Former denominations established links to the different traditions of social and cultural anthropology in Europe, being named ‘anthropological’, ‘ethnographic’, ‘ethnological’, or ‘Völkerkunde’ museum. However, the large-scale museum projects of the last two decades throughout Europe typically chose names that erase this relation. Some museums introduced categories such as ‘world’, ‘cultures’, or a combination of the two in their titles. Others chose to name themselves after a particular place or to keep denominations linked to a particular person, usually a European collector or researcher. Such names made the museum’s position within the museumscape less legible. They also marked the profound unease governing museums holding ethnological collections, then and now: if the museums are no longer ‘ethnological’ or ‘anthropological’, which role do they choose to adopt?

With this question in mind, I planned my research with fieldwork in several European museums undergoing transformation. My research started in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin (henceforth, Ethnological Museum or Museum with a capital M) and would ultimately lead to this book. In Berlin, the debates were particularly sensitive. The Humboldt Forum, a new cultural centre, would host the Ethnological Museum’s future exhibitions on Berlin’s Museum Island. The project put the questions of which ruins to keep, which monuments to (re)build in Germany’s capital, and therefore, which histories to honour or neglect on the political and public agenda: approved by the German parliament in 2002, the Humboldt Forum is now situated in the partly reconstructed Berlin Palace (Stadtschloss), selectively emulating the historical baroque architecture. The Stadtschloss was substantially affected by bombing in the Second World War, then demolished by the government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and replaced with the Palace of the Republic, to be finally rebuilt on the ruins of this demolished ‘House of the People’ (Haus des Volkes), as it was often referred to. Characterised by the coming together and confrontation of the nation’s different histories, or in Jonathan Bach’s words, the ‘incarnations of Germany’s twentieth century’ – imperial (until 1918), Weimar (1919–1933), National Socialist (1933–1945), a divided Germany (1945–1990), and a reunited Germany (since 1990) – the Humboldt Forum turned into a ‘conflict
zone’ in which the question of how to deal with its diverse histories has taken centre stage (Bach, 2017a, p. 91). Players in the Humboldt Forum were to be the collections of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin’s Central Library, and the so-called non-European collections, represented by the Ethnological Museum and the Asian Art Museum. Most of Berlin’s museum collections, including those two, are part of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz; henceforth, SPK). The SPK consists of a large conglomerate of cultural organisations, including, among others, the State Museums of Berlin (SMB), the Berlin State Library, the Prussian Secret State Archives, as well as several research organisations. Employing more than two thousand people, it is Europe’s largest cultural organisation (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2018). The Humboldt Forum, often referred to as Germany’s ‘most important cultural project of the 21st century’ (Parzinger, 2011), reflected this grandeur: The costs for the building alone rose from an original estimate of 480 million euros to 680 million euros in 2021 (Bundesregierung, 2019a, p. 2; Schönball, 2019; APA, 2021).

I wanted to understand how the Ethnological Museum was to position itself within a broader museum landscape, what its mission could be, and who it was to serve. The issues raised about the Humboldt Forum, and in particular, its relation to the Ethnological Museum, pointed from the beginning to larger questions of collective memory, and thus, to politics and the negotiation of German national identity. Observing how people negotiated the give-and-take of exhibition making and related tasks on a day-to-day basis, I imagined, would provide insights into how these larger questions resonated. Which echoes would they find in the process of producing the exhibition’s move from Berlin’s outskirts, where the Ethnological Museum was located, to Berlin’s centre on Museum Island? I imagined that breaking open the process of production would allow me to enter, at their core, the debates on ethnological museums and their historical mission to represent culture. I didn’t imagine, however, that it would be precisely via the debate on national museums collections that the negotiation of Germany’s colonial past would take political centre stage in the period of 2013 – 2021, the period this research is concerned with.

I started my research with a body of literature on ethnological museums and material culture at hand that conceptualised objects and museums with metaphors related to change, hybridity, and transformation. The literature applied theories from actor–network theory to conceptualise how we work with and understand museums and their collections (Gosden, Larson, & Petch, 2007). These understandings focused on the dynamic and transformative potential of museums, describing them as ‘enmeshed’, or as ‘assemblage’ (Harrison, Byrne, & Clarke, 2013). The idea that the museum is
constituted by its objects was the point of departure for my investigation, but I regarded the museum not only as a construct consisting of material assemblages but also as a set of social collections (Byrne et al., 2011, p. 4). I adopted the analytical and methodological tool of the object biography to trace and problematise the negotiation between the different layers of significations that the objects had accumulated over time and their affective and political weights that were being negotiated (Harrison, Byrne, & Clarke, 2013, p. 5). I distanced myself from approaches that frame the museum as a static entity, going beyond the immediate physical and temporal confines of the museum, and involving a variety of events, negotiations, and technologies. In defining the museum as a ‘repository of social histories in material form’ (Gosden, Larson, & Petch, 2007, p. 2), I considered the museum as a dynamic and relational entity, made up of a variety of associations between people and things in a constant state of transition.

Working in the Museum made me see these approaches in a different light. The Museum didn’t feel ‘dynamic’ to me. I experienced the everyday in the Ethnological Museum as shaped by frustration, anxieties, complaints, slowness, and hurdles. Despite the ongoing and passionate work of museum staff, some things just didn’t seem to change. The museum staff related this atmosphere to what they framed as the larger organisational ‘structures’ affecting museum work. The public debate and activist opposition to the Humboldt Forum – which had just started to be built – influenced this atmosphere of stagnation, or even regression, as some critics situated the Humboldt Forum. These activist positions and the curatorial work within the Museum focused the attention on the complicity between ethnological museums and colonial rule, in particular German colonial rule. Taking these changes into consideration, my questions and analytical lenses shifted.

This book takes the current transformation processes of ethnological museums in Europe as its point of departure to analyse how colonial legacies are worked with and through in the present. Defined here as colonial legacies in themselves, ethnological museums have long been criticised for their attempt to both own and represent the world. This book focuses on how these points of critique are addressed in one museum – the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, and in particular, its Africa department. How do museum staff work with collections that were collected in colonial contexts? How do the museum’s colonial legacies materialise in the museum’s everyday? How do museum staff relate to and engage with both the material and immaterial colonial legacies, as they become increasingly contested?

This book focuses on how and why the stubborn facts remain. Working in the Museum and researching the biography of particular objects made me realise not only how strongly colonialism had shaped the Museum’s coming
into being but also how powerfully colonial logics influenced the Museum’s present. I relate the resistance to change in the Museum to how colonial logics persist within it. In this research, I don’t argue against change in ethnological museums – indeed, so much has changed in the decade during which I have followed this debate and which this book also traces. Rather, the book shows how deeply colonial ways of conceiving and doing the world are ingrained in the organisations we work with, how they linger and are carried along, and how they continue to act powerfully in our everyday.

The Ethnological Museum as colonial legacy

My analysis departs from the observation that the Ethnological Museum is a colonial legacy in itself. I unravel the different dimensions of the collection’s relationships to colonial rule in the following. I then show how in this book, I approach the Museum via an ethnography, which unfolds in the systematic working through of colonial collections.

Ethnological museums offer themselves as potential subjects for an ethnography of colonial legacies. Both in their material and immaterial dimensions, ethnological museums are a blatant example of colonial violence, as they played a crucial role in the colonial system of appropriation and alienation. They materialise contemporary anthropological ways of thinking that were informed or even structured by the racialisation that characterised the colonial endeavour. Today, the organisational character of the collections per se perpetuates the colonial construction of the ‘unmodern other’ through anthropological knowledge orders that themselves conceal the colonial encounter.

I work with the notion of ‘colonial collections’ in this book, but this doesn’t mean that these collections are in themselves colonial. Many of the objects labelled as such and the related systems of governance and belief predate colonial times. The collections carry meaning and significance beyond the colonial encounter. However, these collections have been considered under and somehow limited to this attribution, due to their mode or the period of acquisition, production, and appropriation in ‘colonial contexts’, both in the colony and the metropole (German Museums Association, 2019, pp. 20–33). The collections stand in for the colonial and imperial histories that underlie their presence in the museum.

‘Colonialism was profoundly material’, argue Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth Philipps (Edwards, Gosden, & Phillips, 2006, p. 3). The materiality of colonialism didn’t only concern the extraction of ‘resources’ (gold, rubber, human resources, etc.). The often violent acquisition of
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Material culture in the colonies was equally a constitutive part of the colonial enterprise and governance. Colonial collecting allowed the coloniser to research, control, and disempower societies by means of seizing their material culture, both in the colonies and in imperial centres (Abonnenc, Arndt, & Lozano, 2016; Bennett et al., 2017). This included not only a mere material seizure but also a spiritual disempowerment, such as in the context of war: some objects were deliberately taken because they were of spiritual importance to those resisting colonial conquest (see, for example, Ivanov & Weber-Sinn, 2018). Colonial collecting usually went hand in hand with the establishment of colonial archives or, put differently, the collecting of material culture was part of constituting the metropoles’ archives of colonial rule. These archives supported the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of knowledge from and about the colonies (Basu & de Jong, 2016). How museum staff used both these archives and collections – in exhibitions and research – often encouraged the justification of the colonial mission and supported the contemporary conviction and narratives of European and White superiority in imperial centres. Objects became principal players in the construction of narratives about the colony and confirmed the role of collecting as central, not marginal, to the colonial project.7

Anthropology was equally profoundly material, in particular in its constitutive phase, which coincided with the heyday of European colonial rule (1884–1914). As in other European anthropology departments, the progressive institutionalisation of anthropology in Berlin was closely linked to Berlin’s Ethnological Museum, then Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, and its collecting policies. From the museum’s foundation in 1873 onwards, its co-founder and director Adolf Bastian aimed to establish anthropology on the basis of the natural sciences. In that context, the collection would serve as the point of departure for research. Bastian was convinced that ‘the monstrous mass [was] necessary to sufficiently represent in a systematic, methodological order the ethnological provinces of the earth in their full extent’ (quoted in Zimmerman, 2001, p. 186). For Bastian, in contrast to the natural sciences, categories in anthropology had not yet been established, but would result from and be developed out of the totalising gaze on the collections. Bastian attempted to create a ‘universal archive of mankind [...] to provide a real basis for the study of ethnology’ (Bastian, 1872, p. iii). Defining anthropology as a ‘comparative’ and therefore ‘statistical’ discipline, ‘completeness [...] is the first and most important desideratum’. In the tradition of a salvage anthropology, Bastian described this desideratum of completeness as ‘eternal’ (‘für immer’), as in ‘impossible’, because he started from the postulate that ‘many tribes [Volksstämmen] are irretrievably and forever lost’ (Bastian, 1872, pp. iv–v).8
The publication of the *Anleitung für ethnographische Beobachtungen und Sammlungen* (‘Instructions for Ethnographic Observation and Collecting’) in several editions reflected the Museum founder’s mission and alludes to the kind of collecting the Ethnological Museum pursued. The instructions put forward the aim to collect ‘systematically’, ‘to give a preferably exhaustive image of the respective tribe’s culture’ and ‘to raise an inventory, as it were, of the complete cultural heritage’ (Ankermann & von Luschan, 1914, p. 9). At the same time, the fact that there was a need for the instructions pointed to the lack of documentation of the collections. This means

Figure 0.1. Cover of ‘Instructions for Ethnographic Observation and Collecting’, Bernhard Ankermann and Felix von Luschan, 1914
that, unlike other museums, which would send scientific expeditions to the colonies, the collections were mainly provided by colonial staff situated in the colonies who served as suppliers of material culture for the Museum. It is subsequently both the collections as well as the lack of information and documentation about them that constitute the Museum’s legacy.

Concerning the Africa collections, objects arrived in disproportional numbers from the German colonies, namely what were then Togo, Cameroon, German East Africa, and German South West Africa (Ivanov, 2005, p. 42). Between 1884 and 1914, the African collections grew from 7,388 objects to 55,079 objects (Krieger & Koch, 1973, p. 106). The Berlin Museum’s position as the ‘Central Museum’ encouraged the steady growth of collections, as the Berlin Museum claimed the right of ownership to all collections arriving from the German colonies. About 64 per cent of today’s Africa collections, consisting of approximately 75,000 objects, stem from what have been defined as ‘colonial contexts’, be they governed by German or other European colonial powers (German Museums Association, 2018, pp. 16–23).

Ethnological museums played a crucial role in the colonial system in which ‘comprehensive collecting [manifests] as a form of domination’, as Mieke Bal pointed out (Bal, 1992, p. 560).

At the same time, the colonial project was backed up with ideologies, imaginations, knowledge systems, and knowledge production – in short, a mindset. This mindset justified the colonisers’ mission by virtue of their alleged superiority, beyond actual colonisation – meaning the occupation of a territory and a society. As literary research has shown, ‘colonial fantasies’ and ‘imperialist imaginations’ were as much part of German colonialism as the exercise of rule. These imaginations and mentalities preceded, accompanied, and lingered long after actual German colonisation (Zantop, 1997; Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, & Zantop, 2001; Ames & Gilman, 2005). As Sharon Macdonald, Henrietta Lidchi, and I summarised it,

[ethnographic museums, then, carry a colonial legacy not only in terms of objects acquired during specifically colonial periods and not only, indeed, in terms of the objects themselves. Questions of potentially wrongful acquisition of objects, as well as the issues of ownership to which they lead, are undoubtedly important, but they are only one aspect of the complexity of this legacy [...] Important too in considering the extended legacy of colonial relations are questions about particular knowledge formations and modes of knowledge making, the nature of the ethnographic museum and to whom it orients itself; and access to the collections and involvement in shaping their futures, in both the past and the present. (Macdonald, Lidchi, & von Oswald, 2017, p. 97)
The map reflects contemporary ideas of the Museum’s collections, in which ‘a culture’, ‘a tribe’, or a particular ‘region’ could be represented through ‘its’ material production. Conceptions of ‘tribes’ and indigeneity were defined by drawing on collections, which were constructed as the materialisation of otherness, and in particular of ‘savageness’ and ‘primitiveness’. In exhibition, the objects were used as representative of particular kinds of otherness, as fragments of cultures. These exhibition and display modes as well as the objects themselves would have implications for the ways in which notions of ‘culture’ were normatively employed and how they were used in social management regimes in the metropole and colonies (see, for example, Dirks, 1992; Bennett et al., 2017). At the same time, the map reveals the strong impact that colonisation would have on the acquisition policy of the Ethnological Museum: all the areas marked in dark grey – indicating ‘complete or almost complete collections’ – are almost identical with the German colonies (see figure 0.4). The collections are proofs of colonialism’s materiality; they constitute one of colonialism’s tangible manifestations. How collections were used, then – in exhibitions and research – reveals how contemporary colonial ontologies were substantiated with the help of anthropology, and in particular, its museums.

At the same time, the relations between colonialism, anthropology, and museums have been shaped by ambivalence. As Benoît de L’Estoile highlights, colonial relations are characterised by ‘a multifarious process of appropriation rather than by the sheer negation of the colonised’ (de L’Estoile, 2008, p. 268). These processes of appropriation, roughly situated between
Figure 0.3 'Map with Indications on the Collections of the Africa department in the year of 1911' (authored by Bernhard Ankermann, Krieger, & Koch, 1973, p. 112)
Figure 0.4 Map of contemporary national borders and German ‘protectorates’, designed and used for Object Biographies exhibition.
the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries, have historically adopted different forms and modalities, but they have often been predominantly shaped by violence, domination, and conquest. For de L’Estoile, ‘[a]lthough generally asymmetrical, this process of appropriation entailed, to some extent, a mutual aspect’ (de L’Estoile, 2008, p. 268). This concerns the discipline of anthropology in particular. If one scrutinises the politics of anthropological research at the time – both conducted in armchairs in German anthropological institutes, and in colonies abroad – it is clearly complicit with colonial regimes of domination, appropriation, and racist misrepresentation. It also crucially reveals an interest in and defence of cultural difference, exchange, hybridity, and cosmopolitanism. Seeing these processes of appropriation as a legacy, then, centres on the enquiry of a common history of mutual, often violent, and conflicting relationships.

As the situation was complex in the past, it is equally contradictory in the present: ethnological museums, in their attempts to transform themselves, have researched, addressed, and problematised their much-criticised missions to own and represent otherness, while risking glossing over, legitimising, and reproducing epistemologies, representations, and inequalities conventionally associated with ethnological museums’ coloniality. Working through these ambivalences, contradictions, and complexities of how the colonial presence manifests in the museum’s present is what an ethnography of the museum as colonial legacy attempts to illuminate and understand.

An ethnography of colonial legacies

Colonial pasts, the narratives recounted about them, the unspoken distinctions by which they continue to ‘cue’, the affective charges they reactivate, and the implicit ‘lessons’ they are mobilized to impart are sometimes so ineffably threaded through the fabric of contemporary forms they seem indiscernible as distinct effects, as if everywhere and nowhere at all. (Stoler, 2016, p. 5)

It is via an ethnography that I approach the black box of the ‘everywhere and nowhere at all’ of colonial legacies in this book. I look at how the aforementioned relations between anthropology, colonialism and museums manifest in the present. Whereas postcolonial critique has been accused of establishing quick links and making causal assumptions between the colonial past and its continuity in the present, I try to identify and understand the ways in which people – including myself – approach the museum as colonial legacy through an ethnographic account of the Museum’s everyday and the museum staff’s
concrete practices. Probing the different kinds of relationships to the colonial past in the present, I examine the persistence of colonial epistemologies in particular. Working through colonial collections manifests as an invitation to grasp and analyse the complexity of colonialism’s remnants in the present.

The research interrogates ways of relating to the colonial past in two modes that I mark as distinct but that are related to each other. I elaborate these modes in the following two sections. On the one hand, the analysis deals with identifying and analysing the explicit negotiation, use, and mobilisation of the colonial past. On the other hand, this ethnographic approach to colonial legacies interrogates ‘the past as it lives now’, as Benoît de L’Estoile defines it, with reference to Bronislaw Malinowski (de L’Estoile, 2008, p. 272). It focuses on how colonial presences materialise, sometimes in uncontrollable, unexpected, or unpredictable ways, and how these past presences are dealt and lived with in the Museum’s everyday.

**The mobilisation of the colonial past**

An ethnography of colonial legacies entails to understand how German colonial history is explicitly dealt with through the debate on ethnological museums and their collections. Sharon Macdonald’s concept of ‘past presencing’ is helpful here, as it is concerned ‘with how the past is related to at specified moments or stretches of time’ (Macdonald, 2013, p. 16). In this case my concern is with the way in which ‘Germany’s colonial past and history’ – defined differently by the many agents involved – is ‘related to’. This means in particular how the colonial past is mobilised, negotiated, downplayed, or neglected in regard to the Ethnological Museum’s collection in manifold ways – or to name even more nuances, how it is addressed, suppressed, silenced, censored, made invisible or visible.

That this book concentrates on the working through of colonial legacies also stems from the considerable developments in the field. One characteristic of ethnographic fieldwork is how research questions and foci shift when undertaking this work. In my case, my interests, in sync with the developments in the field and in the Ethnological Museum evolved towards a focus on German colonialism and its negotiation.

At the time of writing, between 2019 and 2021, the debate on German colonialism reached a momentum reflected in considerable public and media interest, presence in political debates, position-taking by different stakeholders, and policymaking. A few months after the Ethnological Museum’s opening in the Humboldt Forum in the fall of 2021, there was a general political agreement *that*, and sometimes even *how*, German colonialism should
constitute a significant part in Germany’s memory culture. Key events and examples include

- the government’s coalition contract (January 2018) and subsequent political negotiations on a national level, including an official hearing in parliament and the definition of framework principles (Eckpunkte) on how to deal with collections from colonial contexts on both national and state levels (March 2019);\(^{15}\)
- the application of public funds to provenance research, the subsequent establishment of a focus on colonial-era provenance research at the German Lost Art Foundation, and the nomination of four permanent posts devoted to provenance research in both Berlin’s Museum of Asian Art and the Ethnological Museum in 2019 (BPA, 2019);
- the recurrent public positioning of the SPK, the Humboldt Forum, and its representatives as supporting restitution, reconciliation, and partnership with the formerly colonised (Parzinger, 2019; Dorgerloh, 2019).

In 2018, representatives of the government stated that ‘Germany and Europe need to face their colonial history’, and in direct connection with this recognition, described restitution as ‘only the first step’ in a process of historical reconciliation (Grütters & Müntefering, 2018). The Humboldt Forum’s website states that ‘Colonialism and Coloniality is a core theme in our programme’.\(^{16}\) The organisation is profiled to become a ‘centre for postcolonial debate’ (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2019; see also Bundesregierung, 2019, p. 9). The commitment to the restitution of the so-called Benin Bronzes to Nigeria in the autumn of 2021 is the latest step in a chain of events and political decisions presented by politicians as contributing to the addressing of the colonial past in Germany.

However, it was only during the period of my research that the Ethnological Museum’s collections were gradually, publicly, and politically defined as ‘sensitive’ (Lange, 2011, p. 19), and thus contested, in Germany.\(^{17}\) While the Humboldt Forum slowly took shape, the collections that had long been considered as unproblematic, scientific, and naturally part of European museums by museum officials and in cultural politics became ‘contested’, ‘awkward’, and ‘unsettling’, as Sharon Macdonald describes some of the characteristics of ‘difficult heritage’ (Macdonald, 2009, p. 1). In regard to German colonialism, Friedrich von Bose in his pioneering research described the Humboldt Forum as a ‘catalyst of critique’ and a ‘discursive nodal point’ – which was rapidly appropriated by cultural politics – to pin down how the Humboldt Forum functioned as a prism to problematise Germany’s colonial past (von Bose, 2017a, p. 127; Federal Government Commissioner
for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, quoted in Ringelstein, 2018). Whereas the constitutive relationship between colonialism and anthropology had, for some time, been acknowledged in scholarship, both concerning ethnological museums in general and in Berlin’s specific case, in public debate, journalists and politicians only gradually constructed and perceived the Ethnological Museum as a remnant of colonialism during the period of my fieldwork. The collections subsequently became subject to ‘ongoing conflicts of interest and differences of view’ (Macdonald, 2009, p. 19). From 2013 to 2021, negotiations around Germany’s colonial legacies in relation to the Ethnological Museum’s collections – both inside and outside of the Museum – show a shift of attitude in regard to how public organisations, politics, and the public debate have positioned themselves towards Germany’s colonial past. This shift is orientated towards recognising and accepting Germany’s colonial past as part of the nation’s histories, as well as the aim to establish a moral consensus when it comes to how this past and its symbolic and material implications are publicly dealt with. That German colonialism has most prominently been addressed in politics and a broader public via issues related to museum collections stands out.

The period 2013 to 2015, which this book focuses on, is a time characterised by political insecurity about how to handle the rising claims related to German colonialism, which preceded the successive public, political, and national acknowledgement of Germany’s colonial past. An analysis of this period allows me to identify the differences of view and to point to the lines of conflict that processes of negotiation of contested colonial legacies involves before reaching an apparent consensus. This involves an analysis of the questions, hesitations, and resistances that accompanied this process. Here, I build my analysis in particular on my own position as the co-curator of an exhibition addressing colonial provenance and violence. Beyond the political, cultural, and social developments, which seemed to change on an almost daily basis, this book focuses on how colonialism ‘endures’ in the museum (Stoler, 2016, p. 7), interrogating how the past manifests now.

The colonial past as it lives now

Unlike the past’s explicit ‘mobilisation’, such as for political means or financial reparations, an ethnography of colonial legacies also looks at ‘the past as it lives now’ in the museum’s everyday (de L’Estoile, 2008). This approach entails grasping and situating the different forms in which colonial presences manifest and act on the present – not necessarily immediately identifiable or identified as such – including the sometimes scarcely obvious, historically
grown, and possibly transformed manifestations of colonial modes of knowledge production or representations.

To examine that which remains from the past, or put inversely, ‘the deep imperial genealogies of the present’ (Stoler, 2016, p. 4), it is necessary to relate historical and ethnographic analysis.

As such, doing an ethnography of the museum as colonial legacy is distinct from but closely related to literature subsumed under the category of ‘anthropology of colonialism’, which centrally interrogates the relationship between the colonial history and present of anthropology.

Anthropologists have long recognised that anthropology is ‘a daughter born out of an era of violence’, as Claude Lévi-Strauss phrased it in the 1970s (Lévi-Strauss, 1973, p. 69). Rodney Harrison has argued that anthropology as a scientific discipline was founded ‘out of the desire to characterise racial and cultural differences to legitimise the rule of colonial societies’ (Harrison, 2009, p. 238). The anthropology of colonialism then, as defined by Peter Pels, consists in the analysis of the historical relations between anthropology and colonialism in relation to the present.

The anthropology of colonialism is also always an anthropology of anthropology, because in many methodological, organizational, and professional aspects the discipline retains the shape it received when it emerged from – if partly in opposition to – early twentieth-century colonial circumstances. (Pels, 1997, pp. 164–165)

Because the Ethnological Museum is an anthropological organisation, the analysis of its historical modes of knowledge production and, more generally speaking, epistemologies form a constitutive part of the analysis of what constitutes its contemporary working. The Ethnological Museum has already figured as a prominent subject of analysis to identify and deconstruct both past and present representations, in anthropology itself as well as in cultural studies and museum studies more generally speaking. Furthermore, the anthropology of colonialism puts anthropology’s intellectual roots, tools, and methods at the centre of its enquiry. It questions the disciplines’ relations, and in particular, its resistances to and complicity with colonial regimes of power. Methodologically, this meant to not only be in the presence of museum staff, to understand their everyday grappling with the remnants and residues of the colonial past. It also meant to ask past and present staff about the histories, especially recent, of the organisation and to engage in a historical research of the organisation. An anthropology of colonial legacies thus necessarily works hand in hand with an
anthropology of colonialism in order to situate these present phenomena within their historical genealogy.

I use the notion of ‘colonial legacies’ here although it is not agreed upon. Ann Laura Stoler, for instance, whose work this research substantially builds on, has advocated that ‘colonial legacies’ lack analytical potential to depict and analyse how colonial histories matter, notably in contrast to the notions of ‘duress’, ‘debris’, or ‘ruins and ruination’ that she has herself established (Stoler, 2009; 2011; 2013; 2016). It is, however, exactly this lack of conceptual precision and an evocative argument and thus the potential for an open description and analysis of what happens on the ground that prompts me to use the term ‘legacy’ here. In contrast to Stoler’s description of the remnants of the past, often implying the shattered or the broken, the Ethnological Museum as colonial legacy seems relatively intact, even if contested. It is rather the notion of ‘working through’ that stands in for the argument here, as it refers to the analysis of how contending with the colonial past materialises in the museum.

**Working through colonial collections**

I first came across the notion of ‘working through’ in the context of ethnological museums in a conversation with the curator and scholar Wayne Modest. Wayne Modest coined his understanding of the museum as a ‘space for the process of working through’:

> the objects sit in a space of contested, entangled relationality. ‘Working through’ implies that one has to question, debate, to feel uncomfortable; to box and fight about the objects and their meanings in the present. (von Oswald, Ndikung, & Modest, 2017, pp. 15–18)

Modest’s description resonated with my work and my experiences in the field. Working through points to hurdles, resistance, and process, as it draws attention to work. In a classic ethnographic interest, I approached the museum to understand its everyday, partaking in work practices, looking to identify the extraordinary in the ordinary. To do so, between 2013 and 2015, I worked as the assistant to one of the two Africa curators and then co-curated the exhibition *Object Biographies* as part of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem with Verena Rodatus. The Humboldt Lab Dahlem was a temporary programme dedicated to finding experimental formats of working with the Museum’s collections. These two different curatorial entries allowed me to do an ethnography of the Museum as a whole. I spent more time in the Ethnological
Museum than I had planned, and abandoned the comparative dimension of this work. Concentrating on the Ethnological Museum and its collection, this research spans different work practices – unlike most museum ethnographies, which tend to focus on one aspect of museum work or to concentrate on one particular department. In the library, archive, museum storage, conservation, as well as digitisation, I worked with museologists, exhibition designers, archivists, restorers, museum storage managers, and many more. The ethnography unfolded in working together, allowing me, to grasp what people actually did, not only what they say they did (Miller, 1997, p. 16).

Working through colonial collections translates the complications and adds the political and memorial aspect of museum work to the picture. English dictionary definitions of working through describe it as dealing with something that is difficult or unpleasant, to manage a problem that has many parts, or to go through a process of understanding and accepting. In German, the different dimensions of working through unfold in their translation: working through translates as *durcharbeiten* and *abarbeiten*, *verarbeiten* and *aufarbeiten*. These notions carry different significations, histories, and connotations.

Abarbeiten/durcharbeiten

*Abarbeiten* has the connotation of a to-do list, of a task to be done bit by bit, to toil away at a problem. *Durcharbeiten* means to engage with something thoroughly, patiently, from the ground up. Engaging with colonial museum collections is tedious and seemingly never-ending, always in process. The quantity of colonial collections remains innumerable: much is uninventoried and unknown to museum staff – not only for the Ethnological Museum, but for most ethnological museums in Europe. As the former storage manager once said about the conservation, storage and care of collections: ‘I had a lot of ideas in a short period of time. But then I realised that every single idea I have, I need to keep up 75,000 times’, referring to the estimated number of objects in the Africa department. Beyond quantity, colonial ideologies traversed the Museum. They were ingrained in its very structure and functioning.

An analogy with Siegmund Freud’s concept of ‘working through’ (*durcharbeiten*) would be all too easy to make here. For Freud, in short, the process of working through consists of two phases: a resistance to remembering, articulated in the patient’s sickness, followed by a recognition of the resistance, which, in turn, becomes an overcoming of this resistance and a process of healing. Ultimately, for Freud, the process of working through turns into a will to recover and, thus, a will to remember. However, and beyond the
critique of why the application of psychoanalytical concepts to institutions, societies, or nations is difficult to maintain, this schematic description of Freud’s concept risks oversimplifying the manifold ambivalences, nuances, and contradictions the process of working through colonial collections in the Museum entails. It turns the process into a progressive and somehow causal one, denying at once the many precursors, as well as relapses, recurrences, and reproductions the process may involve.

**Aufarbeiten/verarbeiten**

In Germany, possibly more than in other national contexts, the notion of working through (aufarbeiten) implies, even if only tacitly, references to dealing with contested pasts and trauma more generally speaking. In particular, it references the ways in which Germany’s National Socialist and, later on, socialist past have been dealt with. The notion of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, commonly translated as ‘coming to terms with the past’, stands in for the necessity to tackle one’s own history. Nuancing a finite idea of engaging with one’s history, the notion of working through, aufarbeiten, refers to ongoing and inconclusive work: work that a dealing with contested pasts and their deployment and implications in the present comprehends. Working through underlines that remembering, as well as forgetting, are not passive acts, but actual ‘work’, active and continuous engagements. It alludes to the laborious, lengthy, and repeated efforts that working through the past involves, as well as to the multiple forms of difficulties, denials, resistances, and refusals to do so. Working through as in aufarbeiten, then, defies the illusion that one can get over and done with difficult pasts. What makes this process so difficult and repetitious, then, are the insistent ways in which working through the colonial past points to ongoing forms of exclusion, racism, and inequality that persist in our contemporary societies.

In their differences, the translations and their significations capture what this book’s argument is about: working through colonial collections in museums is a request to engage with the depth and breadth of how colonial pasts manifest and are dealt with in the Ethnological Museum. The process of reckoning with the past as political and memorial work (aufarbeiten, verarbeiten) entails as much the practical, lengthy, tiring collection work inside the Museum (abarbeiten), as it includes grand political symbolic gestures outside of it.

Working through is not an ethnographic term. I use it here as an analytical and methodological approach that unfolds in the book’s composition and structures its argument. In eight chapters, I unravel how colonial
Working through colonial collections always includes the risk of reproducing the mechanisms and logic one attempts to dismiss, erase, oppose, or counter. Working through is not an easy, linear process, but rather a repetitive, draining, and laborious engagement, which involves discomfort and conflict. Dealing with these questions doesn’t only concern the Ethnological Museum in its quest to define its position and interrogate its relationship to its colonial past. Rather, it relates to questions of the ‘working through’ of colonial legacies more generally speaking.

The structure of the book

Working through stands in for the relations between that which remains and that which changes in processes of transformations. Museum ethnographies tend to be described as studies of closed-off and isolated societies, comparable to villages, dominated by the researcher’s interest in the organisation’s ‘total social life’ (Handler & Gable, 1997, p. 10; see also Gable, 2013) – in my case, the Ethnological Museum was located in Berlin’s suburbs, approximately ten to fifteen kilometres from the city centre and usually deserted. However, and in contrast to understandings of museums as villages or islands, the fieldwork in Berlin’s Ethnological Museum allowed me to see how ‘the local is negotiated into being in relation’ (Macdonald, 2009, p. 5). As Sharon Macdonald, Christine Gerbich, and I discussed in an article on methodological approaches to museum ethnographies, organisations such as museums ‘are, inevitably, entangled in multiple networks of various kinds, usually involving some degree of distributed governance’ (Macdonald, Gerbich, & von Oswald, 2018, p. 140). I was confronted with organisational and political change with regards to the Humboldt Forum, which did not seem controllable from within the Museum, because of this distributed nature. As such, this research project situates itself at once as an ethnography of a process, of an organisation in the making – the
Humboldt Forum – and as an ethnography of an established organisation – the Ethnological Museum – shaped by rules and regulations, routines, and habits. The research project addresses the relationship and tensions between individual agency and structure, between ‘good’ intentions and their outcomes.

The book shows how colonial legacies are identified, researched, and addressed within the Museum. It illuminates efforts and processes brought forwards and fought for by museum staff to identify and publicly address the museum’s colonial legacies, as in an explicit mobilisation of the past. Whereas the book chronicles, describes, and analyses these processes, it focuses above all on the way in which museum staff struggle to find alternatives to the disciplinary framings and orderings, professional conventions, and organisational hierarchies, with a view to their historical genesis. The book notably discusses the limits and boundaries that museum staff face when trying to work through the museum’s colonial legacies. It points to the constant push and pull, as well as the risk of reproducing, stabilising, and legitimising the museum as colonial legacy: tensions that the working through of contested legacies entails.

In the first chapter, I trace my own attempt to situate the remembrance of colonial history in Germany, and in Berlin. I start with my account on how I, as many others, didn’t learn in school that there were German-governed colonies. Relating German memory politics with developments related to the Humboldt Forum shows how activist engagement prepared the grounds for the Humboldt Forum to become a ‘catalyst of critique’, as Friedrich von Bose (2017) put it.

Building on the history of how colonialism was remembered and silenced in Germany, the second chapter situates the reader in 2013, when I started working in the Ethnological Museum. The chapter introduces the reader to the field and fieldwork the book is based on. I describe the political context and affective atmosphere at the beginning of the fieldwork in 2013 as dominated by binaries, between an ‘outside’ and an ‘inside’ of the Museum and the Humboldt Forum, between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, between ‘activism’ and ‘critique’. These binaries decompose, I show, once I enter the Museum. I observe curatorial work reckoning with the museum’s histories of colonial collecting. My position as researcher changes from participant observer to observant participant, when I become the co-curator of an exhibition. I become ‘affected’ by the field (Favret-Saada 1977), a field in which the colonial haunts the present. The second chapter shows that working through the museum’s colonial legacies as an observant participant prepared the grounds for a critical engagement beyond binaries. This work proved to be emotionally challenging within a public organisation
positioned in a politically uncertain context with regards to access to collections and inventory, collaborative practices, and ultimately restitution.

To ethnographically understand the workings of the past in the present within an organisation, its histories need to be engaged with. In the third chapter, I situate the Museum and its collection in their histories. I show how the history of the Museum as organisation, especially its recent histories, have been disregarded in its archiving practices and have to be reconstructed via oral history and fragments of archival traces. As such, the process of reconstructing organisational histories shows how archival and ethnographic work go hand in hand to understand the duress of coloniality in these organisations. The chapter focuses on the way in which the collections moved, beyond national borders, within Berlin, and within the Museum itself. Working through manifests here as engaging with and contributing to writing of organisational histories.

In chapter four, I trace how colonialism operates in the Museum’s knowledge infrastructures. This chapter is structured along the learning experience of meeting and working with Boris Gliesmann, the database manager, who initiates me to the documentation work done in the Museum. I analyse the relationships between past and present inventory and cataloguing practices to argue that museum work is based on and continues to rely on colonial modes of ordering, naming, and thus conceiving the world. Working through manifests as a means to engage with categories, classification, and names. These are ‘historically situated artefacts’ (Bowker & Star, 1999b, p. 278), despite attempts to change, erase, or replace them. Names are difficult to get rid of. Avatars then figure here as a means to imagine alternative futures for the objects’ historical groundedness, in terms of an ‘epistemic disobedience’ (Mignolo, 2011, p. 9).

Chapter five addresses the imbalance of resources—financial, personnel—and of attention attributed to the caring and managing of the results of colonial collecting (versus representative work). Building on chapter four, chapter five depicts the Museum as a space fragmented by hierarchies, through the story and narrative of Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, who pursued a twenty-year career in the department as its storage manager. Between different tasks and obligations, the Museum is organised along practices understood as mundane, which can be summed up as ‘care’, versus practices associated with the ‘representation’ of the Museum—clearly reflected in the distribution of resources. Working through colonial legacies manifests here as an individual attempt to reckon with the ambitious project of collecting the world at the end of the nineteenth century. This personal narrative reveals how managing shortage (lack of budget, resources, and knowledge) results
in improvisation, and how it leaves its personal marks on the organisation’s structure and materiality.

Departing from an account in chapter five of how little is known about the collections present in the museum storage, chapter six follows my journey to find out more about the provenance of a particular group of objects depicted as ‘Luba’ and acquired by a German military officer, Werner von Grawert. The process shows how little can often be found with regards to the object’s biography within and outside of the Museum. An analysis of the mechanisms of research reveal, on the one hand, processes of past exclusion and suppression of Indigenous voices (in the archive). On the other hand, I show how the disparity between the Global North and South continues in the production of knowledge on these objects. Following the Luba object in its itineraries through Western circuits of value, the invention of ‘masters’ as individualised producers has been an effective means to circumvent the lack of documentation in provenance and monetise the production of knowledge related to provenance. Working through provenance ultimately shows a process in which mechanisms of appropriation continue to serve Western organisations – universities, museums, and the art market – financially and symbolically.

Chapter seven questions the collections as active and agentive matter; it discusses the shifts from subjects to museum objects, and from museum objects to subjects. The chapter builds on ethnographic observations from museum practitioners responsible for conservation. I frame the museum’s obligation to keep things, built on conceptions of heritage as stable and durable, as the attempt to master materiality. The practice of musealising and the accompanying paradigm of conservation deny the collections other forms of existence and life than those imposed by the museum’s rules and regulations. As part of this paradigm of conservation, museum professionals since the nineteenth century have treated collections with pesticides. In turn, museum objects have transformed into agentive subjects, as they affect those surrounding them via their toxicity. The object then counteracts the attempt to control and destroy all possible forms of life, the attempt to entwesen, but rather develops a toxic agency. The object not only changes symbolically via a transformation of the significations and usages within and outside of the museum organisation. Rather, through its transformation of substance, it physically changes and turns into a material and chemical amalgam of its histories. Working through manifests here as engaging with the collection’s materiality itself.

The book’s last chapter closes the narrative on the working through of colonial collections. As the book’s different chapters analyse and show, the Ethnological Museum originated from and was still embedded in colonial
modes of doing and thinking the world. Beyond the question of what to display, the chapter looks at processes of how exhibitions were produced. It analyses the museum’s curatorial cultures. Based on an ethnography of the planning process for the Humboldt Forum, the chapter proposes that these cultures remained authoritative, research-focused, and collection-centred. I ascribe the resistiveness of this culture to the Museum’s and SPK’s unchanging structures, which impeded change from happening. The book ends with the observation that, if the Museum as such doesn’t change its foundational structures, attempts to transformation within the Museum will remain challenging.

In the concluding discussion, I return to the book’s main arguments by elaborating on the question of change and transformation in ethnological museums.

As a research resource, I chronicle the most important events, notably political, of the developments related to the negotiation of colonial museum collections in Berlin and Germany in a concluding timeline, starting with the Humboldt Forum’s foundation stone ceremony in 2013 and ending with the opening of the Ethnological Museum in the Humboldt Forum in 2021.
Notes

1. These dimensions of the ‘crisis’ had been identified, discussed, and responded to for at least thirty years. Seminal monographs and edited volumes that have significantly shaped my research include, for example, in relation to international case studies, Clifford (1988); Karp and Lavine (1991); Karp et al. (1992); Clifford (1997); de L’Estoile (2007); Gosden, Larson, & Petch (2007); Kazeem, Martinez-Turek, and Sternfeld (2009); Byrne et al. (2011); Phillips (2011); Harrison, Byrne, and Clarke (2013); Golding and Modest (2013). In the German context, see, for example, Berner, Hoffmann, and Lange (2011); Kraus and Noack (2015); Förster et al. (2018); Edenheiser and Förster (2019); Splettsstößer (2019).

2. For an overview of the changes in ethnological museums, see, up to 2013, Pagani (2013), including the restructuring of the Dutch ethnological museum landscape, the opening of the Museum aan de Stroom in Antwerp, as well as the new permanent exhibition in Basel. Since then, in the German-speaking context, beyond the Humboldt Forum, the following developments have notably stirred debate: the appointment of Clémentine Deliss at the Weltkulturen Museum Frankfurt (2010–2015) with the introduction of a ‘post-ethnological’ museum mission; of Nanette Snoep at the State Ethnographic Collections (SES) Saxony (2015–2018), followed by her directorship of the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne; the replacement of Nanette Snoep at the SES by Léontine Meijer-van Mensch in 2018; the appointment of Barbara Plankensteiner at the Völkerkundemuseum in Hamburg; and the subsequent name change of the museum to MARKK, as well as the name change, renovation, and opening of the new permanent exhibition in 2017 at the Weltmuseum Wien. On an international level, the reopening of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (Belgium) in 2018 was the most awaited event, preceded by the release and handing over of the so-called restitution report by Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr to the French president Emmanuel Macron in November 2018, which shifted attention to questions of restitution (Sarr & Savoy, 2018); for an overview of the debates related to the report, see von Oswald (2018).


4. The Musée du Quai Branly opened in a new building and structural setting, including a new name in 2006. Since 2016, it has been called Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac; the Museum aan de Stroom Antwerp opened in 2011; Museum der Fünf Kontinenten München changed its name in 2014; the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, reopened as the AfricaMuseum with a new permanent exhibition in 2018.

5. Museums named after collectors and/or researchers include: The Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne which reopened with a new permanent exhibition in 2010; The Linden-Museum in Stuttgart; The Pitts River Museum in Oxford which reopened in 2009; The Humboldt Forum which opened in stages between 2020–2021.

6. The concept of ‘object biographies’ has been increasingly used as an analytical and narrative tool to understand the social and cultural life of things, first coined by Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai in the 1980s (Kopytoff, 1986; Appadurai, 1986). Despite criticism that the notion of ‘biography’ might mislead to an understanding of the objects’ biographies as linear, or as attributing the object intentional and individual agency (Hahn, 2015; Joyce & Gillespie, 2015), the concept can serve as a point of departure to trace and analyse relationships between people and things over time and to depict the socio-material networks they are enmeshed in and show how long-lived things extend beyond different systems of understanding (Joy, 2009), including their museum lives.
Used in anthropology and archaeology alike, numerous examples of object biographies now exist. For literature reviews and discussions related to object biographies, see, for example, Hirschauer and Doering (1997); Gosden and Marshall (1999); Hoskins (2006); Brower Stahl (2010); Chua and Salmond (2012); for monographs and edited volumes dealing with particular object biographies, see, for example, Daston (2000); Bonnot (2002); Daston and Galison (2007); Tythacott (2011); Bonnot (2014); Förster and Stoecker (2016).

7. For case studies and examples that trace and interrogate the interrelatedness between museums, the colonies, and the metropoles, see, for international examples, Thomas (1991); Gosden and Knowles (2001); Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips (2006); Bennett et al. (2017). For German case studies, see Essner (1986); Gothsc (1983); Zimmerman (2001); Penny (2002); Weber (2005); Förster and Stoecker (2016); Brandstetter and Hierholzer (2017); Förster et al. (2018); Reyels, Ivanov, and Weber-Sinn (2018); Splettstößer (2019).

8. Extracts quoted from the German:


Da die Ethnologie, als zu den comparativen Wissenschaften gehörig, statistischen Regeln zu folgen hat, bleibt, wie in jeder Statistik, Vollständigkeit der thatsächlichen Daten, auf den sie ihre Aussprüche zu begründen hat, ihr erstes und wichtiges Desiderat, und leider, wie es scheint, ein Desiderat für immer, da auf jemalige Erfüllung dieses Wunsches wird verzichtet werden müssen. (Bastian, 1872, pp. iv–v)

For a documentation and analysis of Adolf Bastian’s position and work, see, for example, Penny (2002); Fischer, Bolz, and Kamel (2007); Penny (2019).

9. The instruction was first published in 1899 by the curator of Oceania and Africa, Felix von Luschan; it was republished in 1904 in an extended version by the same author; and it was reformulated in a last edition by Bernhard Ankermann, Luschan’s successor, in 1914. The instruction was designed like a questionnaire, with questions on one side of the page and blank spaces to fill in information on the other.

10. My translation from the German: ‘Wo es sich aber nicht nur um die Beschaffung einzelner Gegenstände handelt, da sammle man systematisch, d.h. so, dass die Sammlung ein möglichst erschöpfendes Bild der Kultur des betreffenden Stammes gibt. […] Diese sind also in erster Linie zu sammeln; es ist gewissermaßen ein Inventar des gesamten Kulturbesitzes aufzunehmen.’

11. The Dakar–Djibouti expedition (1931–1933) headed by the French anthropologist Marcel Griaule is probably the most famous example of such a ‘scientific’ collecting mission.

12. The extensive collecting of material culture was facilitated by the federal council’s decision (‘Bundesrat’) in 1889 by defining Berlin’s museum as the ‘Central Museum’ when it came to the acquisition of collections from German protectorates. This decision implicated that all collections acquired under publicly funded expeditions would be the property of Berlin’s Museum, which could then decide to keep the collections, send them back to the colonies, or to send or swap doubles, so-called Doubletten, with other German museums. For further explanation and contextualisation, see, for example, Stelzig (2004, p. 39); Ivanov (2005, pp. 41–42).
13. This was different, for example, from scientific expeditions in colonial contexts, which focus not only on owning but also on knowing the people by means of their material culture, reflected then in the collection’s detailed documentation. French museums, unlike Berlin’s Africa department, acquired a significant part of their collections via scientific expeditions. For details on the different modes of acquisition concerning the Musée de l’Homme, see Sarr and Savoy (2018, pp. 42–52). Sixty-four per cent stem from the following calculation: between 1884 and 1914 (German colonial rule), the African collections grew from 7,388 objects to 55,079 objects (Krieger & Koch, 1973, 106). Given that today’s Africa collection is estimated at 75,000 objects, the difference constitutes approximately 64 per cent (Website Ethnologisches Museum, https://www.smb.museum/museen-und-einrichtungen/ethnologisches-museum/sammeln-forschen/sammlung.html, consulted 16 April 2019).

14. For examples, see Pels (2008, p. 283). When it comes to museum collections, this aspect of mutuality is seen, for example, in the fact that not all the objects acquired in colonial contexts were looted, robbed, or acquired in dubious circumstances and that there is proof of diplomatic gifts, of trade, and of the early formation of an art market, including the negotiation of and adaptation to styles, tastes, and prices, or the mockery of the colonised through pictorial depictions of Europaness. For discussions concerning German East Africa, see, for instance, Weber (2005, pp. 120–130); for Central Africa, see, for example, Schildkrout and Keim (1998); and for depictions of Europaness, see Lips (1937).

15. The political debate focused on ‘colonial cultural goods’, both reflected by a document authored by both the national and regional ministers of culture (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2019), as well as an official hearing of experts in the German national parliament (Deutscher Bundestag, 2019), initiated by parliamentary questions put forwards both by the Green and the Liberal Party (Fraktion Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2019; Fraktion FDP 2019).


18. For an extensive literature review, see chapter two of this book, and as prominent examples concerning Berlin’s case, see Zimmerman (2001) and Penny (2002).

19. Objections to the term have been voiced, for example, in Dias (2008, p. 307) or Stoler (2013, p. 7).

20. Related reflections on and analysis of the persistence of the colonial in the present are subsumed in other intellectual traditions, which feed back and which I refer to in the course of this book. These include what has been referred to as postcolonial studies with such prominent scholars as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak, or Homi K. Bhabha, those subsumed under the concept of ‘coloniality’ and ‘decoloniality’, with scholars such Aníbal Quijano or Walter Mignolo, or the Caribbean tradition of créolisation et créolité, with Édouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau. For an overview and comparison of the ‘decolonial’ and the ‘postcolonial’, see Bhambra (2014).

21. I conducted fieldwork in the Royal Museum of Central Africa in 2015, and I led multiple interviews with curators and museum directors, which this work also substantially builds on: Julien Volper, Tervuren (Musée Royale de l’Afrique Centrale), 18 August 2015, Nanette Snoep, Leipzig (Director Ethnographic Collections Saxony), 19 April 2016, Yaëlle Biro, New York City (Metropolitan Museum, New York City), 6 June 2016, Kevin Dumouchelle, New York City (Brooklyn Museum, New York City), 8 June 2016, Gaëlle

22. In a text co-authored with Sharon Macdonald and Christine Gerbich, we review the literature on museum ethnographies extensively, which I rely on in the following. Examples include a focus on exhibition-making (Macdonald, 2002; Yaneva, 2012; Morgan, 2013; Bunzl, 2014; Franklin, 2014; Shannon, 2014; Bouquet, 2015; Jung, 2015; Kreplak, 2017; Marsh, 2019); analysis of how museums present and communicate about themselves, notably via exhibitions, and how their role is perceived and negotiated by others (Butler, 1999; Price, 2007; Meza Torres, 2011; von Bose, 2016; Porsché, 2018); how they are used by their publics or how museums try to engage these publics (Roberts, 1997; Bhatti, 2012; Schmitt, 2012; Morse & Munro, 2015; Knudsen, 2016; Debary & Roustan, 2017; Kendzia, 2017; Sabeti, 2018). They include ethnographies of processes of conservation, archiving, and digitisation (Geismar, 2013; Domínguez Rubio, 2014; Beltrame, 2015), and of community work and collaborative projects (Hendry, 2005; Krmpotich & Peers, 2013; Schorch, McCarthy, & Hakiwai, 2016), and finally, of collecting practices, both contemporary and historical (O’Hanlon, 1993; Förster & Stoecker, 2016).


24. See, for example, Macdonald (2013, p. 11) and Rothermund (2015, pp. 13–15).

25. For a discussion of the different English translations and significations of the term, see Macdonald (2009, p. 9).