Working Through Colonial Collections

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In 2012, a year before I would enter the Ethnological Museum to start my fieldwork, I attended a round-table talk in Paris on the occasion of the exhibition *La Triennale: Intense Proximity*. The exhibition addressed the relationship between art and the ethnographic. Okwui Enwezor, the *Triennale’s* creative director, had recently been part of the Humboldt Forum’s international advisory board and commented on the role and futures of ethnological museums and their collections.

I am of the opinion that ethnographic museums always get it wrong and therefore they are the most experimental museological spaces at this particular time. How do objects signify things beyond the limited framework in which they are placed? I find ethnographic museums are really interesting places to think about the role and the nature of cultural objects and the possibility of experimenting curating or what I would call ‘curatography’ – theorising through curating.

By problematising the role of the curatorial within ethnological museums, Enwezor raised two issues, which form points of departure for the reflections and analysis pursued in this chapter. His expression ‘Always getting it wrong’ referred, first, to the decades of critique with which ethnological museums have been confronted, making these museums’ representations possibly the most discussed and problematised exhibition genre in the fields of museum anthropology, art history, and postcolonial critique. Depicting them as ‘limited frameworks in which these objects are placed’, he alluded to the disciplinary and organisational framings that the objects are exposed to. Within these framings, the objects take on a particular significance of ‘difference’, defined by anthropological theory and
ethnographic research, because they are part of an ethnological museum’s collection and their exhibitions. Second, the quotation allows us to think about how to work and analyse the representations produced by and within ethnographic museums. Enwezor highlights that ethnographic museums are good ‘to think about the role of curating’. This thinking about and the critique of representation have been at the core of the analysis of curatorial practices and in relation to ethnological museums in particular. Whereas the critique of representation in regard to finished exhibitions, and thus, put simply, the thinking about past wrongdoings and possible futures has dominated the analysis of exhibitions, what curators actually do in ethnological museums has not been taken into account as much.

This chapter addresses how curators engage and struggle to break with the legacies of representation in the Ethnological Museum by looking at processes that produce representations – instead of analysing representations, and thus exhibitions themselves. How are conventional tropes of representation in the Ethnological Museum, closely related to colonial epistemologies, engaged with? How do they get challenged? Why and how are they reproduced in contemporary exhibition practice?

The observation of exhibition making processes facilitates the deconstruction and understanding of dominant power dynamics and their undergirding structures. In the Ethnological Museum, I observed these processes up until 2015, which is when Neil MacGregor was appointed as the Humboldt Forum’s Founding Director (Gründungsintendant). Neil MacGregor suggested and realised substantial changes in the exhibitions’ layout in the Humboldt Forum. At the Humboldt Forum’s opening in 2020 and 2021, few of the particular planning processes I observed left visible traces in the new set of permanent exhibitions. Nevertheless, the analysis of the how of exhibition making matters. Long-established curatorial cultures – ways of making museum – impeded innovative curatorial work. ‘Structures’ acted on the maintenance of conventional museal orders, confirming the Ethnological Museum’s role as fundamentally concerned with the definition, demarcation, and representation of cultural difference and alterity. One curator once exclaimed in despair:

When you enter the reconstructed Royal Palace, situated opposite of the museums of ‘the Great Civilisations’, pass its foyer with an overwhelming display styled like a chamber of curiosity, learn about the glories of Western science and explorers, move up several floors until you find the exhibitions of the Ethnological Museum, compartmentalised in regional areas – what room to manoeuvre does one have to challenge all of these framings? 3
This quote stands here a perennial reminder: the restorative representational and symbolic politics of the Humboldt Forum framed and obstructed the attempt to transform representations.

**Repair as curatorial approach, its ambivalences and ruptures**

Focusing on the fieldwork in Berlin, this chapter is also based on learnings from numerous interviews with curators and museum directors in ethnological museums, as well as further observation of curatorial practice in the Royal Museum for Central Africa, where I spent time between June and December 2015. The chapter begins with the observation that curating in ethnological museums has been characterised by the reckoning with legacies of representations in those museums, and more broadly speaking, of colonial imaginaries. Exhibitions in ethnological museums contributed to forging racist visual tropes, which rely on colonial imaginaries of the ‘Black Man’ as ‘the ultimate sign of the dissimilar’, as Achille Mbembe has put it (Mbembe, 2017, p. 11). Today, curators often position themselves in relation, and more specifically, against the histories of exhibiting and representing ‘Africa’ in ethnological museums.

These imaginaries closely relate to broader colonial constructions of otherness in that such representations rely on binary differences. These binaries usually entail a strong hierarchy, because they were constructed to establish and maintain relations of colonial dominance. Exemplary binaries have been opposing ‘nature’ versus ‘culture’, ‘tribal’ or ‘primitive’ versus ‘modern’ or ‘civilised’. Small-scale societies isolated in space and time are put in juxtaposition with great civilisations with deep and long histories, or localised, rural, and immobile societies contrast with global, interconnected, cosmopolitan, urban, and mobile ones. Anthropologists have been criticised for locking the people they claim to represent in a ‘non-historical time’ (Clifford, 1988, p. 202) and an eternal ‘ethnographic present’ that denies these subjects ‘coevalness’ in exhibition displays (Fabian, 2014).

How to contend with the legacies of the colonial representation of Black history and the history of Africa has been interrogated by scholars and cultural practitioners through fictional and factual accounts and narratives. Notions of ‘healing’, or ‘countering’ have been suggested in order to engage with histories of conquest, domination, and misrepresentation. Sadyia Hartman, reflecting on her own practice as a writer addressing slavery in the US context, problematised the role of authorship and positioning, and wondered how to
do more than recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive. I want to tell a story ... without committing further violence in my own act of narration. (Hartman, 2008, pp. 2-3)

In relation to the European colonial project and its reverberations, the artist Kader Attia centralises his practice around the notion of repair. ‘Intentionally fractured’, as Clémentine Deliss describes his practice, Attia’s understanding of repair involves the rendering visible of the wound and its stitching. This intentional fracture allows the histories and presents formerly erased, neglected or downplayed to be addressed and divulged (Deliss, 2016, see also Vergès, 2019).

In my observation of curatorial practices in museums, I understand some of the responses to stereotypical representations of Africa as an expression of the notion of repair. Repair usually departs from a particular given, and implies the explicit will to fix, to cure, or improve. Yaëlle Biro, then Associate Curator for the Arts of Africa at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, identified the challenges associated with the curation of African collections in the ‘danger of the single story’, referring to the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The difficulty for her consisted in defying essentialist and simplifying ideas of what constitutes Africa and the histories conveyed through objects. Kevin Dumouchelle, then Associate Curator of the Arts of Africa and the Pacific Islands at New York’s Brooklyn Museum, stated in June 2016:

I want visitors to understand that Africa has a deep history, that it is a place that is not cut off from the world and cut off from history but very much a constitutive part of that story. And a part of the art historical story particularly.6

In Berlin’s Ethnological Museum, Paola Ivanov, one of the two curators responsible for its ‘Africa’ collections, proposed an exhibition which focused on countering the established narratives and accompanying modes of display. The exhibition aimed at challenging the stereotypes confirmed in anthropology’s historiography, and thus subverting the museum’s own histories of exhibiting and producing knowledge.

In the first published concept of the planned exhibition for the Humboldt Forum, Paola Ivanov distanced herself from representational tropes of ‘Africa’ and expressed her objective to counteract those: she aimed at ‘taking a decidedly “southern” point of view and to turn established perspectives on their head’ (Ivanov & Junge, 2015, p.12).
To this end, she developed an exhibition format that was informed by research from ‘new relational global historiography’ and its conceptual tools – a theoretic angle she had also employed for her anthropological research, notably for her research project on aesthetics and consumerism in Zanzibar (Ivanov & Junge, 2015, p. 13, see also Ivanov, 2012b; 2013).

Repair, more than similar notions such as redress or recovery, is a material practice. An exhibition, then, functions here as a temporary but materialised argument in order to correct or shift perspectives. At the same time, however, to repair often implies restoring. Particularly in the context of ethnological museum collections, this easy kinship between repair and restoration leads to a problematic ambivalence within curatorial work since the restorative aspect of repair engenders a risk as much as a redress. Whilst attempts to heal articulate themselves in particular curatorial strategies, they run the risk of reproducing representations perceived as violent, or, of stabilising and legitimising an organisation otherwise contested.

In the following, with Berlin’s Ethnological Museum as an example, I will argue that analysing how exhibitions are conceived and produced matters as much as looking at the resulting representations. I depict how what I call the ‘curatorial cultures’ in the Ethnological Museum obstructed attempts to change – cultures which I regard as particular and locally-grown but which find resonance and counterparts in other European ethnological museums.

Curatorial cultures in the Ethnological Museum

Within the process of developing and producing exhibitions in the Ethnological Museum, a particular ‘curatorial culture of the ethnological’ prevailed. The notion of the ‘culture of the curatorial’ has been elaborated in different publications on the curatorial. In these publications, the authors point to the emergence and establishment of a professionalised field of ‘the curatorial’, rather than foregrounding the notion of ‘culture’ (von Bismarck, Schafaff, & Weski, 2012; O’Neill, 2012). Here, in contrast, I use ‘culture’ to elaborate on a particular, habitual way of doing things. Using the notion of ‘curatorial culture’ thus points to the routine, practice-based, historically embedded, and customary character of exhibition making, as well as to the difficulties of escaping it. A ‘curatorial culture’ implies particular ways of doing the museum through exhibition making, informed by the organisational frame of ‘the ethnological’. The analysis of curatorial culture, then, highlights the importance of taking into account how exhibitions – and thus representations – are produced.
The curatorial culture in the Ethnological Museum was characterised by different practices, three of which I elaborate in what follows: (1) being authoritative, (2) being research-based and -focused, and (3) being collection-centred. As the analysis shows, this particular culture risked reproducing the stereotypes and narratives curators intended to resist, concerning what the museum is, what it contains, and who it is to serve.

**Curating as an authoritative practice**

The first element of the ‘culture of the ethnological’ was the maintaining of scientific authority over the collections and the Museum’s exhibition. This implies an emphasis on the curator as *custos*, which, etymologically speaking, focuses on questions of keeping and guarding. ‘Keeping’ collections implies the understanding of a custodian as gatekeeper or guard, defining and deciding who has the right to access to and interpretation over the collections (and who doesn’t). The definition of the curator’s role as *custos* has been closely linked to the internal organisational structure of the Ethnological Museum. The understanding of departments as ‘curatorial kingdoms’, historically grown through the regional departmentalisation of the Museum, persisted during my fieldwork, despite attempts to break open and reform the Museum’s structure (see chapter three).

At the time, the Ethnological Museum continued to be predominantly defined by its collections – which continued to be regionally confined. During my fieldwork, the recurrent talk of ‘my collection’ or the implicit maintenance of regional restorers stood for the de facto persistence of what was recurrently described as ‘curatorial kingdoms’. Whereas a generational change within the Museum encouraged the progressive decomposition of the different departments, the workflow continued to principally take place within the respective departments, despite the formal abandonment of this structure.

The lack of exchange was further facilitated by the regional organisation within the Humboldt Forum. Curators worked on the exhibitions involving ‘their’ collections by themselves. Up to the point where the exhibition projects were handed to the exhibition designers, no justification about the exhibition concept had been necessary, except in direct exchange with the Museum’s director Viola König. Most of the curators thus prepared ‘their’ exhibition for the Humboldt Forum individually, and often with the same method and theoretical references as they had always done. Some of the curators had been working in the Ethnological Museum for more than twenty years. The curators were also not informed about the other curators’
exhibition projects, although most exhibitions were already at the stage of being drawn by the exhibition designers when the discussions of and exchange on the different exhibitions started in early 2014. Solely in dialogue with ‘their’ collection, most curators were not involved in working groups within the Museum or any other kind of collaboration. Speaking on behalf of the collections and keeping authorship thus remained in the hands of the curator. The curators would subsequently be defined as (and often see themselves) as the legitimate and sole authority over the respective collections.

The Ethnological Museum’s conceptual limbo fostered the authoritative character of curatorial processes at the time. In 2008, the Ethnological Museum’s director Viola König handed in her first concept of the Ethnological Museum’s position in the Humboldt Forum, a mission she had been explicitly employed for in 2001 (König, 2012a, pp. 9–11). However, this and following concepts and drafts were de facto never recognised or referred to as such within the Museum.

The process of developing a concept ‘failed’, Peter Junge retrospectively claimed. Peter Junge was one of the Africa curators at the time, but also guaranteed the liaison between the Ethnological Museum and the Humboldt Forum.10 He explained that this was due to ‘desinterest about a conceptual discussion within the Museum itself’, as well as the Museum’s ‘very bad social climate’. In the working process, König’s concept was boiled down to three keywords – ‘multiperspectivity’ (Multiperspektivität), ‘audience’ (Publikum), ‘contemporaneity’ (Gegenwart). The curators didn’t take these ideas as guidelines or references for their exhibitions.11 With a view to the longer history of how the Ethnological Museum was to exist within the Humboldt Forum, despite countless working groups, conferences, consultation groups, advisory boards, published and unpublished concepts, preliminary exhibition projects, and different moratoria, there was no agreement within the Museum on the Ethnological Museum’s mission, vision, and contribution to Berlin’s museum landscape, and the Humboldt Forum in particular.12

The understanding of the custodians as sole authors of the exhibition not only enhanced their authority, but simultaneously charged them to deal with a substantial number of expectations and tasks. One aspect of the expertise required in the context of ethnological museums is engagement with people who identify with the collections or come from places where the objects have been produced. In 2011, Robin Boast had already stated in an article that

[d]ialogue and collaboration is the name of the game these days and there are few museums with anthropological, or even archaeological,
collections that would consider an exhibition that did not include some form of consultation. (Boast, 2011, p. 56)

Ien Ang, in 2005, identified a ‘predicament of diversity’ in museums (Ang, 2005). Whereas this predicament might apply in Anglo-Saxon museum contexts, the Ethnological Museum did not provide a framework for processes of consultation, cooperation, or collaboration to take place. Processes of collaboration became lengthy and administratively difficult processes, without any resources – personnel or financial – available. Working alone was not challenged from within the Museum at this stage, despite the repeated organisational injunction to ‘let go of’ or ‘share interpretational power’ (Deutungsmacht aufgeben/teilen). Curatorial authority and authorship were thus maintained, without any particular questioning of this authority within the frames of the Museum. This raised the question whether and how the Museum’s aim to engage in ‘multiperspectivity’ would be possible from within the organisation solely.

Curating as a research-focused practice

The curatorial authority was accentuated by some of the exhibitions’ mission to translate scientific findings into the exhibition. A prerequisite for this kind of exhibition making was that it was research-based, aiming at translating current theoretical arguments and research findings (about the Museum, about the objects, on the region of origin) into an exhibition that reflected these arguments.

Scientific accuracy, and the depiction of the research findings in the exhibition – in all their complexity – was a high priority for many curators. The focus on the translation of research into the exhibition rested on assumptions that define the museum as a scientific organisation. Peter Junge explained that the need to ‘turn scientific ideas into curatorial concepts’ was not resolved throughout the exhibition making process, resulting in curatorial concepts ‘difficult to exhibit in their scientific complexity’. The exhibitions, at least at their conceptual state, presupposed a considerable familiarity with the concepts and terms employed by the curators, giving way to the impression that the exhibition’s primary audience was expected to be a scientific community. Said differently, the exhibitions remained research-focused.

The exhibition format can of course serve multiple communities, including a scientific one. However, the role of experts in museum education and learning – in the German context labelled as ‘mediation’ (Vermittlung)
was barely existent in the exhibition’s planning process. With a view to the Museum’s infrastructure, the absence of a department of mediation in the Museum signalled that the need for and existence of a professional expertise for processes of translation, transmission, or mediation was not considered at an early stage of the exhibition-making process. Rather, this process was expected to be fulfilled by the exhibition designers alone. The designers, for their part, were themselves struggling to understand and transmit the key arguments, and continuously characterised some of the exhibitions as academic and difficult to understand.

‘Education and Outreach’ (BV – Bildung und Vermittlung) was, in contrast to the expressed needs for mediation, defined in particular terms: the responsible person’s tasks were limited to (and at the same time overwhelmed by) ‘junior spaces’. BV was embodied by a single person, responsible for the entire space of the Ethnological Museum and Museum for Asian Art in the Humboldt Forum. The implicit assumption was thus that only children and teenagers needed ‘mediated’ content. In contrast to identifying and defining the process of exhibition-making as a collaborative and multi-authored one, different kinds of expertise were not equally valued during the work process. Whereas the curators’ claim of scientificity was enhanced, the person responsible for BV was deprived of the acknowledgement for being scientific, and thus, necessary: the almost complete absence of BV during the exhibition-making process testified to this prioritisation. Despite calls for a greater acknowledgement of the – usually female – workforce and expertise of museum educators, it continued to be absent from exhibition-making processes, maintaining its role as ‘a secondary activity that only communicates pre-existing content’ (Landkammer, 2019, p. 2).

This understanding of the museum has been repeatedly challenged in light of recurrent calls to democratise the museum, such as within the concepts of the ‘new museology’. Reducing the exhibitionary format to a focus on ‘scientificity’ (Wissenschaftlichkeit) has been criticised for reproducing the status of the museum as a place for the few, excluding large numbers of the museum’s potential users. These critiques, some of which have been developed within the recent ‘educational turn’ and build on constructivism and ideas of critical pedagogy, question the museum’s approach to learning as a top-down endeavour, in which the museum represents the knowledge-able and objective instructor – the transmitter of knowledge. Promoters of alternative approaches to learning in the museum rather suggest the museum as a place in which knowledge is co-produced in interaction, where it is possible to ‘un-learn’ its established modes of interacting, or to go further, in which the museum might even learn from those who use it (Kamel & Gerbich, 2014; Gerbich, n.d.; see also Sternfeld, 2016; Landkammer, 2019).
The maintenance of the exhibition as a research-based and research-focused practice can be understood as part of the cultures of the ethnological in the sense that it repeated and sustained historical understandings of the Museum as an organisation by and for research. Whereas the continuation of research on collections and the display of this research is of course necessary, it nevertheless challenged, in its present form, current understandings of the museum as ‘audience-orientated’ (publikumsorientiert) and the way that this aim was put into practice in the museum. Recent approaches to the museum and results from visitor research concerning the role of museums were disregarded, such as defining it as a place for lifelong learning or taking into account the variety of motivations that shape how people experience exhibitions (Gibbs, Sani, & Thompson, 2007; Falk, 2009). In relation to this contradiction stands another, in which the central role of collections – both with regard to research and exhibition – called into question the museum’s claim to be ‘contemporary’ (Gegenwartsbezug).

Curating as a collection-centred practice

In museums, exhibition making is usually focused on the presentation of material culture, and thus is collection-centred. This means that the curator uses collections to illustrate, evidence, or demonstrate an argument with objects. In ethnological museums, as pointed out by Henrietta Lidchi, museum objects are used as generalising and representative examples of the represented culture, rather than being singular and specific in space and time. The collections are thus employed as material proof and manifestation – as a ‘representation’ – of this precise culture framed as ‘different’ (Lidchi, 1997, pp. 161, 171-172). Adopting the ‘format of contextualising and reconstructing’, this representational paradigm claims the entitlement and right to display otherness, a kind of otherness shaped by anthropological theory and ethnographic research. The entitlement to represent otherness has been subject to critique at least since the writing culture debate in anthropology. It always implies the risk of producing representations that limit, generalise, essentialise, and homogenise those it claims to represent – and usually, without their involvement. However, this essentialism was difficult to escape. For instance, the draft for the future Africa exhibition reproduced the exact stereotypes and representational tropes it aimed at deconstructing. The claim to adopt a ‘consistent southern perspective and the change of perspective’ contradicted the fact that no partners were involved in the exhibition making process. In the draft, the attempt to exhibit distinct and entire cultures resonated in its title, The World of the Swahili. Doing so over
a consistent number of years, as the exhibition module *Cities and Aesthetics of the Swahili (19th–21st centuries)* illustrated (Ivanov & Junge, 2015, p. 13–14), revealed the contradictions regarding temporality that the curators were confronted with. They were working with collections dating in their major parts from the 19th century, but they were also bound to the guiding principle of ‘contemporaneity’ in the Museum.

Viola König, in the Museum’s mission statement, endorsed contemporaneity alongside the key concepts of ‘publics’ and ‘multiperspectivity’ (König, 2012c). The so-called *Gegenwartsbezug* ran counter to the collection-centred practice of the Ethnological Museum on two accounts: first, the Museum’s collection hardly contained any contemporary material and lacked the funds to acquire it. If so, the acquired objects were part of a global circuit of ‘contemporary art’, difficult to be categorised and thus equally integrated into the regionalised taxonomies of the Museum. And second, the self-understanding of the Humboldt Forum, with which the Ethnological Museum would integrate, was not historical. According to its online pitch, the Humboldt Forum didn’t claim to be a museum of cultural history, nor did it speak of its collection as historical. Presentations of the Humboldt Forum rather depicted it as a ‘new cultural district […] that brings together diverse cultures and perspectives and seeks new insights into topical issues such as migration, religion and globalisation’. This was not a problem in and of itself. Of course, topical issues do not preclude historical contextualisation as such. But in the case of the Humboldt Forum, this positioning implied an implicit refusal to define and mark the grand majority of the exhibited collections as historical. This incoherence – resulting, once again, from the failure to develop a stringent overall museum mission – enhanced the risk of locking cultures into what Johannes Fabian famously described as an ‘ethnographic present’ (Fabian, 2014), which the abovementioned exhibition draft illustrated. As such, the collection-centred culture of the Ethnological Museum conflicted with its aim to represent the contemporary; in turn, this focus encouraged the museum’s self-styled and historical task to represent ‘culture’ as decontextualised and invariant – and as something that was limited to that considered and marked as ‘other’.

The characteristics of the curatorial culture spelled out and identified here – as research-orientated, built on collections, and dominated by curatorial authority – probably don’t come as a surprise. They concern, in some way or another, a lot and different kinds of museums: museums were conceived in this way (see, for example, Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). However, aiming at change and transformation, the ‘fixing’ of representations clearly involves what is shown, but also how exhibitions are conceived and produced. The next part of the chapter explores possible reasons to explain the
resilience of the curatorial cultures that impair the curators’ ability to challenge the Museum and its practices.

**Cultures in ‘structures’**

In what follows, I offer attempts to understand how the curatorial culture was sustained by describing and situating what the museum employees usually framed as ‘structures’. These ‘structures’ referred to that which seemed uncontrollable and autonomous from their very position as museum staff: a constellation difficult to grasp and to describe, consisting of numerous players, decision-making processes, diverging interests, and, finally, what museum staff described as the ‘unwritten rules’ of the SPK – the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, which held the majority of Berlin’s museum collection.

Describing my difficulties writing about the Museum, and the positionality of curators within these constellations, one employee vividly disagreed when I pondered on whether to put particular agents at the centre of my analysis.

> We are all victims of the structures. The hierarchies are so important and massive when working in the SPK. Just look at what the structures produce. This is what you should concentrate on in your analysis of the Museum, not single persons. In your analysis, you have to always ask yourself: Is it about power, or is it about content [Geht es um Macht oder um die Sache]? The relation between power and content is out of balance in the Humboldt Forum: it is not about content, it’s about representation, and how to keep or promote your own position. To be honest: every time I look in the mirror, I ask myself: ‘Why am I doing this? Can I still stand up for what is actually happening here?’

The following description of the ‘structures’, condensed into a vignette, is an attempt to further understand why change in the curatorial culture was difficult. Museum staff described and experienced the Museum’s structures and ways of working as lacking transparency and as being overbearing and all-encompassing. The chapter thus finishes by arguing that, until the Museum’s structures and ways of working are intelligently rethought and substantially addressed, changes on the level of representation are unlikely to take place. The successive deconstruction of the process of producing representations in this chapter thus reveals how attention needs to be devoted not only to what one will see in the exhibition, how these representations
Questions of agency, responsibility, and accountability were discussed with the notion of ‘structures’ by staff at the Ethnological Museum. In Berlin, the quantity of organisations, stakeholders, and interests involved in the Humboldt Forum project as well as the importance of its budget set the level for a high degree of complexity – a complexity that was dismissed as ‘non-transparent’ and ‘entangled’ not only by internal museum staff but also by external players, including the press (see, for example, Savoy in Häntzschel, 2017a).

The following conversation is composed of several discussions between museum staff and I during fieldwork, reflecting the museum staff’s own analysis and struggle with positioning their work within the SPK and within the Humboldt Forum.22 I situate the conversation in the Museum’s canteen at lunch, the place and time of day where museum employees would meet regularly to discuss. Employee A and Employee B sit with me, as we just come out of a meeting. We have our lunch while discussing.

Employee A [sighing]: Well, it is obvious that there is a failure of leadership on all levels. Once you notice that such a bad atmosphere is dominant, you need to organise a meeting, an event. You then need to understand what’s going on to be able to counter it. But those responsible for the planning process in the Humboldt Forum don’t even notice this atmosphere [Stimmung] anymore. For them, it has become the normal kind and vibe to communicate.

Employee B [agreeing]: They don’t perceive these moods anymore. I feel that I’m foreign to this culture [kulturfremd]. I actually tried to decipher the unwritten rules which reign here. What can you still discuss? At what point do I need to shut up? I sometimes asked questions to which I got three different, insufficient answers. I needed to pretend, however, that this answer was an answer, because at that point, we couldn’t go any further. There is no set of rules which defines where we will be in the near future. It’s unspoken, there is a dynamic which carries you along. Of course, things also change – such as when new people come – but at its base, there is a certain standard pitch [Kammerton] – sometimes it
goes up, sometimes down. But in essence, it is about control, power, and money. This is the general dynamic and it continues.

Employee A: These are the wrong working conditions. I am convinced that one of the main reasons for the bad atmosphere at the Museum is the limited agency, coupled with arbitrariness [Willkür] and intransparency of the decision-making structures: ultimately, this is a problem of the SPK’s hierarchical structure, and this limited agency is also present on the higher levels. The leaders of the SPK, the SMB, and the museums are subject to a very bad contract with the exhibition designers, which was decided by the Ministry of Construction. And a stupid building, completely unsuitable for museum presentations! Instead of constructing solidarity structures, the frustration is handed on ‘downwards’, and the curators and storage managers and restorers are in a situation of entirely limited and limiting possibilities; at the same time, they are supposed to do ‘everything’: the exhibitions! This doesn’t only generate frustration, but also anger and cynicism.

Employee B: And on top of that, we have wrong working contracts. It’s simply a bad framework to work in. And it’s impossible to be creative in these circumstances.

Employee A: Yes, but one just continues. No one tells the director that the Emperor is naked.

Employee B: Yes. It’s actually like a marriage, where at one point you realise: Oh! This was a mistake! [They start laughing.]

Employee A: Until the bitter end!

Employee B: And we stay together because of the children!

Laughing, we get ourselves some coffee. Employee B addresses me directly: ‘So you are writing about ethnological museums and […]’, and I jump in ‘And their transformations, yes. And I also wanted to consider the structural implications, but actually this information is not very easy to get.’

Employee A [nodding]: You’re right. But you know, that’s part of the secret society which reigns here. This is anthropological theory. You create secrets if you refuse to communicate information. [Employee A pauses and looks at us.] It’s as simple as that. The information can be
whatever. The sky is blue. The point is that you create power by withholding information.

Employee B [disagreeing]: Well, they do give you information. When I arrived, the first thing I did is ask for an organigram. And the administrative department [Stabsstelle] provided me with one. But it takes a lot of time to understand what is actually going on, to grasp the conflicted constellations and relations [Gemengelage] of actors and interests. Still, and here I agree with you, one has to work oneself through. Despite the help and allies in the field, there are unwritten rules. The project has its own culture. There are rules which reproduce the institution. And institutions do also produce quite some botch [Murks].

Employee A [laughing in agreement]: Yes, one thing it produces is that actors within the Forum don’t work target-orientated. I mean, they do of course pursue some sort of target, but not the target that they are supposed to pursue. Namely, that the Humboldt Forum becomes a success. They pursue their individual interests. It’s not about the Humboldt Forum. And this is why I tell you, Margareta, what you can study really well here is demotivation. How to demotivate people. I am also completely demotivated. A meeting like the one today demotivates me. And then people do things that get on their nerves a little bit less.

Employee B: Yes, as I like to say: the consensus has settled into resignation. It actually feels as if you are jumping off a plane onto a huge terrain. But somehow, they didn’t give you a compass and you don’t have time to orientate; but you need to take decisions immediately! On basic principles that you can only guess at. And when you try to understand what’s going on, you need to be careful not to waste your energy with all these many, many small things. Things with which you get entangled. Things that wear you out, in which you get caught, that make you run aground, that carry you off. And then the day is gone and no time is left to really work. There is a sediment of structural problems which has been dragged along. Either people leave, or they accommodate themselves to them. And these problems are so huge, no one dares to approach them. Every single employee here, with time, develops her own strategy. She secures herself in her own subsection, or subsubsection, with horse blinders. I think it does have something to do with the SPK’s size, and with how single individuals carry way too much responsibility with way too little resources. But they handle it anyway because they think that they have to. I think that’s one of the keys to understand the situation. Because
what this produces is resignation, and a lot of ‘as if’. You just pretend ‘as if’ you do the work, but everyone knows that you don’t do it. You serve the level of representation. You just satisfy the surface, the crust, the real work is not done. So the ‘as if’, in my opinion, is a big issue because the paradigm still is representation.

The employees’ analysis reflected findings from the anthropology of bureaucracy and work on organisations more generally, which challenge popular understandings of public organisations and bureaucracy. These popular readings see bureaucracy as the rule of the rationale, of objectivity, of neutrality, of impersonality, of professionalism, including the belief in centralised coordination and a basis in paper- and rule-based governance (Mathur, 2017). The employees’ reflections revealed the gap between what public administrations are imagined to achieve and what they actually produce. Max Weber described this gap as ‘irrationality’, a gap that may produce ‘absurdity’, to reference Nayanika Mathur’s accounts of state bureaucracy in rural India (2016, p. 2). Museum staff frequently described the organisational constellation in exactly these terms – ‘irrational’, ‘absurd’, or simply ‘dilet-tante’ – sometimes with direct reference to Max Weber.

Another dimension of this gap concerns the ambiguity of bureaucratic procedures, as the ‘unwritten rules’ museum staff identified produced frustration, insecurity, or even anxiety. One prerequisite for these unwritten rules to work was the highly hierarchical setting. Decision-making processes, for example, were often made ‘from above’, without considering expertise from within; critique and suggestions were usually kept within one hierarchical strata, preventing it from reaching those addressed beyond the Museum (see chapter two on being affected).

At the same time, the gap left room for flexibility. This room to manoeuvre was limited, however, to those agents who know and have learned how to handle the internal procedures and processes, or to put it in one of the employees’ words, who have become part of the Museum’s ‘culture’.24 The flexibility of the rules and regulations, then, articulated in the ways in which museum staff referred to how people seek and succeed in gaining and maintaining ‘power’ (manifest, for example, in acquiring additional financial resources, more exhibition space than others, etc.). At the same time, the lack of project planning as well as the lack of definitions of tasks and responsibilities prevented accountabilities being clearly defined. It seemed as if everyone could adapt their role as they wanted, including the responsibilities that the role entailed. This enabled museum staff on all levels to regularly delegate responsibilities ‘elsewhere’, usually to an undefined ‘above’, leaving questions unanswered and problems ignored, working with ‘horse blinkers’.
The phrase ‘we are all victims of the structures’ was indicative of the way of working in the Museum. The working conditions were at once difficult to handle, seemingly arbitrary (‘victims’), but as a consequence, offered the opportunity to not feel responsible or accountable.

What was depicted by employees as ‘structures’ can be understood as one of the reasons why the curatorial culture of the Ethnological Museum was maintained and reproduced. It was difficult to identify the distinction and demarcation of the SPK’s ‘work cultures’ – and in this particular case, the relation of ‘curatorial cultures’ – to its ‘structures’ and to understand how they reproduced each other through their entanglement. Difficult to make visible and to pin down, these entanglements between structure and culture continued to shape the Museum profoundly when it came to the maintenance of representational tropes as they impeded processes of change.

Put simply, if the structures don’t change, culture won’t change, and it is more difficult to do representations differently. Representations in ethnological museums are not only difficult to change because of established and regulated processes of how exhibitions are thought and produced in these museums. The maintenance of these cultures is facilitated, or rather, these cultures remain because of ‘structures’ predominant in the museum staff’s everyday. Beyond difficulties in engaging with the architectural, disciplinary, and conceptual framings of the Humboldt Forum, it is thus the organisational embeddedness, the ‘structures’, that shape museum work in profound ways.

**Conclusion**

Just after quitting her post in Saxony and moving to head Cologne’s Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, the museum director Nanette Snoep declared in a public presentation at Berlin’s Technical University (12 November 2018) that

> [a] museum doesn’t only conserve its objects, it also conserves itself. It freezes itself. Why is the ethnological museum still dominated by ahistorical discourses as if societies were unchangeable? Why are the museum’s and collection’s histories, the objects’ biographies not represented in the museum? And what role does the diaspora play in the Ethnological Museum?

Looking back at her own museum career, she wondered whether the museum could be seen as a sick patient. Had the state of health worsened or had it stagnated in the last few years? Was there even any hope of healing?
An understanding of the exhibition as single-authored, research-based, research-focused, and collection-centred shaped curatorial processes at the time in the Ethnological Museum; much has changed ever since (see timeline for ongoing collaborative research and exhibition practices). The curatorial cultures contributed to complicating or contradicting exhibition concepts aimed at change. If exhibiting continues to be seen as a practice of dialogue only between curators and collections, curators risk being trapped in the Museum’s disciplinary frames. This is not an argument against expertise, but rather a suggestion to expand what counts as expertise and practising the exhibition process as the result of a constellation of expertise. This might help to break open these framings, as was suggested by Béatrice von Bismarck in her definition of ‘exhibitions as collectives’ of both human and non-human actors, thus defining the process and product of the curatorial as ‘constellational’ (von Bismarck & Rogoff, 2012, p. 24; von Bismarck, 2011, p. 183; 2012).

Returning to the metaphor of repair, the observations on culture and structure in particular reveal more clearly the restorative moment of repair. By repairing, one risks conserving; one risks bringing back into existence or using that which was deemed damaged or destroyed. Repair is a means to mend what has been damaged. By treating the fissure, it conceals the fractures underneath and in turn confirms the existent. So even if the ambitions to challenge representations had been realised, they would have inevitably and invariably contributed to confirming the contested constellations of access to resources, authority, and, ultimately, power. Repair can thus be a means to delegate, to distract from addressing the structural. It can become a means to paint or brush over without touching the root of the problem.

Situating the ethnological museum as a place of repair nevertheless suggests the museum’s central role in contemporary society-making. It includes the belief in the museum as a democratic place for the working through of contested histories to better understand and situate complex presents, allowing these histories to be visible, to be addressed, and to be problematised. Wayne Modest proposed the metaphor of repair to imagine the museum as a place for productive discomfort, conflict, as well as hope (von Oswald, Soh Bejeng Ndikung, & Modest, 2017; see also Modest in von Oswald & Tinius, 2020). Conceived as a reconciliatory practice and approach, repair aims to keep the discomfort alive and to enable negotiations and conflicts to take place – accepting the wounds, without breaking them open again, leaving the injuries and scars visible. In this context, curating – in its etymological origin in ‘taking care of’ or even ‘to cure’ – can be defined as a means to engage in and contribute to processes of healing.

Repair as a practice is inherently ambivalent – between historical redress and healing, restoring and legitimising. The subject and object of repair
- what curators repair (the museum, its structures, relations?) and what the products of the process are – is sometimes not clear and might switch. This leaves some questions unresolved. In relation to the curation of ethnological collections, I wonder: can – and if so, how – exhibition making in ethnological museums be more than a response to its earlier wrongdoings, more than a reaction to critique? Is this even desirable? Or is it necessary to imagine other forms of enquiry, possibly working with and through the collections beyond exhibitions? With reference to questions of culture and structure, what kind of critique is possible within organisations such as the Humboldt Forum, which symbolically and conceptually confirm the critique that curatorial positions and strategies attempt to counter? Can the ethnological museum’s powerful trope of the right to exhibit and to represent otherness ever be broken, and if so, how to do so in a context in which some people believe that this right is still valid?
Notes

1. The exhibition took place in the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, April–August 2012. The exhibition was the subject of an ethnography that I was doing for my master’s thesis (von Oswald, 2016).

2. This is a quotation from the transcription of the conversation, initiated by Sinzania Ravini, which took place in Paris between Okwui Enwezor, Françoise Vergès, Mikela Lundahl, and Nicolas Bourriaud, then director of the École des Beaux-Arts, at Nicolas Bourriaud’s apartment in the school, 21 April 2012.

3. Field notes from 3 February 2014.


5. The writings of bell hooks or Stuart Hall are just two, but crucial, examples of scholars focusing on analysing and grappling with representations of cultural identity, and Blackness in particular (see for example hooks 1990; Hall 1993).

6. Interview with Yaëlle Biro, 6 June 2016, at the Metropolitan Museum, interview with Kevin Douchemelle, 8 June 2016, at the Brooklyn Museum.

7. Talk of the curator’s ‘kingdoms’ is common in ethnological museums. I came across it several times during my stay in Berlin (field note from 27 November 2013), but interviews with Nanette Snoep, then director of the Ethnographic Collections of Saxony (2015), and Steven Engelsmans (2018), who had just retired from his director position at Vienna’s Weltkulturen Museum, confirm the term and practice in European museums more generally speaking.

8. The nine departments consist of the eight historically established regional departments listed on its website, complemented by ‘ethnomusicology’. These departments are South Seas and Australia; Africa; North Africa, Western and Central Asia; South and Southeast Asia; East and North Asia; North American ethnology; South American ethnology; American archaeology; and Ethnomusicology. In an internal organigram, both ‘Ethnomusicology’ and ‘Visual anthropology’ were separate from the eight, historically established specialist departments (Fachreferate). Visual anthropology was, however, not listed as one of the museum’s departments on the website, https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/collection-research/about-the-collection.html, consulted 5 June 2019.

9. The director, as part of the ‘concept group’, was responsible for reporting the museum’s development to the organisational superstructures of the SMB and the SPK, and communicating the ongoing processes and demands back to museum staff involved in the exhibition-making processes.


11. In November 2013, for example, in the first draft of the exhibition designs, the Drehbuch (‘script’), the three terms were to be filled with content for each exhibition section. However, in the ‘script’, most of these boxes were empty, including in König’s own exhibition concept. Another example consisted of the König’s vision of the Museum being ‘modular’ and ‘flexible’ in its exhibition set-up (König, 2012c, p. 127). However, the display cases would be fixed. Several meetings with the exhibition designers clearly
showed how elaborate and immutable the exhibition cases would be. The relocation of 24,000 objects was calculated as a one-way move at the considerable cost of 29 million euros (Fahrun, 2016). This understanding of the objects’ relocation also reinforced the separation between the Humboldt Forum and the Ethnological Museum, where the Humboldt Forum would serve as a permanent showcase for a collection that was kept on the city’s outskirts, with low to no accessibility.

12. In early 2014, during my fieldwork, a desperate attempt to ‘identify common threads’ for the Ethnological Museum in the Humboldt Forum, which would transcend individual exhibition projects was initiated by a group of curators, regardless of the fact that most curators had already handed in the final object lists for their respective exhibition concepts. After a few weeks and meetings, the initiative was abandoned. For an overview of the debates and developments of the concept, animated by formats such as the Museumforum (2002–2005), directed by Viola König and Navid Kermani, replaced by Horst Bredekamp in 2003; the exhibition Anders zur Welt kommen in 2009, which integrated exhibitions by each of the three players at the time; and the diverse public conferences and internal workshop or the international advisory board; see König (2012a; 2012b). In August 2019, the political opposition claimed that no concept has been agreed upon to this day (Bundesregierung, 2019, p. 1).

13. See, for example, Hermann Parzinger’s statement on sharing (Parzinger, 2016a; 2016b).


15. Education was a ‘service’ centrally organised and provided by the SMB’s general directorate (Generaldirektion), see https://www.smb.museum/en/education-and-outreach/profile.html, consulted 29 May 2019.

16. Field notes from an exhibition planning meeting, 6 March 2014.

17. Even when the person responsible for BV was called to participate in several meetings after the draft had been dismissed by the ‘the supervisory group’ (Steuerungsgruppe) in February 2015, this was only ‘last minute’ (a few weeks before the final handing-in of the exhibition draft), with almost no impact on the outcome and the final exhibition draft.

18. For an overview of the debates, see, for example, Hohenstein and Moussouri (2017).

19. Selected writings on the topic include Hein (1999); Hooper-Greenhill (1999); Lindauer (2007); Wilson and O’Neill (2010); Mörsch (2009); Jaschke, Sternfeld, and in collaboration with Institute for Art Education, Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (2012); Mörsch, Sachs, and Sieber (2017).


23. Bettina Probst headed the Stabsstelle (‘administrative department’), which was created in 2012 and funded by the SPK. Probst was responsible for the long-term planning of the Humboldt Forum concerning its content and design, as well as for cooperation with (future) project partners, with a focus on media, sponsoring, and education (Probst & Wegner, 2013, p. 115).

24. For ethnographic interrogations on ‘bureaucratic ambiguity’, see Best (2012) for research conducted within the World Bank and the IMF, see Tuckett 2015).
Figure 9.1 The stairs guiding to the exhibitions of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art in the Humboldt Forum, announcing their future opening, 21 April 2021, photograph: Margareta von Oswald.
This book is – ultimately – about change. About change and the continuities within it. At the time of publishing this book, in 2022, almost a decade has passed since I spent time in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. At times it feels as if the field of ethnological museums, related discourses and practices have transformed entirely ever since. When I started my research in 2013, the German political landscape was marked by political faux pas and the breaking of diplomatic protocol when it came to the interaction with representatives and descendants of the formerly colonised, both in Germany’s former colonies and in Germany. Public outcries and opposition to the Humboldt Forum dominated public debate. Demands to access, research and repatriate collections were on the table, but remained publicly unaddressed by those in charge of the collections (No Humboldt 21!, 2013). The Forum’s representatives routinely confirmed the collection’s legal and legitimate status within the Ethnological Museum (Parzinger, 2011, p. 21).

Today, colonialism is politically and publicly acknowledged as an integral part of Germany’s history. The remembrance and recognition of German colonialism was first announced, then anchored in the 2018 coalition contract (Koalitionsvertrag, 2018, pp. 154, 166, 169) as on a par with the remembrance of the SED dictatorship and the NS reign of terror (Koalitionsvertrag, 2018, p. 167). As I illustrate in the timeline that closes this book: museum collections, and the Humboldt Forum as the ‘most important German cultural project of the twenty-first century’ (Parzinger, 2011), served as central prisms to negotiate Germany’s stance towards its colonial history. Public funds now prominently support research on colonialism and digital access to the collections (German Lost Art Foundation, 2019a; BPA, 2019). A ‘contact point’ has been set up to inform about colonial collections, facilitating potential requests for the restitution of museum objects (Kulturstiftung der Länder, 2020). As part of transnational policies of reconciliation, German museums engage in multiple projects of collaboration and processes of restitution. Felwine Sarr, co-author of the controversial ‘restitution report’, described Germany as one of the ‘most progressive [nations] in Europe’ when it comes to dealing with its colonial histories, and in particular where commitment to and implementation of restitution are concerned (Sarr & Savoy, 2018; Felwine Sarr in Bloch, 2019). The Humboldt Forum, for its part, is profiled to become a ‘centre for postcolonial debate’ (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2019; see also Bundesregierung, 2019, p. 9). These developments were framed by parallel debates and developments in other European contexts, indeed globally. In Berlin, they built on alliances and claims facilitated by the convergences between different organisations, initiatives and actors across the fields of politics, contemporary art, academia, activism, and museums (von Oswald & Tinius, 2020). These discourses, political decision-making processes, and
their organisational implementation point to the multifarious ways in which different histories understood as ‘difficult heritage’ (Macdonald, 2009) in Germany and the associated remembrance practices and memory politics start to relate, and risk competing.¹

I first entered the Humboldt Forum in April 2021. It was a few months before the permanent exhibitions of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art would open, scheduled for September of the same year (see figure 9.1). The stairs indicated: ‘Soon: From Berlin to Africa in 3 minutes’; ‘At the top of the stairs is the South Pacific’; ‘Just 50 more steps to Asia’; ‘America? Take the escalator behind you’. In their essence, these statements captured the historical mission of ethnological museums. They perpetuated the self-entitlement of a Western organisation to represent, manage, and organise entire continents and regionally distinct cultures, and to make visitors access and experience these cultures, rebuilding boundaries between ‘Berlin’ and ‘the rest of the World’. This book questioned how much, and how, ethnological museums – grounded in colonial thought and conquest – can transform (themselves). What can and should their role be?

This research’s point of departure was to situate the ethnological museum itself as a colonial legacy. Whereas the museum has been recognised as a modern organisation and as an organisation that has contributed to the making of nations,² positioning ethnological museums as a colonial legacy might still cause irritation. To reduce the collections to being ‘colonial’ ignores, for instance, the fact that many of the objects, and more importantly the cultures and peoples who are at their origin, pre-date colonialism and have existed independently from colonial power structures. The historian Glenn Penny has stated that the ‘the role [of colonial interests] was neither the dominant nor the most important factor in the development’ of ethnological museums (Penny, 2002, p. 13). However, my focus on the Ethnological Museum as colonial legacy shifts attention to the Museum’s historical relations with and role within the colonial project, as well as its position towards the afterlives, echoes, and implications of these relations in the present. This positioning is thus an acknowledgement of the structuring factors that the colonial past continues to have on the present. Defining the Museum as colonial legacy then focuses on where and how its structuring effects manifest – as, indeed, they do in obvious and less obvious ways. Centrally and finally, viewing the Museum as colonial legacy has been an ethical choice. This understanding of the Museum has enabled me to explicitly point to the continuation of and dealing with racist and discriminatory aspects of contemporary life and work in a society shaped by its genealogy in colonialism.

The book focuses on the ways in which a pivotal Western organisation, grounded in and constituted through colonial governance, works through its
colonial pasts and presents. The Ethnological Museum in Berlin presented itself to think about Germany’s relation to its colonial past in particular because its colonial legacies are undeniable. The colonial relations are materialised in the Museum’s composition; the collections and their documentation are evidence of colonial exchange in its different and often violent forms. Only because of colonialism’s material dimension, along with the strong representational tropes of the Humboldt Forum, could the discussion around German colonialism arise in such intensity and manifold forms during the period that the book covers – in a national context that has long been dominated by bypassing and ignoring the public remembrance and recognition of Germany’s colonial past.

Investigating the ethnological museums’ crisis, I approached the questions of change and transformation through an ethnography. I looked at how museum staff, in their everyday, worked with and through colonial collections. I was interested in understanding and probing how material and immaterial colonial legacies manifest, and what museum staff do when engaging with these legacies. What can ethnography do in such a context?

**The colonial, the mundane**

My research focused on seemingly commonplace things and ordinary moments: repetitious filling out of databases, cleaning of showcases, putting things into cupboards, ordering chaos, tidying up, looking through documents, books. Dust, grids, labels, orders, names, computers, databases, boxes, files, chemicals, masks, gloves.

What is conceived as ordinary, habitual, common is no less significant and turned more and more political throughout the years. And my ethnography points not only to how the Ethnological Museum is grounded in its colonial past, but more importantly, how this very past weaves through and informs its present. Indeed, museum staff confront its remnants in their everyday, developing ideas and strategies to engage with those legacies. Even if they identify and confront the Museum’s colonial genealogy head-on, processes of engaging with colonial legacies is far from linear and clearly defined. Museum work in ethnological museums is characterised by a constant risk of reinscribing and reproducing the exact mechanisms and asymmetries one wishes to dismantle. Those working in the Ethnological Museum have been both active participants in addressing, laying open and engaging with the museum’s colonial legacies while, at the same time, reproducing, maintaining, and affirming them, even if involuntarily.
In this book, I show how current knowledge production and museum practices are based on and continue to be shaped by parameters that date to the Ethnological Museum’s foundation in the nineteenth century. Working through means engaging with the diverse strata of coloniality in the Museum; strata of long-standing patterns of power, established structures and practices derived from colonial governance and knowledge production which still act on the organisation’s present. The challenges and contradictions inherent in the reckoning with colonial legacies through the Museum’s everyday – touching upon the very words, material orderings, and interactions and work processes in the Museum – show the irreversible grounding of our contemporary worlds in the colonial past.

The museum as peopled organisation

People who work through the Ethnological Museum’s colonial histories and legacies make the collections accessible: they inventory objects, create museum storages, research and document the collection’s histories, expand the database and its content. Museum staff, including myself, curated exhibitions with the aim to be (self-)critical and collaborative. We worked through layers of colonial traces and their current reverberations.

Doing an ethnography necessarily relies on working with individuals. It is common in museum histories to foreground the role of the museum’s founders, its collectors, and curators. However, those who work behind the scenes, such as the storage manager, the database manager, and the conservator, generally go unnoticed and undocumented. I regard the Ethnological Museum as a ‘peopled organisation’ (Morse, Rex, & Richardson, 2018, p. 116). Seeing the Museum as peopled counters understandings of the museum as homogeneous, faceless, and anonymous. It emphasises how museum staff contribute to, resist, and produce the museum.

In the book, by depicting their personal, passionate engagement with the collections, I highlighted the crucial role that individuals and their subjectivities play in the museum’s constant processes of becoming, countering their usual role as ‘footnotes of history’ (Miller, 2010, p. 50). The focus on people and their practices was also necessary to inspect the Museum’s recent history. Organisational knowledge has only partly been documented, and is rather incorporated by the people working in the Museum, some of whom have been working in the organisation for several decades. It is only by working with museum staff that I was able to comprehend, trace, and document these histories – histories that crucially shape the organisation, but are also subject to rapid change in the context of organisational restructuring. Ways
of knowing and being in the Museum are passed on and constructed through personal interaction in the organisation and are thus only graspable via an oral history and an ethnography of its practices and long-term engagement with employees.

Writing about individuals and their efforts also shows that there is only so much one can do. In the Ethnological Museum, there was no shortage of innovation and visions of change, devotion or even self-sacrifice to the Museum’s well-being and success. However, grand political gestures and symbolic architectural framings, organisational hierarchies and decision making, the structure of funding, curatorial cultures and work routines limited and impaired individual agency in the attempts to change, and even more so, to structurally transform the Ethnological Museum.

**Working through colonial collections**

Models for structural change in ethnological museums exist, and are practiced. In Germany, Clémentine Deliss, Léontine Meijer-van Mensch and Nanette Jacomijn Snoep, to name just three museum directors, engaged in the attempt to systematically transform the organisations they have been heading. These attempts have included measures to radically open museum structures, such as encouraging work in the museums’ storages and archives. The three directors have fostered access to the documentation of collections and their archives, developed different methodological approaches to curatorial work and research, and have invited numerous people to work with in order to change the meanings of the museum’s collections. Finally, they have encouraged to rethink the ethnological museum’s role, both in German society as well as in the places that the collections relate these museums to. Nevertheless, as the book shows, change in ethnological museums is only possible to a certain extent. The colonial past impacts the present, and its remnants and afterlives force us to reckon, and live with it.

Thinking about change, this book finishes with an invitation to further engage in the interminable, difficult, and contradictory work that the reckoning with colonial collections requests. In Germany, the claims for the recognition of colonial pasts and imperial histories have been closely linked to developments and debates on Germany’s self-understanding as a ‘migration society’ (*Einwanderungsgesellschaft*) witnessing the rise of right-wing presence in its political landscape along right-wing extremism and racist terrorism. Working through colonial collections is thus always as much about difficult pasts as it is about difficult presents. As places of ‘critical discomfort’ (Modest, 2020), ethnological museums mirror in their
interdependence with colonial governance the tensions, frictions, and interroga
tions that characterise our living together today; entanglements which structure our contemporary societies and that remain overlooked by many, and unrecognised by most. Confronting the resistance to and repression of difficult memories and histories, this book invites us to acknowledge, remember, and work through the colonial past, with the hope to live otherwise, and more justly, in the present.³
Notes

1. With the public recognition of German colonial history, its relationship to and the general position of Holocaust and National Socialist remembrance has become more central. Relationships between provenance research related to both regimes has started to solidify since an initial conference in Munich in 2017 (Förster et al., 2018), and has been institutionalised with the creation of the colonial-era-focused branch of the German Lost Art Foundation. However, the need to politically position the Holocaust as ‘without precedent and incomparable’ in Germany remains prominent (Kultusminister Konferenz, 2019, p. 3).

2. For the modern museum, see, for example, Hooper-Greenhill (1992) and Bennett (1995), and for the relationship between modernism and colonialism, see, for example, Quijano (2007) and Mignolo (2011).

3. This is a nod to Jacques Derrida’s invitation to ‘learn to live with ghosts’ (1994, pp. xvii–xviii).
Timeline

This timeline functions as a rough indicator of the political, social, and cultural developments concerning the Humboldt Forum, the Ethnological Museum, and the negotiation of German colonialism in Germany from its foundation stone ceremony in 2013 until the physical opening of the Museum of Asian Art and Ethnological Museum in the Humboldt Forum in the autumn of 2021. The timeline is inspired and informed by the work of No Humboldt 21!, who provided very useful timelines both on their website (see ‘Comments: Politics; Comments: Press’) and in the publication No Humboldt 21! Dekoloniale Einwände gegen das Humboldt-Forum (2017). The anthropologist’s Larissa Förster’s efforts to chronicle the debates on the transformation of ethnological museums in Europe, and in the German-speaking context in particular, are also a major source of information here. Förster regularly sent around a ‘digest’, an informal mailing list, which included lists of the most prominent articles in Germany and Europe with regards to colonial collections. This digest made its way into the ‘Media Review on Museums’ on the website of the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage; the digest traces debates from 2017 till 2020 and is still accessible.

This timeline is my personal selection and not exhaustive. It brings together positions from activist, political, and cultural agents, focusing on developments in Berlin. It only covers national or international events if I considered them to be of major importance for the field in Germany, such as central nominations, restitutions, or the release of ‘guidelines’. The timeline does not include those requests by activists and politicians concerned with human remains.
2013

3 June 2013: No Humboldt 21! publish their moratorium, the resolution ‘Stop the planned construction of the Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace!’ (No Humboldt 21!, 2013).

12 June 2013: The foundation stone of the Schloss is laid (Haubrich, 2013; Schaper, 2013).

28 June 2013: Brief enquiry of the member of the Berlin House of Representatives Clara Herrmann (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), requesting information about the definition of the ‘legality’ and ‘legitimacy’ of collections acquired in colonial contexts, as well as the state of the arts concerning provenance research of the Ethnological Museum (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2013a).

16 November 2013: Preview and inauguration of the exhibition Anti-Humboldt-Box, organised by Artefakte/anti-humboldt (Brigitta Kuster, Regina Sarreiter, Dierk Schmidt) and AFROTAK TV cyber-Nomads (Michael Küppers-Adebisi), in cooperation with Andreas Siekmann and Ute Klissenbauer. The exhibition travelled ever since, and has been shown in locations such as in the August Bebel Institut (2013), the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (2013), Galerie Scriptings (2013–2014), the Villa Romana Florence (2015), the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg (2016), and in Berlin’s Kronprinzenpalais during the Steirischer Herbst (2017).


4 December 2013: Activists from the associations Tanzania Network, Berlin Postkolonial, and UWATAB address the SPK: ‘Request on the

13–16 December 2013: Press releases of the Central Council of the African Community in Germany, No Humboldt 21!, and the Initiative Black People in Germany, opposing the idea to create a Nelson Mandela Square in front of the Humboldt Forum (No Humboldt 21! & ISD, 2013; Zentralrat der Afrikanischen Gemeinde in Deutschland, 2013)

17 December 2013: Inauguration of the conservative politician Monika Grütters (CDU) as Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media in a grand coalition of CDU and SPD under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel (Bundesregierung, 2013).
2014

16 January 2014: The SPK’s director of the presidential department, Dorothea Kathmann, responds briefly and without detail in an email to the request of the activists (cf. 4 December 2013), neglecting precise questions concerning the collections’ origins and denying the existence of human remains in the SPK’s collections (Kathmann, 2014).

29 January 2014: Monika Grütters (CDU) holds her inaugural speech as Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media in the German parliament. In it, she highlights in ten points why she is a ‘passionate defendant’ of the Humboldt Forum (Grütters, 2014a).

12 February 2014: Activists from the associations Tanzania Network and Berlin Postkolonial contest the vague answers in Kathmann’s answer (cf. 16 January 2014) and insist on the existence of a collection of human remains in SMB in an open letter (Prosinger & Mboro, 2014).

5 March 2014: Answer from the president of the SPK Hermann Parzinger regarding the open letter from the Tanzania Network (cf. 12 February 2014). In the letter, Parzinger gives an account of the state of research on the collections, acknowledges the existence of human remains in Berlin’s Museum of Prehistory and Early History, and invites representatives of the associations to a conversation as well as to visit of the storage spaces at the Ethnological Museum (Parzinger, 2014).

11 March 2014: Answer from the Berlin Senate to the brief enquiry of Member of the House of Deputies Clara Herrmann (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) on 12 February 2014: ‘The Senate continues to plead for the examination of the provenance of objects which ended up in museums or other institutions during the colonial period via respective research projects’. (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2014).

3 November 2014: Answer from Monika Grütters, Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, to the brief enquiry of the party group Bündnis 90/Die Grünen on 9 October 2014 regarding the topic of the ‘Cultural Usage of the Humboldt-Forum’: ‘To the knowledge of the Federal Government, the museums will take into account the current debates around the history of their own collections, colonial contexts, and provenance research’ (Grütters, 2014b).

8 December 2014: After a long planning process, the SPK’s president Hermann Parzinger and the curator Peter Junge cancel the event Fenster zur Welt oder koloniale Trophäenschau? Das Humboldt-Forum in der Diskussion (‘Window to the world or colonial trophy exhibition? Discussing the Humboldt Forum’) at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt one week before it was supposed to take place. The panel was to include themselves, representing the Humboldt Forum, and the academics and activists Grada Kilomba, Prince Kum’a Ndumbe III, and Joashua Kwesi Aikins. No Humboldt 21! interpret the move as a ‘refusal to dialogue’. They publish the SPK’s press department’s cancellation: the SPK had accused the organisers of ‘phrases of accusation, defamation, and unbearable populism’ in their announcement of the event (No Humboldt 21!, 2014a).

17 December 2014: No Humboldt 21! issues the press release ‘Germany has to restitute human remains and loot from Cameroon, Togo, Tansania, and Rwanda’. It includes a list, with specific numbers, of human remains and what is referred to as ‘war booty’ in the collection (Kriegsbeute), which the activists had researched by accessing the museum’s online database SMB digital via keywords, as well as via archival research. The request concerns the Ethnological Museum’s collections in particular (No Humboldt 21!, 2014b).
2015

January 2015: The anthropologist Nanette Snoep leaves Paris’ musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac to direct the State Ethnographic Collections of Saxony, with its museums in Leipzig, Dresden, and Herrenhut.

5 January 2015: Answer from Monika Grütters, Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, to the written request by Member of Parliament Özcan Mutlu (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) about colonial loot and human remains in the museum storage of the SPK and the SMB:

The government and the Prussian Heritage Foundation (SPK) hold that no unlawfully acquired objects in the collections of the State Museums Berlin should be preserved, independent from the time periods they stem from. This applies to Nazi-looted art as well as displaced art and cultural artefacts due to war; to collections purloined by the GDR regime; but also to objects stemming from colonial contexts of injustice or to objects from illicit archaeological diggings. (Deutscher Bundestag, 2015)

26 March 2015: The SPK releases the ‘Statement regarding the approach of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation) to handling human remains in the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) collections’ (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2015a).

March 2015: The Rhodes Must Fall protests at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, begin, requesting the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes. They become a central reference for further protests that address racism within higher education, in particular in universities in South Africa, the UK, and the USA.

08 April 2015: Monika Grütters’s first important intervention in the Humboldt Forum’s organisational structure is to nominate the founding directorship (Gründungsintendanz) in April 2015, which becomes the Humboldt Forum’s public face. The directorship consists of Hermann Parzinger, representing the SPK; the art historian Horst Bredekamp, representing Humboldt University; and Neil MacGregor, formerly the director of the British Museum. Neil MacGregor’s
intervention in the exhibition plans are pronounced and logistically supported and financially realised by the company Humboldt Forum Kultur GmbH (2016–2018), a firm created explicitly for the purpose.

18 May 2015: For the first time, Hermann Parzinger publicly profiles the Humboldt Forum as dealing with Germany’s colonial history. In an article titled ‘Berlin’s rebuilt Prussian palace to address long-ignored colonial atrocities’ in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Parzinger announces that the Humboldt Forum’s permanent exhibition would deal with the Maji Maji war (Scaturro, 2015), a position that he would continue to espouse until the Humboldt Forum’s opening (see, for example, Parzinger, 2017).

May 2015: Clémentine Deliss is dismissed without notice as director of the Museum der Weltkulturen Frankfurt.

9 June 2015: The SPK releases the document ‘The Non-European Collections of the State Museums Berlin – Statements of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation on their Handling and Provenance Research’ (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2015b), of which no English translation exists until today.

12 June 2015: In a press release, No Humboldt 21! criticises the ‘Statements of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation on their Handling and Provenance Research’. They interpret the statements as an avoidance of returns, or, as they put it, ‘a dubious manoeuvre to preserve unlawful property’ (No Humboldt 21!, 2015b).

9 September 2015: Paul Spies is nominated to head the exhibition about Berlin in the Humboldt Forum. Spies also becomes the director of the Stiftung Stadtmuseum (City Museum Foundation) (Brockschmidt, 2015).

18 October 2015: The Humboldt Lab Dahlem closes its last exhibitions. Initiated by the German Federal Cultural Foundation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes) in cooperation with the SPK, the project aimed to find ways of engaging with the collections of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art with view to their exhibitions’ move to the Humboldt Forum. It featured more than thirty projects throughout its seven ‘rehearsal stages’ (*Probebühnen*) and workshops (Humboldt Lab Dahlem, 2015).
2016

**February 2016:** The project Tanzania–Germany: Shared Object Histories (2016–2021) begins. The aim is to do collaborative provenance research on the Ethnological Museum’s Tanzanian collections, which consisted of approximately ten thousand objects. Funded by the Prussian Cultural Heritage Board of Trustees (*Kuratorium*), an association of leading German businesses, the project focuses on objects that were acquired ‘through violent appropriation and colonial wars’ (*Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*, 2016a).

The project The Humboldt Lab Tanzania (2016–2018) also starts. It intends to work through issues related to colonial war booty, together with artists, scholars, and communities in Tanzania (*Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*, 2016a; see also Ivanov, Weber-Sinn, & Reyels, 2018). The project leads to the signature of a memorandum of understanding between the University of Dar es Salaam and the SPK, which intends to guarantee the long-term cooperation between German and Tanzanian national institutions.

**18 July 2016:** The German Federal Republic recognises that ‘the war of annihilation [against the Nama and Herero people in the colonial German South West Africa] [...] from 1904 to 1908 was a war crime and genocide’ (*Bundesregierung*, 2016). The recognition would only be partial, because ‘retrospective legal claims’ would not apply. As the government stated, ‘notions of “reparation” and “reconciliation” (*Wiedergutmachung*) would not apply in this context’.

2017

1 January 2017: The Ethnological Museum in Dahlem closes its doors to the public.

27 March 2017: The plan to move the collections to the external museum storage Friedrichshagen are officially suspended. Instead, the idea of a ‘research campus’ (Forschungscampus) suggests that collections will mostly stay in Dahlem. A cooperation with the Freie Universität, the museum’s neighbour, is set up (Ossowski, 2017).

7–8 April 2017: For the first time, the conference Provenance Research In Ethnological Collections of the Colonial Period brings together scholars working on provenance research across the fields of the National Socialist and colonial periods, putting the topic on a wider academic agenda.

20 July 2017: Bénédicte Savoy, a French art historian based at Berlin’s Technical University, leaves the Humboldt Forum’s advisory board. With her demand that there should be an unveiling of ‘how much blood drips from each artwork’, she refers to the provenance of collections acquired in colonial contexts (Häntzschel, 2017a).

2 September 2017: The Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, confirms that Germany has ‘cared little about colonialism for a long time’. She promises funding for research on colonialism, defining it to be a ‘national task’ (Monika Grütters in Schaper, 2017).


28 November 2017: In Ouagadougou, the French president Emmanuel Macron announces his wish to return museum objects from French public collections to France’s former colonies in Africa (Macron, 2017). With the French president’s subsequent and immediate promise to return twenty-six objects to the Republic of Benin, the political and legal argument in favour of restitution and reparation in Germany gains more legitimacy.
16 December 2017: In December 2017, the founding directorship of the Humboldt Forum is replaced with a new organisational and administrative structure. This new structure consists of a leadership system of ‘four pillars’, plus the directorate (Generalintendanz): administration, collections (including Museum of Site), Humboldt Academy (education), and programming (responsibility of the Humboldt Forum’s Intendant, or director, in cooperation with the state of Berlin) (Zawatka-Gerlach, 2017). Monika Grütters creates and appoints two further leadership positions: the director of collections (Sammlungsdirektor), merging the directorship of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, and the general director (Generalintendant).

18 December 2017: Addressing the German chancellor Angela Merkel, Berlin Postkolonial publishes an open letter on the subject of the restitution of cultural objects and human remains from Africa. Numerous organisations, institutions, and private persons sign the open letter (Kopp & Mboro, 2017).
2018


12 March 2018: The German government’s coalition contract (Koalitionsvertrag) is settled. The coalition contract suggests to reinforce cooperation with Africa, ‘especially by working through colonialism as well as the construction of museums and cultural organisations in Africa’ (Koalitionsvertrag, 2018, p. 154); to put the remembrance of the SED dictatorship in the GDR (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands; Socialist Unity Party of Germany), the National Socialist reign of terror, and the German colonial history on the same level (Koalitionsvertrag, 2018, p. 166); and to prioritise provenance research concerning colonial museum collections in Germany (Koalitionsvertrag, 2018, p. 169). It also includes the aim ‘to adapt [the SPK] to the requirements of a modern cultural industry with international appeal’, including an evaluation by the Science Council (Wissenschaftsrat) and a subsequent ‘general reform’ of the SPK (Koalitionsvertrag, 2018, p. 169).

6 March 2018: The French president Emmanuel Macron commissions the art historian Bénédicte Savoy and the economist Felwine Sarr to research the framework of possible restitutions of collections to Africa (Terp, 2018).

19 and 20 March 2018: The SPK’s foundation board (Stiftungsrat) appoints the music ethnologist Lars-Christian Koch to become director of collections (Sammlungsleiter) at the Humboldt Forum, heading both the Ethnological Museum’s and the Museum for Asian Art. Formerly curator and interim director at the Ethnological Museum, Koch thinks ‘colonialism will be the topic of the years to come’ (Jöbstl & Mathey, 2018). Hartmut Dorgerloh, former director of the Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation (Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg), is announced as the general director (Generalintendant) of the Humboldt Forum (Kilb, 2018). With the taking of office of Hartmut Dorgerloh, the founding directorship
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23 April 2018: Gorch Pieken is appointed to lead the curatorial team responsible for making an exhibition with the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2018).

26 and 28 April 2018: In two key interviews, Germany’s Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, positions the Humboldt Forum. She describes it as the ‘nation’s business card’ (Visitenkarte der Nation) in a conversation with Hermann Parziner (quoted in Mangold & Timm, 2018) and states that it is ‘above all thanks to the Humboldt Forum that colonialism has been put on the political agenda’, attesting that it has ‘operated like a catalyst, even before its opening’ (quoted in Ringelstein, 2018).

May 2018: Publication of the first version of the ‘Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts’ by the Deutscher Museumsbund (German Museum Association, 2018). In the document, representatives of the legal department of the SPK and the Dresden State Art Collections confirm that ‘[t]he current legal [system] […] does not provide suitable instruments for deciding ownership issues surrounding acquisitions from colonial contexts’ and that it was ‘very questionable’ that the ‘political will’ both on the national and international level existed to conceive such legal instruments (Thielecke & Geißdorf, 2018, p. 71).


12 October 2018: Representatives of the Länder and the federal government agree that the Länder, together with the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media and municipal umbrella organisations (kommunalen Spitzenverbänden) will set up a working group on dealing with collections from colonial contexts. This will include cooperation with the Federal Foreign Office, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the German Museums Association (Bundesregierung, 2018).
21 November 2018: Publication of the restitution report entitled ‘The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics’. Its authors, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, propose to change the French *code du patrimoine* to circumvent the collection’s protection by the principle of inalienability (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, p. 67). They also request the reversal of the burden of proof, which means that the museums would be charged to evidence that the collections were acquired with ‘consent’ (*consentement*), and the claimant parties will not be obliged to prove its illegal acquisition (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, pp. 39–40). These suggestions opposed and contrasted the official positions voiced by most Western museums up to this point and caused controversy in both academia and public debate (Elysee, 2018). For first reactions on the report in politics and the media, see von Oswald (2018).

8 December 2018: The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium’s Tervuren opens its doors as the ‘AfricaMuseum’ after several years of substantial renovation and redesign (Marshall, 2018).

15 December 2018: The Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, and the Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office, Michelle Müntefering, state that ‘Germany and Europe need to face their colonial history. The restitution of cultural artefacts is just the beginning’, asking ‘How can museums and collections justify having objects from colonial contexts in their collections, whose transfer to Germany contradicts our value system of today?’ (Grütters & Müntefering, 2018)
2019

1 January 2019: Nanette Snoep is appointed director of the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum für Völkerkunde in Cologne and leaves Leipzig, Dresden, and Herrnhut, where she directed the State Ethnographic Collections of Saxony since 2015.

13 January 2019: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs commits to the foundation of an ‘Agency for International Museum Cooperation’, with 8 million euros for 2019 alone, with a focus on the nourishing of ‘capacity building and improvement’ within museums, the ‘exchange of curators and objects’, as well as to ‘read between the lines, an acceleration of restitution processes’, all with a regional focus on Africa (Zekri, 2019).

01 February 2019: Léontine Meijer-van Mensch starts her position as the new director of the State Ethnographic Collections in Saxony, following Nanette Jacomijn Snoep. She is now director of the respective museums in Leipzig, Dresden, and Herrnhut.

04 February 2019: The German Lost Art Foundation establishes a branch that focuses on colonial-era provenance research – in an organisation originally founded ‘in order to aid the search for cultural assets and especially those of Jewish provenance which were illegally obtained through Nazi persecution’ (German Lost Art Foundation, 2019a; BPA, 2019).

28 February 2019: The Land of Baden-Württemberg and the Linden-Museum Stuttgart restitute the whip and the Bible of Namibia’s national hero Hendrik Witbooi to Namibia (Linden-Museum Stuttgart, 2019).

06 March 2019: The Humboldt Forum is profiled to become a ‘centre for postcolonial debate’ (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2019; see also Bundesregierung, 2019, p. 9).

13 March 2019: Definition of framework principles (Eckpunkte) on how to deal with collections from colonial contexts by both political representatives of the national government and the cultural ministers of the Länder in March 2019 (Kultusminister Konferenz, 2019).


3 April 2019: Official hearing of ‘experts’ in the German national parliament who agree that ‘the return of objects from colonial contexts in German museums to the societies of origin can only succeed in a joint process with all parties involved’ (Deutscher Bundestag, 2019a; see also Fraktion Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2019; Fraktion FDP, 2019).

6 May 2019: On the occasion of the 2019 Annual Conference of the Directors of Ethnographic Museums in German-Speaking Countries, the group publishes the Heidelberg Statement, claiming that ‘decolonising requires dialogue, expertise and support’ (Heidelberger Stellungnahme, 2019).

17 May 2019: The German Historical Museum restitutes the Stone Cross of the Cape Cross to Namibia (Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2019).

4 July 2019: After the idea of a ‘research campus’ (Forschungscampus) emerged in 2017, advances to support the research campus are made: in July 2019, the results of a ‘potential assessment’ (Potenzialanalyse) are published by an architectural firm and partly made public. The SMB announces the anthropologist Alexis von Poser as the research campus’s director at the same time (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2019a). The Museum for Asian Art and the Ethnological Museum are subsequently co-directed by Christian Koch and Alexis von Poser as deputy director.

22 August 2019: A brief enquiry by the Green Party in the German parliament about the conditions of museum storages in Germany is responded to in the press (Deutscher Bundestag, 2019b). In the article,
‘Contaminated, Corroded, Flooded’ (*Verseucht, zerfressen, überflutet*), the journalist Jörg Häntzschel describes the conditions of museum storage in German ethnological museums, particularly in Berlin, as ‘administrative emergencies’. Referring to the museum storage’s current operation as ‘passive de-collecting’, he criticises what he understands as a lack of transparency concerning the state of conservation of the collections, which are ‘to say the least, not ideal’ but rather, ‘catastrophic’ (Häntzschel, 2019a); the politician Monika Grütters responds to this critique (Häntzschel, 2019b).

**18 September 2019:** Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures (2019–2021): this official partnership is launched between the Ethnological Museum Berlin and the Museums Association of Namibia (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2019; see also Stienen & Bahr, 2019; Stienen, 2020).

**23 September 2019:** Öffnet die Inventare! becomes a public appeal demanding physical and digital access to German museum collections in a context in which parts of the collections have not been inventoried and public online access to the collections is highly restricted (Öffnet die Inventare!, 2019).

**November 2019:** Four provenance researchers are employed at Berlin’s Central Archive on a permanent basis to research the provenance of the collections in the Ethnological Museum and Museum of Asian Art.

**12 November 2019:** The focus on ‘collections from colonial contexts’ (*Sammlungsgut aus kolonialen Kontexten*) is institutionalised with the foundation of unit K 56 (*Referat K56*) as part of the protection of cultural property of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters. Unit K56 is part of the subsection on basic questions of cultural politics, protection of cultural property, and monuments (*Grundsatzfragen der Kulturpolitik, Denkmal- und Kulturgutschutz*).

**12 November 2019:** The US-American George Soros’s Open Society announces to ‘strengthen efforts to restore cultural objects looted from the African continent’ with 15 million USD over four years, ‘support[ing] networks and organisations working to return Africa’s heritage to its rightful home’ (Open Society, 2019).
2020

31 January 2020: In Berlin, a funding scheme of 3 million euros from the city and the German Federal Cultural Foundation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes) will address colonial heritage broadly speaking – working together, and thus further institutionalising, the programme of activists in Berlin’s case and funded with a total sum of 3 million euros. It includes a cooperation between Berlin’s City Museum, the City of Berlin, and several NGOs, including Berlin Postkolonial, Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland (ISD), and Each One Teach One (Barthels, 2020).

12 February 2020: Implementation of the funding scheme by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the ‘creative industry’ in Africa with 15 million euros, including the funding of ‘museum work and especially the working through [Aufarbeitung] of the colonial past’ (BMZ, 2020).


28 May 2020: A golden cross is placed on the Humboldt Forum’s cupola, causing a virulent debate. The Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum is formed on the occasion.

June and July 2020: In Berlin and across Germany, protesters support the Black Lives Matter movement in several, large demonstrations.

12 June 2020: Different activists, including Mwazulu Diyabanza, try to dislodge a funeral pole in the musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac in Paris. Going through several trials, the activists continue to attempt to take objects from other European museums throughout 2020 and 2021 (Willsher, 2021).

1 July 2020: Emmanuel Kasarhérou is appointed the director for the musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac.

3 August 2020: Germany launches the German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts, which is supposed to ‘help societies of origin and other parties obtain information about colonial-era art collections’ (Kulturstiftung der Länder, 2020). It follows up on the cornerstones agreed upon by Bund and Länder (cf. 13 March 2019, Kultusminister Konferenz).

Summer 2020: Foundation of BARAZANI.berlin – Forum for Anti-Colonialism and Resistance, a site for virtual exhibitions and programming, is dedicated to opposition to the Humboldt Forum. It emerged from the working group on Museums and Collections of the alliance Decolonize Berlin.


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