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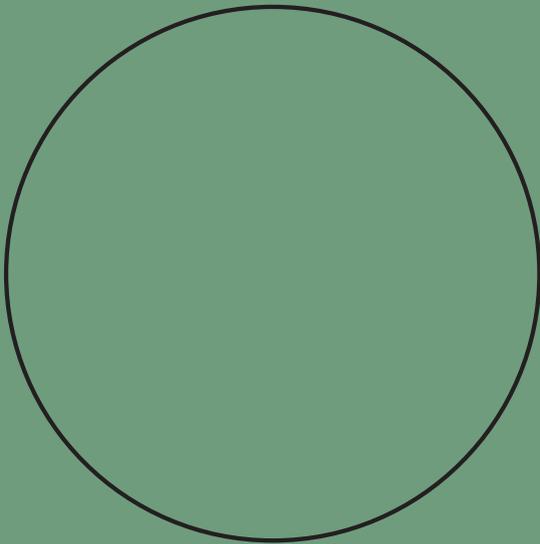


papers

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## Imperial Lives

Biographic Approaches  
as Decolonial Practice



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## Imperial Lives. Biographic Approaches as Decolonial Practice

### The Conference and Beyond

Anne Haeming

2024

#### What We Talk About When We Talk About Imperial Lives

Sometimes, the relevant way to understand a word is through its roots. This is true in the case of the research fields of ethnography and ethnology: their etymology conveys the subjective positionality of the disciplines. Just take a closer look: “ethnography” and “ethnology”, from Greek “graphein”, to write, and “legein”, to speak, tell, count. Writing and speaking, telling, and counting are things you do by yourself, as an individual. The subjectivity of the scientific perspective is rooted in these disciplines.<sup>1</sup> This positionality is reproduced in language, action, and language action: a repertoire of gestures that, in the name of research for imperial endeavors, creates and ensures asymmetric dependencies. Or as Walter Benjamin once put it: “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”<sup>2</sup>

The conference “Imperial Lives. Biographic Approaches as Decolonial Practice” was conceptualised by Carl Deußen and myself to address the lack of critical research on the perpetrators and implicated agents of imperialism.

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<sup>1</sup> For an early approach to this perspective, see Werner Kutschmann: *Der Naturwissenschaftler und sein Körper: die Rolle der “inneren Natur” in der experimentellen Naturwissenschaft der frühen Neuzeit*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin: “On the Concept of History”, in: Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, vol. 4, 1938–1940, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, 392.

It was inspired by the research project about ethnologist, collector, and writer Wilhelm Joest “The Intimacies of Colonial Collecting”, conducted by the two of us for the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Köln, pre-financed by the Museums-gesellschaft RJM e.V. (2019), then funded by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung (2020–2023).

Today, calls for decolonization are directed at the entire society and its institutions. But it is in the ethnographic museums, which Wayne Modest has aptly described as the “hyper-visible warts”<sup>3</sup> of imperialism, that these calls are heard most loudly. The conference therefore focused on these institutions and ethnographic collecting, while also including adjacent disciplines and case studies.

The need for decolonisation is now widely accepted among museum professionals, although the precise meaning of the term continues to be hotly debated. Various approaches have been articulated to meet the challenge, including working with creator communities and community museums, provenance research on imperial collections, restitution of objects, shifting museum programming to appeal to broader audiences, diversifying staff and leadership, collaborating with artists and scholars from the Global South and diaspora, and a general epistemic shift away from racist and neo-colonial modes of representation.

Critical research into the histories of institutions, collectors, and their scholarship is also part of this multiplicity of strategies. It adds a degree of concreteness to the spectre of imperialism, which sometimes tends to dissolve into the abstract or systemic.

But what is getting overlooked all too often: Empire meant that there were concrete individuals involved in creating, maintaining, and

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Modest: “Things are a Changing or Perpetual Return. Horizons of Hope and Justice or of Anxiety,” in: Barbara Plankensteiner (ed.): *The Art of Being a World Culture Museum: Futures and Lifeways of Ethnographic Museums in Contemporary Europe*, Kerber Culture. Bielefeld: Kerber, 2018, 117, 120.

defending both imperial rule and the wider racist episteme that underpinned it.

Engaging with the biographies of such actors provides both benefits and pitfalls: biographic approaches as decolonial practice can be concrete and transformative, but also painful for the descendants of both the colonised and the colonisers. They offer uncomfortable moments of identification and disidentification, allow us to understand the minutiae of imperial life, and also challenge us with the ambivalences that such knowledge provides. And, of course, they are always haunted by the danger of turning into hagiography.

Wilhelm Joest, previous to the research project, was remembered primarily as a curious traveller and somewhat eccentric *bon vivant*, obscuring both his entanglement in imperial structures and his status as an ethnographer within the scholarly *avant-garde* of the time. As such, he floated beyond any historical analysis, a figure that no one needed to confront.

The conference was set up to address such cases of lacking or uncritical historical engagement, inviting scholars, writers, and artists to present, compare, and develop forms of “Researching” and “Narrating” imperial lives as an intersectional endeavor.

#### The Conference: an Overview

The panels either focused on questions of narrating or researching imperial biographies, with the last panel addressing both topics simultaneously. The topics of the presentations were diverse, ranging from biographic case studies to methodological questions and on to theoretical considerations of the (mis-)uses of biographic approaches. Due to a variety of circumstances, this collection showcases three of the presentations and keynotes. But we cordially invite you to find out more about the other participants’ research and compelling arguments in the recorded videos made available on the conference website.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See the whole program of the two days, the speakers and the abstracts of their papers, as well as the

Since the variety of approaches represented a stunning and fruitful spectrum of this still largely underexplored field of research, it seems essential to give you an overview of the presentations, delivered in five panels and two keynotes over two days.

The first panel, “**Science and Violence**” (chaired by Ciraj Rassool), focused on the relationship between scientific inquiry and imperial violence. Katherine Biber, Nicholas Miller, and Marie Hoffmann – who contributed to this collection – presented biographic case studies that powerfully demonstrated the link between imperial science and domination. They showed how scientists participated in settler genocide, grave robbery, and the plantation economy without questioning or changing their behaviour.

Indeed, a common theme of the conference was how scholars supported, willingly and sometimes enthusiastically, imperial structures. Thus, the panel also raised methodological questions: to what extent do contemporary scholarly ambitions reflect those of our imperial predecessors, and how can these genealogies be addressed? How can the violence perpetrated against people of colour be represented without reproducing or neutralizing it? What might be the benefits and dangers of depicting violence as graphically as it was perpetrated?

Peter Schröder’s presentation offered a counterpoint to these studies of violence, presenting the case of German-born Kurt Nimuendajú as that of an anthropologist who was committed to protecting the people he studied from the violence of the Brazilian state. A contrast that raised questions about the possibility of a just academic life within imperial structures and the causes of anthropology’s eventual transformation from an imperial to an anti-imperial discipline.

In the first keynote, “**Writing Oneself on the Universe**”, author and scholar Patrice Nganang further explored this ambivalence of bio-

recorded presentations here: [www.imperiallives.com](http://www.imperiallives.com).

graphical research on participants in oppressive regimes. He focused on Günter Tessmann, who conducted scientific and ethnographic research in Nganang's home region of Cameroon. In contrast to later French observers, Tessmann had attempted to capture the land he was describing holistically and, according to Nganang, with a level of detail that required empathetic and even loving observation. Tessmann still shared an imperial and racist worldview – but Nganang found his writings helpful in understanding his current post-colonial position as a writer and scholar exiled by the Cameroonian government.

These affinities opened up questions about the relevance of imperial writings today and what can be done with them, including writing new, decolonial narratives that both draw on and contradict them.

The second day began with the panel “**Imperial Self-Portrayal**” (chaired by Freya Schwachenwald), which aimed to analyse how imperial actors told their own stories and narrated their individual personalities. Kathryn Ticehurst highlighted the importance of the genre of field notes in understanding this process of self-creation. She argued that in this relatively raw material, personal contradictions and ambiguities could be productively revealed; especially regarding the ethnographer's engagement with imperial structures of domination. Philipp Müller – whose paper is included in this collection – extended this idea to published material, using his case study to highlight the potential pitfalls of using material of questionable veracity. Finally, Arisa Loomba broadened the field by showing how even Rudyard Kipling's house and collection could be read as a form of imperial self-representation. A theme running through all papers was how the acquisition of experiences and objects followed a logic of violent appropriation or ‘hunting’ of specimens and their incorporation into the self-narratives of imperial agents.

The following panel, “**Deconstructing Imperial Archives**” (chaired by Stefanie Michels),

focused on narrative methods of representing imperial biographies in the present. Agnès Lacaille showed how the ambiguous archive and collection of the Belgian collector Jeanne Walschot could be curatorially transformed into a multi-layered exhibition that addressed both the collector and the many networks and discourses in which she had moved, from Belgian imperialism to socialism to the anti-colonial struggles of independent Congo. Jonas Tinius took up this notion of incoherent and contradictory – or, as he conceptualised it, “awkward” – archives and how they could be reused in curatorial efforts and glocal networks in Berlin. Tal Adler also focused on Berlin, presenting his method of artistic provenance research and how it could be used to address the archival injustice of imperial legacies by providing biographies for the individuals whose skulls were stolen and brought into the scientific collections of Germany's imperial capital. All three participants agreed that imperial archives can indeed be deconstructed, with varying degrees of re-creation and fabrication.

In the second keynote of the conference, Vanessa A. Opoku presented the artwork “**Berge versetzen/Moving Mountains**”, which she co-created as part of the PARA collective at the Grassi Museum in Leipzig; her paper is also part of this collection. Together with Tanzanian artists Rehema Chachage and Valerie Asimwe Amani, the collective aims to buy and return the summit stone of Mount Kilimanjaro, which was removed and stolen by the geographer Hans Meyer during German colonial rule. Opoku highlighted the initial centrality of Hans Meyer's imperial biography in the project and the subsequent move away from a person-centred approach to make room for the current inhabitants of the Kilimanjaro region, their relationship to the theft of the summit stone, and the possibilities for future repatriation.

Opoku showed that biographical research can indeed lead away from the initial biography to address more pressing issues beyond it by using the biographic material. She also

highlighted the strong emotional response to the artwork and how the German public still showed more empathy for the imperial protagonists than for those who suffered from their exploitation.

In this sense, she described the hurt caused by the removal of the summit stone of the German mountain Zugspitze or the de(con)struction of a pedestal in the Grassi Museum as a necessary precondition for an emotionally honest debate on imperial legacies.

The following panel, **“Imperial Production of Knowledge and Ignorance”** (chaired by Carl Deußen), focused on the specific knowledge produced by imperial scholars and the extent to which it could be seen as ‘knowledge’ to the present day. Sarah Longair focused on islands as metaphorical figures for European thought and as actual sites of collection and knowledge production. She highlighted how indigenous agents were able to resist imperial access and actively keep scholars ignorant, and how these scholars used different methods to overcome this resistance, for example by forming gendered bonds. Suha Hasan focused on the ambivalent roles of the British advisor to the royal court in Bahrain, Charles Belgrave: both on his depiction as the nation’s political modernizer; as well as on his authority as a historian of Bahrain, whose texts continue to have an impact. Hasan, however, showed how to deconstruct his writings and proposed alternative ways to read them, as well as alternative sources for Bahrain’s history. Finally, Nora Derbal presented the ambiguous biography of the Orientalist linguist Heinrich von Maltzan. Von Maltzan worked within imperial structures and from an imperial mindset, but he also recorded unique linguistic material, raising questions about the extent to which he was able to produce original knowledge despite his imperial embeddedness.

The final panel, **“Decentring Imperial Memory”** (chaired by Richard Kuba), highlighted the indigenous biographies often present in imperial sources and asked how they could be extracted

and narrated. Shreya Gupta showed how Indian coin dealers appear as nameless interlocutors in the writings of British collectors. By reading different sources side by side, however, Gupta was able to discern different dealer biographies and highlight their considerable agency in procuring and selling ancient coins.

Yann LeGall showed how the imperial biography of the German military officer Gaston Thierry could be used in several ways: not only to decipher the living history of Biema Asabiè, the Togolese ruler murdered by Thierry – but also to disnarrate Thierry to the point of transforming him into a metaphorical fish, the African symbol for European imperialists coming from the sea. Finally, Luisa Marten presented the case of a friendship between an imperial anthropologist and his main informant, arguing that in such cases of “interlocution”, both imperial power structures and ways of transcending them can become visible. The panel showed that imperial archives can indeed reveal indigenous agencies, and that such research can have very different outcomes.

One of the key takeaways from the conference “Imperial Lives” was the idea that imperial archives are “awkward archives”, as Jonas Tinius put it: because they are often incomplete and biased towards the perspectives of imperial actors. However, biographic approaches can reveal and challenge these biases and point to the general awkwardness of the imperial project. The conference showed that research can begin with imperial biographies, but also move beyond them in order to show the importance of indigenous voices and resistances. Sometimes these two fields can be used side by side as forms of interlocution, or applied to biographies caught between imperial power and resistance to it. Sometimes it can be crucial to talk about the effects of imperial actors without fully representing their presence.

Affect was also a central theme, with discussions focusing on various realms of reception and the diverse viewpoints they refer to, be it discomfort, pain, embarrassment, or horror.

Vanessa A. Opoku's presentation highlighted the importance of experiencing these emotions in order to participate in the debate with sincerity. At the same time, Patrice Nganang argued that there may also be a kind of love in these archives that we should not suppress.

More importantly, the conference emphasised that, as scholars, we are all implicated in our work, albeit in different ways, and that our work can help us understand our implication in larger structures of postcolonialism. This implication can manifest itself in a sense of instability, of being thrown into the world, so to speak, which can lead to a desire to stabilise and linearise narratives and positionalities. However, as many contributors have shown, it is not only worth resisting this urge to stay with the discomfort. Moreover, it seems to be essential for scholars to point towards ways to destabilize perceptions and offer ways to heterogeneous narratives and positionalities.

Importantly, the conference demonstrated that there are many decolonial approaches to engaging with imperial biographies, violent and uncomfortable as they might be. Such biographies can be footnoted to other stories of resistance and resilience, or deconstructed and disnarrated to represent the fractured lives of imperial agents without reproducing the violence inherent in their worldview. A better understanding of imperial lives allows us to better understand our own involvement as postcolonial subjects, as well as the present we inhabit. It allows us to imagine different, and hopefully better, future biographies.

Overall, the conference achieved its aim of bringing together a diverse and multidisciplinary group of scholars to further the debate on imperial legacies and to highlight the specific contribution of biographic approaches.

#### How to Question the Positionality of Knowledge Production

Ethnology and ethnography, *legen* and *gräphen*, reading and telling – researching and narrating. What applies to the work of scholars and collectors in the 19th or early 20th century

who were entangled in imperial structures, applies to scholars today just the same: reading and writing are fundamentally subjective acts. Words and language are powerful tools – especially when you use them to participate in the production of knowledge. In German, there is the phrase: “*Sprache bildet Welt ab*”, with the visual term “*abbilden*”. It roughly translates as “language depicts the world”. However, the sentence fails to capture the essential aspect: language always only re-presents one, very individual perspective on the world. And is therefore arbitrary. This is why methods of decolonial practice that focus on researching and narrating ought to draw attention to their positionality.

From the very beginning, the research project about Wilhelm Joest rested on these two pillars, researching and narrating, that are so intricately intertwined. With the leading question being: How to widen the discussion, broaden our views, and talk about the various ways to “re-present” and not reproduce imperial actors and their work – in order to question the positionality of knowledge production.

This opens up to a whole new set of questions that show the broader scope of biographic approaches as decolonial practice: How to narrate the results of a research project that focuses on someone else's positionality with all its bias? Which kinds of storytelling enable which kinds of reception? What can narrative look like that undermines colonial structures, when language is part of the very system? Which narrative strategies are suitable in this case? Are there narrative tools to try to destabilize the power of language and history writing and knowledge production?

How to write about research without reproducing instances of control, order, and violence and thus limiting the production of knowledge? How to write about an imperial actor while knowing about the defining power of language, the violence of archives, the historical colonial framework of research institutions like ethnographic museums, and their mode of knowledge production? It all boils down to:

conception, representation, and reception – in the context of sharing research results in any way, shape, or form.

As far as conception is concerned, one of the primary objectives would involve ways to suspend, deconstruct, or subvert the genre stereotypes of biography. In order to avoid the traditional teleological search of chronology that, as it happens, is also integral to the ideology of modernity and hence European colonialism of the late nineteenth century. And furthermore, to create a mode of narration that doesn't rely on the static, the firm, the obvious, the convinced, but rather makes room for the dynamic, the flexible, entropic, doubtful, and openly speculative; while at the same time allowing for misunderstandings and contradictions.

The relevance of the second realm, representing, is directly linked to the beginning of this text: whether ethnography or ethnology, both disciplines convey already etymologically the actions of an individual as writing, telling, speaking, counting. Ethnographers like Wilhelm Joest were narrators and storytellers and documented their perspective in various kinds of texts. They told their stories in their letters, their diaries, their travel logs, their publications, scientific and otherwise, about their work, their travels, their lives, and hence about themselves. They reflected – re-presented, if you want – themselves in the ethnographica, the objects they acquired.

As a consequence, it is essential to find ways to represent an imperial actor without reproducing his ideology and his worldview – while at the same time avoiding any notion of hagiography. In our case, the research project allowed us to make Wilhelm Joest visible as a colonial actor and ethnographer, a scientist, a multifaceted individual with room for complexities and unresolvable contradictions. And not as simply good or evil. This is one reason why Joest's example might serve as an example for a generation of German traveling scientists of the second row.

Here, Michael Rothberg's notion of the "implicated subject"<sup>5</sup> comes to mind: he positions these "implicated subjects" as individuals that participate in wrongful and violent structures and thus collaborate and strengthen and control said systems – but without being the main perpetrators on stage. Much like Joest, who occasionally slips into the role of an active protagonist, as someone who produced, manifested, and spread imperial narratives in his work.

Moreover, Rothberg's approach also involves us as scholars and researchers and storytellers. It is therefore crucial to be aware that we, with our plethora of perspectives, also work in knowledge production – and speak from a specific, subjective position. This comes with the responsibility to make the mechanisms and gaps of knowledge production as transparent as possible; especially when recounting the research about someone's life story. It seems crucial to show the underlying subjective and hence fictional quality of science, and to make it visible without tipping over to fiction.

Thirdly, reception: here, the main objective would be to create a realm that allows for things to happen. This involves employing narrative techniques for various modes of representation. Always guided by the question: how to allow for a shifting reception rather than one of certainty – especially when addressing a broader audience, not just fellow scholars? To the effect that the act of 'reading' ideally enables a critical reappraisal of one's position as a reader. It ideally allows for a necessary self-positioning vis-à-vis imperial protagonists like Joest – via moments of identification and dissociation.

Although the relevance of research and storytelling about colonial protagonists is oftenti-

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<sup>5</sup> See Rothberg: *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators, Cultural Memory in the Present*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019; Rothberg: "Feeling Implicated: An Introduction", *Parallax* 29, Nr. 3 (3. Juli 2023): 265–81; Rothberg: "Introduction to Feeling Implicated: Affect, Responsibility, Solidarity (2)", *Parallax* 29, Nr. 4 (2. Oktober 2023): 399–405..

mes contested in current debates: the project and the conference suggest that it's unquestionably essential to add biographic approaches to the roster of current decolonial practice.

Michael Rothberg's notion of "multidirectional memory"<sup>6</sup> seems helpful as a backdrop for critical historical investigations and storytelling in this context: it relies on the premise that a society's memory work and the evaluation of its various violent histories of "Aufarbeitung" is not a zero-sum game. Rather, it can be considered an intersectional endeavor, adding up to a common good for a society's collective memory. Especially since these instances are often as entangled as the histories themselves. From a German perspective alone, that might involve the deeds of colonial actors, the national socialists, or protagonists of the dictatorship in the GDR. In this vein, narrating also means paying respect to the responsibility to the German cultural and ideological heritage and the recognition, reparation, and reconciliation that might or could follow. Especially when focusing on a variety of individuals along the spectrum of agency, including the mentioned role of "implicated subjects".

Put together, this approach could offer representations of history "in a 'minor key,'" as Ann Laura Stoler puts it, as "an entry point into the 'imperfect interval' between personal and public sensibilities", thus "inflecting" their "collision and collusion"<sup>7</sup>. In short, biographic approaches can evoke complexities and contradictions that keep everyone on their toes.

<sup>6</sup> Rothberg: *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Cultural Memory in the Present, Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Laura Stoler: *Along the Archival Grain*, 245.

<sup>8</sup> Stoler 52.

### The Scope of this Collection

Paying close attention to conception, representation, and reception in the colonial context of European knowledge production: this is what all three chapters in the concise conference collection at hand are conveying.

It is at the heart of Marie Hoffmann's and Philipp Müller's research, from a French and German perspective, respectively, as well as central to PARA's artistic intervention presented by Vanessa A. Opoku. Because "museums and their collections are not neutral", as Hoffmann puts it, it is all the more crucial to provide a plethora of perspectives on their founders and/or the individuals who personally 'acquired' – to use the broadest term possible – the objects the collections consist of.

Because for too long, the institutional representation of the colonial protagonists was all too limited, Hoffmann explains in her contribution "From 'traveler' to scientist: rethinking the biography of Alphonse Pinart in the context of his collecting practices": "Presenting [Alphonse] Pinart as just an explorer, a scientist or a scholar is akin to ignoring or glossing over the colonial aspects of his collecting practices, as well as the systemic violence he was part of." Her paper uses the French collector Pinart (1852–1911) as an example to propose how a decidedly biographical approach enables imperial institutions such as Western ethnographic museums in their decolonial endeavors. Because, as Hoffmann points out, it is essential to show how exactly objects entered the museum collection – and through whose hands. Thus, adding context about the acquisition when other details are unknown, illuminating the institutional history, as well as highlighting the loss of knowledge about the objects and the colonial biases of museum collections.

Müller, in his wide-ranging paper "In the Shadow of the Collector" draws attention to the figure of the ethnographic "collector", how they perceived of themselves and how their work was staged and represented – with a special emphasis on Richard D. Volkmann, who led a so-called "punitive expedition" to the border

of what is now Angola, where he collected objects for Karl von Linden in Stuttgart. As Müller puts it, “the collecting colonialists in particular staged themselves as ‘solo collectors’ and heroic physical and intellectual conquerors of the Other”. He argues that research on ethnographic objects and object biographies should be accompanied by critical biographical research on their collectors and, above all, on the historical, political, and ideological context of their time. It is this context that has shaped the perception of and knowledge production around ethnographic objects to this day.

Vanessa A. Opoku’s keynote showcased the artistic research, performance, and installation “Berge Versetzen/Moving Mountains” as a decolonial approach with a rare and physical outcome of biographical research. The project, displayed at the GRASSI Museum in Leipzig, as already mentioned above, explores the history and cultural implications surrounding a stone from Mount Kilimanjaro, brought to Germany by Hans Meyer in the late 1880s. Opoku shows how “Berge Versetzen/Moving Mountains” challenges colonial narratives and questions the material and immaterial value of objects like the ones Meyer collected. Her compelling paper conveys the scope of the research underlying the final permanent exhibition, the strategies involving and addressing stakeholders in Germany and Tanzania alike. It is a stunning artistic intervention in a museum space that offers new ways to convey decolonial research, including the participation of visitors. The project is all the more powerful because of the ripple effects it created since the opening – in the discussions about the role of ethnological museums and the handling of colonial artifacts.

#### A Plea for ‘Life Writing’

With that in mind, it might be worthwhile to think about the adequacy and inadequacy of terminology once more. The term “biography” is a canonical reference to a genre. Moreover, it is a genre that is firmly rooted in European tradition. It is that context that already points

to the reason why “biography” might not be the best or most appropriate term, especially when it comes to addressing the global plurality of voices and perspectives of individual lives that are worth telling.

Etymologically, “biography” derives from Greek “bios” – “life”, and “graphein” – “to write”. Furthermore, grammatically, the noun signifies a completed act. In this sense, to imagine the story of a life as a defined, stable, finite entity once again reflects the teleological European perception of history in the era of colonial modernity as linear progress. A perspective that has brought so much violence, loss, and trauma to so many people.

For lack of a more appropriate term, for the time being, “life writing” seems to serve the purpose a little better: yes, it’s also an English expression, but more inclusive and accessible. More than that, the present participle – “-ing” – conveys an endless continuity: as a plea to be open, dynamic, unfinished. This is what narrative strategies should aim for, in order to suspend the tendency of knowledge production to be orientated towards definition. It is worth a try.

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## From 'Traveller' to Scientist. Rethinking the Biography of Alphonse Pinart in the Context of his Collecting Practices

Marie Hoffmann

2024

### Abstract

Provenance research has gained momentum in recent decades, particularly with numerous calls for postcolonial museum approaches.<sup>9</sup> One of the main focuses has been revealing the unseen and unheard voices of Indigenous peoples silenced by colonization and Western imperialism. However, in parallel, it seems crucial to also take a look at colonial collectors and the context of their collecting practices that are at the origin of museum collections. Museums, as tools of empires,<sup>10</sup> have not only served as theatres for showcasing the objects gathered, extracted, and looted by colonial individuals. They also exalted colonization and promoted Western imperialism, setting up the individuals involved in these processes as 'heroes'.<sup>11</sup> It is impossible to deny the political dimension of provenance research and museums and the heritage field,<sup>12</sup> and this includes biographical approaches.

To decolonize these institutions, it is crucial to reassess these biographies specifically in connection with how the objects came to enter museum collections. Using the figure of Alphonse Pinart (1852–1911), I want to highlight how the biographical approach can cast a new light on the colonial context of object acquisitions and the institutions' histories themselves. Indeed, a biographical approach can provide

context for the acquisition when other details are unknown, as well as highlight the loss of knowledge about the objects and the colonial biases of museum collections.

### Keywords

*Collecting, Collector, Colonialism, Ethnography, Ethnographic, Museum, Collection, Traveller, Violence, Alphonse Pinart.*

### Introduction

The global movement questioning the manner in which museums and their collections have been shaped by colonialism is rather recent, having gained momentum over the course of the past decades.<sup>13</sup> One of the main components of these initiatives, and probably the most publicly advertised in broader debates, is the development of provenance research for museum collections.

This focus has gained notable attention in the media, especially through recent cases exposing thefts perpetrated by staff in major Western museums, which have highlighted the systemic lack of research in documenting the provenance of potentially looted or stolen artifacts.<sup>14</sup> Although these approaches and processes were already considered in connection with the National Socialist (Nazi) expropriation of cultural property, documenting the provenance of so-called ethnographical, anthropological, and archaeological collections acquired in colonial contexts has developed and accelerated over the past decades; especially with numerous calls for the development of postcolonial museum approaches.<sup>15</sup>

One of provenance research's main points of focus has been revealing the unseen and

<sup>9</sup> Tompkins, 2020 : 18–24.

<sup>10</sup> Longair, McAleer, 2017 : 3.

<sup>11</sup> Aldrich, 2009; Bloembergen, Eickhoff, 2015; Ashby, 2020; Falcucci, 2021

<sup>12</sup> Turner, 2020

<sup>13</sup> von Poser and Baumann, 2016; Jones, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> One of the latest examples happened in the British Museum, see <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/british-museum-independent-review-complete-after-massive-theft-2407800>.

<sup>15</sup> Tompkins, 2020 : 18–24.

unheard voices of Indigenous peoples silenced by colonization and Western imperialism in the context of European museums. These goals are challenged by a glaring lack in museum archives: of sources or even mentions of the Indigenous creators and collaborators. This situation highlights the much-needed collaboration as well as input from Descendant communities, essential when working with colonial collections.

However, in parallel, it also seems crucial to take a closer look at the lives of colonial collectors at the origin of museum collections in the context of their collecting practices, and thus cast a new light on their biographies and the histories of Western museums. Indeed, it is impossible to deny the political dimension of museums and more broadly of heritage itself, and therefore, the political implications of provenance research.<sup>16</sup> Museums, as tools of empires,<sup>17</sup> served as theatres for showcasing not only objects gathered, extracted and looted by colonial individuals, but also for exalting colonization and promoting Western imperialism. Museums established the men (and more rarely women) involved in colonial processes, who provided institutions with artifacts and Indigenous ancestral remains as trophies to display, as 'heroes'.<sup>18</sup> As Hilmar Farid said, 'it's not simply about the return of objects; it's about knowledge production. It's about rewriting of histories; it's about dealing with past injustices'.<sup>19</sup>

In order to decolonize museums as institutions, it is crucial to reassess these biographies, specifically showing how these individuals collected or acquired the objects that then entered collections. Setting aside the biographical approach would be tantamount to ignoring the role museums and collectors played in colonial propaganda: as Alicia Schrikker stated in

the PPROCe Report, 'provenance research of objects with a colonial history must not solely revolve around the question of when and why an object ended up in [Museum collections but] (...) include a biographical approach to the object, with space for reflection on the changing socio-political context in which the object acquired meaning'.<sup>20</sup>

#### The Biographies of a Colonial Traveller

Between 2015 and 2019, I documented the provenance of collections from the Pacific Area that are now held in five regional museums in Northern France.

In this context, I quickly encountered the limitations of archival provenance research related to the scarcity of information about these artifacts and their origin, whether geographical or material. However, in cases where provenance data was missing, the majority of records contained the names of donors and sellers. Within the context of the euergetic relationship between donors and museums, documenting donors' names and sometimes their biographies (or at least some information about their lives, whether in connection with the objects or not) appears to have been essential for the staff of 19th century European Museums: these would allow for the recognition of their donation in the display, a process that was an integral part of the donor-museum relationship. That is, museums named galleries after colonial collectors, displayed their portraits, and relayed truncated, idealized, and sometimes fictitious biographies.<sup>21</sup>

Using the example of one of the collectors I encountered during my research, Alphonse Pinart, I want to highlight how the biographical approach can cast a new light on the contextual provenance of the objects and the colonial legacy of institutions' history. This prosopographical perspective can provide some context for the acquisition when other details are

<sup>16</sup> Turner, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Longair, McAleer, 2017: 3.

<sup>18</sup> Aldrich, 2009; Bloembergen, Eickhoff, 2015; Ashby, 2020; Falcucci, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Mooren, Stutje, van Vree, 2022: 14.

<sup>20</sup> Schrikker, 2022: 76

<sup>21</sup> About euergeticism in museum context, see for instance Pomian 1987, Poulot 1988 and 2008.

unclear or unknown – which is mainly the case for Pinart's collections of artifacts – and also emphasizes the loss of knowledge about objects and museum collections' colonial biases.<sup>22</sup>

Alphonse Pinart (1852–1911) was a wealthy heir and colonial traveller who began his journey in 1870, leaving France for the United States (San Francisco) around the age of 18, and then made his way to Alaska in 1871. Afterwards, he travelled around the American continent and in the Pacific, from 1875 to 1882, commissioned by the French Ministry of Public Education, Cults and Fine Arts (*Ministère de l'instruction Publique, des Cultes et des Beaux-Arts*).

Pinart's first mission was set between 1875 and 1878. In February 1878, he requested a 5-year extension, including an annual stipend of 25,000 Fr, which was granted by the French government. The financial support of the French government started in 1878, six years after Pinart's first journey to Alaska. However, from 1883, he progressively fell out of favour due to financial disputes with the Ministry. Therefore, most (but not all) of his travelling and 'collecting' years are set between 1870 and 1885. Pinart is an interesting figure as he both travelled using his own funds as well as being sponsored, financially and materially, by the French colonial administration.<sup>23</sup>

One of the points of contention between Pinart and the Ministry of Public Education, Culture, and Fine Arts was his lack of publications. He might have failed to provide reports or publications for the majority of his travels, but he

did leave behind a series of travel diaries. These diaries are now kept at the Bancroft Library, the primary special collections library of the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, having travelled alongside multiple companions, from navy officers to a Scottish painter, there are several second-hand descriptions of Pinart and his 'collecting' practices and methods. These documents offer a unique perspective, with some from the collector himself, either corroborated or challenged by external sources, and shed some light on his travels, his interactions with colonial powers, Indigenous communities, and individuals. They also reveal insights into what he considered to be valuable information worth being documented in his diaries, presumably with the intention of future publications or reports in mind.

Before turning to Pinart's diaries, it is interesting to consider Pinart as a figure himself. This approach involves analyzing how he presented himself, how the press, museums, and scientific societies portrayed him during his lifetime and beyond. Understanding these portrayals is crucial for discerning how they may have influenced the way he and his 'collecting' practices are still described today. Although Pinart garnered an indisputable notoriety in scientific circles during the beginning of his travelling 'career', engendering the creation of a number of biographies, he passed away in relative anonymity.

It was only during the last decades of the 20th century – during the 1970s – that interests in his collections, particularly the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq<sup>25</sup> and Yup'ik masks now kept in the Château-Musée of Boulogne-sur-Mer, triggered a series of publications and new biographies. In most of these sources, Pinart is usually described as a scholar, a linguist, or even a

<sup>22</sup> While the provenance of the artifacts collected by Pinart is often uncertain, the provenance of the Indigenous ancestral remains he gathered is better documented.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, in 1877, when faced with a lack of French vessels available to take him to Alaska, Commandant Théophile Aube (1826–1890) offered him the opportunity to join his vessel for a tour in the Pacific (Lafontaine, 2006). The Ministry also assisted Pinart in securing transportation for himself, as well as the artifacts and indigenous ancestral remains that he gathered, 'collected', and looted. All these elements provided Pinart with optimal conditions and support, as well as protection, during all his travels.

<sup>24</sup> These diaries that were mainly transcribed by Guillaume Lescop, Ph.D. candidate, and for the lesser part by myself.

<sup>25</sup> Both terms are employed: the former, Alutiiq, is a legacy of colonization; and the latter, Sugpiaq, is the traditional name (Chya and Fine 2023).

scientist<sup>26</sup>, and in any case, a man with a strong passion for languages and Indigenous populations. Some of his contemporaries, especially members of academic societies, usually qualified him as a traveller (*voyageur*) or an explorer (*explorateur*). These terms referred to categories recognized by the French government as well as museums: for instance, the National Museum of Natural History (*Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle*) in Paris created a school to train 'travelers-naturalists' (*voyageurs-naturalistes*) in 1818.<sup>27</sup> Travellers (*voyageurs*) were usually charged with collecting artifacts, Indigenous ancestral remains, and data, all of which would later be sent to France to be catalogued, classified, and analyzed by 'armchair scientists' such as the professors from the National Museum of Natural History.<sup>28</sup>

Pinart did not confine himself to these categories; rather, he often seemed to present himself as a scholar, sometimes even as a professor, to the press and his travelling companions. For instance, as early as 1871, 19-year-old Pinart introduced himself to the American press as a "French scientist" although he had neither a formal degree nor any documented training.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, he was labelled as "Prof. A. L. Pinart, ethnologist" after his first trip to and through Alaska.<sup>30</sup> The *Arizona Weekly Citizen*, on December 4th, 1881, even headlined one of their articles as an "Interesting interview with a Famous Traveller and Scientist Prof. Pinart". Based on testimonies and archives, it does appear that Pinart may have tended to lie or, at the very least, embellish the truth – a practice not uncommon for colonial travellers of the time. Indeed, colonized territories were the

perfect stage for Western adventurers or travellers to reinvent themselves. This phenomenon is exemplified by another French traveller and an acquaintance of Pinart, Eugène Boban (1834–1908), but also by other Western collectors who embellished their stories as a way to enhance the value of the collected artifacts.<sup>31</sup> The French press described Pinart in 1934, a few years after his death, as 'a French researcher of great knowledge and merit'.<sup>32</sup>

While some sources do cast doubts about Pinart's knowledge, methods, and expertise,<sup>33</sup> the prevailing historical record tends to emphasize the most flattering aspects of Pinart's biography. One of the most telling example is the entry in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia (in both French and English) which states that he "was a French scholar, linguist, ethnologist and collector, specialist on the American continent" and "studied the civilizations of the New World in the manner of the pioneers of the time, mixing the empirical observation of anthropological, ethnological and linguistic elements". Although there are also other issues with these statements, specifically regarding word choices (such as 'New World' or 'pioneers'), for the point of this article, I will focus on the biographical components.

Another online database, dedicated to ethnographic collections in museums (MuseoArtPremier), qualifies Pinart as a 'great scholar from Boulogne' and specifies that he was 'both an anthropologist, ethnologist and linguist'.<sup>34</sup> Several scholars provide mainly positive descriptions of Pinart, including the anthro-

26 Grant, 1946.

27 Bourguet, 1997; Laissus, 1981.

28 Soubrier 2018; Sibeud, 2002.

29 *Gold Hill Daily News*, April 25th, 1871, 2. (Gold Hill); *The Portland Daily Press*, April 26th, 1871, 3; *The Idaho World*, March 6th, 1873, 1. (Idaho City).

30 *Los Angeles Daily Herald*, March 8th, 1876, 1. (Los Angeles); *Arizona Citizen*, March 25th, 1876, 3. (Tucson); *Arizona Citizen*, April 25th, 1879, 1. (Tucson); *Arizona Silver Belt*, April 25th, 1879, 3. (Globe City).

31 Deußen, 2022; Walsh, 2022.

32 *Le Matin*, 2 aout 1934 : "chercheur français de grand savoir et de grand mérite". <https://www.retronews.fr/journal/le-matin/2-aout-1934/66/151125/2?from=%2Fsearch%23allTerms%3Dalphonse%2520pinart%2520museum%26sort%3Dscore%26published-Bounds%3Dfrom%26indexedBounds%3Dfrom%26page%3D1%26searchIn%3Dall%26total%3D35&index=17>.

33 Cumming, 1882; Lafontaine, 2006.

34 <http://www.museoartpremier.com/Pinart-CM-BSM.html>.

pologist Joëlle Robert-Lamblin, who indicates that “the humanist A. Pinart can be considered a linguist, historian, ethnologist and archaeologist all rolled into one”.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, Pinart is sometimes described, particularly regarding his travels to Alaska, as ‘young and relatively powerless’.<sup>36</sup>

Although there are recent instances describing him as a thief or a looter,<sup>37</sup> Pinart has mainly been described as a scholar, an anthropologist, and an explorer by and large for the past decades. These descriptions, completely expunging the colonial context that framed and supported his travels, provide a very biased perspective of his collecting practices while perpetuating colonial viewpoints that envision a world requiring to be ‘explored’ and ‘discovered’ by Westerners. In this context, how can the biographical approach put these portraits into perspective, repositioning Pinart’s biography in the context of his collecting practices and the reality of his travels?

#### Collecting Within and Through Colonial and Scientific Networks

Although Pinart was never a formal employee of the French government, they funded his travels, and he was mandated on official missions. Colonial networks appear to have been essential for his travels, which is at odds with the idea of a self-funded scholar and powerless explorer. Even when considering that his first travels were self-funded, they would not have been possible without colonial networks and their administrations. Pinart himself was very much aware of the importance of gaining the support of local and international networks and relays; hence, getting access to the colonial and scientific networks was part of his preparations from 1870 to 1871.

<sup>35</sup> Orig. “L’humaniste A. Pinart peut être considéré à la fois comme un linguiste, un historien, un ethnologue et un archéologue”. Robert-Lamblin, 1976: 26.

<sup>36</sup> Clifford, 2013: 310.

<sup>37</sup> Sharp, 2023.

Before leaving San Francisco to reach Alaska, he actively prospected to establish contacts with American scientists such as William Healey Dall (1845–1927), who also travelled and gathered artifacts for the Smithsonian Institution. He met Dall on a trip to Washington around 1870 or 1871 and requested introduction cards for his journey to Alaska,<sup>38</sup> ensuring that he would be able to rely on missionaries and colonial commercial companies once he arrived. Indeed, all along his Alaska trip, Pinart relied heavily on the support of the Hutchinson, Kohl & Company: visiting their agents, staying at their house, and travelling on their boats. The company’s agents also acted as main intermediaries between him and Indigenous peoples and assisted him during his archaeological enterprises: ‘in the afternoon I took a [illegible] with M. [illegible] the agent of H.R&Co and around the bay; this we did hoping to find the place where the natives told me were [sic.] the places where the old inhabitants used to bury their dead’.<sup>39</sup> His connections with colonial commercial companies would be long-lasting: for instance, between 1883 and 1884, he was employed by the Universal Panama Canal Company (Compagnie universelle du canal interocéanique de Panama).<sup>40</sup>

Pinart was able to finance and organize his first trip to the United States and Alaska as a wealthy heir, and this expedition had a crucial impact on his life because it allowed him to gain access to scientific societies and official networks. For instance, he became a member of the Ethnographic Society of Paris (Société d’Ethnographie de Paris) on November 4, 1872, the Anthropological Society of Paris (Société

<sup>38</sup> Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Unit 7073, William Healey Dall Papers, folder 10 Alphonse Pinart. N. D., 1871–1886, box 15, letter March 2nd 1871.

<sup>39</sup> Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 1, Volume 3, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>40</sup> Dossier Cessac Pinart Mission sur les côtes N-O de l’Amérique, F/17/2997, Archives Nationales France, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine.

d'Anthropologie de Paris) on November 7, 1872, and the Geographic Society of Paris (Société de Géographie de Paris) on January 3, 1873. In 1874, he won a gold medal from the Geographic Society of Paris for his Alaska trip. The 266 Alutiiq (Sugpiaq) and Yup'ik artifacts and ancestral remains he took from Alaska were exhibited in the National Museum of Natural History in Paris as early as 1872.<sup>41</sup> Between 1873 and 1874, he consolidated his access to scientific and official networks on a tour to museums in Europe and Russia: a typical strategy of 19th-century anthropological networks.<sup>42</sup>

This first expedition was also probably essential in setting up or at least consolidating his relationship with Ernest Theodore Hamy, the assistant naturalist (aide-naturaliste) at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris at the time, and from 1880, curator (conservateur) at the Museum of Ethnography of the Trocadéro (Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro). This personal relationship between the two men, as attested by their correspondence, was instrumental in the development of Pinart's contacts with the Museum of Natural History as well as the Ministry. In fact, Hamy was among Pinart's sponsors and a longtime supporter of his relationship with the French administration.<sup>43</sup> This support was likely not impartial, as Pinart was one of the suppliers of ancestral skulls for Hamy's *Crania Ethnica*,<sup>44</sup> one of his main academic works.

Indeed, Pinart did not remain a self-funded traveler, but became a 'voyageur' supported by the French government. In 1875, he applied to the Travel and Missions Commission (Commission des voyages et missions) under the French Ministry of Public Education, Cults and Fine Arts for a first 'official honorary mission' (mission officielle honorifique), for which

he was recommended by several scholars from his networks.<sup>45</sup> In his application letter, one of his main arguments was to emphasize the benefits to French museums and the scientific world. This argument was one of the main requirements to obtain the support from the Ministry – that is, the mission and its leader had to be disinterested and have for their main objective the advancement of knowledge.<sup>46</sup> This reasoning takes place in the context of colonial scientific competition, which ran parallel to commercial and military rivalry.<sup>47</sup> In fact, Pinart travelled during a time of intense competition, starting in the 1870s and reaching its apogee with the Berlin Conference in 1884–1885 (Driver, 2001).<sup>48</sup> Pinart was well aware of this international scientific race, as attested by some of his comments:

“The small note we are about to read was only intended to appear in the second volume of my *Voyages to the North-West Coast of America*, which has been in print for some time. If I have detached this ethnographic fragment from the whole of which it forms a part, to publish it immediately, it is because it has come to my attention that an American traveller, abusing the confidence I had in his scientific probity, recently gave himself before a learned body of a large city in the [American] West as the author of the excavations I am about to make known, without even hinting that he had in any capacity a collaborator.”<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Dossier Cessac Pinart Mission sur les côtes N-O de l'Amérique, 8 février 1875, F/17/2997, Archives Nationales France, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine.

<sup>46</sup> Soubrier 2018, 18.

<sup>47</sup> Alam, 1978; Petitjean et al., 1992; Pollock, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Driver, 2001.

<sup>49</sup> Author's translation. Orig.: “La petite notice qu'on va lire ne devait paraître que dans le second volume de mes *Voyages à la côte nord-ouest de l'Amérique*, dont l'impression est depuis quelques temps commencée. Si j'ai détaché de l'ensemble dont il fait partie ce fragment ethnographique, pour le publier immédiatement, c'est qu'il m'est revenu qu'un voyageur américain, abusant de la confiance que j'avais eue dans sa probité scientifique, s'est récemment

<sup>41</sup> *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, 1873: 177.

<sup>42</sup> Boas 1887; Bahnson 1888; Dorsey 1899; Penalzoza-Patzak, 2022

<sup>43</sup> Letter, April 17, 1867, PK 889, Muséum Nationale d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris.

<sup>44</sup> *De Quatrefages*, Hamy, 1882.

One major element of biographies written about Pinart is the omission or glossing over of his motivations for travelling and gathering artifacts and ancestral remains. Indeed, these were also set in the colonial scientific context.<sup>50</sup> His quest for ‘undiscovered’ lands, ‘authentic’ Indigenous cultures, and unpublished materials can be linked to his desire, in a very colonial perspective, to leave his mark on history. Sometimes quite literally; for instance, when he mentioned having scratched his name on a rock where he believed he was the first “white man” who had ever been there; typical for colonial travellers.<sup>51</sup> Pinart noted that “this is the place where the aleuts are to halt when going in a party to Sanakh; upon it I wrote my name and the date of my crossing Ouninak strait this being the first time that it has been effectuated [sic.] by a white man”.<sup>52</sup> In his notes, he also proposed to give his name to one of the harbours he is travelling in: “Between Georges and Cape (...) opens a large bay which we are about to describe and to which I propose to give the name of Pinart’s harbor”.<sup>53</sup> A glance at a map of Canada or the United States reveals how colonialism manifested itself in the renaming of places, simultaneously erasing Indigenous geographical identities.<sup>54</sup>

This type of practice was even common in the sciences, such as archaeology, up until very recently. For instance, a large number of archaeological sites in North America bear the name of the predominantly white men who claimed to have ‘discovered’ the site or owned the land it was on. As stated by Margarita Diaz-Andreu,

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donné devant un corps savant d’une grande ville de l’ouest [américain] comme l’auteur des fouilles que je vais faire connaître, sans même laisser entendre qu’il ait eu à titre quelconque un collaborateur.” Pinart, 1875: 3.

<sup>50</sup> Pollock, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Walsh, 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, September 1871, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 1, Volume 3, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Rose-Redwood et al., 2020.

‘like other human sciences such as geography, anthropology, and history, archaeology became a tool of imperialism’.<sup>55</sup>

Pinart’s travels and collecting practices are, therefore, set in a colonial tradition based on a supposed dichotomy between a polished Western society and a ‘savage’ world yearning to be “discovered”. Although Pinart presented himself as an explorer of ‘wild’ and ‘unknown’ lands, he was well aware that this was not the case. For instance, he was aware of the fact that Alaska had been colonized and explored by Russian expeditions over 100 years prior to his travels.

His correspondence and diaries are also tinged with his opinions on colonization. It is apparent, for instance, in the regrets he expressed upon seeing Port-au-Prince in Haiti: “The city, which contains 8 to 9000 inhabitants, is nothing but ruins and debris; it is hardly a sight to see a city, once French and so rich”, mocking disparagingly the national guard as “certainly the most bizarre, the most buffoonish show I’ve seen”.<sup>56</sup> These comments seem to stem from a combination of French imperialism and a nostalgia for the lost colony, as well as inherent racism that aligns with the racial theories of the time, which can be found in multiple occurrences in his notes. In the same way, when describing Cuba, Pinart indicated that ‘everything died by the inertia of Spain’, referring to the numerous conflicts between the Cuban independentists and Spain (called the Ten Years’ War).<sup>57</sup>

Even when he expressed a form of sorrow in the face of what he believed to be the progressive disappearance of Indigenous cultures induced by colonialism, he also appeared as a staunch defender of colonization, particularly in its most brutal aspects. For instance, when mentioning the Russian colonization and ens-

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<sup>55</sup> Diaz-Andreu, 2007: 210.

<sup>56</sup> Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, September 1871, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 2, Volume 7, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>57</sup> Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 2, Volume 7, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

lavement of the Unangan (Aleut) in Alaska, Pinart wrote: “although the Aleutes [sic.] are now excessively soft and harmless, the Russians went through much suffering at the beginning. Many Russians paid with their lives because of their tenacity in trying to settle down on these otherwise inhospitable islands”.<sup>58</sup> Though his point of view coincided with the mentality of the time, it was not shared by every traveller and artifact collector; some would sometimes be critical or show compassion when describing the effect of colonization on Indigenous peoples and societies.<sup>59</sup>

#### Encompassing Salvage Collecting Through Scientific Violence

Pinart’s descriptions as a man with a passion for travel and languages correspond to a movement in France during the 19th century with the rise of popular publications, the multiplication of learned societies, and the interest in amateur scientific practices.<sup>60</sup> However, his participation in salvaging anthropology and racial theories is largely omitted. As Pinart’s first report to the Geographic Society on his Alaska expedition states in 1872, he aimed to prove or disprove racial theories and “to determine with precision the demarcation line between the Aleut and Eskimo races” (author’s translation).<sup>61</sup> In his diaries, he emphasized the importance of the authenticity criterion regarding Indigenous peoples.

This emphasis seems to be mainly what he perceived as the absence of Western and colonial influences, aligning with the ‘salvage paradigm’ that dominated the anthropological and ethnographic fields.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Pinart often made references to the fact that Indigenous

societies are losing their traditional languages due to colonization, reproving how Indigenous populations are ‘mixing’ with colonists and therefore are becoming too ‘civilized’ to be deemed worthy of study.<sup>63</sup>

The imminence of the event is also expressed throughout Pinart’s notes in the numerous mentions of what he perceived as the effects of colonialism on Indigenous peoples (whether positive or negative), evoking, for instance, prostitution and alcoholism.<sup>64</sup> He also mentioned his intent to trace the ‘lost’ origins of the Indigenous peoples he encountered and deemed worthy of studying. He described how some Indigenous traditional languages are disappearing, thereby reinforcing the theory of their impending disappearance and also his importance as a collector.<sup>65</sup>

All along his travels, Pinart gathered, bought, and looted a large number of ancestral remains, particularly skulls. He was always careful to catalogue and document them, largely influenced by the development of racial taxonomies based on craniometry and cephalometry. Moreover, there are several accounts about Pinart’s tendency to be ruthless in collecting artifacts, and especially ancestral remains. This practice appears in his notes and correspondence, but has rarely been discussed in the context of the study and exhibition of his collections.

For him, the archaeological context seemed to be a guarantee of authentic artifacts, and his main goal while investigating burial sites was to acquire artifacts and ancestral re-

<sup>58</sup> Wallace, 2007: 40.

<sup>59</sup> Walsh, 2022; Le Masne, 2016; Zins, 1998.

<sup>60</sup> Bourquin, 1993; Venayre, 2002; Soubrier, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Orig.: “Déterminer avec précision la ligne de démarcation entre les races aléoute et esquimale”, *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, 1873: 79.

<sup>62</sup> Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, 1875, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 2, Volume 6 & 7, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Clifford, 1989.

<sup>63</sup> Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, 1878, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 2, Volume 9, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, 1876, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 2, Volume 6, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>64</sup> Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, 1875, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 2, Volume 6 & 7, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>65</sup> Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, 1878, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 2, Volume 9, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

mains.<sup>66</sup> For instance, from Rapa Nui (Easter Island) alone, Pinart 'collected' over 70 skulls in around a week.<sup>67</sup> His lack of concern for the Descendants, his sense of urgency, and lack of rigour are discernible in his notes about his excavations. For example, while working in a cave in Unga, Alaska, where he 'collected' several funeral artifacts and two human skulls, he described digging through the four burials he identified in the cave in less than half a day. The material and remains were later sent to the National Museum of Natural History in Paris.

In his diary, the event is summarized in eight lines, mainly recording the geographical aspect of the cave. Only one brief sentence indicates that he "took all that was in a passably good state and worth transport."<sup>68</sup> His haste in excavating archaeological sites is perceptible in the majority of the burial excavations mentioned in his diaries: as a matter of fact, most of his excavations do not seem to last more than a day, even when encountering multiple burials on the same site.<sup>69</sup>

Even when some authors mention that Pinart had no qualms in appropriating artifacts, these references do not encompass or provide a realistic picture of how ruthless he was.<sup>70</sup> For

instance, due to the implementation of the new legislation dubbed "Law of 1880,"<sup>71</sup> he was unable to export artifacts he had gathered while digging in Mexico. As a consequence, Pinart tried to leverage his personal network as well as the Ministry's network to circumvent the interdiction on exporting archaeological finds imposed by the "Law of 1880." At the time, Mexico was among the first former colonies to establish national authority over archaeological finds.<sup>72</sup>

Several of his travelling companions also gave adverse impressions of Pinart's collecting habits regarding ancestral remains; for example, one of them compared his quest for human skulls with "the instinct of a schoolboy hunting for birds' nests."<sup>73</sup> Moreover, several sources attest to Pinart's penchant for theft,<sup>74</sup> which he admitted himself.<sup>75</sup> Another travelling companion recounted how Pinart had to face the wrath of Tuamotuans (Paumotus) after having 'stolen' one or two bags of skulls on Makataea Island (Tuamotus). He was then saved by the intervention of the official resident of the French colonial administration<sup>76</sup> in the Tuamotus islands.<sup>77</sup> This event also illustrates how he was protected by the colonial administration.

Pinart's violent methods, which would nowadays be described as severe looting,<sup>78</sup> were in line with the practices of the time; as stated by Susan Pollock, "the history of anthropological collecting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries makes clear that although the degree

<sup>66</sup> Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 2, Volume 5, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley: "Nous creusâmes à nouveau au même endroit sans succès ; mais malgré cela notre temps ne fut pas perdu car l'excavation nous révéla la manière dont ces populations enterrent leurs [morts]".

<sup>67</sup> Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 2, Volume 7, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>68</sup> Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, September 30, 1871, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 2, Volume 7, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>69</sup> Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, July 6, 1871, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 2, Volume 7, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Diary, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, February 16, 1876, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Box 2, Volume 5, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>70</sup> *The Phoenix Herald*, September 17, 1879, page 4. (Phoenix): "Wherever there is a strange looking mound M. Pinart looks into it, exhumes skeletons,

measures skulls, collects stone implements, and leaves nothing undone to get at the ultimate facts about extinct people"; Clifford, 2013: 310.

<sup>71</sup> Earle 2007.

<sup>72</sup> Peniche, 2015.

<sup>73</sup> Constance Gordon Cumming book p. 35.

<sup>74</sup> Dall, 1875; Twitchell, 2008.

<sup>75</sup> Alphonse Pinart, "Voyage en Sonora", *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, sixième série, Tome XX, juillet-décembre 1880.

<sup>76</sup> Lafontaine, 2006: 267.

<sup>77</sup> *Messenger de tahiti*, journal officiel des Établissements français de l'Océanie, Samedi 17 décembre 1870, 1<sup>ère</sup> année, n. 51.

<sup>78</sup> Platt, 2015.

of coercion exercised varied, the practices of collecting inevitably took place in contexts of starkly unequal power relations and involved various forms of violence.<sup>79</sup> Based on the analysis of his correspondence, diaries, and reports, for Pinart, only the acquisition and transfer to French museums mattered, in particular as a way to participate in the 'competitive race to fill museums'.<sup>80</sup>

However, biographies about Pinart, even the most recent ones, as well as exhibitions and scholarly works regarding his collections, mainly stay silent about these aspects of his collecting practices. This omission gives a biased and, in some ways, an idealised view of Pinart methods; it fails to provide the reference framework necessary to understand the collections' genesis. The violent nature of Pinart's collecting practices might not be unexpected or surprising considering the moral, colonial, and scientific contexts, illustrated by recent studies revealing Indigenous remains were more often collected than Western remains.<sup>81</sup> But they warrant emphasis when discussing his collection. Highlighting his collecting practices is especially crucial when considering their public display and hence their accessibility for Descendant communities.

While museums and researchers might suspect the violent and colonial nature of his methods, the fact that these are almost constantly overlooked casts an incredibly positive light on Pinart, contradicting the reality of his practices. In view of the calls to decolonize society and museums, as well as the political essence of museums as institutions, it is critical to highlight these methods, particularly regarding Indigenous ancestral remains and burial materials.

## Conclusion

Considering the way Pinart has been described for the past decades, in light of a detailed biographical approach to the provenance of the collections bearing his name, it seems crucial to revise and widely share his actual biography. Presenting Pinart as just an explorer, a scientist, or a scholar is akin to ignoring or glossing over the colonial aspects of his collecting practices, as well as the systemic violence he was part of.

That being said, Pinart's case is similar to many other collectors from the 19th century, whose biographies are progressively being revised to highlight the contexts of acquisition of their collections, such as Arthur Baessler or Wilhelm Joest.<sup>82</sup> Museums and their collections are not neutral,<sup>83</sup> and as Charis (Carisse) Gullickson stated in her essay, "choosing not to address local histories of colonialism is museum passivity, not neutrality".<sup>84</sup>

A path towards a postcolonial approach of the museum can hardly be conceived without revising the biographies of the colonial individuals who looted, stole, or purchased the objects now on display in Western museums. However, reviewing biographies should not only be done with repatriation in mind but also because neglecting to mention the darker aspects of their collecting practices might, in a way, perpetuate colonial bias.<sup>85</sup> It may erase the reality of how, in the case of Pinart and numerous so-called 'collectors', many of the artifacts and ancestral remains were acquired.

<sup>79</sup> Pollock, 2023: 381.

<sup>80</sup> Pollock, 2023: 380.

<sup>81</sup> Pollock, 2023; Martin-Moya et al., 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Fründt et al., 2022; Deußen, 2022.

<sup>83</sup> Kraft, 2018; Bloomfield, 2024.

<sup>84</sup> Gullickson, 2023: 4.

<sup>85</sup> For more on the debates around the terminology on restitution and repatriation see Rassool & Gibbon, 2023.

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## In the Shadow of the Collector

### The Collector and the Other in the Context of the Colonial Appropriation of “Ethnographica”

Philipp Müller

2024

#### Abstract

There are certain obvious blind spots in the perception and presentation of the “collector” of ethnographica in the colonial discourse and the archives of ethnological museums. At first, it is striking that colonial structures of violence and exploitation are rarely discussed. But if one contrasts the representations with the actual appropriation practices, one also realizes that external sources of information are often concealed; and indigenous actors rarely appear as individuals, but only as ethnic groups. The following article therefore aims to address the question of the role and representation of individual “imperial lives” and the other in the context of colonial collecting in the German Empire since the late 19th Century. To this end, the colonial structures behind the appropriation practices are analyzed and contrasted with the views of colonial collectors on their own collecting practices. The gravitational centers of (scientific) interest in objects from the colonies were museums, even if one can increasingly speak of a broad “salvage movement” at the end of the 19th Century. The collectors may have approached museums as individuals; still, the appropriation itself took place within the context of colonial structures of violence and exploitation and on the basis of colonial networks of local Europeans, soldiers, missionaries, farmers, or civil servants. Conversely, indigenous actors weren’t only involuntary victims, but also have been able to take advantage of the European demand by actively producing export goods. However, the appropriation of objects

was accompanied by a fatalistic view in which colonial expansion was veiled in the form of unfolding “culture” or “history”. The indigenous producers in turn appeared merely as “ethnic groups”, as extras, as the Other. Therefore, the actors and the structures are to be consciously illuminated, and the discursive figure of the “collector” subjected to a critical analysis.

#### Keywords

*Collecting, Collector, Colonialism, Ethnography, Ethnographic, Museum, Salvage, Ideology, Racism, Nationalism*

#### Introduction

The question of biographical analysis and representation as a means of decolonization is only one aspect of a general reflective turn in the current discourse on colonial collecting and the question of which approaches and topics should have priority, and which should not. As Carl Deußen rightly points out, the current focus of research and policy is primarily on provenance research, which seeks to clarify the legal and moral legitimacy of property claims and often pays too little attention to more fundamental social relations.<sup>86</sup>

To identify colonial continuities and not prematurely treat global power and exploitation relations and their legitimizations as a closed matter of the past, it would therefore be important to take a closer look at the so-called “contexts of collecting”. It is not an easy task to uncover the circumstances of collecting in the colonial archive, as they were rarely addressed by the donors. The structures of exploitation and violence, which in many cases enhanced

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<sup>86</sup> Carl Deußen, “The Archive of Wilhelm Joest and the Limits of Provenance Research” *Thinking About the Archive & Provenance Research*. boasblogs papers 4. (Bonn, Bremen, Köln, Siegen: boasblogs, 2022), 37–38.

the possibilities of collecting, as well as the agency and actions of indigenous actors, rarely played a role in colonial publications or correspondence. They instead disappeared in the narrative shadow of colonial actors, who staged themselves as adventurous explorers.

If we want to bring these structures of self-staging to light, we must nevertheless ask ourselves: What does “being a collector” mean in this respect? If we look at how objects generally made their way from the colonies to the museums and living rooms of Europeans, we first notice that collectors were by no means only scholars, but also civil servants, military personnel, missionaries, settlers/farmers, traders, employees in mining companies, etc. This is what prompted Rebecca Habermas to speak of a “movement”.<sup>87</sup> What is the consequence of the theoretical analysis of collecting?

The following article aims to address these questions by presenting a critique of the legitimizing narrative of the “collector” in the colonial period.<sup>88</sup> To this end, the ideological and political-economic colonial structures of collecting ethnographica will first be outlined, and then the staging practices of the collectors will be analyzed.

#### The Demand for Ethnographica: The Rescue and Conservation of “Ethnic Culture” in Europe and Overseas

*Almost every age, according to its inner attitude, seems to develop a specific building problem: the Gothic the cathedral, The Baroque the palace, and the early nineteenth century with its nostal-*

<sup>87</sup> Rebecca Habermas, “Rettungsparadigma und Bewahrungsfetischismus: Oder was die Restitutionsdebatte mit der europäischen Moderne zu tun hat” in *Geschichtskultur durch Restitution? Ein Kunst-Historikerstreit*, ed. Thomas Sandkühler, Angela Eppler and Jürgen Zimmerer, 79–100. (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2021), 79.

<sup>88</sup> The focus is on the German Empire, although other colonial contexts will also be mentioned.

*gic inclination to imbibe the past, the museum.*  
– (Siegfried Giedion 1995 *Building in France*, 120)

At the beginning of the 19th century, there were already collections of objects from non-European societies in Europe, which found their way into the art and curiosity cabinets of European monarchs as exoticized “curiosities”, i.e., popular due to their “foreignness”, and were intended to positively underline the cosmopolitanism of these rulers.<sup>89</sup> Over the 19th century, interest in objects from outside Europe ultimately became a social phenomenon in Europe that culminated in a veritable “collecting movement” around 1900.<sup>90</sup> In the course of the emergence of bourgeois society, urban civic elites founded scholarly educational and antiquarian associations in which they created and researched collections and founded the first museums or reorganized former royal collections.<sup>91</sup>

Ethnographica as data were part of the contemporary method of object-related, empirical research.<sup>92</sup> From 1850 to 1918, large ethnographic museums were founded throughout the German Empire, and a massive accumulation of objects from all parts of the world began.<sup>93</sup> At a time of intense competition for the division of the world into European spheres of

<sup>89</sup> Hans Peter Hahn, “Wieviel Ethnologie steckt im Weltkulturenmuseum?” in *Ethnologie und Weltkulturenmuseum*, ed. by Hans Peter Hahn. (Berlin: Vergangenheitsverlag, 2017), 21.

<sup>90</sup> Habermas, *Rettungsparadigma und Bewahrungsfetischismus*, 80.

<sup>91</sup> Karoline Noack, “Welt im Kasten – Zur Geschichte der Institution ‘Völkerkunde’ im deutschsprachigen Raum” in *Museumsethnologie – Eine Einführung*, ed. by Iris Edenheiser and Iris Larissa Förster, 30–47. (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2019.), 31.

<sup>92</sup> Andrew Zimmermann, “What do you really want in German East Africa, Herr Professor?” in *Engaging Colonial Knowledge. Reading European Archives in World History*, ed. by Ricardo Roque and Kim A. Wagner. (New York/Hempshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 282.

<sup>93</sup> Hans Peter Hahn, “Wieviel Ethnologie?,” 22.

power, non-European societies became prominent “objects” of study in European science. The colonial expansion of the German Empire contributed significantly to the growth of the ethnological museums, providing the political-economic framework in which the museums acquired large parts of their current collections.<sup>94</sup> As scientists were unable to finance their collections and research activities on their own, they were dependent on external funding from donors and the state.<sup>95</sup>

This, in turn, strongly influenced the course of ethnological museums to the extent that external actors and interests were able to exert their influence on the museums and promote the opening of the museums to the public. Internal discussions on the separation of show collections for amateurs and the public, and collections for scientists increased in ethnological museums. In the course of the increasing importance of national identity in the 19th century, the Prussian state saw its museums as one of the noblest forms of representation of state cultural policy.<sup>96</sup> However, as Glen Penny writes, it is important to emphasize the federalism that already characterized the decentralized nature of museum policy and the competition between the cities themselves in the times of the Kaiserreich.<sup>97</sup> With the ethnographica on

display, these institutions turned into “symbols of urban self-awareness”<sup>98</sup>.

Still, it would be wrong to see science as a mere “contractor”, as it was often the other way around: science and museums often tried to put their research at the service of “national interests”. In this regard, Gesa Grimme writes that colonial political and economic considerations increased interest in systematic research and exploration of the colony, which in turn led to an increase in attention for ethnology as a discipline.<sup>99</sup>

But it was not only science that founded museums: colonial economic associations also founded collections, which later developed into museums, because they hoped that familiarizing the population with the colonized would increase support for their economic interests.<sup>100</sup> In addition, missionary societies had an interest in ethnographica, which they presented in their own museums and exhibitions for promotional purposes.<sup>101</sup> It must also be emphasized that the collectors or appropriators of objects did not necessarily give them to museums – they also presented them in their homes: in living rooms in the metropolises and the colonies, objects served as memorabilia and decoration.<sup>102</sup> Interest in and fascination with the colonial other brought together numerous di-

**94** Iris Edenheiser and Elisabeth Tietmeyer, “Der ‘Klassiker: das Museum als Praxisfeld der ethnologischen Wissenschaften’ in *Angewandte Ethnologie*, ed. Sabine Klocke-Daffa (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019), 517.

**95** Michael Kraus, “Die Flickschusterei des Fortschritts. Anpassung als Sachzwang bei der Entstehung der Ethnologie,” in *Museum und Universität in der Ethnologie*. Curupira Workshop Band 8, ed. Michael Kraus and Mark Münzel (Marburg: Förderverein Völkerkunde in Marburg e.V, 2003), 234.

**96** Karl Hammer. “Preußische Museumspolitik im 19. Jahrhundert” in *Bildungspolitik in Preussen zur Zeit des Kaiserreichs*, ed. Peter Baumgart (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1980), 267..

**97** Glenn Penny, *Objects of Culture* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 9–10.

**98** Anja Laukötter, “Von der ‘Kultur’ zur ‘Rasse’ – vom Objekt zum Körper? Völkerkundemuseen und ihre Wissenschaften zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts” (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2007), 34.

**99** Gesa Grimme. “Abschlussbericht – Provenienzforschung im Projekt ‘Schwieriges Erbe’: Zum Umgang mit kolonialzeitlichen Objekten in ethnologischen Museen” (Lindenmuseum Stuttgart, 2018), 7.

**100** Felicitas Bergner, “Ethnographisches Sammeln in Afrika während der deutschen Kolonialzeit. Ein Beitrag zur Sammlungsgeschichte deutscher Völkerkundemuseen” *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde*, no. 42, *Zur Geschichte der Afrikaforschung* (1996): 231.

**101** Habermas, *Rettenungsparadigma und Bewahrungsfetischismus*, 83..

**102** Dag Henrichsen and Lisa Roulet. *Anneliese and Ernst Rudolf Scherz’s ‘Ethnographic Object Collection’ from Namibia and Southern Africa* BAB Working Paper No 1. (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2020), 7–9.

verse, largely middle- and upper-class groups at the time.

#### Collecting as the Preservation of "Ethnic Originalities"

Some clarification is needed regarding the colonial background of "colonial" collecting. The colonial expansion of European powers had already started in 1492. So why did the interest in ethnographic objects only grow to that extent in the 19th Century? The massive collecting around 1900 is often explained as an emotional-enthusiastic "collecting mania" (*Sammelwut*): an expression that merely psychologizes the behavior but does not explain it, as it claims that the purpose of collecting is an "instinct". A concept that is now cited more frequently is the so-called "salvage ideology", which accompanied the practice of Europeans collecting or appropriating objects both inside and outside Europe in various ways and also became a prominent idea in the 19th century.<sup>103</sup> It stated that the "natural peoples" were doomed to become extinct and that their objects should therefore be rescued as soon as possible.<sup>104</sup> The reason given for the extermination was thereby not the ruthless interests of exploitation, but the "spread of culture" or the "course of history."

Elisabeth Tietmeyer and Iris Edenheiser refer to the "ethnic paradigm" that accompanied the founding of both museums from European folklore studies (*Volkskunde*) and ethnology (*Völkerkunde*).<sup>105</sup> Birthe Kundrus points to the intertwining of colonial images of the other with nationalism, noting that the construction of the self also goes hand in hand with the construction of the other.<sup>106</sup> This is the reason why the "salvage ideology" has an internal and an external dimension. Broadly speaking, "sal-

vage ideology" is based on the belief that a certain threat, may it be industrialization (within Europe) or the expansion of European "culture" (in the colonies), leads to a loss of "authentic" ethnic identity, which can only be countered with a rapid rescue operation that includes all types of supposed "expression" of this ethnic identity. In this respect, the collection of "own" and "foreign" objects was initially no different.<sup>107</sup> The Brothers Grimm were already systematically collecting fairy tales at the beginning of the 19th century.<sup>108</sup> They considered the texts as literary manifestations of a "folk spirit" (*Volksgeist*).<sup>109</sup> By analogy, the founder of the Berlin ethnographic museum Adolf Bastian, saw the objects of non-literate societies as "material text".<sup>110</sup> The desire to preserve ethnic identity was also the basis of Ernst Rudorff's later *Heimatschutz* movement, which sought to protect "German nature and culture" from destruction by "industrialization".<sup>111</sup>

The *Heimatschutz* movement saw the processes of urbanization and changes to the landscape that were taking place as part of industrialization as a threat to German identity.<sup>112</sup> Liberalism and the labor movement were identified as the culprits for these processes and as enemies that would endanger German unity.<sup>113</sup> Being a leading figure of the labor movement, Karl Marx himself, on the other hand, shared neither the fear of industrialization nor of the loss of ethnic identity. He saw industrializa-

<sup>103</sup> Habermas, *Rettungsparadigma und Bewahrungsfetischismus*, 85–86..

<sup>104</sup> Bergner, "Ethnographisches Sammeln in Afrika", 227.

<sup>105</sup> Edenheiser and Tietmeyer, "Museum als Praxisfeld", 517.

<sup>106</sup> Birthe Kundrus, *Das Kaiserreich im Spiegel seiner Kolonien* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2003), 141..

<sup>107</sup> Habermas, *Rettungsparadigma und Bewahrungsfetischismus*, 90.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, 87.

<sup>109</sup> Mark-Georg Dehrmann, "Galerie der Volksgeister. Zum europäischen Diskurs des 'Nationalepos' im 19. Jahrhundert," *Zeitschrift für Germanistik, Neue Folge*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2019): 287.

<sup>110</sup> Penny, *Objects of Culture*, 26.

<sup>111</sup> Habermas, *Rettungsparadigma und Bewahrungsfetischismus*, 88–89.

<sup>112</sup> Andreas Knaut, "Ernst Rudoff und die Anfänge der deutschen Heimatbewegung" in *Antimodernismus und Reform. Zur Geschichte der deutschen Heimatbewegung*, ed. Edeltraud Klüeting (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991), 20.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, 31.

tion only as a means of increasing profits by replacing costs for the workforce and lamented the socio-economic (!) consequences for workers and peasants caused by this process of change.<sup>114</sup>

The “salvage ideology” is thus to be understood within the framework of perceptions of self and the other in the emerging nation states of the 18th and 19th centuries. Nations were “presented for the past and future as if they formed a natural community that per se had an identity of origin, culture, and interests that transcended people and social conditions.”<sup>115</sup> The “people” (Volk) were thus not imagined as a political entity or at least created, but as a determined-natural, psycho-mental entity that expressed itself in material and immaterial culture and biology. So, at the very moment when modern states emancipated themselves from agriculture and replaced it with a capitalist industrial production, not only a kind of nostalgia for nature and the countryside arose, but also the idea that the political collective subordinate to the state had always been a natural or biological community: a kind of kinship group. In this respect, there was a kind of equation with the colonial other, who was otherwise considered backward.

On the other hand, the “salvage ideology” implies a fundamental difference, which I will now want to show in more detail using two examples: I would like to illustrate this with the ideas of “natural peoples” of the two founding fathers of German-speaking ethnology and anthropology, Rudolf Virchow and Adolf Bastian, respectively.

Virchow was at the interface of folklore studies (Volkskunde) and ethnology (Völkerkunde), as he was not only one of the chairmen of the Berlin ethnological society BGAEU

(Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgesellschaft), but also founder of the folklore museum (“Volkstrachtenmuseum”) in Berlin.<sup>116</sup> On the occasion of its opening in 1889, he wrote about the latter that it would “do for our people what the ethnological museums have done for foreign peoples, especially primitive peoples” [transl. by the author].<sup>117</sup> He further states that, “unfortunately, the natural peoples are disappearing with alarming speed in contact with the civilized peoples, and it may be regarded as a particular stroke of luck that the increased care in the observation and collection of all the peculiarities of these sinking survivors of prehistoric times has at least used the last period of their existence to save for the future not only the memory, but also real objects of contemplation.”<sup>118</sup>

In Adolf Bastian’s work, the threat scenario that should make it necessary to “save” the objects sounds as follows: “One often speaks of an extinction of the ‘natural peoples’. Not the physical extinction, as far as it occurs, is important, because it depends on the almighty course of history, which can neither be hindered nor stopped. But the mental extinction, – the loss of the ethnic originalities, before they are saved in literature and museums for study, – such loss threatens our future induction calculations with all kinds of falsifications and could ques-

<sup>114</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, (Anaconda Verlag, 2009 [1867]), 411.

<sup>115</sup> Étienne Balibar, “Die Nation-Form: Geschichte und Ideologie” in *Rasse, Klasse, Nation. Ambivalente Identitäten*, ed. Étienne Balibar und Immanuel Wallerstein (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 2019), 118..

<sup>116</sup> Anne Haeming, *Der gesammelte Joest – Biographie eines Ethnologen* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2023), 58.

<sup>117</sup> “Es wird für unser Volk dasjenige thun, was die ethnologischen Museen für die fremden, insbesondere Naturvölker gethan haben.” Rudolf Virchow, “Das Museum für deutsche Volkstrachten und Erzeugnisse des Hausgewerbes in Berlin,” *Die Gartenlaube*, Heft 26. (1889): 436..

<sup>118</sup> “Leider schwinden die Naturvölker in der Berührung mit den Kulturvölkern in erschreckender Schnelligkeit dahin, und es darf als ein besonderer Glücksfall betrachtet werden, daß die erhöhte Sorgfalt in der Beobachtung und Sammlung aller Eigenthümlichkeiten dieser versinkenden Überlebender Vorzeit wenigstens noch die letzte Zeit ihres Bestehens benutzt hat, um für die Zukunft nicht allein die Erinnerung, sondern auch wirkliche Objekte der Anschauung zu retten.” *Ibid*.

tion the possibility even of a human science” [transl. by the author].<sup>119</sup> Here, the enforcement of colonial exploitation is naturalized as an unalterable necessity: as an “all-powerful course of history”.<sup>120</sup> The “course of history” constructed as an autonomous actor threatens the “real ethnic-mental identity” of “natural peoples”, which is expressed in their material manifestations. The latter must therefore be rescued as quickly as possible if its usefulness for research is to be preserved.<sup>121</sup>

The idea of “rescue” was common among colonial collectors, also outside of science. For example, the colonial officer, part of the German military in the colony German South West Africa, Richard D. Volkmann wrote to Karl von Linden in 1903: “Above all, the !Kung or Kalahari bushman is rapidly receding from culture and he is perhaps the original inhabitant of South Africa and certain to become extinct” [transl. by author].<sup>122</sup> According to Habermas, this idea can be found among most contemporary col-

lectors.<sup>123</sup> Among missionaries as well as artists in the realm of expressionist and primitivist modern art around 1900, there is lamentation about the loss of exoticized, supposedly originally intact living environments.

### The Commodification of Indigenous Objects

As soon as, apart from science, the art market – from artists to philanthropists and art historians like Carl Einstein – developed an interest in the field, the commodification of ethnographica gave rise to another reason to collect: money. We will therefore take a brief look at the political-economic background to the commodification of objects. Elias Aguigah points out the entanglement of the appropriation of ethnographica with the so-called primitive accumulation and the transformation of objects into capital.<sup>124</sup> The colonial, political-economic context around 1900 was already characterized by the establishment of capitalist relations of production.<sup>125</sup> Where previously consumer goods had come to Europe from overseas mainly as part of barter trade, by the end of the 19th century, raw materials were increasingly being extracted for the accumulation of capital in the European metropolises.<sup>126</sup>

As already mentioned, however, there was also considerable interest in other material

**119** “Man spricht vielfach von einem Aussterben der Naturvölker. Nicht das physische Aussterben, soweit es vorkommt, fällt ins Gewicht, weil ohnedem von dem allmächtigen Geschichtsgang abhängig, der weder zu hemmen, noch abzuenden ist. Aber das psychische Aussterben, – der Verlust der ethnischen Originalitäten, (...) – solcher Verlust bedroht unsere künftigen Inductionsrechnungen mit allerlei Fälschungen (...)” Adolf Bastian, *Der Völkergedanke im Aufbau einer Wissenschaft vom Menschen* (Berlin: Ferd. Dümmlers Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1881), 179–180.

**120** As Penny notes, Bastian and Virchow were also already beginning to criticize colonialism (Penny 2002, 99). After all, the idea of rescue also contained a certain rejection of the consequences of colonialism, but these “sighs” did not lead to an anti-colonial, political commitment in any of them at this time.

**121** Even though Bastian’s view was certainly formative for German ethnology, the rise of the “Kulturkreislehre” and ethnologists such as Graebner, Ankermann and Frobenius also gave rise to voices that deviated from the idea of unchanging natural peoples (Gaisenhainer 2021, 199).

**122** “Vor allem der !Kung- oder Kalahari-Buschmann weicht schnell vor der Kultur zurück u. er, ist vielleicht der Urbewohner Südafrikas und dem Aussterben gewiss.” Lindenmuseum. Volkmann an Linden 10.01.1903, KML Volkmann.

**123** Rebekka Habermas, “Die Suche nach Ethnographica und die kunst sinnigen Kannibalen der Südsee. Oder: Was die koloniale Nostalgie im Kaiserreich mit der kolonialen Aphasie heute zu tun hat” *Historische Zeitschrift*, Bd. 311, Heft 2, (2020): 359ff..

**124** Elias Aguigah. “Restitution of looted artifacts – a Marxist approach” *Review of African Political Economy*, (2023).

**125** Aguigah analyzes the collection of ethnographica in the context of “primitive accumulation”, i.e. the expropriation of the population from their means of production and the transformation of resources into capital. In the context of this article, however, I would like to focus primarily on the process of commodification of indigenous objects of everyday use they underwent in the context of colonial trade.

**126** Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (University of California Press, 2010), 310.

products, weapons, handicrafts, and clothing of the colonized.<sup>127</sup> As a result, Habermas explains, new trade networks developed, connecting German museum directors with London auction houses and dealers.<sup>128</sup>

In addition to wholesalers, there were also small itinerant traders who supplied the museums with ethnographica or human remains.<sup>129</sup> Ethnographica were special commodities. Stored in museum and personal collections, the objects, unlike raw materials, remained outside the capitalist production process. Their original use value was therefore only of limited interest. Spears were not used as weapons, and bowls not as tableware. The objects stood for something else: as “ethnographica”, they represented the supposed ethnic, cultural identity of the colonized other in objectified form and made this appearance “researchable and representable”. In this respect, ethnology provided an ideological foundation for colonialism.

But to be precise: ethnologists didn’t “invent” the other. The separation of “own” and “foreign” is, at first, a political one insofar as the European states and the reach of their political power and monopolies of violence defined who belongs to their collectives or not in the first place. The other is initially a result of violence. Then, as Andrew Zimmermann points out, this separation has been ideologically accompanied by the supposedly natural separation of “cultural and natural peoples”.<sup>130</sup> Zimmermann refers here to the proximity of the commodity fetish and the attributions of ethnographica, both of which are stripped of their social conditionality. In this respect, the ideological, new semio-

tic use value of the colonial, ethnographic object is therefore the reification of these political identities. And thus, the result of a “primitive symbolic accumulation”, as Elias Aguigah puts it.<sup>131</sup> What Marx said about the “commodity fetish” also applies in this case: “It is only the particular social relation of men themselves which here assumes for them the jugglery form of a relation of things”.<sup>132</sup>

#### Collecting Ethnographica in the Context of Colonial Structures

*The work is not much different from any factory, office, or typing job. Why did the ethnographic questioning always remind me of a police interrogation? [transl. by author]<sup>133</sup>*  
– (Michel Leiris, *Phantom Afrique*)

Based on the scientific, political, missionary, and later also artistic-aesthetic interest in the living environment of the colonized in the form of their material culture and its commodification, collecting became more systematized around 1900. The museums’ acquisition opportunities in the German Empire initially depended on the personal contacts of the directors and their budget. Ethnologists either collected objects themselves or, more frequently, resorted to networks and trade. If museums had multiple copies of an object, it was not uncommon to exchange duplicates with other museums.<sup>134</sup> Some museum ethnologists from the early phase of the institutionalization of the discipline, such as Bastian and Felix von Luschan from the Museum in Berlin and Karl Weule

<sup>127</sup> According to capitalist market logic, objects that were difficult or impossible to obtain by peaceful means were all the more coveted, which increased the willingness to use violence (Aguigah 2023).

<sup>128</sup> Habermas, “Die Suche nach Ethnographica”, 370.

<sup>129</sup> Ernst Rudolf Scherz, *Südwester Geschichten am Lagerfeuer erzählt* (Basler Afrika Bibliographien: Basel, 2005), 55.

<sup>130</sup> Andrew Zimmermann, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 150.

<sup>131</sup> Elias Aguigah, “Restitution of looted artifacts”.

<sup>132</sup> Marx, *Das Kapital*, 84–85.

<sup>133</sup> “Die Arbeit unterscheidet sich auch nicht wesentlich von irgendeiner Fabrik-, Büro- oder Schreibarbeit. Warum hat mich denn die ethnographische Befragung immer wieder an ein Polizeiverhör erinnert?” (Michel Leiris 2022, 321).

<sup>134</sup> Markus Schindlbeck, “Kolonialwaren und Trophäen. Die Abgabe von Dubletten und das Berliner Museum für Völkerkunde im Kontext des Kolonialrevisionismus,” *Paideuma*, 47, (2021), 84.

from Leipzig, had already jumped out of their proverbial “armchair” and set off on collecting expeditions. The travel conditions around 1900 were still precarious and characterized by great difficulties due to the unfamiliar climatic conditions and logistical problems.<sup>135</sup>

In 1873, Bastian and the Berlin Society for Geography founded the “Afrikanische Gesellschaft,” which sent expeditions to Africa to explore the land, the resources, and the people.<sup>136</sup> They pursued scientific goals, but as a byproduct, they delivered useful knowledge for the colonial exploitation of the continent and as a foundation for the continent to be “intellectually conquered.”<sup>137</sup> The objectives also included the development of trade routes, which were seen as a “cultural task of the German people.”<sup>138</sup> Around 1900, the state began funding ethnographic research trips to Africa, South America, Asia, and Oceania.<sup>139</sup>

#### The Symbiosis of Museums and Colonial Networks

In addition to their own collections as a result of expeditions, the museum directors also tried to establish contacts overseas to obtain ethnographic objects.<sup>140</sup> This way, they created large-scale networks that extended across the European colonies, or as Karl Graf von Linden, since 1899 director of the ethnological museum in Stuttgart, put it: “My reach has grown tremendously in the meantime and now reaches even into the heart of the most distant peoples” [transl. by the author].<sup>141</sup> His network of collectors stands out in particular, as he was

able to achieve an extraordinary increase in his collection without ever having been to the colonies.<sup>142</sup> The collectors in his network were, to a large extent, members of the military, lower and higher actors from the business world, and missionaries.<sup>143</sup>

Even though it is mainly men who appear as donors in the archives of colonial museums, women also collected.<sup>144</sup> One example is the collector Antonie Brandeis. She worked in Micronesia as an ethnologist, colonial author, and collector for various museums, such as Freiburg, Stuttgart, Hamburg, and Berlin.<sup>145</sup>

#### The Importance of European and Indigenous Actors on the Ground

In the discourse on collecting, there is the notion of the scientist as someone who is “on his own”. This view conceals that scientists, too, were mostly dependent on indigenous interpreters and porters.<sup>146</sup> As Heinze shows, collectors often used indigenous servants, prisoners, and slaves for services like transportation or translation.<sup>147</sup> The case of Lieutenant Jesco von Puttkamer stands out in particular. He “collected” a large drum from a chief of Bafu-Fondong in Cameroon for Karl von Linden in Stuttgart during a punitive expedition in 1905: he relied

<sup>135</sup> Laukötter, “Von der Kultur”, 146.

<sup>136</sup> Beatrix Heintze, *Deutsche Forschungsreisende in Angola* (Frankfurt: Lembeck, 2007), 23.

<sup>137</sup> W. Koner and R. Hartmann, *Correspondenzblatt der Afrikanischen Gesellschaft*, Bände 1–20. (Berlin: Afrikanische Gesellschaft Deutschland, 1877), 11.

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>139</sup> Laukötter, “Von der Kultur”, 34.

<sup>140</sup> Bergner, “Ethnographisches Sammeln in Afrika”, 228ff.

<sup>141</sup> “Mein Arm ist inzwischen ungeheuer gewachsen und langt selbst in das Herz der fernsten Völker.” Lindenmuseum. Linden an Kuhn 25.11.1904, KML Kuhn.

<sup>142</sup> Markus Himmelsbach, “Briefe aus der ‘Mitte der Steppe’, praktische Ehrungen und der Berliner Moloch – Einblicke in das Sammlernetzwerk des Karl Graf von Linden”, *Tribus* 68 (2019): 112.

<sup>143</sup> Gesa Grimme, “Abschlussbericht – Provenienzforschung”, 20.

<sup>144</sup> It is also part of the structure of the colonial archive that male collectors were also assigned the collections of their wives (Grimme 2021, 22).

<sup>145</sup> Godwin Kornes, “Sammlerin, Ethnographin, Kolonialaktivistin: Neue Erkenntnisse zur Mikronesien-Sammlung von Antonie Brandeis.” *Paideuma: Mitteilungen Zur Kulturkunde*, 67, (2021): 11.

<sup>146</sup> Bettina Von Briskorn, *Zur Sammlungsgeschichte afrikanischer Ethnographica im Übersee-Museum Bremen 1841–1945*, TenDenZen – Jahrbuch des Übersee-Museums, Sonderband (Bremen: Übersee-Museum Bremen, 2000), 124.

<sup>147</sup> Heintze, “Deutsche Forschungsreisende”, 50.

on 120 indigenous porters to transport it across rivers to the coast under cruel conditions.<sup>148</sup>

Additionally, the collectors could rely on supplies and support from other local Europeans. These Europeans often treated the Africans brutally, “secured” routes for the travelers, and helped them at every turn.<sup>149</sup> Even if ethnologists also viewed the behavior of local Europeans critically, they ran the risk of adopting certain racist stereotypes.<sup>150</sup> As Walter Sauer aptly writes, the collectors’ ability to access indigenous objects depended primarily on the local context of power.<sup>151</sup> They decided whether a purchase or exchange had to be fair or whether the other party could be coerced into handing over the objects with good words, a few threats, or even open violence.

Even if the collection of ethnographica took place in a context of power asymmetry and was often accompanied by violence, it should also be pointed out that the indigenous groups sought to pursue their own interests and were also able to benefit by participating in the trade.<sup>152</sup> Sauer shows that in places of indigenous rule, collecting could fail. As collector Oskar Lenz attempts to acquire “fetish figures” in Congo, he fails because a religious dignitary refuses.<sup>153</sup> In the course of the colonial conquest, however, these relationships shifted more and more in favor of the colonialists. Another important group for the collectors was missiona-

ries. They sold objects to museums and set up collections themselves.<sup>154</sup>

#### The Collector and the Other in Colonial Discourse

*Who built Thebes of the seven gates?  
In the books, you will find the names of kings.  
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?  
– (Brecht 1979, 252)*

Having outlined the accumulation of objects from the colonies as the result of colonial networks within fluctuating power relations, I now want to go into the self-perception of the Europeans. It is characteristic of colonial-era archiving around ethnographic objects that the actual, indigenous producers and creators of material culture do not appear as individuals, and they are therefore often difficult to reconstruct. I would now like to go into the reason why.

#### On the Self-Perception of Colonial Collectors

As outlined at the beginning, collecting ethnographica was usually seen and justified by Europeans as an act of “rescuing” objectified ethnic identity from being lost through the fatalistic annihilation of “natural peoples” by the pseudo-actors “culture” or “history”. The following examples are intended to show further dimensions of the collectors’ self-perception and the extent to which the figure of the (scientific) collector could represent a trivialization or glorification.

Of interest here is an article in the *Dresdner Journal* from 1901, which contains a rare description of collecting strategies. It deals with a lecture given by the collector Johan Adrian Jacobsen at the Dresden Society for Geography, in which he spoke about his collecting activities for the Berlin Museum of Ethnology:

<sup>148</sup> Sebastian Sprute, “Die Jagd nach der größtmöglichen Trommel: Sammelwut, Kolonialkriege und Trägerleid oder die menschenverachtende Beschaffung von Ethnographica im kolonialen Kamerun, 1902–1908,” *Tribus – Jahrbuch des Linden-Museums Stuttgart*, Bd. 67 (2018): 140–142.

<sup>149</sup> Heintze, “Deutsche Forschungsreisende,” 43–44.

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*, 45.

<sup>151</sup> Walter Sauer, “Nichts als die Liebe zur Forschung selbst? Sammeln im kolonialen Kontext – Implikationen für die aktuelle Museumspolitik,” in *Das Museum im kolonialen Kontext – Annäherungen aus Österreich*, ed. Pia Schönberger. (Czernin Verlag: Wien, 2018.), 68.

<sup>152</sup> Habermas, “Die Suche nach Ethnographica”, 369.

<sup>153</sup> Sauer, “Sammeln im kolonialen Kontext,” 70.

<sup>154</sup> Habermas, “Rettungsparadigma und Bewahrungsfetischismus,” 83.

“He began by pointing out how difficult it was to bring together an extensive ethnographic collection. This depends partly on the character of the people you are collecting from, partly on the objects you can offer in exchange; it also depends, of course, on whether a tribe really still has valuable objects to trade, which the traveler cannot always find out easily. It is most difficult to collect religious objects, such as idols, ancestral images and other things connected with the cult, because these are most carefully and shyly guarded by the natural peoples. From Mr. Jacobsen’s reports, it emerged that courage and perseverance soon led to the goal, but above all, the ability, which is not unique to everyone and not easy to acquire, to understand the character of the tribes to which he comes” [transl. by the author].<sup>155</sup>

What “courage” actually meant from the writer’s perspective is described in more detail: “A few months later [...] he collected large wooden figures representing gods at night on an old, abandoned Indian burial ground [...]” [transl. by the author].<sup>156</sup>

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**155** Orig.: “Er wies zunächst darauf hin, wie schwierig es sei, eine umfangreiche ethnographische Sammlung zusammenzubringen. Das hängt teils von dem Charakter des Volkes ab, bei dem man sammelt, teils von den Tauschobjekten, die man anbieten kann; auch kommt es natürlich darauf an, ob ein Volkstamm wirklich noch wertvolle Gegenstände zum Eintauschen besitzt, was der Reisende nicht in jedem Falle leicht erfahren kann. Am schwierigsten ist es, religiöse Gegenstände, wie Götzen, Ahnenbilder und anderes, was mit dem Kultus in Verbindung steht, zu sammeln, weil diese von den Naturvölkern am sorgfältigsten und mit einer gewissen Scheu behütet werden. Aus den Mitteilungen des Hrn. Jacobsen ging hervor, dass bald Mut, bald Ausdauer zum Ziele führen, vor allem aber die nicht jedem eigene und nicht leicht zu erwerbende Fähigkeit, den Charakter der Volksstämme, zu denen er kommt zu gewinnen.” “Verrein für Erdkunde,” *Dresdner Journal*, November 25, 1901, 1–2.

**156** “Einige Monate später [...] sammelte er nachts auf einem alten, verlassenen indianischen Begräbnisplätze große Holzfiguren, Götter darstellend [...]” *Ibid.*

This is just one example, but it shows how extraordinarily little regard was given to the consent of the colonized. Lack of consent was seen as a challenge. If they did not want to give up their objects, theft was trivialized as a courageous act by a “cunning connoisseur”. When military actors, soldiers or officers, report on their “collecting practices”, the gap between what was commonly understood as “collecting” and the actual circumstances of acquisition becomes particularly clear. Richard D. Volkmann, for example, was a senior commander of the “Schutztruppe” in German South West Africa. In 1903, he led a so-called “punitive expedition” to the border with Angola, where he collected objects for Karl von Linden in Stuttgart.

In a letter, he reports on the circumstances of the appropriation of the objects:

“A few days ago, I returned from the difficult (...) strenuous Okavango journey. Unfortunately, I was not able to collect much, as I had to shoot my way through the mighty Chief Himarua right from the start and then move 325 km along the Okavango among Owakwangeni tribes, who are among the most disreputable between Congo and Oranje. So I was glad to reach my destination ‘Andara’ with my few men at 1 o’clock without any losses (...). – The latter was the seat of the legendary ‘King Andara’ chief of the Mambokushes (also Ovambukushes); (...), after his death his son Diewe ruled, who lived on a rocky island, wildly romantic, as if in a robber baron’s nest, surrounded by the raging waters of the Okavango, which here divides into a myriad of arms. Following the principle of ‘divide et impera’, I approached him in a friendly manner, gave him an old [?] horse and chased him as far as I could and, if possible, incited him against his neighbors (...) – I have collected quite nice things here, but I fear that the transfer will cause difficulties. – No museum owns a single piece from these tribes.” [transl. by the author].<sup>157</sup>

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**157** Orig.: “Vor wenigen Tagen kehrte ich von der schweren (...) anstrengenden Okavango-Reise zurück.

In Volkmann's depiction, gathering ethnographica goes hand in hand with the subjugation of the indigenous population. The indigenous people become "exotic" and threatening "extras" in the self-portrayal of the "heroic conqueror". He doesn't shy away from revealing the violent context of his collection, but rather brags about it. Another case of a military collector is Lothar von Trotha.<sup>158</sup> His "scientific" expeditions were also characterized by violence and coercion, whereas von Trotha perceived himself entirely as a "passionate collector and explorer".<sup>159</sup>

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Leider konnte ich wenig sammeln, da ich mich gleich in Anfang mit dem mächtigen Häuptling Himarua herumschiessen und dann 325 km längs des Okavango unter Owakwangeni-Stämmen bewegen musste, die zu den verrufensten zwischen Kongo und Oranje gehören. So war ich froh, mit meinen paar Leuten ohne Verlust (...) um 1Uhr das gesteckte Ziel 'Andara' zu erreichen. – Letzteres war der Sitz des sagenhaften 'King Andara' Häuptling der Mambokuschen (auch Ovambukuschen); (...), nach seinem Tode herrscht sein Sohn Diewe, der auf einer felsigen Insel, wildromantisch-, wie in einem Raubritternest – haust, die rings von reißenden Wassern des Okavango umgeben ist, der hier sich in eine Unmenge von Armen teilt. Nach dem Grundsätze 'divide et impere' stellte ich mich zu ihm freundlich, schenkte ihm ein altes (?) Pferd und hetzte ihn nach Möglichkeit gegen seine Nachbarn auf, die soebene mehrere deutsche Reisende u. eine ganze deutsche Familie ermordert hatten, die leider teilweise auf dem linken portugiesischen Flußufer wohnen, daß man ihnen aus politischen Gründen nicht beikommen kann. – Hier hab ich ganz nette Sachen gesammelt, nur fürchte ich, dass die Überweisung Schwierigkeiten macht. – Von diesen Stämmen besitzt kein Museum ein Stück." Lindenmuseum. Volkmann an Linden 10.01.1903, KML Volkmann.

**158** Lothar von Trotha led the so-called "Schutztruppe" in the genocide of the Herero in 1904, having already gained experience as a military man and "collector" in China and German East Africa (Hardung et al 2022, 11). He also acquired naturalia and ethnographica and carried out numerous geographical measurements, which were useful to him in asserting his ruling interests in the colonies (Hardung et al 2022, 14).

**159** Christine Hardung, Mathias Häussler, Clara Himmelheber, and Judith Zweck, Recherche zur Provenienz eines Schädels aus Ostafrika und zu einem verschollenen Dokumentenbestand (Nachlass Lothar

In the case of the "colonial hero" of Mannheim, the military Theodor Bumiller, the staging as an explorer played a lesser role, as he was more concerned with "imperial staging".<sup>160</sup> Bernhard Gißibl writes about Bumiller's relationship to ethnographic objects, that the media he used to stage himself were foremost objects and his own body.<sup>161</sup> He used not only ethnographica but also all kinds of "exotic" souvenirs from the colonies as a means of staging himself as a cosmopolitan, extravagant adventurer.

In the case of military collectors, the figure of the "collector" is especially trivializing and exposes the contradiction of the ideology of the "naturalness" of the extinction of the indigenous groups. As shown above, in the contemporary discourse on collecting ethnographica, there was not always such ignorance of the suffering of the indigenous people, but also a certain ambivalence towards the coercive character that collecting often had in the colonial context. However, the scientific exploration of the colonies was seen as a respectable service to one's own nation, as well as to the colonized. In the sense of "great men make history", collecting was presented as the action of a single individual, and all other actors were disregarded as secondary.

#### The Ethnification of the Other

With the inventory in ethnological museums, any object entered the scientific cycle of 'museum rebirth'. The donors were thereby noted in the inventory lists as the relevant individuals connected to the objects and became, to stay in the metaphor, the 'midwives' of this act. They were the contact persons for any queries – not the indigenous people who had made the objects. Museum directors also requested infor-

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von Trotha). Projektbericht, Deutsches Zentrum für Kulturgutverluste, (2022), 15.

**160** Bernhard Gißibl and Katharina Niederau, *Imperiale Weltläufigkeit und ihre Inszenierungen – Theodor Bumiller, Mannheim und der deutsche Kolonialismus um 1900* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 66.

**161** Ibid, 67.

mation about the collected objects in their correspondences with the donors.

Linden, for example, wrote to one of his collectors:

“My museum holds well over 60,000 items, all of which are stored under glass and frames to protect them against damage from moths, dust and contact; each item is provided with a legend indicating the exact place of origin and tribal affiliation, the name of the item if available in the native language, as well as the name of the patron” [transl. by author].<sup>162</sup>

If the previous owners or producers weren't important personalities, they were subordinated to a “tribe” or “ethnic group” and thus ethnicized. This notion went beyond the purely pragmatic cataloging and referred to the underlying “ethnic paradigm” that shaped the view of the museum staff in the practical and intellectual classification of the objects. Objects were not only assigned to an ethnic group and thus stripped of the individuality of the marker, but also used to construct ethnicities and “ethnic borders” and hence practically became “ethno-graphica”.<sup>163</sup>

As a consequence, the previous owners or producers were abstracted in the sense that the objects were only seen as the physical-manifest expression of an ethnic group, while the collector appears as the authoritative individual of information gathering and knowledge production, who “somehow” appropriated the object. This ignorance was a practical expres-

sion of the European view on the alleged gulf between the “cultural and natural peoples”, which they regarded as unbridgeable.

#### Staging the Collector as a Means of Acquisition

To take part in the scientific exploration of the colonies gave donors of objects the possibility to earn recognition and social capital. But this also meant that museums could ‘pay’ collectors with honor and recognition as a cheap way to obtain the objects. Usually, colonial servants were motivated to collect by state decoration.<sup>164</sup> The awards served as a means of increasing prestige and opportunities for advancement at home and in the colonies.<sup>165</sup> Museum directors, for example, in Stuttgart, Leipzig and Munich, used this powerful means of exchange to “buy” their objects from overseas via these awards.<sup>166</sup> These means were not reserved for all museum directors; in Linden's case, this can be attributed to good contacts from his work as treasurer at court.<sup>167</sup>

Linden also flattered his collectors by actually exhibiting the objects and not, as was often the case in Berlin, letting them gather dust in the depot.<sup>168</sup> It was important to him that the collectors felt valued and honored. He therefore affixed labels to the exhibition cabinets bearing the names of the collectors, thus honoring them. Attaching the collectors' names became a means of acquisition and, through this honor, military actors were sometimes also chosen as “collectors” based on their war booty.

<sup>162</sup> Orig.: “Mein Museum begreift weit über 60.000 Nummern, welche sämtlich unter Glas und Rahmen zum Schutz gegen die Beschädigung von Motten, Staub und Berührung geborgen sind; jeder gegenstand ist mit einer Legende versehen, welche den genauen Herkunftsort nebst Stammeszugehörigkeit, den Namen der Sache wenn erhältlich in der Sprache der Eingeborenen, sowie auch den des Gönners ausweist”, Lindenmuseum. Linden an Bang 23.11.1907, KML Bang.

<sup>163</sup> Hans Peter Hahn, *Materielle Kultur – Eine Einführung* (Reimer Verlag, 2014), 152.

<sup>164</sup> Rainer Buschmann, “Contested duplicates: disputed negotiations surrounding ethnographic doppelgängers in German New Guinea, 1898–1914,” *The British Journal for the History of Science* 55 (3) (June 2022): 13.

<sup>165</sup> Gesa Grimme, “Abschlussbericht – Provenienzforschung”, 22.

<sup>166</sup> Felicitas Bergner, “Ethnographisches Sammeln in Afrika”, 230–231.

<sup>167</sup> Himmelsbach, “Sammlernetzwerk Linden”, 112.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. 127.

### Concluding Thoughts on the Presentation of Collectors

Ethnologists were central actors in the genesis of “ethnic attributions” for the objects from the colonies. Nevertheless, the process of ethnicizing material objects must be seen in the social context of the establishment of colonial-racist and nationalist categories of perception of self and other. The objects of the colonized are ascribed an ethnic identity that is doomed to destruction by the clash of “nature” and “culture” or by the “course of history”.

This fatalistic view accompanied the interest of various contemporary groups in the lives and living environments of “natural peoples”, but above all, it disguised colonialism as a “natural fact”. The circumstances of acquisition in the colonies took place in a context of power asymmetry, although the indigenous communities played very different roles in this process, from which they could also benefit depending on the specific power relations. The collectors, on the other hand, were not only named in the discourse, but also honored with nameplates and sometimes medals in the museums.

Within the museum discourse, the attitude towards violent collecting practices was ambivalent, but often opportunistic or even affirmative. In this respect, it is not surprising that the collecting colonialists in particular staged themselves as “solo collectors” and heroic physical and intellectual conquerors of the Other. In the view of the collectors themselves, the indigenous actors only appear as “ethnicities”, as extras, as the Other. They thus become “peoples without history” in a double sense. This elitist view of history, which Brecht criticized in his poem, fits in with the contemporary understanding of history as “Great Men Making History”, not least because female actors are ignored.

To describe collecting colonialists such as Volkman as “collectors” without context is a trivialization, which must be taken into account when discussing their biographies. In the meantime, the reference to having been a “collec-

tor” is no longer necessary praise in German museums. Nevertheless, it is important that the concept of “collecting mania” is questioned and that collecting is not trivialized as a nonpolitical spleen. The collecting individuals and discourses must be placed in their social context so as not to run the risk of exaggerating individual actors, individualizing the phenomenon, and perpetuating the colonial self-perception of the actors.

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## Moving Mountains / Berge versetzen

How the Artist Collective PARA Explores the History and Cultural Implications Surrounding a Stone from Mount Kilimanjaro, Brought to Germany by Hans Meyer in the Late 1880s

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2024

### Abstract

The artist collective PARA, in collaboration with Tanzanian artists Rehema Chachage and Valerie Asimwe Amani, initiated a project titled “Berge Versetzen/Moving Mountains”. The project, displayed at the Grassi Museum in Leipzig, explores the history and cultural implications surrounding a stone from Mount Kilimanjaro, brought to Germany by Hans Meyer in the late 1880s. As part of their research, the team discovered the stone’s divided existence: one piece held by an antiquarian while the other half’s location remains unknown. The project challenges colonial narratives, questioning the material and immaterial value of such objects. The exhibition includes interactive elements, showcasing internal research communications and allowing viewer participation. As part of this de-colonial approach, it highlights the symbolic act of removing the top six centimetres from Germany’s highest mountain, Zugspitze, echoing the removal of Kilimanjaro’s stone, and offers it for sale to fund the restitution of the Kilimanjaro stone. The project has sparked discussions about the role of ethnological museums and the handling of colonial artefacts.

### Keywords

*Berge Versetzen, Moving Mountains, PARA, Rehema Chachage, Valerie Asimwe Amani, Grassi Museum Leipzig, Mount Kilimanjaro, Hans Meyer, colonial narratives, interactive elements,*

*restitution, participatory restitution, ethnological museums, colonial artefacts, exhibition, Neues Palais Potsdam, Kaiser-Wilhelm-Spitze, German East Africa, REINVENTING GRASSI.SKD, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Kibo, Mount Kilimanjaro, open research, artistic research, replicas.*

### Introduction

Berge Versetzen / Moving Mountains is a collaboration between the artist collective PARA, and the artists Rehema Chachage, and Valerie Asimwe Amani. The exhibition and installation opened on March 03, 2022, with a performance by PARA at the Grassi Museum in Leipzig. It is part of REINVENTING GRASSI.SKD, the museum’s approach to address its heritage, “casting critical perspectives on the ethnological collections, their acquisition, and exhibition history,” as they put it themselves.

I will begin by discussing our research phase, addressing the questions we asked, how the project came together, and why we were asked to undertake it. Initially, we explored various approaches to the subject, which I believe is an ongoing process – I feel this process is never truly complete. This paper merely reflects our progress since the project’s inception, starting with the research phase in 2020, four years ago. I want to clarify that, although we’re a large group, I am merely expressing my personal perspective on the project. While our views aren’t vastly different, ongoing discussions within our team and with the museum help shape the direction of this project and our use of the space.

### The Summit Stone

The Grassi Museum invited us in 2020 to contribute a piece to the permanent exhibition. Bastian Sistig and Jonas Fischer, two members of our collective, began investigating the rumour that the summit stone of Mount Kilimanjaro had been brought to the German Reich by

the German colonial geographer Hans Meyer in the late 1880s. This stone is one of several stones and objects Meyer collected from the Kibo, the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. Meyer was a prominent figure in Leipzig's ethnological and scientific research circles at the time, and the objects he collected are now part of various collections across Germany and Europe.

When the GRASSI Museum invited us to contribute a piece to their permanent exhibition, we began researching the history of one specific stone and its current location. We then approached Rehema Chachage and Valerie Asimwe Amani, two Tanzanian artists, to see if they were interested in collaborating with us on this project and exhibition.

We discovered a catalogue from the Antiquariat Kainbacher, an antiquarian in Baden, Austria. This catalogue contained the stone from our research and other parts of Hans Meyer's collection, including letters, diaries, research documents, paintings, and photographs. At the time of our initial research, the entire collection was on sale for approximately 200,000 Euros. However, our primary interest was in the stone. We reached out to the Antiquariat Kainbacher to discuss our project, explaining our interest in the stone for restitution purposes, not purchase. The antiquarian was amenable to this discussion, and we were able to agree on a purchasing price of 40,000 Euros. We maintained contact with him throughout our research.

What distinguishes this particular stone from the rest of Hans Meyer's collection is its special characteristic: it was divided into two. This split is visible on its edge. One piece stayed with Hans Meyer and is now part of his family's inheritance, currently held by the antiquary. The other half was gifted to the German Kaiser Wilhelm II. at the Neues Palais in Potsdam, Germany, by Hans Meyer himself.

Hans Meyer tried to climb Mount Kilimanjaro three times. On his fourth attempt, he succeeded in reaching the summit and renamed it Kaiser-Wilhelm-Spitze. He brought back a

stone from this expedition, asserting it to be from Mount Kilimanjaro's peak. He gave this stone to Kaiser Wilhelm II, symbolizing the power of the German Reich during that period. It is worth noting that Tanzania was called German East Africa back then, making this gesture symbolic of Germany's newly acquired colonial possessions. As of now, a stone is displayed in the Grottenaal at Neues Palais in Potsdam. However, this is not the original stone but a replica. The whereabouts of the original and the origin of the replica remain a mystery. One hypothesis suggests that the original stone was lost amidst World War II's devastation, and that a similar stone was positioned in its stead.

A significant part of our research involved engaging with various stakeholders in Tanzania and elsewhere, including museums, collections, experts, political figures, and community representatives. This allowed us to grasp the different narratives and attitudes at play. Notably, our research prompted an official reclamation request for the object from the Regional Council of the Moshi district in Tanzania.

With this knowledge in hand, we initiated the project *Berge Versetzen/Moving Mountains* and assembled a team. Some contributors are part of the PARA collective, while others are friends and colleagues we invited to collaborate with us. We began our discussions with the curators of the Grassi Museum on how we could realise our ideas. They are currently in the process of deconstructing their old permanent exhibition to make room for a new one. This marked the first part of REINVENTING GRASSI.SKD.

The first part of the new permanent exhibition, consisting of five rooms, opened simultaneously with our work, which is showcased in two rooms. The first room deals with the missing half of the Kibo summit stone, the second one with the half that is being offered for sale. During our research phase, we found a wealth of archival footage and material in the form of photographs and letters.

The archives that we incorporated into our research were the Leibniz-Institut für Länder-

kunde, the Zentralarchiv of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz and the Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten (SPSG). Furthermore, we conducted our research in the archive of the Grassi Museum itself. We incorporated some of this material into our exhibition.

#### The Narrative of Hans Meyer

A significant question we grappled with was how much emphasis to place on Hans Meyer and his narrative. He was the person who brought a stone to Germany and labelled it as the peak of the Kibo, the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro. We couldn't ignore this narrative. The stone, symbolic and palm-sized, cannot truly represent a peak, especially of a volcano. However, we had to engage with Meyer's narrative, while recognising that the stone might be just a stone. The most challenging part is grappling with a single stone that carries a history of colonialism and violence, which are inseparable from one another. In early 2021, I joined the PARA collective. At that time, Hans Meyer and his journey to Mount Kilimanjaro were one of the central themes of the exhibition. However, we later moved away from this concept, seeking a fresh approach to our research and discussions about potential restitution.

One key element we introduced was the Round Table, a station within the Grassi Museum's exhibition featuring three monitors. This became, in my view, the heart of the entire exhibition. All of the different research laid the groundwork for the table – an attempt to represent the diverse and often conflicting perspectives on the question of restitution that we encountered throughout our research.

We decided to make our research process visible, striving to include viewers and help them understand our positions, conflicts, and inconsistencies. One monitor features a questionnaire. This allows viewers to ask questions, reflect on the exhibition, and share their thoughts. Their input is sent to us and incorporated into the open research displayed on the table.

We also included our internal research communication: emails between team members, initial discussions with collaborators, advisors, and others involved in the research, including those in Tanzania's Moshi district, are part of the open research. Take, for example, this excerpt from a video message by Elias Mutani, contributor during our research phase:

“Hello, my name is Elias Mutani from the North of Tanzania. I just learned about the original Kibo summit stone and the efforts to crowdfunding and return it. However, I find it shouldn't be that way. Why? Why should someone buy something that was stolen? The person possessing it should remember that they still embrace the evils of the colonial invasion in Africa. They have a moral obligation. Just return it from where it is because it was taken illegally. The story belongs to Kilimanjaro, and it should lay there.”

We believed it was crucial to include a variety of voices, even when they contradicted each other. Some suggested we shouldn't buy it back, others thought we should. There were differing views, with some dismissing it as just a stone and emphasising the importance of human remains still stored in the depots as being more important.

The subject of finance also sparked debates. Some believed only “white money” should be used to repurchase the stone, while others felt strongly that no white individuals should profit from this process, implying that the antiquarian should return it without demanding payment.

What personally intrigued me was a video message from our colleague, Gabriel Mzei Orio. Filmed from a similar perspective as a photograph of Hans Meyer that we found in the depot, his insightful comment on this image further enriched our discussions.

“My name is Gabriel Mzei Orio, from Kilimanjaro region. As you see far away there, there is the Mount Kilimanjaro, standing at 5895

meters above sea level. I was talking about the stone which was taken by Hans Meyer in Mount Kilimanjaro. [...] Now, many people from Kilimanjaro are looking for the remains of their ancestors and objects, which were taken during the colonial period. So, for me, for the Kibo summit stone to be brought back to Tanzania, it's a good idea simply because I was thinking that maybe one day, we have a community museum in Kilimanjaro, whereby this stone will be put there, and people learn about its history."

### One Stone, Two Stories

We were faced with two stories of two pieces, originating from one stone. One piece is lost, its whereabouts unknown, while the other is currently available for purchase. To address this, we decided to divide the exhibition into two parts. The first part focuses on loss, voids, and elements that have been forgotten or need to be reconstructed. The second part examines the other half of the stone that is physically present, questioning its material and immaterial value and exploring how we can interact with it.

At the outset, there is AVOID/DEVOID. It is the first station that is built into the first of the two rooms dedicated to our exhibition and functions as a Sonic experience – an audio installation by Rehema Chachage and Valerie Asiimwe Amani. This room serves as a transition point into research, reflecting, confusion, denial, and loss. There were extensive debates about the appropriateness of an ethnological museum as the venue for such discussions. After all, it's a place intimately tied to colonial violence. Initially, I struggled with the idea of partnering with such a museum. Past visits there had been painful and challenging, making it difficult to navigate the rooms. However, AVOID/DEVOID, besides being a brilliant artwork, serves effectively as a transitional space. It's a dark space that prompts reflection on what you've witnessed in the rooms before entering our exhibition, and what might linger afterwards. We

aimed to distinguish our exhibition from others within the permanent collection.

After leaving the AVOID/DEVOID space and entering the gallery proper, you proceed to the second station, the introduction. Here, you learn about the history of the stone, its origins, and a brief history of Hans Meyer's expedition to Mount Kilimanjaro. This is essentially the only moment where we feature Hans Meyer as a protagonist. Also in this room, you'll find another work of Rehema Chachage and Valerie Asiimwe Amani. In *THE JOURNEY*, the artists use the silent conquering of a displaced stone as a starting point of reflection. It is a still-moving visual collage built upon fractured histories of objects. The installation directly confronts the European culture of documenting, categorising, and claiming ownership over things and geographies that could not be owned or claimed. Photographs encountered in the archive, which are from the Hans Meyer collection, are woven, reworked, pulled apart, and re-stitched together in an attempt to subvert the original narrative. The collage analyses what it means to re-appropriate appropriated material, and transposes the observer (colonialist) by turning them into the observed (the displaced object). It prompts questions about how to handle the legacies of such individuals.

The last part of this room is *TEACHING A STONE TO SPEAK*. We wanted a space where people can reflect on the deeper layers of this topic. There are texts from us and our colleagues that can be read on printouts and listened to through an audio station. The transition between the first and second room is *THE VAULT*, which I will revisit later.

Due to the questions raised about the material and immaterial value of the stone, we decided to focus on this very concept within the second part of the exhibition. We thought that if we playfully devalue this object symbolically, it might be a tool to discuss the value of such objects. So, we decided to create a 3D model of the stone, print it, and make a cast to produce replicas. We plan to produce 2000 replicas. If

we sell each for 25 Euros, we can buy the stone from the Antiquariat and return it to Tanzania.

We liked the idea of using the museum's material for the replicas, thus making the museum itself an object of restitution. We wanted to test the museum's dedication to change and reflect on these topics and the history of these objects. We felt the museum might want to engage in the discourse of restitution and reinvention without facing discomfort or criticism. To us, taking something from the museum's own material fabric made sense. After considering various locations, the museum suggested a pillar in the staircase as the best option. This pillar is unique as it's the only piece in the entire building not under any monument protection. Years ago, it served as a memorial pillar for Karl Weule, the director from 1906 to 1926, during whose tenure the museum's collection significantly expanded. Weule was a close confidant of Meyer's. During his time as director, a large portion of Meyer's objects were added to the collection as well.

We decided to deconstruct this pillar in a public performance with a jackhammer and use the resulting raw material for the replicas. The most significant impact of our work, or perhaps the most controversial aspect, was the destruction of this object, the pillar, within the museum. It contrasted with the perception of the museum as a cultural institution, as a place intended to preserve and show a certain care towards objects. This action stirred up a lot of discussions.

The MINING STATION is the first station located in the second room. It serves as a mobile quarry, where the raw material from the pillar is progressively reduced in size. This facilitates its use in the production line, which is the most prominent feature of the room. Initially, the raw material is ground up and then, via a multi-step process, it is transformed into replicas. These are then packaged and made available through a vending machine. The GRASSI Museum offers workshops where visitors can participate in constructing these replicas. A central idea of the work is the participatory

aspect of this restitution process. By engaging the public in this act of creation, so to speak, creating the museum as raw material, they become an integral part of the narrative. This is a symbolic gesture to democratise the process and encourage dialogue on the questions our work explores.

Returning to the first room, to THE VAULT, this part of our exhibition also stirred considerable interest. We went to the Zugspitze, the highest mountain in Germany, and removed the uppermost 6 centimetres. The symbolism surrounding our work and the stone was so profound that we felt it deserved an adequate response. To help a German audience get involved in the topic, we wanted to connect the dots and nudge the audience to understand that taking items that don't belong to you, under the guise of research, preservation, or exhibition, is not an abstract concept happening on a distant continent a long time ago. We wanted to transfer this concept to the German landscape. This is why we are offering the top six centimetres of the Zugspitze for 40,000 Euros. This amount is precisely what we need to purchase the peak stone of Mount Kilimanjaro.

### The Response

To conclude, I will discuss the public response to our project. We anticipated that the theft of the Zugspitze would significantly impact our public relations narrative. It prompted a broad and intense media response across all German (and a few international) outlets, from "Bild" to "Süddeutsche Zeitung," which was not insignificant.<sup>169</sup>

<sup>169</sup> Dan Hicks: "Unmasking a History of Colonial Violence in a German Museum", *Hyperallergic* (2022, March 28), Online: <https://hyperallergic.com/719708/unmasking-a-history-of-colonial-violence-in-a-german-museum>; Juliane Neubauer: "Neupräsentation der Sammlung des Grassi Museums in Leipzig", *Deutschlandfunk Kultur* (2022, March 04), Online: <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/neupraesentation-des-sammlung-des-grassi-museums-in-leipzig-dlf-kultur-521680dd-100.html>; N.N.: "Berge Versetzen: Künstler\*innengruppe PARA 'entführt' Spitze der Zugspitze", *KUNSTFORUM International*

The subsequent backlash, skilfully leveraging the destruction of the museum's pillar, could be perceived as a politically motivated campaign, to the extent of personal attacks, by a small but vocal group opposing the idea of rethinking the role of museums, questioning "care," restoration practices, and ownership. We attempted to initiate conversations around this subject, particularly since it's an emotional topic for many individuals. We aimed to create a space for these discussions. However, this act was largely interpreted as a significant attack on the idea of the ethnological museum as a place for archiving and caretaking. From our perspective, a German ethnological museum was not the appropriate place for these objects anyway, and neither was its self-proclaimed role and mission. As a consequence, we had to rethink the way we approach panel discussions dedicated to our work to better inform the public about our process and considerations.

The most gratifying moments are when we host international museum professionals and have members of our collective, colleagues, curators of the museum, and visitors discuss and reflect together on the work and the questions it brings up. What we really hoped for, from the very beginning, was to create a place of reflection.

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## Authors

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# 5

The international conference “Imperial Lives” revolved around new biographic approaches to research and storytelling – as a part of decolonial practice for ethnographic museums. This concise collection of papers provides a rough overview of a research field that is only now beginning to evolve: looking at imperial actors through a critical biographical lense, in order to contribute to and complement European decolonial “Aufarbeitung” is an essential part of memory work. The papers offer (self-)critical, dis-centering and creative perspectives on knowledge production and collecting and curating practices in museum contexts.