Iris Edenheiser
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Museumsethnologie

Eine Einführung

Theorien
Debatten
Praktiken

R E I M E R

INHALT

Gedruckt mit Unterstützung der Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung und von Sharon Macdonalds Alexander von Humboldt-Professur

Bibliografische Information
der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Umschlagabbildungen
siehe Bildnachweise S.382

Lektorat
Anna Felmy (Deutsch), Sabine Lang (Englisch)

Gestaltung
Torsten Köchlin, Janne Holzmüller

Schrift
Pitch Sans, Lyon Text

Papier
115 g/m² FLY weiß 05

Druck
Beltz Grafische Betriebe, Bad Langensalza

Printed in Germany
ISBN 978-3-496-01614-4

Researching Ethnographic Museums in Europe

Conversation with Sharon Macdonald

Sharon Macdonald is the founding director of the Centre of Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH) located at the Institute of European Ethnology at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Trained as a social anthropologist, Macdonald has made museums and heritage institutions her – and CARMAH's – primary field sites. Her commitment to identifying broader societal issues in daily museum work has made her a sympathetic, yet also critical, observer of, and participant in, Berlin's and Germany's museum debates.

Larissa Förster: You have done research on science and history museums, on heritage and memorial sites of all kinds and all across Europe – is there anything particular about ethnographic museums and collections in Europe compared with other kinds of museums?

Sharon Macdonald: If by 'ethnographic museum' we mean a museum with collections from peoples outside Europe – which is how the term is most often used in the English-speaking academic literature, as with 'ethnologisches Museum' in German – then these museums especially raise questions about the ways in which Europeans have collected and represented other parts of the world. While such questions apply to other kinds of museums to various extents, there is no doubt that many of the thorniest cases – and those for which issues of repatriation, restitution and decolonization come most forcefully into play – concern ethnographic museums. With growing post-colonial sensibility, the whole raison d'être of ethnographic museums has come into question. They can't be there just as monuments to imperialism and colonialism – to the European capacity to master the world. Articulating an implicit 'European identity' by contrast with the non-European – as, following Edward Said, one might argue that ethnographic museums do – is also no longer acceptable and makes little sense in the contemporary world.[1] So ethnographic museums are struggling especially hard to redefine their role – they are trying to figure out how to 'do the ethnographic', and even whether they should. But that struggle is not necessarily negative. In many ways, it is what drives their current creativity and energy – why we see so many renewing and renaming themselves.

That makes them very interesting to research. For anthropologists, that is even more so because of their relationship to our discipline. Here, though, I want to make a further point as an anthropologist who has worked primarily within Europe. Before joining an Institute of European Ethnology – the very intellectually lively and self-reflective one at the Humboldt-Universität zu

Berlin – in 2015, I trained and worked in departments that researched many parts of the world and did not make the strong Europe–non-Europe division that shapes the German disciplinary and museum constellation, built on the Volkskunde–Völkerkunde division. I do think that to tackle many of the pressing issues about the nature of the world today, anthropology needs to look globally without taking some supposedly foundational Europe-non-Europe distinction as its premise. And so too with museums. Here in Berlin, there was such a good opportunity to do that in the Humboldt Forum, in which objects from the Ethnological Museum will be shown but not those from the Museum of European Cultures, except perhaps a few jemmied in as an afterthought. To me that is a real missed opportunity. There was such a great chance here to do something new and transcend these existing and problematic boundaries. That wouldn't have just meant adding in the Museum of European Cultures in another space within the Humboldt Forum – making it like a shopping mall of discrete museums – but doing something much more radical and exciting and mixing things up, creating a whole new way of looking at the world – one that isn't stuck in the old categories.

Speaking of research: What can ethnographic fieldwork in and on (ethnographic) museums look like and entail? What kind of questions can it raise – and what answers can it give?

I would want to define ethnographic fieldwork in and on museums quite broadly – not only the hanging around inside a museum for ages kind of fieldwork that I did in the Science Museum.[2] So ethnographic fieldwork that looks deeply at aspects of the work of museums – maybe following it across museums, and beyond them, into related organisations, stakeholder groups – such as activists and communities in countries with links to the objects – is also the sort of research of which we need more. To me, what I see as characteristic of ethnographic research is that it has a commitment to a deep understanding of a phenomenon, to getting to know how participants involved see and experience what is going on – including differences between parties and individuals. It means paying attention to what happens in practice – which might be rather different from what those involved say is happening or even believe to be happening. One reason for that discrepancy can be that the ethnographer looks for links beyond the specific situation – maybe speaks to a wider range of actors or puts what is going on in a broader context.

It is surprising that there hasn't been more ethnographic fieldwork done in ethnographic museums. What fascinating sites they are, and so good for looking at key questions in the discipline! So what can we get out of doing so? I was recently reading Conal McCarthy's new book about Te Papa – it doesn't call itself an ethnography and says that it is aimed at a general reader, which makes it wonderfully readable and engaging. But it is an almost-ethnography – an example of what Douglas Holmes and George Marcus call para-ethnography.[3] It describes an institutional history in which he was partly involved, and includes some direct description of events and conversations. He has done much that an ethnographer might, such as giving attention to different work roles and to the politics of the institution, as well as including biographical portraits of selected staff members. Summing up his reasons for writing the book, he says:

> "Many people have little idea of how a museum actually works. Often museums are not particularly good at explaining what they do, even in core functions such as collections. Studies of museums need to reveal the inner

workings of professional practice and open them up to public understanding, self-reflection and critical analysis."[4]

This seems to me to be a good reason for doing ethnographic fieldwork in museums. But what kinds of questions does it tackle? Putting it simply, the central ones are: why do some things get collected and not others? Why do some things get exhibited and not others? And who and what is involved in this? Although they seem simple, however, these questions can and should be answered on multiple levels. This includes those of identifying factors such as the following: institutional assumptions ('we are the kind of institution that does this...', 'that's just how we do things...'); political and financial ones ('the minister won't like it if...', 'our funding depends on...'); and nearly always individual and rather chancy ones ('I just fell in love with those objects', 'Well, so-and-so bumped into so-and-so and they got talking and...'). Alongside these are a bunch of significant local concepts – such as territory and ownership (collections and exhibitions are often colloquially referred to by the name of their curator – 'so-and-so's exhibition' and so forth), object love ('I had to include them'), turn-taking ('B is next in-line to do an exhibition'), status ('you can't just over-ride somebody who has been here so long....'), and who is allowed keys to the storage. Ethnography lets us see how curators and other staff within museums see things. It also helps us to understand unspoken feelings – what causes curators to get enthused or anxious, what is the mood at meetings and the general tone or 'affective atmosphere' of the workplace. That can also have implications for the kind of work that is done, such as how willing, for example, people will be to try something new – might they be cautious because of fear of criticism? The significance of such implicit and affective factors is emerging in some of the ethnography being done in the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage – CARMAH – that I set up in Berlin.[5] We recently published an article in which we tried to show some of the reasons for doing institutional ethnography and also the value of going beyond just one location.[6] The methodological argument that we made was for keeping the in-depth quality of ethnography within specific organisations – in this case museums or exhibitions – while not being constrained by these as 'containers' of the research. It is undoubtedly one of the real challenges of ethnography to make it speak out beyond the particular case studied, while keeping the highly valuable rich, specific detail. Fred von Bose's ethnography of the earlier phase of the making of the Humboldt Forum, for example, locates it in wider developments and debates, such as about multiculturalism and post-colonial critique.[7] Andrea Scholz, in her writings on a collaborative project with students from an indigenous university in Venezuela, reflects on the institutional context of her work.[8] There are also some 'insider accounts' that are para-ethnographic in the way that McCarthy's book is. I think here, for example, of Claus Deimel's recent book, "Des Museums neue Kleider. Die Riten im Museum der Menschen". He was for many years director of the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig, and later of all three ethnographic museums in Saxony, combined as the Staatliche Ethnographische Sammlungen Sachsen (Leipzig, Dresden, Herrnhut). His book sometimes reads like ethnography – when, for example, he gives an amusing but also insightful description of the difficulties of getting a simple plug installed in the storage, or when he describes a visit from the Minister who asks whether everything is stolen, or in his naming of museum directors as 'small despots'. But it also more polemical than ethnographies normally are. Deimel notes, by the way, that Germany

possesses the most ethnographic collections and museums in the world.[9] So maybe we should expect there to be more ethnographic work on them in the future – I hope so.

That is interesting about Germany – but is there much more such ethnography elsewhere?

There is surprisingly little published ethnographic fieldwork about ethnographic museums. Quai Branly has probably received most attention. There is Sally Price's "Paris Primitive" and also Benoît de l'Estoile's "Le Goût des Autres. De l'Exposition Coloniale aux Arts Premiers"[10] – both of which chart and analyse the events leading to the museum's opening, with both having had some direct involvement, as well as access to documents and interviewees. Since then, there have also been some other more specific studies, including Tiziana Beltrame's work on the databases, and Debary and Roustan's ethnographic research with the museum's visitors.[11]

In the UK, there is not much altogether. Probably the first but largely ignored by academic museology is Nigel Barley's account of going to Sulawesi to do research for the Museum of Mankind – where he was curator – and working with a group of Torajan craftsmen in the Museum to build a rice barn.[12] The fact that it is written and marketed as a popular comedy is no doubt the main reason for it being overlooked; and although there are some nice insights into such collaborative museum work – such as discrepant working practices (for example, the Torajan craftsmen don't like to stop working at 5 pm) – this is subsumed under a more general and somewhat repetitive motif of endless hilarious cultural misunderstanding. Reflections on collecting and exhibition-making by one of his colleagues at the Museum of Mankind, Michael O'Hanlon, has, however, become discussed as significant museum ethnography. This is in his short, popular (but more serious than Barley's) book about the "Paradise" exhibition – of which he was curator.[13] That became well known partly because James Clifford made it the subject of an insightful discussion, in which, among other things, he raised questions of more general resonance about the focus of ethnographic exhibitions – how far they should consider broader geo-politics, and whether they should seek to meet the expectations of the peoples they are about. The "Paradise" example was then taken up by Henrietta Lidchi, in her much read chapter on issues of representation in museums in a volume edited by Stuart Hall. It is also discussed by Mary Bouquet in her book about anthropology, museums and visual culture.[14]

Collaborative projects have been the subject of most work by anthropologists relating to ethnographic collections. Laura Peers and Alison Brown's "Museums and Source Communities", published in 2003, was groundbreaking in this regard, bringing together a collection of case-studies, primarily by curators looking at their own practice, of work with 'source communities' – a term that their book really brought into wider use. It is kind of odd, though, that now it has become almost de rigeur to say 'so-called source communities', with people wiggling their fingers in little air-quotes. This could be seen as questioning whether these communities really are the source of these objects. Maybe that is what some people doing this mean. But most, I presume, are signalling awareness that the term is problematic. But one rarely hears articulated what precisely is problematic. The idea that there is one source and that people from whom objects came necessarily constitute a community are presumably key reasons for questioning it, and the term can also relegate 'source communities'' role to just having been there at the beginning, thus playing down their

continuing rights and relationships. But it was precisely in order to argue for such continuing involvement that Peers and Brown deploy the term, as they argue in their book's introduction.

Since then, there have also been other accounts by anthropologists of collaborative initiatives in which they have been involved or have led, such as Paul Basu's on his Sierra Leone digital repatriation project.[15] Worth especial mention is Cara Krmpotich and Laura Peers' "This is Our Life" – a book-length work that really shows the value of substantial and detailed ethnographic reflection.[16] They were both active participants over many years in the collaboration between Haida people and the British Museum and Pitt Rivers that the book documents and analyses. They do an outstanding job of rich ethnographic description brought together with critical reflection and theorising.

Then there is also further work done on other places, such as Mary Bouquet's insightful ethnographic reflections on her own practice as a curator, in Portugal, Norway and the Netherlands.[17] The Museum of Anthropology of the University of British Columbia has been pioneering in its practice and the writings of its current director Anthony Shelton – and his predecessor Ruth Phillips (trained as an art historian) – can also be thought of as ethnographic in a broader sense.[18]

There is here also the question of what we are counting as an ethnographic museum. We might need to think, for example, whether we want to count, say, something like the National Museum of the American Indian – which has been looked at ethnographically by Jennifer Shannon.[19]

How do you envision research on ethnographic museums for the future?

I would really like to see the work broadened out to go beyond focusing on curators, to more on conservators or designers, as well as work on museum-related organisations, such as the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation or on activist groups. It would be great too to see more ethnographic research on museum visiting.

You mentioned earlier that there is a question today about how you 'even do the ethnographic' – and whether you should. What did you mean by that – and can we and should we?

I was referring to the struggle to find a role and mode of operating for ethnographic museums today. A conception of ethnography as a mapping of diverse cultures is out-dated in today's untidy, dynamic world. But that isn't all that the ethnographic can do or is about. I would say that it is also concerned with reflecting on questions of cultural difference and diversity – including asking methodological questions about how we think about and approach these. 'Doing the ethnographic' today includes reflecting on colonial legacies, figuring out more equable ways of working with others, recognising difference without exoticising it and so forth. These seem to me to be vital matters in our contemporary world – they concern not just ethnographic museums or academic anthropologists but society more widely. Moreover, we need new, more collaborative, constellations of work and expertise that reach out beyond traditional museum roles to involve many more participants and diverse ways of engaging in the world. So we absolutely need the ethnographic in this sense; we need what ethnographic museums are capable of doing. They should be key sites for cultural reflection on – and even intervention in – our contemporary world and global histories. I have already said that I would like to flex the boundaries and stir things up more. I would like to keep an ethnographic ambition of taking us into other practices and lifeworlds – but without pinning

this either onto outside Europe or even thinking it geographically. There are today practices and ways of life that spread over continents – and this isn't just the category of 'migrants' – but, say, things like people engaged in cosplay or bitcoin or deciding how best to curate their selfie collection. I would like to see ethnographic museums push much more into quirky, surprising, thoughtful topics like these, or like global debt and its consequences, popular protest, or sleep practices (including the contemporary sleep deprivation epidemic), that can get people thinking and debating – making us think about what it is to be human and, indeed, whether we even want to draw firm lines around that.

What role would collections play in that?

Collections can be a brilliant resource for taking us into other practices and lifeworlds. The Museum of European Cultures, for example, has cosplay costumes in its collections; and many museums have items relating to finance, protest and even sleep. Research on collections is vital for knowing just what they are capable of. Moreover, tackling new topics can be an opportunity to collect more objects, ensuring that collections are dynamic and that they address life today. There is undoubtedly something about objects that have themselves lived other lives, that have passed through hands and dwelt in other buildings, that gives them the capacity to transport audiences. Tapping into that is a massive advantage.

Collections are also vital historical records – including for telling the more complex and entangled histories of colonialism. After all, colonialism has been foundational to making Europe what it is today – not only economically, though that is absolutely crucial, but culturally, socially and politically. That didn't finish when colonial rule formally came to an end. Rather, it set up particular dependencies, structural relations and imaginaries that continue to have far-reaching effects. Post-colonial settlements and relationships have also shaped subsequent migration and diaspora in ways that also make Europe what it is today. Because colonialism has such extensive entanglements, there is something that could be told about colonialism for most kinds of museums. But for ethnographic museums it is so much more to the fore due to the direct acquisition of significant proportions of collections during colonial rule. This means that such museums have an especial remit to address this. It is, though, important not to think colonialism too narrowly as just about the period of direct colonial governance – and equally not just as about the acquisition of specific collections during that time. We need to also think about the wider and continuing relations. Post-colonial critique has been important to emphasising that. Equally, though, we need to go beyond reductionist accounts of colonialism. More recent scholarship has emphasised that colonialism wasn't just one uniform thing or process. Rather, it worked variously at different times and in different places, and not all colonial agents had identical – or even necessarily unambiguous – aims or effects. Moreover, degrees and kinds of agency among local populations also varied. This kind of work of specificity is important – and it is just this that is usually characteristic of anthropology. And museums – ethnographic museums – can be excellent places to do this work and show it, precisely because they have the collections and archives with which to do so. Nicholas Thomas, for example, has made these arguments well.[20] With thorough research, ethnographic museums can bring forgotten pasts to light, and can highlight dimensions and complexities that might otherwise be ignored. And sometimes, because of the work of their

anthropologist-curators, they also have good connections on the ground in the relevant countries to be able to take this further.

Is there a difference between how British and German (ethnographic) museums deal with colonialism?

If one thinks of the exhibitions like "German Colonialism. Fragments of its Past and Present" at the Deutsches Historisches Museum between 2016 and 2017,[21] the question comes to mind whether it would be possible to do such an exhibition in the UK. There have been some quite hard-hitting ones about slavery. But something directly analogous – in such a high-profile established institution – hasn't been done. The Museum of British Empire and Commonwealth did contain critical content, although it was criticised by some as insufficient, but it closed in 2012, after only being open 10 years. The debates around Brexit – and the fact that the vote was for it – show just how much nostalgia for the days of Empire there is in Britain. I was struck that in one interview, Neil MacGregor – former Director of the British Museum and former member of the founding directorship of the Humboldt Forum – said that "Britain forgets its past. Germany confronts it".[22] That is putting it too baldly but it captures something of an important difference. In Britain, there is a much greater tendency to look for self-bolstering aspects of the past, whereas in Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust create a deep suspicion of doing so.[23]

Holocaust history – the time, necessity and energy for addressing that – has also been a major part of the reason why Germany has taken a long time to address its colonial past. Concerns about relativizing or de-centring the Holocaust have been raised in relation to looking at colonialism. But we can, I think, take some heed from Michael Rothberg's arguments about multi-directional memory, namely that remembering one atrocity does not necessarily mean pushing another out of view, and that, indeed, it can operate to the contrary.[24] I also think, however, that the multidirectional memory argument overlooks that in practice there is often only so much space, time and resource – so some things get less attention when others are getting more. That, however, is something that can be explored in research on ongoing heritage-making. Will the now stronger focus on Germany's colonial past mean that other histories, especially that of Holocaust though also of Germany's Socialist past, recede more into the background – or not? It is a question we can investigate empirically in the current museum and heritage developments. For ethnographers of the contemporary museum and heritage scene, these are all very interesting matters to address.

Even if research on German colonialism and ethnological collections came a bit later, and even if there is much further that it should go, it is impressive to see how much is now going on – and with such energy. I have the sense that debates here in Germany at the moment are as, or are even more, lively than has ever been the case in the UK.

In the Anglophone academic world the discipline of anthropology has contributed substantially to the field of museum and heritage studies (not the least through your own work). Furthermore, the debate on the legitimacy of ethnographic collections, their necessary transformation as well as on critical and postcolonial museology started much earlier in the Anglophone than in the German-speaking museum world. What are your observations concerning discrepancies, but also overlaps and transfers between here (Berlin, Germany) and elsewhere?

It is interesting what you say about anthropology contributing to museum and heritage studies in the Anglophone world because I sometimes feel that it doesn't do so enough! Certainly, there are brilliant scholars such as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett or Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, whose work has been very influential.[25] One reason why I wrote the book "Memorylands" was my feeling that there was a lot of great work in anthropology that just wasn't featuring in the wider debates – in memory studies, museum and heritage studies.[26] Part of the reason is about format. Anthropology tends to do less synthetic work of bringing studies together and presenting their findings than do some other disciplines. Maybe it is because our own research takes more time and so we don't do so many overview or easy-uptake texts.

Museum and Heritage Studies are not, however, so strongly established in the German university system as they are in the UK, North America and Australia. Partly, this is because in the German university system it is often harder to establish new programmes, departments and Chairs. But there have long been scholars in Germany doing great work in these areas, and we are seeing a new generation of researchers who are taking this to a new level. There is so much international exchange today, which opens us all up to fresh perspectives and provocations, as well as enabling collaborative, multi-country, work that would not be easy to accomplish otherwise. My own sense is that the debate in Germany is very vibrant and thoroughly internationally informed. And my prediction is that it will become even more so in the future.

Acknowledgments

Sharon Macdonald is grateful to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for supporting her current research, and to her colleagues in the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage for lively discussion of issues raised here. She especially thanks Larissa Förster for conducting the interview, and Larissa Förster and Iris Edenheiser for their helpful suggestions.

Notes

1 Said (1978); and see, for example, Coombes (1994) and Macdonald (2016a).
2 Macdonald (2002).
3 McCarthy (2018); Holmes and Marcus (2007).
4 McCarthy (2018: 145–146).
5 CARMAH is funded primarily by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, with further support from the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the Berlin Museum of Natural History and the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation. More information can be found on its website: http://www.carmah.berlin.
6 Macdonald, Gerbich and von Oswald (2018).
7 Von Bose (2016).
8 E.g. Scholz (2017). See also her article in this volume.
9 Deimel (2016: 11).
10 Price (2007); de l'Estoile (2007).
11 Beltrame (2012); Debary and Roustan (2012, 2017).
12 Barley (1990).
13 O'Hanlon (1993).
14 See Clifford (1995); Lidchi (1997); Bouquet (2012).
15 Basu (2011).
16 Krmpotich and Peers (2013).
17 She describes and gives references for this earlier work in Bouquet (2012).
18 See, for example, Shelton (2000) and Phillips (2011).
19 Shannon (2014, 2015).
20 Thomas (2009, 2016).
21 See https://www.dhm.de/en/ausstellungen/archive/2016/german-colonialism/the-exhibition.html.

22 Adams (2016).
23 See Macdonald (2016b).
24 Rothberg (2009).
25 Appadurai 1986; Appadurai and Breckenridge (1992); Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998).
26 Macdonald (2013).

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