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VOICES FROM THE CONFERENCE 1 – Are academics asking the right questions?

The Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne has an impressive entrance hall: the ceiling is so high that it almost feels like being outside. Glass, dark brick stone walls, a shiny stone floor.

For three days the museum is hosting the conference 'Museum Collections in Motion' (15-17 July 2019) that promises 'colonial and postcolonial encounters'. The organizers are anthropologists and historians from the University of Bremen, Cologne and Siegen. The guests are academics, curators and activists.

We are two MA-students from the University of Bremen who are attending the conference with the mission to document our observations and impressions. In between the panels we picked up some of the points raised in the panel discussions and conducted short interviews. We had engaging encounters and hope to transport a fraction of what went on in the three days of the conference.

On day one the opening panel on the history of objects caused a debate among the conference participants. Here are a few of their voices.

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The entrance hall of the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum during the conference
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Monday, 15th July 2019 – Panel One: Looting, Trading, Brokering, Collecting. Locating Agency and Desires.

Chair : Ulrike Lindner

Speakers: Nicholas Thomas, Peter Pels, Bernhard Gissibl

Diskussant: David Anderson

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Ulrike Lindner is a professor of Modern History at the University of Cologne. She is one of the six organizers of the conference.

How would you describe the first panel this morning?

Ulrike Lindner: I think the first session gave a good start for the conference because it showed that there are a lot of controversial points we must discuss here. We talked about the individual stories of objects and we also looked at the agencies of the colonized and colonizers. We heard papers by people who have researched these issues for a long time. This roused quite a controversy because other people thought that colonialism and its brutality and armed conflict wasn't mentioned enough. I thought it was quite a good start because we could see how different audiences interact with the topic of colonial objects and with the topics of colonial violence and how difficult it is to bring audiences together. I think it is a big task for us to do this at this conference, but I think it was a promising beginning.

Why did you start the conference with that particular panel?

Ulrike Lindner: We thought it would be good to start with a historical topic and move to more recent discussions from there. Academic thinking may start with the history of objects, as an activist you would never do that. We (the organizers) are all academics and we will always start with history and context. Afterwards I questioned myself, I thought that we should have started another way. From an academic standpoint it was a logical beginning.

Why is the history of objects important?

Ulrike Lindner: I think the history of objects is very important. If you are only interested in the question whether the objects were looted or not, you miss a lot. Colonial objects have a long history that belongs to both, the colonized and the colonizers. The object's history belongs to the people who produced them, used them, bought them, shipped them. It is important to look at these different arenas in

order to understand the entangled history of the Global South and the Global North. I think restitution for all these objects is an imperative, but it is also important to look at the narratives of the objects. This approach offers the possibility to write a new history: one in which the formerly colonized and the formerly colonizing people can work together.

What can history offer to the debate on restitution?

Ulrike Lindner: History can look at all these interactions. Firstly, the brutal violence: armed conflicts are researched by historians. We know that looting and trading with museums went hand in hand. Historians have researched this. Secondly, European colonizers also had to negotiate. Of course, this was a very asymmetric situation, but, at the beginning of the colonial conquest, it was a field in which indigenous people had quite a leeway to negotiate. They could earn money; different people were involved in the selling process and it is easy to forget them. Historians look at these interactions. We know where it ended: in complete suppression and in armed conflict. The colonizers had the better weapons, they could suppress people easily. But before that happened, there were many interactions. It is important to know about these developments because it gives colonized people some of their agency back.

Ciraj Rassool is a Professor of History at the University of Western Cape and Associate at the Global South Study Centre at the University of Cologne. He is a former fellow of the Morphomata Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Cologne.

Ciraj Rassool: An important issue is what do we mean by colonialism and the challenge of `decolonisation` or postcoloniality. One of the main leaders of the

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Humboldt Forum, Horst Bredekamp, went on record at a conference in Bonn in 2016 suggesting that Germans were supposedly very lucky to have had a relatively short colonial experience, and that as a consequence, were `relatively untouched` by colonial attitudes. Nicholas Thomas made a very important point during the first panel, emphasising that colonialism didn't end, and that it was not in the past. Thomas argued that colonialism continued, but he suggested that this was through the presence of China and other powers doing new forms of extraction in Oceania. But this is not the most important way that colonialism has continued. The problem with colonialism is that it might have stopped politically, but it has continued epistemically. The ethnographic museum is a colonial museum, because it is located in a colonial category, which is not merely a category of organising and classifying knowledge but is a category of the domination of people in the world.

You simply can't free the objects in an ethnographic museum without questioning the category of the ethnographic itself. You have to question the intellectual history of a society like Germany that continues to divide the world in those with history and those without history. I fear that there is a problem with the reproduction of the ethnographic, as if this category is value-free. On the African continent, anthropology is not a discipline about making futures; it is the discipline of our colonial pasts. Therefore, when we demand restitution, we do so by not only wanting the objects; we want the decolonisation to include an epistemic engagement with the categories that organised the museum. When we say that restitution is not only an event, and not simply a physical transfer, we mean that restitution has to become the basis of a new museum. That is the museum of the future.

[...]

It has been interesting to discover what the first few years of 'Provenienzforschung' – empirical research on the provenance of collections in Stuttgart, Dresden and elsewhere have revealed for us. This research has shown that there was a spike in collections in museums when members of the German army returned from the

battlefields of Namibia, having just been responsible for the slaughter of tens of thousands of people. Those collections were improperly understood as 'ethnologisch'. They were made ethnological. Those are genocide collections. Those are collections that belong to the dead.

Carmela Thiele is an independent journalist based in Karlsruhe. She is working for taz (die tageszeitung, Berlin), Deutschlandfunk and is a member of riffreporter.de. On that platform for science journalism she is publishing her magazine debattemuseum.de. She just posted an interview with Sandra Ferracuti from the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart, Germany about a necklace from Namibia. In addition she wrote a report on the permanent exhibition at the Linden-Museum as well as a report on the conference "Museum Collections in Motion".

Carmela Thiele: For two years now I have been looking into the triangle of colonialism, ethnographic collections and art. I am trying to get an idea of what matters in this debate. My impression is that most anthropologists feel attacked and worry about their legacy not being appreciated. If you see anthropology as an open science, you might understand why some anthropologists feel misunderstood. It is indeed commendable that anthropologists look at other ways of living. But now, in the context of colonialism and restitution debates, this suddenly seems a bit off-key. I think it is extremely important that we look at all of this really closely and that we take it personally. Not only the museum needs to be decolonized, we need to observe ourselves. Today I noticed that one of the speakers showed newspaper articles in his talk which depicted a caricature of an African man. Two people left the room when they saw the picture because they could not bear to look at it. Up until now I never understood why something like this could be such a sensitive issue. But during the talk today I realised something: I realised that I would not want to be in

that position. Reversing the circumstances can be a very helpful tool in situations like this: Imagine being the object. The object of research, the object in question. People are turned into objects.
The conference reconfirmed for me that it is an important task to find words for all of this. This is also my task as a journalist. Finding words where we have none, words for the confrontations that ensue, for the suspicion, for the emotions.

Christian Kopp is a Berlin based historian, curator and activist. He is board member of the NGO Berlin Postkolonial that has been struggling for a decolonization of German memorial culture and public since 2007.

How would you describe the first panel this morning?

Christian Kopp: I was surprised – and not in a positive way – to see a panel consisting solemnly of white male speakers, I found this a rather shocking welcome for the guests from the Global South. I think we should have had at least a balanced panel with two speakers from the South, with descendants of the colonized. But I would even go further and say that as a gesture of welcoming we should have had a completely Black panel of the descendants from the colonized. And I was even more surprised to barely see any differences within the positions of the speakers. Some of the speeches evaded the political questions that are on the table right now. They didn't take a clear political position. So I was, to put it mildly, surprised by the panel.

What was the panel about from your perspective?

Christian Kopp: I can only say what I understood from the speakers. As I said, what I got was that most of them are historians, in some way complaining about a discussion mainly focusing on provenance research on the objects in the museums

and the non-consideration of the broader picture. But then they were claiming that the broader picture is much more complex than the discussion about the objects, where I would be very careful and add that even the discussion about the objects is complex. At the same time, it should still be possible to have an opinion and a political standpoint on what is being discussed. And I see this focus on the "complexity" of colonialism very much as a device to avoid this political question, which remains in the room. You could see that from the reaction of the audience. But those voices from the audience were not in the same position as the speakers of the panel, having 15 minutes to talk. I would have loved to see all those people, who reacted to the political question of positioning oneself, speak on the panel. And I was even more surprised to see a second all-White panel, only with the addition of a female speaker. I am still in shock by this, because the organizers of this conference are no newcomers, they are no students, and they should be aware of the controversial situation we are in. I am still trying to figure out what they were up to, if this was intentionally planned or an accident, which is very unlikely.

Do you think academia and activism can go together at all?

Christian Kopp: Yes, I think so. For a long time, it has been a question of exclusion. Today at the first panel you saw the exclusion of the voices from the Global South and, secondly, the exclusion of female voices and activists. Not that I would have been very keen on sitting on the panel, but if you want to show that this is a multi-directional issue with many perspectives, you simply can't present four speakers representing the same perspective.

Would you say that an activist discourse is completely different from an academic discourse?

Christian Kopp: I wouldn't go as far as saying it is completely different. We, in our work, always try to put these two discourses together. There is of course research done over the last two or three decades by historians, which is very helpful for

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activism, even if one comes to a different conclusion. But my impression is that the academia is trying to exclude the voices of the activists. I remember the director of the Museum of Natural History in Berlin asking Bénédicte Savoy to decide if she is speaking as an activist or a scientist. This is him trying to exclude a part of her. It is saying that you can't be a serious scientist while having a political standpoint at the same time. This is claiming to be the only one to objectively judge history, which is the opposite of being open.