

**Un-doing post-colonial knowledges.
Perspectives from academia-arts-activism**

Veranstalter: Manuela Bauche, Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Freie Universität Berlin; Katharina Schramm, Chair for Social and Cultural Anthropology and Cluster of Excellence „Africa Multiple“, University of Bayreuth; Nadine Siegert, Iwalewahaus Bayreuth / Goethe-Institute Johannesburg

Datum, Ort: 19.07.2019–21.07.2019, Bayreuth

Bericht von: Manuela Bauche, Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Freie Universität Berlin; Katharina Schramm, Chair for Social and Cultural Anthropology and Cluster of Excellence „Africa Multiple“, University of Bayreuth; Nadine Siegert, Iwalewahaus Bayreuth / Goethe-Institute Johannesburg

At the end of 2018, cultural politics in Germany and many other European states were shaken by the debate on how European museums should deal with objects originating from colonial contexts. Until now, this debate is dominated by actors from the museum field in Europe, while African and African-Diasporic voices are often marginalized. Decolonial positions, too, remain largely invisible or are being delegitimized as uninformed, non-pragmatic and biased. However, many of these actors have been engaging with the post-colonial history of European collections long before it became a public hype. The workshop „un-doing post-colonial knowledges: Perspectives from academia-arts-activism“ was jointly organised by Katharina Schramm, Nadine Siegert and Manuela Bauche. It aimed at following up on the current debate by forging a conversation among practitioners and scholars from arts, academia and activism, with a special focus on views emerging from the African continent and the African diaspora. In line with the research objectives and intellectual agenda of the Bayreuth Cluster of Excellence „Africa Multiple: Reconfiguring African Studies“, the workshop sought to decentralize the dominant focus on institutional concerns and to consider objects, archives and knowledges as parts of wider relations.

Departing from the demands for the restitution of African objects that was sparked off

by the recent report of Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, the workshop widened the debate beyond matters of provenance research, following up on the broader question of how a „new relational ethics“¹ between formerly colonized and colonizing people, communities and states could be designed. In addition, the conveners wanted to open up new imaginary spaces for thinking further about object matters – be it in terms of new curatorial practices, forms of circulation and meaning-making or through deeper engagements with modes of conservation and care.

The workshop opened with a keynote address by TEMI ODUMOSU (Malmö). She addressed important questions about the afterlives of colonialism as tangible in colonial portraits and collections. She interrogated colonial representations and contemporary relations to them through the question of silenced subjectivities and modes of „looking back“ as well as „looking away“. Odumosu also addressed the affective relations and responsibilities that are evoked when working in the colonial archive.

During the workshop sessions, participants were invited to present short provocations from which the broader discussion unfolded. In the course of the workshop deliberations, three related themes emerged: un-doing post-colonial knowledges; objects and affects and (disrupting) institutions.

How can we think the museum, the object, the archive in ways that transgress established modes of reasoning and that have the potential of undoing colonial knowledges? This was one of the key questions that ran through the workshop. With regard to museums, the workshop discussed the need for reworking their underlying classificatory systems. As EL HADJI MALICK NDIAYE (Dakar) and GREER VALLEY (Cape Town/Durban) argued, the very distinction between „ethnographic“ displays and „cultural history“ displays that we find in many institutions mirrors an occidental perspective that is highly problematic. Yet, the classificatory systems that structure museum collections and

¹Felwine Sarr / Bénédicte Savoy (2018), The restitution of African cultural heritage. Toward a new relational ethics. Report. November 2018, https://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf (22.08.2019).

archives prove hard to transform. Catalogues and databases constitute very effective and persistent modes of ordering. In her presentation on a provenance research project in the Tanzania collection of Berlin's ethnological museum, PAOLA IVANOV (Berlin) gave insights into the difficulties of altering catalogue entries or the underlying epistemic scaffolding. She pointed out how important it was to pay attention to the power and effects of descriptive terms such as „war booty“ that clearly mirror the position of German collectors, not those of the objects' original owners. In this context, CHRISTIAN JARLING (Bremen/Hamburg), building on his experience at Bremen's Überseemuseum asked whether of a form of „esperanto language“ for the inventory practice in museums might be a way out of the biases of classificatory traditions. At the same time, it also became clear that museums should abandon the claim of having access to *all* knowledges. A lack of information must not necessarily be negative. Could the lack of knowledge not also equal epistemic resistance – in the face of the dominance of provenance research and its claim to know?

The possibility of undoing knowledges was also discussed in view of activist, academic and artistic interventions into museums and archives. EVA BAHL (Göttingen/Munich) addressed the ways in which activist interventions such as that by [muc] münchen postkolonial into Munich's city museum worked towards new modes of making visible colonialism and anti-colonial resistance in the German public sphere. Another concern was brought up by NASHI-LONGWESHIPWE MUSHAANDJA (Windhoek/Cape Town) while commenting on his performance „The Dance of the Rubber Tree“ which had intervened into an archive of colonial photographs in Hamburg. He stressed the need to acknowledge that the lines between arts, academia and activism are largely blurred, as many persons embody all of these positionalities. Perhaps academic knowledge should also be understood as an artistic form of knowledge production and vice versa, he suggested.

Another reference to epistemic resistance concerned the articulation of different modes of knowledges and the building of alterna-

tive archives. This was a point that was stressed by WAZI APOH (Accra) and PEJU LAYIWOLA (Lagos) who both emphasized the role of local knowledges and forms of meaning-making in relation to the objects as well as the need for community consultation in matters of restitution. Oral histories were not isolated elements in reconsidering and re-making archival knowledge.

Participants also discussed the impact of non-material, embodied and performative modes in dealing with the object realities. This led to the consideration of the ephemeral as a way to open up new possibilities for transgressing conventional modes of knowledge and display. Curatorial practice then would equal caretaking and activation that could take many different forms – even burning, as Mushaandja emphasized. The topic of fire was discussed controversially – as a mode of urgency and drawing attention; as evidence of colonial conquest and violence; as a form of creating durability (for example in firing clay to create sculptures, as in Layiwola's artistic work „benin1897.com“); as well as a form of cleansing and ritualized performance that might free objects from the prison of storage.

The second theme that ran through the workshop connected objects and affects. Presentations such as Layiwola's art project on the looting of the Benin Bronzes by the British empire in 1897 or Mushaandja's performative engagement with colonial collections in European museums demonstrated that as part of the new relational ethics, it is important to endure the discomfort and anxiety this decolonial process entails. Not being reconciled by the singular act of repatriation this would require entering a long-term process of collaborative engagement with open and maybe unresolvable questions. Decolonizing emotions would be an important aspect in this process. This also resonated with Odumosu's keynote where she discussed possibilities of resistance – such as the resistance of the object to fully disclose itself by becoming opaque and illegible. This might be important in the engagement with sacred and spiritual objects that might call for a „safe space“ in the process of restitution.

Objects and affects were also related to the

question of „shared heritage“ and other practices of ownership. How can objects be reconnected to people? Here, the issue of inventoring and naming came again into play. The examples of the projects presented by Jarling and Ivanov showed how limited the knowledge of the museums is about the origin of the objects and the conditions of their „collecting“ – examples of the ‘colonial aphasia’ as described by Ann Laura Stoler. Again, artistic and curatorial research seems to enable alternative and new forms of decolonial thinking and practice, also in regard to affective relationships with loaded objects. Participants brought up „friendship“ as a possible form for such a framework, conceptualizing it as a relationship of utmost sincerity and responsibility that entailed the possibility for constructive critique.

New forms of working with those loaded objects have been proposed in the presentation by Valley, who re-used the objects from the estate of the founders of the University of Stellenbosch as props in a performance setting. Instead of speaking back *with* the object she proposed speaking back to the colonial object as a form of decolonial curatorial practice. REGINA SARREITER (Stuttgart/Berlin) reflected on two projects by the group Artefakte/aktivierung: the „Anti-Humboldt-Box“ (an exhibition in a suitcase) and another project on artificial facts and forms of activation. In both cases, the idea was to bring objects into new circulations, disrupting their routine display, thereby adding new layers and opening spaces of discussion.

Finally, the role of established institutions, especially of museums housing colonial objects, came up repeatedly. Elaborating on the history of the Musée Théodore-Monod d’Art Africain in Dakar (Senegal) which is part of the Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire (IFAN), MALICK NDIAYE (Dakar) demonstrated both the potential and the limitations of transforming an ethnographic museum that had been created during French colonial rule into a gallery for African art in independent Senegal. Although the paradigm of collecting and displaying objects had been altered, the museum changed its name as late as 2007 to honor its first director Monod – thus inscribing French colonialism into the institu-

tion’s identity until today.

The question of the possibilities and limitations of collaborations between European museums with partner institutions on the African continent and other stakeholders, such as communities, artists or activists, ran through the whole workshop. Participants discussed the potential of arts in particular to not only add, but to disrupt and transgress hegemonic narratives and dominant visual regimes. In her keynote, Odumosu hinted at this potential when she talked about her discomfort to apply the interpretations of an art historian to paintings depicting Black women and to the need to find forms of engagement beyond narrative to reanimate the dead. Greer Valley and SAM HOPKINS (Nairobi/Cologne) both shared insights into their work as a curator and artist respectively intervening into institutions. Departing from her exhibition „the chair“ that engaged with the different ways in which the Stellenbosch University collections deal with objects from the estates of former apartheid politicians, Valley discussed the potential of curatorial work to challenge the persistence of the colonial gaze. Hopkins presented his ongoing research and artistic project „Letter to Lagat“ which reflected on the question of traces: can we imagine an emptied museum? What can the traces tell us about decades of practices of collecting and conservation? The artistic and curatorial projects show that privileging the visual over the textual, the artistic over the academic approach, can be identified as a source of arts’ potential in exposing colonialities. But what happens when art is being translated back into language, asked Hopkins. This question remained largely unanswered. Instead the debate focused on the danger of putting the burden of dealing with colonial legacies on artists and activists, thereby releasing academia and museums from their responsibility to engage with their history but also their present and future duties in a post-colonial entangled world.

The workshop not only addressed the need for collaboration, but also for disruption. Ivanov called for a more radical transformation of the museum space in order to enable effective and sustainable collaborations. The need to rethink institutional structures

was also implicit when LARISSA FÖRSTER (Berlin) who heads of the newly found department in charge of objects from colonial contexts at the German Lost Art Foundation argued that administrative routines could also become instruments of power and thus needed to be carefully performed.

On a road trip to Leipzig, participants had the chance to encounter a practical attempt to go beyond conventional ethnological displays by visiting the exhibition „Werkstatt Prolog“ at GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde. Subsequently, five workshop participants also engaged with the Leipzig public in a round table discussion hosted by the decolonial activist association Leipzig postkolonial in cooperation with GRASSI Museum. Participants were irritated by the exhibition, by what they understood to be a lack of sensitivity in the engagement with royal and sacred objects as well as by narratives that appeared detached from the objects' materiality. Experiencing „Werkstatt Prolog“ led them to ask about the intended audience of the exhibition – and about who was excluded.

In building narratives and displays for multiple audiences and connected to the aim of a „new relational ethics“, the idea of „de-toxification“ might be inspiring. The notion of toxic encounters came up in the course of the workshop and at the public discussion in Leipzig. „De-toxifying“ can be understood as a practical need and an ethical and political requirement. It draws attention to the fact that many of the objects held in European museum collections are highly toxic, as they have been treated with insecticides and other dangerous substances. Restituting these objects in their current state is therefore out of question and decontaminating them is a difficult and expensive task. At the same time, detoxifying can be understood as a process of cleansing in a much broader sense, as a process in which objects are being relieved of the violence they had to endure, in which they are treated with care and sensitivity, in which European institutions take responsibility. Might this idea lead us from toxic encounters to decolonial futures?

Conference overview:

Keynote Address

Temi Odumosu (Malmö): »Who is the Subject? On portraiture in the colonial archive«

Session 1: Introductions & What is at stake?

Introduction: Manuela Bauche (Berlin), Katharina Schramm (Bayreuth), Nadine Siegert (Bayreuth)

Session 2: Public Collections – Histories, Experiences, Collaborations, Expectations

Chair: Nadine Siegert (Bayreuth)

Inputs by: El Hadji Malick Ndiaye (Dakar), Paola Ivanov (Berlin), Christian Jarling (Bremen)

Session 3: Interventions into the Archive – Rescribing and ReSearching

Chair: Manuela Bauche (Berlin)

Inputs by: Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja (Windhoek/Cape Town), Peju Layiwola (Lagos), Eva Bahl (Göttingen/Munich), Regina Sarreiter (Stuttgart)

Session 4: Restitution and Repatriation – The Practice

Chair: Katharina Schramm (Bayreuth)

Inputs by: Greer Valley (Cape Town/Durban), Larissa Förster (Berlin), Wazi Apoh (Accra), Sam Hopkins (Cologne/Nairobi)

Session 5: Conclusions, Visions, Questions

Chairs & Conclusions: Manuela Bauche (Berlin), Katharina Schramm (Bayreuth), Nadine Siegert (Bayreuth)

Guided Tour through the exhibition »Werkstatt Prolog« at GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde Leipzig

Roundtable discussion »Postcolonial reflections. On the future lives of objects«

Chair: Claudia Rauhut (Leipzig/Berlin)

Discussants: Wazi Apoh (Accra), Malick Ndiaye (Dakar), Greer Valley (Durban/Cape Town) and Stefanie Bach (Leipzig)

Tagungsbericht *Un-doing post-colonial knowledges. Perspectives from academia-arts-activism*. 19.07.2019–21.07.2019, Bayreuth, in: H-Soz-Kult 29.08.2019.