

Forum as Laboratory

The Cross-Cultural Infrastructure of Ethnographic Knowledge and Material Potentialities

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We visited the Humboldt Lab in early July 2015, shortly after the conference *Positioning Ethnological Museums in the 21st Century* organised by the Volkswagen Foundation in cooperation with Deutscher Museumsbund, which set out to discuss 'the need for a critical appraisal of the past, present, and future of ethnological museums',¹ as well as our own symposium *Curatopia: Histories, Theories, Practices – Museums and the Future of Curatorship* held at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München.² The presented perspectives and surrounding discussions, which also inform our commentary here, seem to indicate that the 'shifting sands of the museum world' (Thomas quoted in Phillips 2011) have reached the shores of Germany. Moreover, the Humboldt Forum, one of the most significant and contested cultural projects of the Federal Republic, has attracted the critical attention of museum professionals, scholars, politicians and Indigenous groups, among others, on a global scale, resulting in a hotly debated spectrum that spans from (post)colonial celebration to (neo)colonial accusation. The coalition 'No Humboldt 21!',³ for example, demands moral redress, political concessions and legal reparations associated with Germany's colonial legacy which, it is argued, gains further legitimisation due to the reincarnation of the former imperial Berlin Palace as Humboldt Forum for the world. This often polarising positioning is further exemplified in a recent feuilleton 'battle' in *Die Zeit* (11.06.2015) sparring critic Hanno Rauterberg and foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier through the discursive confrontation of 'Palast der Verlogenheit' with 'Weltvernunft!' across a seemingly unbridgeable divide.

We suggest, however, that beneath this divisive expanse flows an estuary of possibilities.

¹
<https://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/veranstaltungen/veranstaltungsarchiv/detailansicht-veranstaltung/news/detail/artikel/positioning-ethnological-museums-in-the-21st-century/marginal/4670.html>

²
<http://www.assembling-the-transpacific.ethnologie.uni-muenchen.de/curatopia/index.html>

³
<http://www.no-humboldt21.de/resolution/>

The Humboldt Lab, entering into this volatile climate, has attempted to negotiate the spaces *in-between*, on the one hand, the radically changing and supposedly less Eurocentric world of the 21st century and, on the other, the corresponding museological re-configuration of the so-called non-European collections of the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst in the heart of Germany. It does not take much insider knowledge and critical awareness to recognise the enormous challenges associated with such an ambitious mission. This makes it even more laudable that the Humboldt Lab invited us as external observers to comment on the project, with a particular focus on the opportunities and limits of collaborative projects. Before we do so, however, such undertaking needs to be qualified. We have not been directly involved in any of the 30 projects constituting the Humboldt Lab over the last three years. Both of us have worked and researched in and with museums for many years in a variety of settings, and we are very much aware of the complexities of museological work which cannot – and should not be attempted – to be sufficiently addressed in a commentary essay. Given this context, we found it refreshing how openly Agnes Wegner, Managing Director, and Andrea Scholz, curatorial member of the team, introduced us to the project and the final exhibition 'Prinzip Labor', and shared with us some of their successes and failures. The exhibited displays as well as the moderated talks in this publication also attest to this transparent ethos nurturing a 'culture of critique' which is much needed to lift the quality of the above described discursive terrain but which, according to Wegner (Talk 2), has been the main challenge even within the institution itself. Our commentary, then, can only be seen as an attempt to provide further food for critical thought rather than an analysis of the underpinning structural arrangements. The inter-related distinction between 'Laboratory Concept' and 'Laboratory Institution', as suggested by Friedrich von Bose (Talk 2), is fruitful for this purpose. That is, we approach the laboratory principle through the double-lens of 'infrastructure' and 'potentiality' as well as the cross-cultural resonances and dissonances in the spaces *in-between* provoked through the presence of Pacific collections and exhibitions in a German museum institution.

The three talks in this book reveal that it is still an open question how the 'Berlin Modell' postulating 'multiple perspectives', 'audience focus' and 'contemporary relevance' can be realised as long as the battles for 'Deutungshoheit' are fought from territorially con-

finised disciplinary positions and amount to a hermetically sealed 'Burgenbau', as Wegner (Talk 2) aptly put it. As we have argued elsewhere, the desperate grip on Deutungsmacht, which continues to paralyse museological discussions and practices, is often not only politically and morally reprehensible but intellectually and methodologically flawed (Schorch and Kahanu 2015). What is much needed, then, apart from a supportive infrastructural architecture and intellectual geography of the institution, is a conscious awareness of, and constructive engagement with, the inescapably interdisciplinary and cross-cultural infrastructure of ethnographic knowledge itself. That is, ethnographic authority can only be dialogically negotiated through a cross-cultural anthropology that is enacted not only through its analytical focus on cross-cultural action, traffic and appropriation, as research increasingly does, but at the level of method, interpretation and representation of the anthropological inquiry itself. How can this laudable goal but difficult task of manoeuvring *in-between* different knowledge worlds, which we have attempted in several instances (Schorch and Hakiwai 2014; Schorch and Kahanu 2015; Schorch, McCarthy and Hakiwai forthcoming), be accomplished?

Despite the limitations and failures emerging in the three talks, we think that the Humboldt Lab has made significant progress on several levels. Wegner's notion or figure of a 'Methodendolmetscher' (Talk 2), for example, deserves to be institutionalised as an integral infrastructural component of exhibition teams. The Lab experiences overall give empirical weight to scholarly claims that contemporary curatorship requires constant cross-cultural translation (Clifford 2010; Schorch forthcoming), and that a museum should be understood not only as an institution or collection but as a method (Thomas 2010). Moreover, Wegner's personal experience highlights that disciplinary boundaries and positions can be as seemingly incommensurable as their cultural variations. Disciplinary differences thus appear not only as intellectual constructions but as cultural differences in their own right. They equally require translation, which makes a 'method translator' a museological key figure for facilitating the required decentring of interpretive authority and its distribution across cross-cultural – including cross-disciplinary – networks.

For this purpose, two of the Lab projects, 'Sharing Knowledge' and 'Object Biographies', seem particularly promising. 'Sharing Knowledge' has begun to establish a virtual platform – through the

intervention of a museum experiment – for the consciously cross-cultural configuration of ethnographic knowledge that is reminiscent of other innovative and successful projects such as the Reciprocal Research Network and the GRASAC Knowledge Sharing Database in Canada (Phillips 2011). ‘Object Biographies’ has offered the material substance for such virtual co-constructions through ‘objects from the depot’ that ‘became the starting point for scholarly cooperation’. Both modules, it seems to us, could be fruitfully developed in conjunction. The key thereby is scholarly cooperation, which goes deeper than the surface engagement with communities as sources, as rightly critiqued by Larissa Förster (Talk 1), towards unsettling the prevailing grip on authorship and ‘Deutungshoheit’, a conceptual goal that, according to Viola König (Talk 1), remains to be realised.

It is vital to note that such envisaged, conscious cross-cultural infrastructure of ethnographic knowledge must be built through the translational dialectic of cross-cultural resonances and dissonances. That is, serious cross-cultural study searches for resonances between different culturally grounded analytical positions and their respective articulation and movement through a common sphere while opening spaces for cross-cultural dissonances provoked through the ‘untranslatable’ (Bhabha 1994). Cross-cultural dissonances thus become a cross-cultural finding throughout the process of collaborative anthropological inquiry – and the productive and conflictual moments of laboratory failures (von Bose, Talk 2) – rather than an inhibition from the outset caused through Eurocentric projections of anthropological imaginations. The ‘[Open] Secrets’ project, for example, clearly shows that certain knowledge cannot be shared but can still be exhibited through exhibitionary tactics such as gaps and the presence of absences. Importantly, however, ‘these boundaries should be negotiated with representatives from the cultures of origin’, as the project team rightly concluded. Such thoughtful reflections, responses, and difficult conversations were encapsulated in a series of discussions related to ‘[Open]Secrets’ that were conducted and then subsequently posted on the Humboldt Forum website. A project with less successful exhibition outcomes nonetheless leaves an important blueprint by consciously contributing to the establishment of an infrastructure towards meaningful cross-cultural engagement. Given our argument, this negotiation has to be performed at the level of cross-cultural scholarship rather than being confined to mere community consultation, and as continuous engagements rather than retrospective gestures,

which in this case proved to be harmful and required sensitive cross-cultural diplomacy. This partial laboratory failure emphasises how fragile and potentially disastrous the dual focus on questioning the own ways of thinking and being while opening to other epistemologies and ontologies can be. The resonating spaces *in-between* are insidiously fraught with dissonances.

Our arrival in Berlin was heralded by a heatwave of historic proportions. While walking in the shades of monolithic European structures such as churches, government institutions and university buildings, we were struck by how Native people often dwell within these shadows; that the journey of the ‘Other’ to Germany, whether embodied as so-called ethnographic material from centuries ago or as contemporary academic individuals, is still largely one of displacement and dissonance. The Humboldt Lab – through its numerous projects – has explored various means of contextualizing and remedying this displacement by connecting collections to contemporary communities of origin, facilitating exchanges that enabled the museum to deepen its understanding of its historical holdings. More importantly, however, these exchanges enabled Indigenous communities to (re)connect to ancestral practices, some of which had been lost for generations (see ‘Sharing Knowledge’). This dynamic flow of knowledge thus enables the museum – as instigator, witness, and recorder – to perhaps replace some of what has been (dis)placed centuries ago.

It is well documented that some of the most important Pacific material resides not culturally in Oceania, but ethnographically in Europe. A potential concern arising for Indigenous communities, who are well represented – materially if not always contextually – in the current Oceanic exhibition in the Ethnologisches Museum, is that when moving to the Humboldt Forum these collections might once again recede into the shadows. Moreover, many ethnographic museums have shuttered the crowded cabinet of curiosities or ‘artefacts’ in favour of minimalist ‘art’ displays, a ‘post-modern recontextualisation’ through which Pacific material ontologies continue to be reduced to, or equated with, Eurocentric categories (Schorch and Kahanu 2015). Pilgrimages of visitation by Indigenous people to these sites are often cost prohibitive but sometimes their evidence can be seen in the shadows, like bundled offerings left behind for the Hawaiian female image Kihawahine, indicating the belief that the mana or power of these images as material manifestations of Hawaiian people persists. While legitimate issues may exist with regard to the initial collection of some of these cultural treasures

and whether ethical limits were reached or exceeded (Schindlbeck 2008), the more important conversation for us is whether the journey of these ancestral figures is indeed over.

In Hawai'i, Bishop Museum's *E Kū Ana Ka Paia: Unification, Responsibility and the Kū Images* evidenced how a temporary exhibition of loaned material was capable of contributing to the Hawaiian community's consciousness, engendering conversations around politics and nationhood, masculinity, and kuleana or responsibility (Tengan 2010, 2014). Opportunities for engagement that are thoroughly informed, envisioned, and implemented by community members both within and external to the Bishop Museum may have once been rare but are increasingly seen as the new norm. Applying such a model in Germany, however, may be much more challenging as efforts to even make inquiries of institutional material holdings, as in the instance of *iwi kupuna* or Native Hawaiian human remains, have – even in comparison to other European countries – often generated little or no response. Indigenous communities might easily despair under these circumstances, but we believe that the Humboldt Lab offers a glimmer of hope by offering examples of true collaborations and partnerships, thus (re)connecting histories with contemporary legacies and (re)awakening hibernating relationships and shifting genealogies (Schorch and Kahanu 2015). What the Humboldt Lab, understood as a boundless museological *principle* rather than a limited temporo-spatial *institution*, provides, is a means of continued cross-cultural exchange by creating an infrastructure of potentiality for future engagement and activation, whether it is through exhibitions, programs, or the collections.

Hawaiian scholar Manulani Meyer (2003), a proponent of the depth and rigor of Indigenous epistemologies and knowledge systems, speaks of the *muliwai*, a place where fresh water and salt water meet; where the river flows into the sea. It is a critical habitat where marine life congregates as the *muliwai* ebbs and flows with the tide, changing shape and form daily and seasonally. In metaphorical terms, the *muliwai* is a location and state of dissonance where and when two potentially disharmonious elements meet, but it is not 'a space in between', rather, it is its *own space*, a territory unique in each circumstance, depending on the size and strength of the river, the width of the opening, and the strength of a recent hard rain. Rather than being a threat to encountering habitats, this living, breathing, and changing *muliwai* is a source of life and *potentiality*. The Humboldt Lab has offered concrete examples of how so-called ethnographic collections within European museums need

to be viewed not as mere 'contact zones' (Clifford 1997) but as areas of creative dissonance, capable of creating new life, new initiatives, new encounters and engagements. Anthropological curatorship and its exhibitory manifestation, we would like to conclude, is most meaningful if it captures and opens the locations and moments of the *muliwai* as the *own space of potentialities* arising from in-between cultural worlds.

Museological labour thus faces the constant challenge of engaging with the effects and opportunities as well as the limits and risks of the cross-cultural dialectic of resonances and dissonances. There has to be a constant analytical movement between the 'here' and 'there', the 'now' and 'back then', to make sense of the underpinning, messy entanglements (Talu and Quanchi 1995). To be sure, anthropological knowledge production has never been a linear affair, despite the undeniable power dynamics underpinning such a concept as 'colonialism'. That is, there have been processes of co-creation since the moment of first encounter, the invention of anthropology and the emergence of ethnographic collections and museums. Museum work, then, has never been an exclusive business since it has always relied on, and had to engage with, others as informants, negotiators, interlocutors and so on. These processes might not have entered official or public perspectives at the time but they still took place. We need institutional histories to really delve deep into these cross-cultural complexities, and museums need to historicise themselves more radically through the medium of the exhibition. At the same time, we cannot glorify the present in which co-creation seems to become a trend and almost fashionable must. Quite often, however, such initiatives can be unmasked as shallow political gestures. They lack methodological rigor and thus fail to address the key question we have followed in this commentary: How can we seriously co-create knowledge across cultural boundaries? This is a methodological question and we hardly run into approaches that are able to move beyond the 'good old' self-other-dichotomy and dissect the *muliwai* or *own space* in-between people, as cultural human beings rather than essentialised ethnological types (Schorch 2014), things, places and knowledge across their global connections. The nature of such anthropological-curatorial inquiry is, like 'the very nature of exhibiting', of course, 'a contested terrain' (Karp and Lavine 1991). The Humboldt Lab has not shied away but has made some headway towards the great promise of museums, that is, the potential for 'making things public' (Latour and Weibel 2005) by revealing the contested processes leading to the defini-

tion of categories and the interpretation of cultural worlds, and by giving 'faces' to decisions and public expression to controversies, in short, by conceptualising exhibitions as *processes* to be revealed rather than *products* to be presented (Schorch 2009). If we want it or not, museums inescapably *are* laboratories, and the infrastructure of ethnographic knowledge irreducibly is cross-cultural. It is up to us, then, to release these realities from the shadows of their often unconscious confinement and lift them to the *conscious space of potentialities*.

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