II

SPECIAL SECTION

Introduction

Beyond the Nature/Culture Divide—Reimagining Human–Environment Relations in and through Museums

Philipp Schorch and Nicholas Thomas

Given the dramatic impact of human action on the environment, evidenced in climate change and biodiversity loss, it has been widely recognized that humanity needs to reimagine its environmental relations. Yet, the deeply entrenched separation of concepts of "culture" and "nature" in Western thought and museums forms a major impediment. Western institutions and legal frameworks define and govern sites of "natural" and/or "cultural" significance; meanwhile, museums promote "cultural" and/or "natural" heritage. Reflecting recent and ongoing efforts to deconstruct the "nature/culture" divide, and to creatively reimagine museum collections as archives of environmental knowledge, this special issue considers how the museums of the future might lead the way in reimagining and reconceptualizing human–environment relations. Advocating a cross-disciplinary approach across anthropology, the arts, and natural history, the authors explore three pressing questions: (1) As knowledge-generating institutions, how were museums historically implicated in the conceptual and actual segregation of "natural" and "cultural" knowledge, and to what extent does this continue to be the case? (2) How can we access materialized human–environment relations conserved in material things, such as Indigenous "artifacts" and "specimens," and generate novel insights across different systems of being and knowing, such as Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies? (3) In what ways can innovative forms of scholarly engagement, curatorship, and experimental exhibitions reactivate historical collections as creative technologies, and so promote the reimagination of human–environmental relations on a larger scale?

Building on *Museum Worlds*'s commitment to mapping regional, theoretical, and methodological debates, this special section, inspired by years of collaborative research and a workshop that gathered university and museum scholars from Britain and Germany, endeavors to unpack the "nature/culture" divide. The intention is to transform the perception of museum collections from static configurations to evolving archives abundant in interlinked cultural and environmental insights. The authors delve into the historical legacy of museums, aiming to comprehend their influential role in cultivating the divide between "natural" and "cultural" domains and to question the persistence of such divisions in contemporary contexts. This is accompanied by a deep dive into the insights embodied within natural and cultural collection items, emphasizing the importance of bridging disparate epistemological and ontological systems, both Western and non-Western, with a particular focus on the Americas and the Pacific. In doing so, the special section

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presents fresh curatorial insights and exhibitionary methodologies that can breathe new life into historical collections, underlining and promoting the need for a reimagined understanding of human–environment relations in and through museums.

Beyond the Nature/Culture Divide

In the Western tradition, the distinction between "nature" and "culture" derives principally from Aristotle's *Physics II* (Barnes 1984). Throughout the Enlightenment and the development of the modern sciences, scholars such as René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Locke separated "nature" and "society" (Aldeia and Alves 2019; Latour 1993; Uggla 2010). The human or Anthropos had thereby been put into focus and on top of a hierarchy, with "nature" being isolated from humans, and existing for them and their needs. This divide can also be seen within the academy, in which the Scientific Revolution and its aftermath have led to a division of the natural sciences and humanities (Spencer et al. 2019), or, in the German context, of *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften* (Miller 2021). This division remains entrenched to this day, as can be witnessed in ongoing discussions such as those of nature versus nurture (Jahoda 1993; Nettle 2009), and objective versus subjective data gathering (Bradshaw and Bekoff 2000). In the case of anthropology, its formation as a discipline emphasized a separation of "nature" and "culture" (Bennett 2015; MacCormack and Strathern 1980). It is ironic, then, that anthropology has itself challenged this distinction, with a prominent example being Philippe Descola (2005), *Par-delà nature et culture*.

The "nature/culture" divide is nowadays often seen—by many scholars but also by politicians, artists, and activists—as the origin of the exploitation of the environment leading to current challenges like the climate crisis and biodiversity loss. The concept of "natureculture" promises to overcome the dualism by considering ecological relationships as both biophysically and socially constituted (Haraway 2003; Malone and Ovenden 2017). Furthermore, research has shown that many "non-Western" and Indigenous societies live lives based on ontological foundations that do not separate humans from other beings, such as animals, or wider environments (Dürr et al. 2020; Hereniko and Schorch 2018; Viveiros de Castro 2014). In the case of Rapa Nui (Easter Island), for example, the word *kaiŋa* refers to both land and uterus. This ontological unison of people and land is shared across "Polynesia" and unsettles imposed separations as "natural" versus "cultural" heritage (Schorch et al. 2020). Different ontological frameworks have produced political effects, as in the case of the Whanganui River in Aotearoa New Zealand, which has, due to its sacred status in the Māori world, been granted legal personhood (O'Donnell and Talbot-Jones 2018). However, such insights and developments remain fragmented with little public effect on a global scale, the kind of momentum that would be needed to effectively tackle urgent problems such as the "Anthropocene," a controversial term coined to describe a new geological epoch that emphasizes the human influence upon the state and fate of planet Earth (Haraway 2015; Trischler 2016; Tsing et al. 2017). In sum, one can discern that the "nature/culture" divide has been questioned across the disciplinary spectrum, with arguments highlighting relationality, interconnectedness, and a processual understanding of life. However, across Western institutions, "nature" and "culture" in practice remain largely separated into different regimes of knowledge and heritage.

In the context of museums, the provenances of material things, mainly "cultural" but increasingly also "natural," associated with colonial histories have become a focus of study and controversy (Lidchi and Allan 2020; Sarr and Savoy 2018; von Oswald 2022). "Natural" specimens and "cultural" artifacts or works of art were often collected together, by the same people, from the same people, yet subsequently separated and dispatched to different institutions associated with different disciplines, knowledge regimes, curatorial protocols, and modes of exhibition (Simpson 2021; Thomas 2021). To what extent such nonbinary forms of collecting were either deliberate actions or pragmatic responses on single excursions or voyages remains to be investigated (Gascoigne 2009). Even though the origin of Western museums can be traced back to cabinets of curiosity (Daston and Park 1998; Findlen 2004), which could be considered cross-disciplinary arenas from a contemporary perspective, the division of "nature" and "culture" established throughout the evolution of the modern sciences also brought about a separation within the museum world. Institutions were divided into natural history and human culture; collections, initially assembled together during

expeditions, were separated accordingly. Furthermore, up to this day, Indigenous art is often considered and portrayed apart from Western art (Clifford 1988; Gordon-Walker 2019). Natural history museums are now beginning to strengthen their focus on reconnecting "nature" and "culture"; one example is the newly developed BIOTOPIA–Naturkundemuseum Bayern in Munich, Germany (BIOTOPIA–Naturkundemuseum Bayern 2021), which set out to become a museum of life sciences (see Rubinstein and Schmitz, this issue). In ethnographic museums devoted to "culture," however, one can hardly find any emphasis on "natural specimens" and related research, especially if they have, due to their institutional histories, become separated from the natural sciences (Penny 2021; Sholts et al. 2016). One exception can be found at Cambridge where the Environment Research Growth Network is exploring new avenues for measuring environmental change through museum collections, including those of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) (see Herle as well as Joy, this issue).[1]

Interconnected histories provide compelling reasons for a new analysis looking holistically at "cultural" and "natural" collections. While the association between the "cultural" and "natural" has often been seen negatively by Indigenous and Western actors alike, as an expression of hierarchies between human societies and/or between "culture" and "nature," it is time to revalue these connections in the context of environmental issues, Indigenous interests in botanical material, and the deep connectedness of human life and ecological environments. The premise of a distinction between "cultural" and "natural" is dubious at the material level, too. "Natural" specimens are mostly "preparations," often artfully and elaborately contrived to spectacular visual effect. "Natural" history itself is a "material" culture with artful qualities. Indigenous knowledge is inscribed in natural history collections and samples of natural materials in ethnographic collections, while scientific data such as information about the diets and habitats of fauna was commonly obtained from Indigenous intermediaries who were frequently the primary field collectors of specimens, as well as the primary sources of the cultural knowledge associated with artifacts (Harrison et al. 2013; Schaffer et al. 2009). This hybrid perspective inspires the present collection of articles, and their associated and ongoing investigations of human–environment relations in and through museums.

Reimagining Human–Environment Relations in and through Museums

This special issue draws on ongoing collaborative research between British and German institutions, addressing connections and comparisons between Britain and Germany—two nations vigorously involved in scientific travel, anthropology, and museum development since the eighteenth century (Buschmann 2018; Campbell and Flis 2018; Penny 2002). The participation of German scholars in British expeditions was an important conduit for the trafficking of collections of diverse kinds across European scientific milieux; exchanges of items between museums continued through much of the twentieth century.

The research group informing this special section is investigating the co-constitution and circulation of cultural and natural collections. Temporally, the research threads address the "before" and "after" of collecting, considering both the uses and values of artifacts and natural resources in Indigenous contexts, prior to collection, as well as their biographies as specimens. The inquiries also look toward a future. Museum collections are already widely reimagined and reactivated through collaborative research with Indigenous scholars and communities. There is scope to do so in a more focused way, in response to the environmental humanities and social sciences as well as more broadly to public recognition of the climate crisis. Conceptually, the research group's initiatives approach both "natural" and "cultural" holdings as archives of environmental knowledge, which offer distinct repositories that are mostly neglected in environmental studies. Moreover, these holdings offer resources for contemporary cultural practices, and sources of inspiration for narratives about sustainability and future change. The research group capitalizes on the rich methodologies of "entangled histories" and "the museum as method," understanding collections as relational assemblages—as outcomes of and evidence for human intentions over time (Thomas 1991, 2016). Collections were also spatially situated, moving between original contexts, cross-cultural encounters, and private and public collections in Britain, Germany, and elsewhere. They are susceptible to further travel and re-activation, especially through dialogue with Indigenous makers and other experts. Analytically, the project informing this special section scopes and develops new techniques for the examination of materials, for

example, through wood identification, enabling refined understandings of the identities and composition of artifacts and specimens to address pressing questions of environmental change and cultural adaptation.

The present collection of articles, which have grown out of the ongoing collaborative research, consists of individual contributions that cover a diverse range of subjects, giving the section a strong cross-disciplinary foundation. Articles explore the historic and ongoing damage to environments caused by "objective" science and collecting, as well as the more vexed questions encountered in ordinary museum work. Amazonian feather headdresses, for example, are used as a basis to explore the multifarious ways, past and present, in which the relationships between "nature" and "culture" have been construed (see Herle as well as Herzog-Schröder, this issue). Insights from Cambridge's museum collections (see Ashby as well as Joy, this issue) blend with studies of German museological initiatives (see Rubinstein and Schmitz, this issue), collections and past collecting expeditions in order to create a strong sense of the connections between ongoing local and global efforts in order to ask and answer the core themes, and shape new museum futures beyond the "nature/culture" divide and toward reimagined human–environment relations. Overall, the authors point to the various dimensions of "nature/culture" entanglements at the level of disciplinary, collecting, and colonial *histories* (Ashby); the material constitution of material *things* (Herle as well as Herzog-Schröder); *landscapes* of heritage (Joy); and concepts, approaches, and principles of *curation* (Rubinstein and Schmitz)—all of which can be studied and reimagined in and through museums. To sum up this introduction and connect the reader to the articles that follow, we offer a concrete example or vignette to allude to the multidimensional "nature/culture" entanglements.

Material Cultures/Natural Histories: Connected Collections, Indigenous Knowledges, Museum Futures

Museum collections of the kind that interest us here were typically assembled and brought into being generations ago. They were, moreover, not one-off creations analogous to old scientific instruments, made at a particular moment; rather they are assemblages formed over time through periodic addition and subtraction. The values and purposes of particular collections have, moreover, been understood in different ways over time. The rationale for a museum's formation is not generally the same as the rationale for maintaining the collection or the institution today.[2]

Reinhart Koselleck, the historian of ideas, reflected on "the disposability of history." The specific question that concerned him was the sense in which, around the time of the French Revolution, it became possible to see History (in the singular) as both the product of human agency (rather than providence or fate) and historical narrative—and similarly, as something people could "dispose of," that is, define and shape, in ways that suited their purposes in particular contexts. His erudite inquiry prompts us to ask whether and how collections are disposable in analogous respects. Koselleck's argument was not a correlative of what became more or less axiomatic in postmodernist thinking: that history (or the body, gender, or the polity) was discursively constructed. His concern was to qualify that thesis, insisting that the "given conditions" of history may "escape disposition or makeability," in other words, agency is partial and limited; history is also something that "happened" (Koselleck 2004: 204).

The items brought together in vast numbers in museum collections exemplify the capacity of collectors and curators to present things in ways that their original creators (and owners) did not envisage, this is the decontextualization that commentators have long lamented. If, in the nineteenth century, scholar-curators thought the comparative collections that they assembled would empower a new science of global technology or of cultural traits that would enable human affinities and migrations to be mapped, this disposition of the material lapsed as anthropology, archaeology, and related disciplines shifted their interests toward social relationships, cultural symbols, and questions of power and hegemony. Artifact collections were thus widely reconceived as "heritage." This contextualization, increasingly prominent since the 1980s, is at once familiar yet also heterogeneous: the issues that it brings out and what it means for different groups vary widely. But in this context Koselleck's question might be raised: In what ways do collections bear "given

Figure 1. Mark Adams's large format triptych of the stumps of tōtara cut down by participants in Cook's voyage in 1773 (1995. *Astronomers' Point. Tōtara stumps. 1773.* Silver gelatin prints.) Courtesy of the artist.

conditions" that are not disposable or makeable? Do aspects of their historical formation constrain the versatility that contemporary curators and cultural activists might wish to exploit? Are artifacts "stuck" in museological regimes that only enable so much remaking?

An optimistic response might foreground the versatility of artifacts and natural specimens that artistic interventions in museums—themselves extensively debated for over 20 years—have (re)discovered and mobilized. Mark Adams's images, for example, capture and reveal events of *history* surrounding the landing of Captain James Cook's *Resolution* at Tamatea (Dusky Sound) in the far south of Aotearoa New Zealand and his exploration and charting of the sound from March to April 1773. The *landscape* of pristine forest on a low hill was cleared, and the location was named Astronomers' Point. The naturalist George Forster later eulogized: "The superiority of a state of civilization over that of barbarism could not be more clearly stated, than by the alterations and improvements we had made in this place" (Forster 2000: 105). In the 1990s, photographer Mark Adams responded with these haunting images of the stumps of the trees cut down 220 years earlier. The images were juxtaposed, in an act of visual *curation*, with photos taken at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, London, of botanical specimens—particular material *things*—collected during the same voyage, evoking the travels of plants and the global project of economic botany. Together, these visualizations effect what the Indigenous Australian artist Brook Andrew has described as "bringing into the light" the signs of land, culture, and history—the multiple layers of "nature/culture" entanglements—that proliferate in anthropological, natural history, and other archives, and in museum collections (Jorgensen and McLean 2017; Thomas and Andrew 2008). Notwithstanding the "given conditions," and the painful legacies of colonial violence that collecting institutions unevenly bear, the museum can thus constitute a particular and powerful creative technology, as this special section sets out to show.

Figure 2. Mark Adams's photograph of the kidney fern specimens collected by the naturalist Forster and brought back to Britain (1995. *Trichomanes reniforme. Tamatea Dusky Sound. Johann Forster.* Silver gelatin print.) Courtesy of the artist.

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NOTES

1. An overview of the Environment Research Growth Network, which is part of the Research and Collections Programme at University of Cambridge, is available online. "Environment Research Growth Network." *University of Cambridge, Research & Collections Programme.* https://collectionsresearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/research-growth-networks/environment (accessed 16 January 2023).
2. The following paragraphs are developed from "Museum—Archive—Infrastructure" (McCarthy et al. 2021).

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