# Decolonizing Research, Cosmo-optimistic Collaboration?

## Making *Object Biographies*

*Margareta von Oswald and Verena Rodatus*

**ABSTRACT:** In Germany, the new cultural center Humboldt Forum (to open in 2019) has become a major site of debate. It will include the contested collections of both the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, which contributed to the negotiation of the role of colonial legacies and their reverberances on contemporary Germany. We took those contestations as a point of departure for the exhibition *Object Biographies* (2015), part of the program Humboldt Lab Dahlem designed to experiment with innovative displays for the Humboldt Forum. Here we reexamine our research collaboration with the Beninese art historian Romuald Tchibozo that was part of the exhibition. His call for the "decolonization of research" was the central guideline in our museum practice aiming for cosmo-optimistic futures. We argue that focusing on processes and questions engaged by the exhibition project can transform contested museum spaces to enable negotiations on ownership, representation, and memory politics.

**KEYWORDS:** colonial legacies, collaborative research, contemporaneity, cosmo-optimistic futures, critical museology, ethnological collections, multiperspectivity, object biographies

> The decolonization of research won't be possible without the decolonization of minds. . . . I think that we [as a research team] took a step in the right direction, but one can't say that this will continue or become regular. It's only going to be little experiments, step by step, that will enable us to create a more favorable context.
>
> —Romuald Tchibozo[1]

In this article, we discuss our collaborative work with the art historian Romuald Tchibozo from the Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Benin. His call for the "decolonization of research" was especially influential in shaping our practice in making the exhibition *Object Biographies* in the Ethnological Museum Berlin in 2015. This involved working with the collections of the museum's Africa department to create a new, experimental exhibition as part of the process of testing ideas for the future Humboldt Forum—in what was called the Humboldt Lab Dahlem—for new displays of objects from the Ethnological Museum that will be shown in a new building in the center of Berlin from 2019. How far we managed to decolonize our research and contribute to more cosmo-optimistic futures is the subject of our discussion.

Cosmo-optimism is a notion still requiring further definition and examination in particular cases. Sharon Macdonald has referred to "normative cosmo-optimism" as the "view that

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cosmopolitanism is a good thing" (2013: 190). "Cosmo-optimistic" thus clearly links to cosmopolitan thought and has, by dint of the "optimistic," a normative or even utopian side to it. Cosmopolitanism, derived from the Greek word *kosmopolitês* (citizen of the world), has been interpreted differently in its long tradition but shares the idea that all human beings are, or can and should be, citizens in a single community. In anthropology, cosmopolitanism has been described as being "about reaching out across cultural differences through dialogue, aesthetic enjoyment, and respect; of living together with difference" (Werbner 2008: 2). Yet, Pnina Werbner states that cosmopolitanism can only be seen "as an ethical horizon—an aspirational outlook and mode of practice" (2008: 2). Taking the idea of "mode of practice" seriously, we follow a case of trying to put cosmopolitan aspirations into practice.

We approach the cosmo-optimistic, then, as a progressive set of ideas and aspirations that can inform ways of working in the museum context. As Wayne Modest and colleagues (2017) have suggested, the museum can be regarded as "a space of working through" in which the analysis of anthropological legacies can be used to identify the complexity of global entanglements and asymmetries, potentially contributing to forging better futures. The making of an exhibition can thus serve as a testing ground on which to explore the potentials and challenges involved in bringing cosmopolitan ideas and aspirations into play with existing material cultural legacies, namely, the collections.

Below, situating the exhibition in Berlin's contested museum context, we show how we sought to decolonize the research processes of our exhibition making. This involved explicitly addressing the anthropological legacy of colonialism and creating a collaborative way of working in order to introduce multiple contemporary narratives into the museum. Drawing on this experience, we assess the challenges and critiques inherent in a collaborative museum practice that seeks to decolonize research and work toward more cosmo-optimistic futures.

## Situating Our Research

Over recent decades, debates about colonialism have come to loom large in relation to ethnological museums in many parts of the world. A major site of such debates in contemporary Germany is the Humboldt Forum, a cultural center that will host displays of objects from both the Ethnological Museum and the Museum for Asian Art and is currently under construction in the center of Berlin. Repeatedly framed as one of Germany's most prestigious and important cultural projects,[2] the Humboldt Forum is housed in a building usually referred to as the Schloss—the Palace—because it entails a reconstruction of the façades of an eighteenth-century city palace. It is also one of the country's most controversial museum projects, not only because of the questions about German memory[3] involved in the reconstruction but also because of the colonial legacy of the Ethnological Museum. For example, the group Artefakte//anti-humboldt—part of the umbrella organization No Humboldt 21, which has argued for halting the Forum—is one of several groups arguing for the need to address the colonial legacy. As they put it:

> The concern we wish to raise and to voice here is that the colonial facts are in no sense accomplished, and that in fact there is again a need to confront them, especially here in Germany: the artefacts that have been created, acquired, interpreted and displayed in the course of European colonial projects need to be urgently reconsidered, and their configuration and significance renegotiated. (Kuster et al. 2013)

In the heated context of critique of the Ethnological Museum and the Humboldt Forum more generally, which was flourishing in the summer and fall 2013, the leadership of the Humboldt

Lab Dahlem (HLD) asked us to prepare an exhibition about "provenance" or "war booty." The HLD project, which ran between 2012 and 2015, had been set up to accompany parts of the Forum's preparations and to experiment with new exhibition formats.[4]

When we were asked to prepare the exhibition, we were both working temporarily in the museum. Verena Rodatus had been employed as a research and museum assistant since May 2013 (until April 2015), after finishing her PhD, in the Africa department. Margareta von Oswald had been working in the museum for one month, assisting the curator Paola Ivanov, also in the Africa department, in preparing the new permanent exhibition for the Humboldt Forum. She was doing so within the framework of her PhD dissertation. As such, we were situated simultaneously inside and outside of the museum—working for it but only on a temporary basis. Strongly identifying with the Forum's critics, we were very conscious of the risk of legitimizing the museum's policies and the institution as "colonial instrument."[5] As Robin Boast has argued, even though most museum professionals initiate critical, collaborative projects with good intentions, museums remain "asymmetric spaces of appropriation" (2011: 63). Despite our misgivings, however, we hoped to contribute to changing the institution from this mixed insider-and-outsider position.

We began by taking a critical look at the museum's permanent exhibition *Art from Africa* (2005–2016).[6] That exhibition had been devised to break with stereotypical representations of Africa in ethnological museums. The focus of the exhibition was on the objects' aesthetics, through which the curators aimed to valorize the objects as "(high) art," using categories such as "Art History" and naming the objects' individual authors wherever possible. Critics, however, argued that this framing downplayed the violence of cultural encounter and that it still resulted in some objects being depicted as representatives of cultural groups (Bose 2016: 203–212). Moreover, some saw the black exhibition space as evocative of Africa as "the dark continent," bringing up associations of the primitive and the savage (Dean 2010: 83). While the collection history of certain objects was explained,[7] histories were not a central issue of the exhibition narrative.

In contrast to *Art from Africa* and to the requested focus on provenance and war booty, we chose the idea of "object biographies" to frame our planned exhibition. In doing so, we drew on analytical perspectives that emphasized objects' trajectories and their social and cultural lives (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986) in order to narrate the relationships and entanglement between people and objects over time, and to show how long-lived objects extend beyond different systems of understanding (Hoskins 2006; Joy 2009).[8] Even though those trajectories have occasionally been made accessible in museums through exhibitions or films,[9] scholars have highlighted "the need to make explicit the 'politics' implicit in any object collected in one place and transported to another, particularly in contexts of colonial domination" (Basu 2011: 37). In particular, we wanted to rotate the visitors' gaze toward the institution itself, directing it to institutional histories, networks, and practices by addressing the little-known and sometimes problematic stories of the objects. Our aim by doing so was to scrutinize the problem of provenance in general, and of violent colonial appropriation in particular, and of museum categorizations and collecting policies that have characterized the limited Western view toward Africa and its artistic and cultural productions. Finding those stories, however, required research. This meant not only looking at when, how, and from where objects came into museums and what they once signified, but also trying to unveil and analyze the specific historical circumstances under which museum collections and related bodies of thought came into existence. It required trying to reconstruct the institutional, disciplinary, and personal contexts in which museum collections have taken form. In this way, extending the collection's potentials to the contemporary, we hoped to use the collection to generate new relationships, introducing topical perspectives into the museum. This required creating a format of research to do so.

## Researching Collaboratively

We thus initiated a collaborative research project with our colleague Romuald Tchibozo, an art historian at the Université d'Abomey-Calavi in Benin, who from 2013 to 2014 was Fellow of Art Histories and Aesthetic Practices at the Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin. In discussion with him, we tried to problematize the idea of research in the ethnological museum itself—namely, by raising questions of public authority and access regarding museums and collections. Less than 1 percent of Berlin's collections were accessible to the public in the museum's previous *Art from Africa* exhibition, which focused on the masterpieces that have become part of an international canon of African art. For decades, most objects have been lying seemingly undisturbed in museum storage. Not only are those objects not accessible to a wider public, but as one curator told us, "little research has been done about them."[10] We thus wanted to use the depots—with their many underresearched objects—to reflect on the objects' hidden "affordances" (Basu and De Jong 2016) in order to question the museum's politics of access and knowledge production.

One aim of our collaboration with Professor Tchibozo was to introduce "multiperspectivity" into the museum, transforming it into a "contact zone" (Clifford 1997). This was not a new idea. Since the 1990s, museum authority has been challenged by those represented in the museum or by those who identified with the collections. Curatorial decision making regarding collections and curatorial practices have come under scrutiny, as have established systems of classification, collection management, storage, and, above all, exhibition policies. Assessing the situation a decade ago, Laura Peers and Alison Brown argued, in Sheila Watson's (2007) influential edited volume *Museum and Source Communities*, that collaboration with local communities was very unevenly adopted internationally, and primarily project-based, rather than part of long-term relationships (Peers and Brown 2007: 519–522). Since then, further collaborative work has been established in more and more countries and is now widely recognized as being good practice for ethnological museums. In Germany, however, museums have been slower to adopt new community-based research approaches and processes. When we began our own work, Berlin's department of collections from Africa did not systematically involve communities in exhibition making and only consulted with them exceptionally.[11]

Our aim, then, was to establish a collaborative project with Romuald Tchibozo, with him playing the role of collaborator according to Nora Landkammer's definition, namely, "as expert in a knowledge not present in the museum, and with a notion of the right to co-determination, as proposed in collaborative museology" (2017: 278). We started working with him in May 2014, inspired to do so partly by his statements about "the decolonization of research." He and Verena Rodatus had already established a working relationship, and the fact that he was based in Berlin at the time meant we could regularly spend time together in the collections. As an international academic, he was very familiar with the question of collaborative research and its politics. In addition, there was a history to his relationship with the Ethnological Museum, namely, that he had previously tried to work with the collections but had been denied access to do so at the end of the 1990s.

Together, we traced a group of eight objects from the collection back to their original site in Benin. In doing so, we were accompanied by Tchibozo's student David Gnonhouévi and the filmmaker Anna Lisa Ramella. Our aim was to document the process of developing images for the exhibition. This drew on provenance research that we had already conducted, which had included visiting the depot several times. There, Tchibozo was particularly drawn to figurative objects in Vodun practices known as Bocios. These objects—whose name is thought to mean something like "empowered" (*bo*) "cadaver" (*cio*) (Preston Blier 1995: 2)—were created by the

**Figure 1.** Marion Benoit taking images of the Bocios (photograph by Anna Lisa Ramella).

Fon people in the area of today's Republic of Benin and were used as protective figures in the front of houses. The Bocios in the Ethnological Museum collection had been bought from the objects collector O. A. Jäger, as part of a group of objects from Benin, in 1967. They had, however, never been exhibited.

Tchibozo's interest in Bocios was not new. He told us that sometime before our visit in the Ethnological Museum's stores, Gnonhouévi had tried to conduct art historical research on Bocios in Benin.[12] This turned out to be quite difficult because Gnonhouévi could not identify a sufficient body of material and eventually gave up his research project. Such a lack of material in Benin itself was, said Tchibozo, a major obstacle to Beninese scholars who contemplated writing an art history of Benin. He then proposed that this issue of absence in Benin and presence in the museum could be explored as a central theme in the HLD exhibition project. We thus attempted to investigate the historic and contemporary reasons for the absence of the Bocios in Benin. A key element of our collaborative attempt to decolonize research, then, was to respect the multiple stakeholders' perspectives and interests—not only those of the Ethnological Museum but also, and especially, those of Tchibozo and his students, whose own previous attempts at research had floundered especially because of the colonial situation that had led to the absence of the objects in Benin and earlier restrictions of access imposed by the museum.[13]

Conservation standards meant we could not take actual objects to Benin and had to rely on high-resolution photographic reproductions (Figure 1). The images served as a visual reference point for conversations with different people in Benin. On location, we interviewed a broad spectrum of people—artists, museologists, collectors, Vodun practitioners, university professors, students, and art dealers—who were engaged in some way or another with the Bocios. We gathered a range of perspectives on the multiple and changing transcultural relations in the times before and during colonialism, the era of independence, during socialism in Benin (1974–1989), and in the current time of globalization. In summary, we collected perspectives on the historical, religious, and political reasons for the present-day absence of the objects in Benin.

## The *Object Biographies* Exhibition

The result of our collaborative research was a four-channel film installation, filmed, conceptualized, and edited by Anna Lisa Ramella, which became part of the chapter of the exhibition specifically dedicated to the Bocios. Here we also showed the invoice from when the museum had bought the objects, and the accompanying acquisition folder, as well as the photographs of the objects that we had taken with us on the journey (Figure 2 and Figure 3). The Bocios themselves were exhibited as if packed in archive boxes—just as in the Berlin museum's storage, to allow literal re-presentation of "behind the scenes." Next to the objects, the video installation served as an experimental documentary of our research trip in Benin. Through the polyphonic voices of the different actors, the video installation offered different short extracts of contemporary interpretations of the historical and transcultural contexts in which the Bocios are embedded (Figure 4).

The different channels problematized the distinct research contexts in Benin and Berlin. Images of Berlin's storage depots, crammed with objects, were juxtaposed with images of empty exhibition spaces and storage areas in Benin. The channels revealed multiple different research contexts, including the critical dynamics of ethnographic fieldwork and issues of linguistic translation, establishing trust, and questioning the authenticity of information.

**Figure 2.** Installation view of *Object Biographies* (Humboldt Lab Dahlem) (photograph by Jens Ziehe).

**Figure 3.** Detail of installation view of *Object Biographies* (Humboldt Lab Dahlem) (photograph by Marion Benoit).

The installation ended with the statement by one of our interlocutors, Mondicaho Bachalou (former museum employee, Abomey):

> To stop a Bocio, you first have to kill it. Kill it how? You aren't going to kill it with a knife or a gun. There are things that will prevent you from killing it for good so it has no power anymore. And it's not dead, you take it in [your museum], it's alive, in your country. That creates problems. Do you understand?

The quotation illustrated the materialized entanglement between European museums and African communities and the different ontologies that inhabit the objects. It also raised questions of the consequences of holding such objects in museums—what potential do they hold?

**Figure 4.** The research collaboration resulted in a four-channel video installation (photograph by Anna Lisa Ramella).

## Challenges in Decolonizing Museum Research

Our collaborative project revealed to us some of the ways in which access had previously been denied to scholars such as Tchibozo and Gnonhouévi, not only by active refusal of requests but also because of issues of location and even visa politics. Although parts of collections are now online, these are generally confined to selected objects, usually to the collections' masterpieces. We also encountered further challenges in our own attempts to decolonize research.

One of these was our inability to move the objects beyond the walls of the museum—a move that would have helped us to challenge the existing colonial structure. Instead, we had to rely on images. These could not, however, replace the materiality of the actual pieces, which significantly reduced their meaning for interlocutors in Benin.

Another was that it was we, as the temporary curatorial team, who initiated, enabled, and framed the cooperation. By the time Tchibozo was invited to enter the project, the exhibition's framework was set, the context given, and certain questions predefined. We had already largely predetermined the kind of input we wanted from him, specifically including him as one of a range of contemporary voices in the exhibition and film. Moreover, just how those resulted—the editing of the film material and the exhibition installation itself—was entirely controlled by German participants. Although this was partly for pragmatic reasons, we also feared losing control of the end product, including the content and look of the film.

Furthermore, our ambition to open up the museum research processes was only restricted in its realization. In Benin, only a limited number of interlocutors took part in discussion about the decolonization of research, and information from the project itself does not seem to have

been taken up in any other ways since. In Berlin, by contrast, where the exhibition and associated events such as tours and a conference were held, the question of decolonization was vigorously discussed.[14] While we might see this as a good outcome in that the collections served to generate new relationships, as "remittances," beneficial to those represented in the museum (Basu 2011: 37), one could also argue that the project served the Ethnological Museum and the Humboldt Forum to affirm and legitimize their positions as a national institutions devoted to "multi-perspectivity."[15] By trying to address the problematic character of the ethnological museum as "a site in and for the center" (Boast 2011: 67), *Object Biographies* sought to challenge the museum's function as "colonial instrument" and thus hopefully avoided in part at least contributing to maintain the museum's status quo.

## Processes toward Cosmo-optimistic Futures

Thinking about cosmo-optimistic futures includes evaluating ambivalences and imagining alternatives to established practices. Reflecting together with Romuald Tchibozo about how we could have expanded on our project to move further in this direction, we agreed that long-term cooperation, trust, and the sharing and common distribution of research results would need to be instituted. Tchibozo's colleague Didier Houénoudé (2012: 517) at the Université d'Abomey-Calavi has likewise proposed an exchange of inventories between African and European museum collections, as well as the institutionalization of cooperation among African museums, and the promotion of touring exhibitions. Curatorial responsibility should thus comprise conceiving new (infra)structures, in which cooperation could take place. In this context, we agree with Nora Landkammer, who argues that that "decolonization should concentrate on organizational development and on understanding community engagement as an all-encompassing practice for institutions" (2017: 278). This would include prioritizing and institutionalizing the access to the collections and to the exhibition space for those who have been denied access, contribution, and coproduction in the making of the museum.

Focusing on the *processes* engaged by exhibitions, rather than addressing them primarily as *products*, is in line with Werbner's conceptualization of the cosmopolitan as "as an ethical horizon . . . and mode of practice" (2008: 2). As we have shown, when it comes to the progressive "working through" of anthropological legacies in order to move toward cosmo-optimistic futures, questions matter, even if we do not manage to find answers. Focusing on processes also means that a contested space such as the Humboldt Forum can become a "place of working through" (Modest et al. 2017). That is, it can provide—indeed, already has provided—the impetus to negotiate issues of ownership, representation, and memory politics. The project in which we were involved here was just one of the developments that had its roots in reactions to the critique of the Humboldt Forum. Since then, other collaborative research projects between the Ethnological Museum and African universities have been put in place, working on, among other parts of the collection, spoils of war.[16]

More widely, the critiques of museum collections and colonial histories have come to increasingly put such histories onto the agenda. The German Historical Museum, for example, opened its first major exhibition on German colonialism in 2016.[17] Elsewhere in Germany, too, there have been an increasing number of projects. In Hannover and Stuttgart, full-time positions dedicated to provenance research of the collections have been created. The ethnological museums in Leipzig[18] and Hamburg[19] both have opened calls for positions, in which research linked to colonial legacies is explicitly mentioned, focusing on colonial photography, colonial war spoils, and human remains. Internationally, similar developments can be observed, such as the Rietberg

Museum in Zurich, Switzerland,[20] which was a pioneer in creating a full-time position dedicated to provenance, or the Research Center for Material Culture in Leiden, the Netherlands,[21] which created a research theme dedicated to "Collections, Ethics and Responsibility."

The situation is clearly one for optimism, but it does not mean that cosmo-optimistic futures are about to be achieved. Commenting on our exhibition project, one employee of the Prussian Heritage Foundation welcomed the discussion about contested collections that was now taking place. The reason for this, however, was that she believed it would be a "catastrophe" if the debate were to emerge during the Humboldt Forum's opening. Her hope was that by tackling it now, it would be surmounted, so the opening could focus on the museum's "masterly achievements."[22]

Our hope, however, is for continuing discussion and process. There are and will for the foreseeable future remain opposing voices and opinions concerning ethnological museums' (future) roles—and we welcome this. As Romuald Tchibozo warned us, the decolonization of research may be a utopian project, but it is nevertheless worth investing in.

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**MARGARETA VON OSWALD** is a research assistant at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage, Berlin. She has studied anthropology and social sciences in Bordeaux, Stuttgart, and Paris. Her PhD dissertation (EHESS Paris; Humboldt Universität zu Berlin) analyzes the "making of" of the future permanent exhibitions for Berlin's Humboldt Forum and Tervuren's Royal Museum of Central Africa, which she contributed to and observed from 2013 to 2015. In 2015, she co-curated the exhibition *Object Biographies* with Verena Rodatus (Humboldt Lab Dahlem). Research interests include the negotiations of colonial pasts in the present, museum ethnographies, curatorship, and collections acquired on the African continent. E-mail: margareta.von.oswald@hu-berlin.de

**VERENA RODATUS** studied psychology and art history and has conducted research in West Africa since 2003. Her doctoral dissertation was published under the title "Postkoloniale Positionen? Die Biennale DAK'ART im Kontext des internationalen Kunstbetriebs." She has worked for the Weserburg | Museum für moderne Kunst, the Africa department at the Ethnological Museum Berlin, and the Humboldt Lab Dahlem. Together with Margareta von Oswald, she co-curated the exhibition *Object Biographies* (2015). Since 2015, she has been lecturer and research associate in the Arts of Africa department at the Freie Universität Berlin. Her research focuses on contemporary art from Benin and oral art history. E-mail: verena.rodatus@fu-berlin.de

## NOTES

1. Transcribed from a video interview between Romuald Tchibozo and Verena Rodatus, in Cotonou, Benin, in December 2014, translated from the French.
2. Notably by political stakeholders such as the German minister of culture Monika Grütters (Sontheimer 2016).
3. Berlin's Schloss is built on the ruins of the German Democratic Republic's Palace of the Republic. The debate concerning memory politics and the politics of place thus does not only concern Germany's colonial but also its socialist past. For a detailed discussion, see Binder (2013) and Bose (2013).
4. With a budget of more than four million euros, exhibitions, workshops, and conferences were organized in cooperation with the in-house curators as well as with external artists, designers, curators, and researchers. The project was funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation, a public funding body.
5. Ciraj Rassool talked of the ethnological museum as "colonial instrument" during the conference "Whose Heritage? Museums and Their Collections," University Bonn, 12 March 2016, insisting on the persistence of the museum's problematic epistemologies. See https://www.khi.uni-bonn.de/de/nachrichten/copy_of_conference-whose-heritage.
6. The exhibition was curated by Paola Ivanov and Peter Junge, then responsible for the museum's department of African collections.
7. The collection history of the pair of Kom figures that was at the center of *Object Biographies* as well was mentioned on a label next to the objects.
8. Using the metaphor in a scientific context has been the subject of critique, especially when it comes to questioning, first, the potential agency of objects that the allocation of a "biography" comprises and, second, the linearity that a biography could suggest, denying the complexity of the objects' entangled histories (Hahn 2015).
9. Susan Vogel's film *Fang: An Epic Journey* (2003) is a prominent and literal example of the visualization of an object biography, blurring the borders between fiction and reality.
10. Extract from Margareta von Oswald's field notes, Ethnological Museum Berlin, 1 November 2013.
11. The collection's curator, Peter Junge, had been engaged in discussions concerning the much contested collections from the Kingdom of Benin, but representatives were not involved in the exhibition-making process.
12. This was research in the context of a one-year preparation program to acquire the authorization for a doctoral dissertation. Through stylistic analysis, he had planned to develop a study on the historic spread of the objects in the geographic context of Abomey and its surroundings.
13. For a more detailed description of the different historical situations that have led to the Bocios' absence, see Tchibozo (2015).
14. The symposium "Always in Crisis? Questions of Representation in Museums for Non-European Arts and Cultures" took place on 18 and 19 September 2015, in Berlin's Ethnological Museum. See http://www.humboldt-forum.de/en/humboldt-lab-dahlem/project-archive/workshop-series-asking-questions/asking-questions/symposium-always-in-crisis.
15. All three notions are used in official published statements of the Ethnological Museum and the Humboldt Forum, but are also prominently referred to in public events by the respective directors (see, e.g., König and Scholz 2013; Parzinger 2011; see also the current status of the planned exhibitions in the Humboldt Box, the preliminary showcase for the Berlin Palace Humboldt Forum).
16. Both Paola Ivanov and Jonathan Fine are engaged in research projects that deal with the critical evaluation of contested collections, from Tanzania and Cameroun.
17. See https://www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/deutscher-kolonialismus.html.
18. The museum has published a call for a research position, with a focus on human remains and colonial war booty. See http://museumswissenschaft.de/grassi-leiter-forschung-ausstellungen.
19. A recent call has been published to advertise a stipend for Namibians in a Namibian-German research project concerning "Colonial Photographs from the Herero and Nama Genocide at Hamburg's Ethnological Museum." See https://www.geschichte.uni-hamburg.de/arbeitsbereiche/

globalgeschichte/forschung/forschungsstelle-hamburgs-postkoloniales-erbe/aktuelle-meldungen/stipendannouncementcolonialphotographiesnamibia.pdf.

20. See the program of the Rietberg Museum Zürich at http://www.rietberg.ch/de-ch/sammlung/provenienzforschung.aspx.
21. See http://www.materialculture.nl/en/collections-ethics-and-responsibility.
22. Extract from Margareta von Oswald's field notes, Ethnological Museum Berlin, 8 November 2014.

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