Anonymous

The Museum – a play

What follows is a fictionalised play that draws on actual events, conversations, and incidents that we have witnessed or experienced working inside museums. Museums are in a bit of a mess. The most recent public debates about restitution of cultural heritage and repatriation of human remains have shaken them, requiring them to revisit their violent pasts and reimagine their future role as public institutions. On one hand, research, inspired by these debates but also informing them, has proven the colonial foundations of many museums, especially those holding ethnological and natural history collections, and medical and university collections. On the other hand, many of these findings evidence the racist conditions under which museum collections were assembled and continue to be researched, displayed and managed. These conditions determine present epistemic, institutional and organisational practices. Calls by stakeholders for acknowledging and redressing colonial crimes, for example through restitutions or reparations, can no longer be ignored by museums and have, to a certain extent, found their way into government and museum policies. For instance, the 2021 coalition contract of the current German government states its commitment to support research into Germany's colonial past and, eventually, to facilitate the restitution of cultural heritage from colonial contexts. Similarly, institutions holding cultural heritage and/or human remains from colonial contexts are developing and implementing guidelines and standards for their handling. Yet, the racist conditions which endure in and suffuse museums' structures and routines, their collections and atmospheres, are largely left unacknowledged save for some trifling attempts to "diversify" the institution or "sensitize" staff to racist discrimination and bias. Often, these attempts come at the expense of those among us who are experiencing racism in the institution, by being turned into tokens, by being made to repeatedly recount racist incidences, or by being forced to again and again confront ignorance.

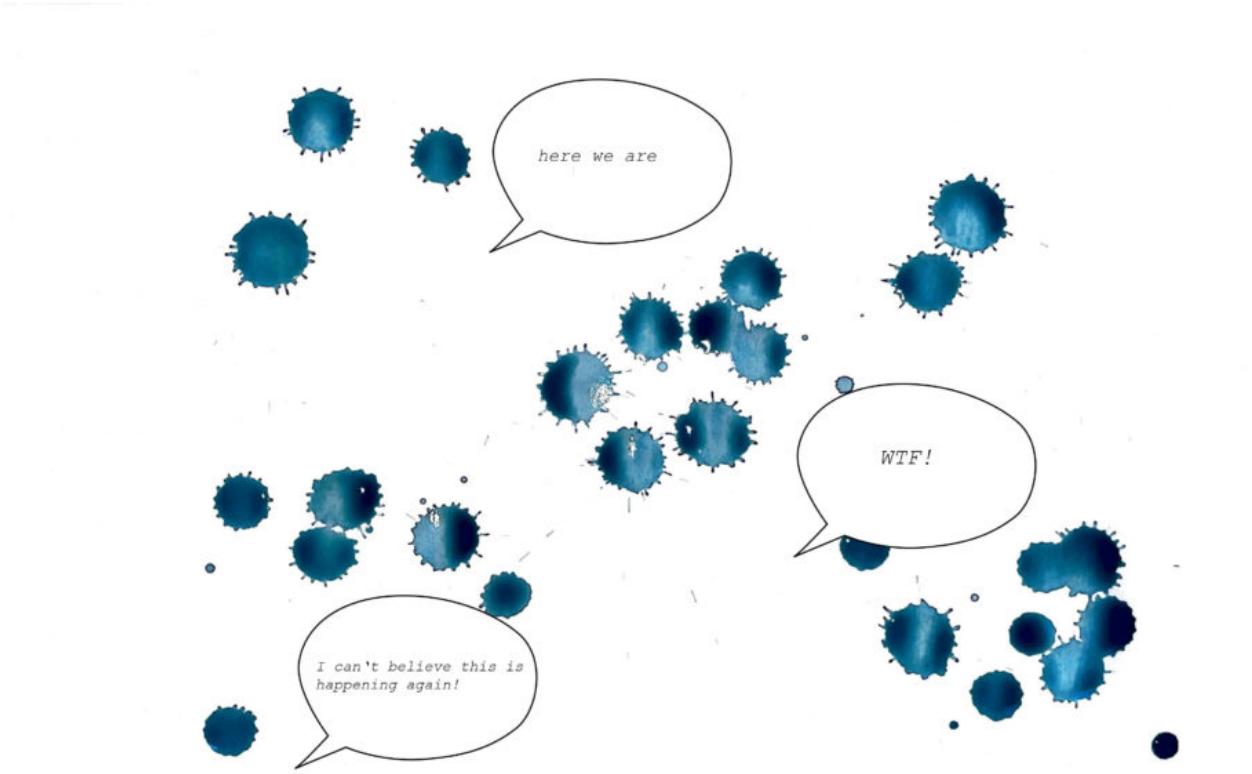
The authors of this blog piece all work in the museum sector. Each of them holds multiple roles and identities: head of department, researcher, project staff, commissioned/invited artist, guest scholar, fixed-term staff, exhibition guard, natural scientist, poet, BIPoC, white, outreach worker, anthropologist, ethnographer, member of an anti-racism working group, member of a self-organized group, member of an art collective, PI in a research project…

While the play is fictional, it is based on real experiences and conversations as well as incidents in museums. It is presented anonymously to primarily protect the authors. We want to continue our work in and with museums, a work that is interested in changing the institution, perhaps even abolishing it. We do not feel safe revealing our names because we are familiar with the retributions that can follow critique. At the same time, we want to avoid highlighting specific individuals, institutions, or projects. The problems of institutional racism depicted in this play are not limited to any particular museum or individual, but rather represent a larger, systemic issue present throughout the museum field and in related institutions, such as universities.

Indeed, in our fictionalized situations, racism does not qualify as an “issue” in a straightforward manner (Mills, 1973: 15). Instead, these situations exemplify how racism operates in what Raymond Williams so aptly termed a “structure of feeling”, describing a general sense that affectively orients assessment of our times and realities. In other words, racism routes the ways in which we come to feel a situation to be appropriate, awkward, right, wrong, acceptable, or unbearable.

Racism in institutions defies easy capture. It manifests in different ways. For example, in the way it is met: by suppressing critical discussion, by not hiring diverse staff, by benevolent advocacy for maintaining the status quo. At the same time the very tangible, material and epistemic racism is expressed in museum collections, archives and inscriptions, including scholarly texts. But our work also confronts us time and again with less obvious and less targeted forms of racism. These are

widespread but not exclusive in institutions of research whose mission—the production of knowledge—is based on the negation of positionality and feelings. In these contexts, racism also (and above all) works by being rendered not only inexpressible but incomprehensible. While talk of racism is allowed to surface in carefully choreographed moments, such as official declarations stating the institution's commitment to diversity and anti-discrimination, its workings and effects on people, interactions, decisions and organisation are difficult to name. Again, none of the scenes depicted in the play refer to explicitly racist incidents. Rather, they refer to specific enactments of an emotional structure: refusal to acknowledge hurt, denial of empathy, commitment to ignorance, and belief in one's own superiority.



"Tears in the institution (after Fred Wilson) I", 2023-ongoing, ©CollectedRage

We will reflect upon these enactments in an epilogue following the "play" below. For now, we invite you, dear readers, to delve into the six scenes we have composed and assemble your own thoughts, images, and context. The scenes are fragments of longer set-pieces. We have collectively imagined these pieces in a series of conversations about our experiences in different museums. We think of them as projection surfaces facilitating both generalisation—they could happen in almost any institution—and reconstruction work, i.e., readers might reconstruct characters, the full breadth of the situation, and its possible antecedents. Some of you might recognize the mode or tone of the situations, or perhaps similar conversations among colleagues come to mind.

"The Museum" and exhibition that appear in the following scenes are inventions. Any resemblances to existing institutions or exhibitions are accidental. However, neither museum nor exhibition are entirely random. We deliberately deploy a museum that encompasses ethnological, natural history, and art collections to acknowledge that structural racism is not confined to "sensitive collections", a term usually reserved for ethnological artefacts or human remains. Also, by coming up with an exhibition that brings together objects and stories from different collections and disciplines, we pay heed to current trends encompassing multi-perspectival approaches to exhibitions and programming which combine natural, cultural, and social histories while also seeking to integrate different kinds of knowledges.

Scene 1

The opening of the new exhibition "Hair: a natural-cultural history" at The Museum, situated in the capital, comprising substantial collections of ethnological objects, natural history, and art. Opening remarks by the minister of culture, the minister of

research and education, and the museum director just concluded. A minor interruption by the artist A has caused some confusion amongst those present. People are milling around in small groups, murmurs and bemused glances fill the expansive hall.

A group of three colleagues is gathered around a high table, set off to the side: H (art historian, working in Museum collection on permanent contract, white, female, cis); AN (anthropologist, working between collection and critical research on fixed-term contract, situated at university, POC, female, cis); B (biologist, working in Museum collection on fixed-term contract, POC, male, cis).

H: Well, that was awkward. [referring to the speech of the director and the intervention by the artist A that followed it]

AN: Yes, but good awkward. A had to call him out…

H: How do you mean?

AN: I mean that the whole purpose of the exhibition was to…I don't know, somehow address the epistemic injustice that our collections are implicated in? Isn't something like that even in the press release? And then he patronizes her like that…taking her words as the museum's new motto or mission or whatever…just to make himself and the institution look super aware?!

B: Urgh, more than just patronising. I feel like he co-opted her…the phrase was taken completely out of context. It wasn't meant as a quick "lesson learnt" but really, a harsh and fundamental critique…You can't just appropriate something like that and then…no action. Remember how the room fell silent in shock and horror when A said it during the workshop?

H: That's true… And the whole thing with the G Collection was just awful. Or really…remains awful. As far as I know, nothing has changed despite A's request and the Decolonize Working Group's email.

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Scene 2

A (*artist, invited for an artistic research project as part of the exhibition on a short-term contract, POC, female, cis*) *joins the group.*

A: Hey, can I hide here for a moment?

AN: Of course!

A: Thanks.

H: That was courageous of you…

B: [at the same time] I'm so sorry…

A: I'm just so tired… This shit just happens again and again and I tell myself that I won't work with these museums ever again…but then I think that this time it will be different because, really, we've been there so many times…[she's reminded of another incident during the preparations of the exhibition* [see insert below]

H: Yaaa, you're so right…I really felt that at some point we were all on the same page…during that early workshop in March even the curator of the G collection was talking about [air quotes] "decolonizing the collections" and how historical responsibility requires a [air quotes] "new ethic of relation".

A: And it only took one rather benign confrontation for all empathy to stop…

AN: All you did was point out the obvious: the collection's "scientific" merit, or however you want to call it, is rooted in racist science.

A: Not just its merit, the science itself is racist.

AN: Yes, our historical research into the making and use of the G collection has shown that again and again…if you look at G's diaries and fieldnotes it's impossible to ignore the racism in the language and…the mindset. Not to mention the boxes of the hair samples and their [air quotes] "scientific" classification…

B: Well, during their training, scientists are not taught to even be mindful of this bigotry. It's like the positions and beliefs of collectors like G are immaterial to the studies he designed and conducted and are therefore of no relevance to today's scientists. It's like they're trained to have white spots.

A: Yeah, well, it seems to me that scientific objectivity can only be clear-eyed if we allow for a few selective white spots.

Scene 2 continued

B and H leave to fetch more wine.

A: Uff, I'm actually still shaken. I thought we shared this in…a more private space

AN: [interjects] Well yes, it was a closed workshop situation and we all agreed to have it as a sort of safer space.

A: Yes, exactly. You know that the situation hasn't been resolved. The curator's comment about the hair sample and its exhibition showcasing was just…really…violent. She didn't get my point at all and now everyone thinks she had such an enlightening conversation with the artist and [air quotes] "learned so much"?! It was never about not showing it…it was about the history, the context, the framing. And that's what's missing from his speech. In the end I had to insist on not exhibiting the hair sample because their contexting was all wrong. The curator probably still is convinced that the sample is [air quotes] "too sensitive" to show…But

that is really not the point…And now for his opening speech he just took this as a "best practice" example for how the institution is dealing with racist incidents? WTF?

AN: Ya, well, he does that a lot. And after someone calls him out, he usually comes to me or one of my [air quotes] "critical" colleagues seeking absolution, feeling misunderstood and…

B and H return with wine, AN excuses herself and makes her way to the bathroom, the Director intercepts her en route

Scene 3

Director (archaeologist, has run the Museum for three years, before that he headed the capital's Cultural Foundation, male, white, cis)

Director: AN! [he catches up with her] Can I have a quick word with… [he stirs them to an alcove] I'm a little bit confused about what just happened. I really didn't mean to offend anyone with my speech. I think it is important to show the public how we as an institution are taking racism very seriously and that our staff is aware and reflected. I just don't understand why we should be silent about it. I mean how shall we ever move forward if we can't even talk about our shared experiences and what we learned from them? You know how I meant it, right?

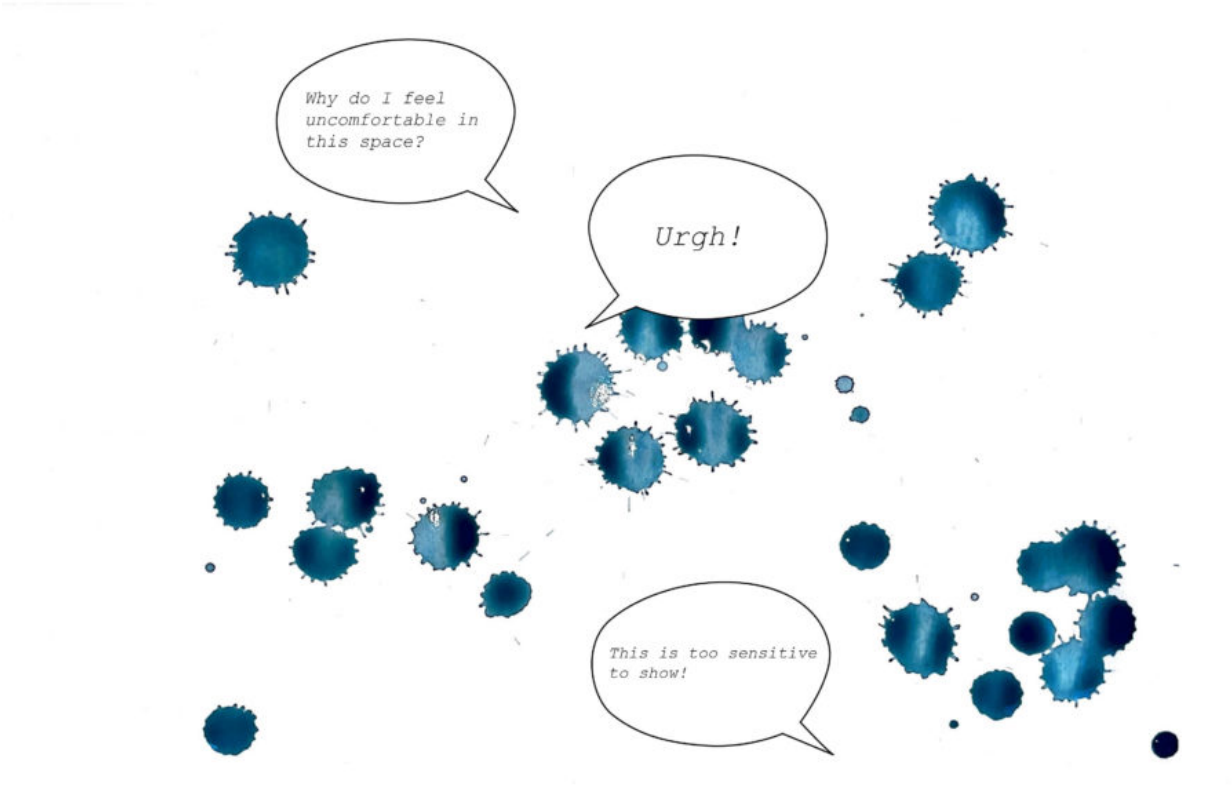
[awkward silence for a few seconds]
AN: Sure…we can talk. Well… I know that your heart…was in the right place, but…I think maybe you're not wholly aware of the situation from all angles? For A…this is not some theoretical discussion or even a single incident…It's actually a reflection of her lived…and repeated…experience. Your recent appreciation for these issues is… very important, but…at the same time…you should realize that it does not compare to her lifetime of dealing with these issues. Also, you should be aware…from your

point of view…this revolves around looking forward…and an institutional stance. Don't get me wrong, these are good things. At the same time though…you have to understand that A can't exactly look forward without simultaneously looking back on painful experiences that inform her worldview. So, I think you entered into your conversation from very different points of view.

Director: Ah, I see, I see. I'm glad that I can talk to you about these issues. While tonight was definitely not what I was expecting, I still believe that this is an important opportunity to learn and so, ultimately, it's a good thing. I think the most important thing is that we all continue to learn about and reflect upon these issues, talk about them, share them in public and with our audiences. Do you think that…deep down…A understands where I'm coming from? I saw you talking to her earlier…

[awkward pause]

AN: Oh…I am sure she understands…at some level. But A's the only one who can say for sure… Maybe you should reach out to her to have a private conversation [sheepishly grins, followed by a noticeable pause]. Actually, if you don't mind, I really need to run to the bathroom [quickly exits].



"Tears in the institution (after Fred Wilson) II", 2023-ongoing, ©CollectedRage

Scene 4

AN has rejoined the group, they continue observing and commenting on proceedings.

AN: Were you at the last meeting of the Decolonize Working Group?

H: Yes, there were only a few...it's hard to fit into the schedule with all the strategy development, the upcoming summit, and the preparations for the exhibition. You know how it is.

B: Did you discuss what we had sketched on the Etherpad the last time?

H: Not really, M [from management] is really keen for the group to work out a plan for the *Beschwerdestelle*. You know, according to the ALG the museum needs to have one. So we discussed possible ways forward.

A: What's a *Beschwerdestelle*?

H: It's a designated person or persons that deal with discrimination in the institution. For example, when there's a sexist or racist incident you can go there and they are obliged to handle it and make sure that it is properly addressed.

A: But if it's a legal requirement shouldn't the museum's management be responsible for setting it up rather than your working group? From the meeting I attended I got the impression that the group is mostly made up of students and junior staff. Do you have an institutional mandate or something like that?

B: That's a really good point. And no, we have no mandate or official standing… To really establish something like the *Beschwerdestelle* you need authority and other pertinent resources which none of us has…Ahem, I'm actually not sure that the *Beschwerdestelle* is something we should invest our energy in. Like A said, it's management's job to make sure that the institution complies with the law.

AN: Yup, I feel the same way. From the discussions so far, I get the sense that most of us want the group to be a place where we can collectively figure out and talk about how racism works here… Listen to each other, support each other and within our, albeit limited, powers…You know, try and do things differently…a little bit better or at least less painful.

A: So, if there was such a *Beschwerdestelle*, what would have happened if I had „reported" [air quotes] my exchange with the curator?

S: It would have been documented, the *Beschwerdestelle* would have gathered information on the incident, probably talked to the head of collections and then

submitted it to the director.

A: And then?

[Clueless glances]

H: Well, the director would then have to implement appropriate measures… If the incident warrants it.

A: I can see the potential benefit in acknowledging discrimination in the institution in some formal process but, hey, if there is no basic understanding of racism, of how it works in structures and words and how and who it hurts…And what are the criteria by which an incident is deemed to warrant an official response?

AN: And what are the criteria by which an incident is deemed to be an incident in the first place?

A: Right. I'm not too optimistic about this *Beschwerdestelle*. Particularly as it seems to be premised on the idea that the…what is it called again…Dientw…*Dienstweg*… and its inhabitants are somehow [air quotes] "decolonized"…

B: When the visiting professor confronted the head of research about the lab leader's racist remarks, his first reaction was to defend his colleague…

Scene 5

H decides to go home, A leaves to join her friends, AN and B make their way towards the bar where they meet ST who joined the group (studies cultural anthropology and works as an exhibition guard at the museum, member of an anti-racist activist group, female, white, cis).

AN: Who are they? [Discreetly nodding to a well-dressed group amicably chatting with the deputy director and some of the museum's benefactors, all white in their 30ies]

B: They are from this agency from Cologne that is accompanying the change management. Because one of the recommendations from the museum foundation's audit was to hire an external consultancy for supervising the strategy process. They've worked with Siemens and BMW but also the Cultural Foundation. I went to the workshop on Friday afternoon.

AN: Ah, of course! How did that go?

ST: They even included us, the freelance and outsourced staff, to join the sessions. First I thought that was quite smart and we had some interesting conversations and viewpoints from some people who are never listened to. But…hey…this doesn't break up any hierarchies. We need to learn a bit more self-organizing and a few buttom-up skills…I know, I know, this sounds very "activist" [air quotes]…

B: Well, it's like Groundhog Day…you remember when the W agency from Sweden was commissioned to roll out a new concept to "dehierarchize" the institution? First we had to play this game… "Do you feel seen in your institution?"… and everyone had to find a spot in the room where we felt most comfortable. I was hiding under a chair and trying to crawl out of the room without been seen [laughing out loud]…

Eight months before the opening of the exhibition. The invited artists are presenting their ideas referring to the G Collection. After the presentations, AM [artist, contributed to the exhibition, male, white] approaches A.

AM: I love your idea, A. It's really amazing. So strong.

Three weeks later. AM posts images of his proposed work, without any comment, on the shared working platform. It includes elements of A's ideas.

Anonymous

Curator comments in the messenger: “Wow! Wonderful how your work is developing so beautifully! Can’t wait to see more!”

A is angry and starts typing into the messenger: “What’s going on?...This is clearly appropriation, why won’t you make this transparent and refer to my work? Or just ask me? Did that ever cross your mind??? Isn’t that the whole point of our engagement with the collection? That we question appropriation and discuss loot??”

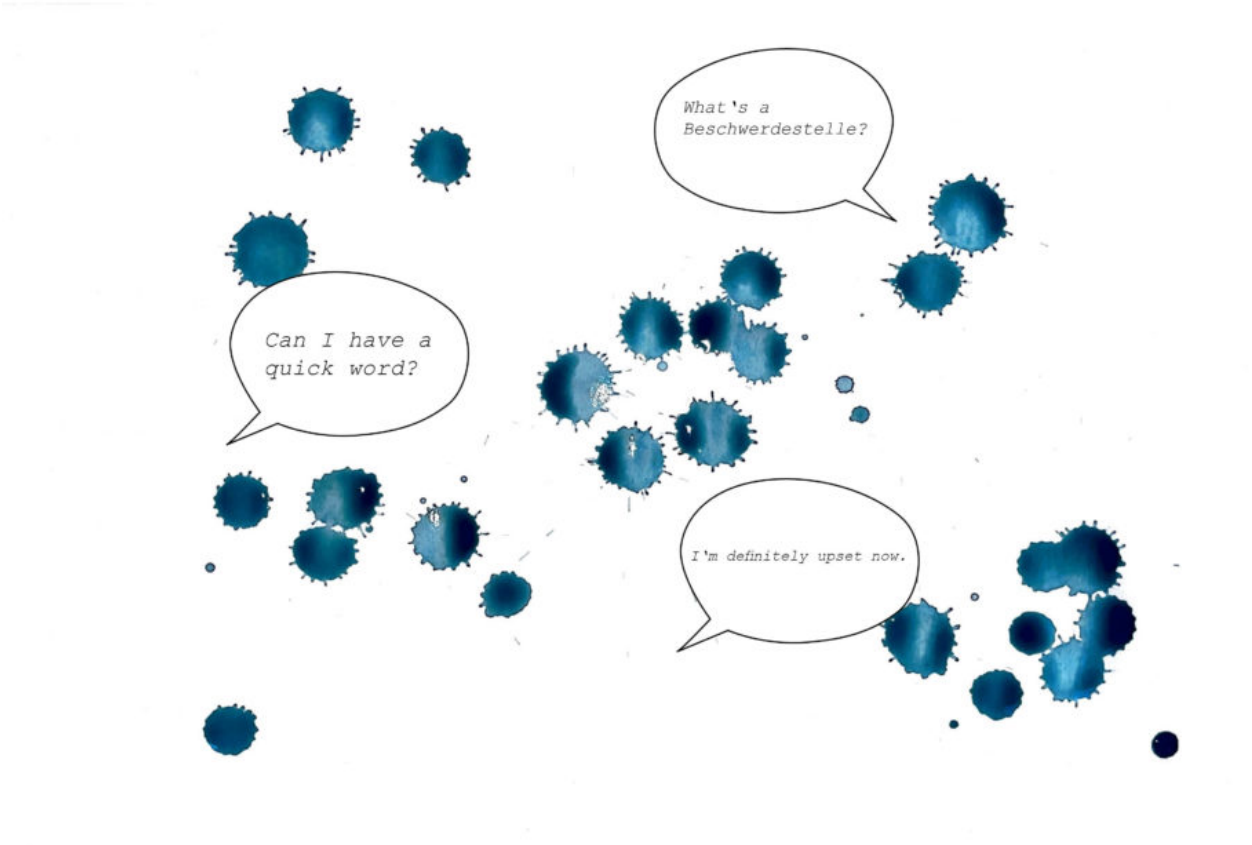
She stops writing and deletes the message. Instead, she writes: “Thanks for picking up elements of my work. I would like to remind you that these elements form parts of myths and collective practices in my home country. So, my work is a discussion that brings together knowledge production and creative flow when working with collections...” A sends the message.

AM responds: “Thanks for reminding me, let’s talk about this later.”

Some weeks later during the setup, curator approaches A.

Curator: I really don’t know why you were so upset, it’s very clear that W’s work has a totally different approach and has nothing to do with yours!

A: I don’t understand how you can’t see this...Can we maybe talk about this when we are finished with the setup? I am definitely upset now...I can’t believe I have to educate you about appropriation and white spots...!



"Tears in the institution (after Fred Wilson) III", 2023-ongoing, ©CollectedRage

Epilogue

"What (just) happened?" This question regularly appears in our work with and in museums. It hovers in the awkward silence that follows a racist remark in workshops and staff meetings, it hangs heavy over the rows and rows and rows of dead animals and artefacts barely contained by store rooms and depots. And it structures the scenes above—scenes which are written and wrapped around an absence, an unknown. Something is literally and metaphorically *off*—off to the side, beyond sight, out of time, not quite right. When we met to discuss this contribution, our conversations rarely referred to something or someone *being* "racist". Yet, all of us

immediately knew which experiences from our museum work we wanted to share with one another in discussing the theme of this blog: undoing race and racism. This perhaps reveals something about us, but it also speaks to the power of remembering and re-telling opaque experiences of tension with "institutional habits" (Ahmed, 2007: 165). Experience became both, evidence and resource: Evidence for structural racism—the effect of which is the reification of "race"—and resource for a critical reflection of the background to experience, which is neither private, nor individual, but always historical and collective. In our experiences, structural racism is constituted in and through obscuring and unknowing, through a form of "structural amnesia" (Douglas 1986: 71): the disavowal of racist remarks, the ignorance of colonial history, the denial of objectivity to accusations of racism as well as the systemic erasure and dismissal of, for example, the specific history of objects and collections or the relevance of a person's employment status for their institutional investments (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007). This unknowing is part of what allows "race" to be done, it renders demands for acknowledgement or redress unintelligible.

"What (just) happened?" At the heart of our "play" lies a series of confrontations which white, institutionally powerful actors often refuse to recognize as part of a struggle against racism. Instead, institutions choose to interpret such struggles as a matter of different perspectives and approaches to history (or life). They seek resolution, and often, absolution, through personalized inclusion: othered voices are integrated in public scripts, such as exhibitions, speeches, and press releases. At other times, marked/racialised subjects (in many cases artists) are temporarily and prominently parachuted into museum spaces. Here, inclusion becomes a form of accumulation that enhances the institution's symbolic capital—once again, bodies are added to the collection, so to speak. Therefore, the political economy of the museum, which is premised on elaborate but rarely elaborated inclusions and exclusions, remains intact. What's more, it strengthens the classificatory logic of museum collections, by subsuming, "celebrating", difference and distinctions without a fight. In this logic, objects, specimens, people become substitutes for their

presumed context of origin. As a consequence, the institution can translate a commission by an artist with biographical ties to former colonies into a cooperation with "communities of origin". Once again, the institution makes racism disappear, this time through busy efforts to perform the institution's awareness—not awareness of racism but its awareness that racism presents a problem for the institution. Hence, haphazardly organized "diversity trainings" and righteous codes of conducts are rarely followed by any serious institutional reconstructions. Rather, conflicts are cast as personal, not institutional.

"What (just) happened?" Feminist scholars, and especially BIPoC feminist scholars, have demonstrated the power of writing from and through marginalized experiences in bringing to light questions which dominating social and cultural norms systematically exclude (e.g. Anzalduá 1990; Mohanty 1995). Cautioning against the presumption that such experiences reveal an unmediated truth or provide an easy route to solidarity, they have argued that writing allows "the *interpretation* of that experience within a *collective* context" (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997: xl) and thus facilitates participation in groups and movements working towards transforming (or abolishing) institutions. In composing (fragments of) a play, we wanted to heed these warnings while also giving us the chance to re-narrate, reflect, and translate our personal institutional histories in the context of their broader political, social, and economic systems. By not naming our names, we are not only protecting ourselves and each other. Above all, we want to draw attention to these systems that sustain and are sustained by institutional racism and hierarchies. As noted earlier, the scenes are composed of modified and rephrased versions of events or conversations that actually happened in our workplaces. There are certainly similarities with people and situations—and these are of course not coincidental either—but we want to inhibit the urge for an unmasking and instead encourage a desire for connection: Do you recognize the ignorance? Can you relate to the discomfort? Have you filed a complaint? Have you experienced a moment when colleagues suddenly turned into adversaries?

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