Leonor Faber-Jonker

Touching history

Objects as witnesses, witnesses of objects

In Berlin, history is tangible. It strikes me every time I visit the city. Empty plots, fading shop signs, and crumbling facades bear witness to the city's tumultuous past. Monuments bear scars. The bronze reliefs of the *Siegessäule* (moved to its current location by the Nazis) are pockmarked with 1945 bullet holes. After Germany's reunification, the tarnished *Reichstag* was rebuilt with a transparent dome, while inside, the graffiti of German soldiers was left in place. The echoes of a divided city, the devastation of war. A few weeks ago, on my way to the book presentation of *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit* in Humboldt University, I had some time to spare and visited the *Tränenpalast*. Once, this benign-looking building had been an entrance point to the West from the Eastern half of the city. A free exhibition evokes the injustices of a city divided. Family heirlooms are on display. Treasured objects, carried in small suitcases by people fleeing the GDR. A set of tableware, buried in East-Germany in the 1950s, only to be dug up decades later, after the fall of the wall. And now, in the museum, viewed by visitors from all over the world, these highly personal mementoes carry new meanings as symbols of injustice and defiance.

I seem to be making a detour. What, after all, do mementoes from lives behind the Wall have to do with the German capital's ethnographic collections? In my opinion, everything. Currently under construction, a stone's throw from the *Museumsinsel* and the German Historical Museum (DHM), is the Humboldt Forum, to open late 2019. The site itself is of historic, highly symbolic importance: the Hohenzollern Palace, damaged in the Second World War and blown up by GDR city planners, is being rebuilt. The GDR *Palast der Republik* has been demolished to make way for the project. The plan to show the ethnographic collections of the Museum of Asian Art,

the Ethnological Museum, Humboldt University and the Stadtmuseum Berlin here, a new heartland for science and culture in the capital, was met with a storm of protest. Activists considered the concept to create a world-leading research centre for 'non-European cultures', Eurocentric and restorative. A continuation of colonial thinking. Particularly hurtful was the thought that objects acquired in a colonial context would be on display as treasures, in a palace that had always been about 'representing power and global relevance'.[i] Whatever will be on display at the Humboldt Forum, it will be tinged by past and present memories.

Against a backdrop of activists' demands and media that highlight the disgrace of showing colonial *Raubstücke*, museum professionals and ethnographic and historical researchers agree: non-European artefacts can no longer be displayed as they once were, as neutral objects, examples of 'different' cultures described in generalizing terms, without explanation or even knowledge of the circumstances under which they ended up in Berlin. The edited volume *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*, outcome of a two-day conference held in April 2017, aims to foster debate on provenance research, essential for shining a new light on these contested artefacts. The digital publication breaks a lance for *systematic* provenance research. Because it is impossible to individually research each and every ethnographic object, editor Larissa Förster explained at the presentation, it is necessary to prioritize: objects acquired in a context of violence, such as war trophies, and items from the former German colonies can be identified as priorities. Collaboration with communities the objects originate from is crucial in this. As provenance researchers try to piece together the biography of an object, their research will range from the institution's archive to archives and oral history in the country of origin. German researchers, writes editor Sarah Fründt, 'cannot *do* this on their own, neither can they *discuss* it on their own'. [ii] They must reach out.

Several contributions to the edited volume are dedicated to collaborations with source communities, exploring a.o. the possibilities (and many challenges) of digital

information sharing of ethnographic collections. Amber Aranui writes about the necessity of respecting the knowledge of communities: 'It is naïve of us to think that just because we work in museums and have extensive knowledge of the physical object itself (...), we have knowledge or even an understanding of its purpose, its designs and its meanings.'[iii] Similarly, Rowley, Jakobsen and Wallace point out that the major benefit of an online research community for institutions, 'is the ability to connect and exchange information with First Nations communities who possess deep cultural knowledge and expertise.'[iv] The importance of an *actual* encounter shines through in the contribution by Namibian historian Jeremy Silvester: a visit to the ethnological museum of the University of Zürich with his colleague Dr. Martha Akawa, where they found themselves confronted with 'fragments of a familiar past far from home' ('They were beautifully displayed (...) but this drained them from meaning'), sparked the 'Africa Accessioned' project, a mapping of African artefacts in European collections.[v] 'Provenance research', Silvester writes, 'can move us from storage to story lines.'[vi] Or in the words of Wayne Modest: can open a 'horizon of possibilities'.[vii]

Source communities can provide greater historical depth, not only because of their 'deep knowledge', but because the stories that emerge in new encounters. In fact, *assuming* communities have an old, 'deep knowledge' smacks of Eurocentric paternalism, as if non-European groups have somehow remained static, unchanged – some groups, like the Sámi, have in fact retrieved collective knowledge through digitalization programmes.[viii] As time passes, the meaning of artefacts *can* change for all parties involved.[ix] The second and fourth part of the volume focus on research programmes currently underway in Germany and upcoming/ recent museum exhibitions respectively. It is striking that the research involved almost always begins in the institution's archives. Only when a significant amount of information is gathered, are the source communities involved. While this makes sense from a researcher's point of view, perhaps the right thing to do would be to turn things around. After all, provenance research begins with *questions*. Provenance

researchers must never assume they, or their questions, are somehow neutral or universal. Opening the dialogue in an early stage, may lead to different questions for all involved. This is all the more important because 'provenance research' itself can have different meanings in different cultures.[x]

In a similar vein, it is necessary to question the dichotomies between good – bad, victims – perpetrators, us – them, inherent to much of the debate surrounding the Humboldt Forum. Heike Hartmann, curator of the DHM, stated during the book presentation that the *Raubstücke der Vergangenheit* could now be put to a positive use. But while there are countless objects that were, indeed, taken as trophies, robbed from graves, violently disowned, there is a problem with approaching all ethnographic objects as 'stolen goods'. The role of the original owner is rubbed out, the agency of source communities ignored.[xi] Moreover, this approach assumes that colonialism is something we have left behind, that we can start with a clean slate. By pointing out the injustices of collecting on the one hand, and the task of *Wiedergutmachung*, or moral duty of today's museum on the other, many contributors to the volume put distance between themselves and the practices of their institutional predecessors. Efforts to understand collections in the context of colonial *history* are important, but not enough. During the book presentation, Elisio Macamo, live on Skype from Basel, held the term postcolonial against the light, mercilessly showing its brittle state. 'We know there was a colonial context, but we must ask what this means for the way we understand the world, the way we do research.' Our frame of reference, our language and thought is determined by a world built on yesterday's collections. 'It is even possible', he asked, 'to truly criticize in our language?'

Museums are said to be about people, not things. Maybe more precisely, they are about stories. Stories of people. Stories of things. Stories that intersect, clash, flow together. The contribution by Christian Feest highlights the fact that institutions make their own stories, the baffling rebuff 'Don't worry, we know how to call these

things', an ultimate example.[xii] We, today's academics and museum professionals, must be conscious of the stories we are making. It is not enough to enter into a dialogue with source communities. We must return to the material things, and enter into a dialogue with the object ourselves. The repatriation of 'El Negro', a stuffed Tswana man, in 2000, has shown us how human remains acquired in a colonial context got tangled up with the identity of a Spanish village.[xiii] Researchers have to acknowledge that they, too, relate to the ethnographic collections on a personal level and ask appropriate questions. How do we relate to objects? What meanings do we give them? I have a childhood memory of staring at an Egyptian mummy in a small, local museum in The Hague in the early 1990s. The remains made me ask questions about disease, death, informing ideas about Egypt and archaeology. For generations of European school children, ethnographica have similarly formed puzzle pieces for understanding the world. To enter a meaningful dialogue, it is necessary to acknowledge this long shadow of the colonial past.

As the Humboldt Forum is under construction, experiments are under way for a novel approach to the ethnographic collections it will host. At Humboldt Lab Dahlem, the layers of meaning of ethnographic objects were evoked in the exhibition 'object biographies', the result of a collaborative project.[xiv] Things in museums that once were testimonies of non-European cultures, are recognized as witnesses of European collection practices. But this shift won't happen overnight. At the Humboldt Forum information centre, I picked up an information magazine. The publication presents the Humboldt Forum as a 'cultural centre of international resonance dedicated to intercultural dialogue' and promises to create bridges between the historic collections and the 'pressing questions of today'.[xv] As I was standing amidst moulds of the phoenix-palace's friezes in the information centre, I thought of my last visit to the Ethnologische Museum in Dahlem. I remember the shock of seeing one, just one, Herero object. A large wooden spoon. The label said: Herero, 19th century. Not a word about the German colony, let alone about the Herero and Nama genocide. A gaping distance. What would happen if this seemingly

simple object is scrutinized, re-encountered? What stories will be unlocked? The potential of provenance research is dizzying. It is an intuitive process that should be guided by transparency, a willingness to enter dialogue, and, importantly, the acknowledgement of personal, deeply rooted perspectives.

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[i] See: http://www.no-humboldt21.de/resolution/english/

[ii] Sarah Fründt, 'Introduction' in: Larissa Förster, Iris Edenheiser, Sarah Fründt, Heike Hartmann (ed.), *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit. Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte* (Berlin: Arbeitsgruppe Museum der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie: 2018), 39. Download of the entire book as well as of single contributions at: https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/handle/18452/19768

[iii] Amber Aranui, 'The importance of working with communities. Combining oral history, the archive and institutional knowledge in provenance research. A repatriation Perspective' in: Förster, Edenheiser, Fründt, Hartmann (ed.), *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*, 52-53.

[iv] Susan Rowley, Nicholas Jakobsen and Ryan Wallace, 'The Reciprocal Research Network. Working towards an online research community' in: Förster, Edenheiser, Fründt, Hartmann (ed.), *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*, 88.

[v] Jeremy Silvester, The "Africa Accessioned Network". Do museum collections build bridges or barriers? in Förster, Edenheiser, Fründt, Hartmann (ed.), *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*, 56-57.

[vi] Idem, 62.

[vii] Larissa Förster, 'Einführung' in Förster, Edenheiser, Fründt, Hartmann (ed.), *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*, 283.

[viii] See: Eeva-Kristiina Harlin, 'Recording Sámi heritage in European museums. Creating a database for the people' in Förster, Edenheiser, Fründt, Hartmann (ed.), *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*.

[ix] See: Paolo Ivanov and Kristin Weber-Sinn, 'Shared research. Zur Notwendigkeit einer kooperatieven Provenienzforschung am Beispiel der Tansania Projekte am Ethnologischen Museum Berlin' in: Förster, Edenheiser, Fründt, Hartmann (ed.), *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*, 147.

[x] Trevor Isaac, 'Using the Reciprocal Research Network. Working towards an online research community' in: Förster, Edenheiser, Fründt, Hartmann (ed.), *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*, 93.

[xi] Wiebke Ahrndt, Das koloniale Erbe. Zur Provenienzforschung am übersee Museum Bremen' in: Förster, Edenheiser, Fründt, Hartmann (ed.), *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*, 320 + Hilke Thode-Arora, "From Samoa with love? Samoa Völkerschauen im Deutschen Kaiserreich. Eine Spurensuche." Eine Ausstellung im Museum Fünf Kontinente,

Müchen, und die Kontextualisierung der Sammlung Marquardt' in: Förster, Edenheiser, Fründt, Hartmann (ed.), *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit.*

[xii] Christian Feest, Historical collections research. Some experiences from the past decades, in: Förster, Edenheiser, Fründt, Hartmann (ed.), *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*, 125-126.

[xiii] See: Frank Westerman, *El Negro en ik* (Amsterdam/ Antwerpen: Uitgeverij Atlas, 2004).

[xiv] Iris Edenheiser, 'Einführung' in: Förster, Edenheiser, Fründt, Hartmann (ed.), *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*, 209.

[xv] Berliner Schloss – Extrablatt nr. 3, September 2015, 24 and 26.