

Back to the Future of Humboldtian Museums¹

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On September 2, 2018, the importance of collections originating from present-day Brazil and currently housed in European museums dramatically increased when the Brazilian National Museum in Rio de Janeiro went up in flames. Most of the twenty million items were destroyed. Many, stemming from South American Indigenous societies, which had accumulated in the museum since its founding in 1818, were lost forever. The information that anthropologists (ethnologists) and other scholars had collected about and with these groups were, in many cases, unique records of societies that have been subjected for centuries, and in some cases until today, to unspeakable violence and devastation.

The destruction of the world's largest archive of Brazil's Indigenous cultures and histories was not only a devastating blow to the Indigenous groups who had been using these materials to obtain information about their ancestors and revitalize their cultures: it was also a tremendous loss for the world and what is often called 'world cultural heritage.' As a result of this calamity, it has not only become more difficult to preserve and understand these groups' histories and cultural practices, but a critical means of reconstructing the history of many Brazilian and global interconnections was also lost.

What should be done with the collections that remain in Europe? In Germany, recent debates about ethnographic museums have led to fundamental shifts in public attention to these institutions. Ever-more heated discussions about German colonial history, the provenance of ethnographic collections and the possible restitution of material things and human remains have brought these long-neglected issues to the fore. At the same time, however, this important and productive debate about the power dynamics within museums has also led to a polarization in which it has been easy to lose sight of the original purpose of ethnographic collections and museums, what has

1 This article is an extended version in English of an editorial by the authors with the title 'Zurückgeben ist nicht die einzige Option' appearing in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on January 9, 2022: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/ethnologie-museen-restitution-ethnologische-museen-1.5503600?reduced=true>

already been achieved and institutionalized in these museums outside of Europe, and the importance the collections housed in Europe might hold for the future.

It is worth reflecting on the history of these museums' origins while moving into the future. It is worth remembering, for example, that the ethnologists who followed in Alexander von Humboldt's footsteps regarded museums as workshops: places where they could engage in a vast, comparative analysis of the material culture produced by people from all over the world. They believed that these material products, from the most magnificent monuments to everyday items, provided information about their makers' and users' relationships to their environments, as well as about their world views. They regarded these material things as sources, not unlike books, and their aim was to harness them for the production of knowledge about human history. In that sense, their museums were never intended to be places where things only served as illustrations for narratives and debates. Yet most became just that.

It does not have to be that way. The collections in these museums can be excavated much like archaeological sites, and the individual items within them can reveal a multitude of insights into human cultures and histories, especially when they are juxtaposed with others in ways that allow them to affect each other as well as viewers, ranging from scholars to laypeople. Moreover, as many anthropologists and cultural activists have been arguing for years, the interactions of material entities with people from their places of origin – with the descendants of the people who produced them – are often different from their interactions with Germans or other Europeans. Such encounters can generate multiple forms of knowledge, a process by which the understanding of human history becomes more complex and complete. This is no longer a question for debate. It is simply a basis for moving forward.

A great deal of success has already been achieved in bringing Indigenous groups into dialogue with historic collections inside and outside Europe. That move, in fact, has already become integral to the very character of institutions such as the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) in Wellington and the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. At the MOA, for instance, 'Multiversity Galleries' were developed together with representatives of the societies of origin, creating a symbiosis of storage and display. This action, however, was not simply a curatorial re-configuration or an end in itself. Rather, the aim has been to provide access to the multiple realities and forms of knowledge embedded in the objects. In keeping with this ethos, the Reciprocal Research Network, an online platform for reciprocal research, digitally transcends the museum's walls, decentering and distributing the power to engage with its collections.

At Te Papa, Māori knowledge has become an independent curatorial area – alongside art, history, natural history and Pacific cultures – which led to the formation of a specific Māori museology and co-leadership through a *kaihautū* (English translation). Here, Māori material cultural heritage is not understood as a collection of objects: rather, the objects are recognized as living beings. The goal of the institution is thus to reconnect people with their tribal treasures and to support the recovery of Māori

knowledge, language and customs. In this setting, an object is not just an object, a bone is not just a bone, a mountain is not just a mountain. As living entities, they house forms of knowing and being that require curatorial care. This potential also exists for the millions of items stored in European museums.

Moreover, these museological reconfigurations have also shown that the journeys of things do not end with their inclusion in one or another collection—a point lost in our current debates. Even in a European museum, however, these things continue to impact people; even in Europe, they can be used in new ways through museological innovations, from collaborative exhibition concepts, to digital access to collections, to the revitalization of cultural practices. Even from Europe, these things can play active roles in cultural lives in other places while they continue to have an impact on the production and circulation of knowledge in local and global contexts. Indeed, even long-hidden things, those packed away in boxes and storages for decades or more, can be ‘resurrected’ and reactivated. Yet none of this can happen unless their future potential is included in our ongoing debates about their origins. Consequently, instead of only asking where those things in German ethnographic museums came from, how they got to Germany and what they have been doing there, one also needs to ask where their journeys may lead them, and what they can achieve in Europe and elsewhere.

In addition, while engaging with these material realities, one should not only think of their physical presence, but also of the knowledge that they contain, which has been waiting for generations to be uncovered and disseminated. For if museum collections are comparable to library collections, they are also much more. A material presence – or what we often simply call an ‘object,’ an ‘artifact,’ or a ‘work of art’ – is not a book. Despite many postmodern arguments to the contrary, they are not just other kinds of texts that can be read. Rather, they may also enable a different kind of profound investigation and experience. Much more than written texts, for example, material things cause us to ask, ‘What is this?’ They arouse viewers’ immediate curiosity, activating empathy and a willingness to act. Even the smallest item offers access to different worlds, to relationships between people and their environment. Consequently, as nineteenth-century German ethnologists already understood as they began filling the world’s largest collecting museums, these material records are unique sources of knowledge that can be used while facing the enormous challenges of the present and future.

So, what should be done? First and foremost, one must enable the objects that are kept in European collections to be more than European intellectual frameworks generally allow. That means leaving behind limited conceptualizations, in which they merely serve to illustrate museum narratives or punctuate political or scientific debates. It also means rethinking the spatiality in museums: as meeting spaces in which people can engage in dialogue with, and be puzzled over, material expressions; as spaces for juxtapositions, rooms for discovery, and settings that encourage scholars and laypeople alike to think forwards, not just backwards, with and about these material entities. Juxtapositions transcending disciplinary, regional and taxonomic frameworks encourage us to ask new questions.

Museums, in other words, should be workshops for the production of knowledge and places where things, which have never been merely ‘ethnographic objects’, can be encountered and questioned in order to reveal their comprehensive qualities – as living beings, as testimonies of creative expression, and as components of material archives. There is no question that German ethnographic museums deserve recognition for the preservation of their extensive collections. Yet they can do much more. Now is the moment to join those who are putting into practice what others have been arguing about, often in the German sense of ‘*streiten*’ rather than ‘*argumentieren*’. Now is the time to invest in a collaborative and outward-looking production and dissemination of ‘world knowledge’ that has been hidden in backrooms and storages. The original idea that drove the creation of German ethnographic museums as well as recent museological reinventions – from Aotearoa New Zealand to Canada – are pointing the way back to the future of Humboldtian museums.²

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² Being written in the *shortcut* format, this article cannot exhaustively review the relevant literature. Instead, our goal was to allude to two key limitations in the ‘German debate’: an insufficient awareness of the history of German ethnographic museums, and an equally insufficient engagement with museological reinventions beyond Germany, as through Indigenous museologies. The reader is invited to engage with our work on both topics and, through this, the relevant literature: <https://uncpress.org/book/9780807854303/objects-of-culture/> and <https://www.chbeck.de/penny-glenn-humboldtschatten/product/27784851> as well as <https://uhpress.hawaii.edu/title/refocusing-ethnographic-museums-through-oceanic-lenses/> and <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526147974/>