



Those Who Are Dead Are Not Ever Gone

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On the Maintenance of
Supremacy, the Ethnological
Museum and the Intricacies
of the Humboldt Forum

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Act I

The very strange thing about choking is that one can choke even while eating the most delicious of foods out there. Maybe, especially with such foods, as the greed to devour that delicacy rapidly – with little focus on mastication, more on consuming – might lead to the diversion of a piece from its track towards the oesophagus into the trachea. In the process of choking, a tender prawn would block the upper airway and prevent oxygen from entering the lungs; within four to ten minutes the lack of oxygen flow to the brain would lead from a reversible to an irreversible brain death, if no one comes to your rescue. When the banality of breathing is obstructed, death is imminent.

Let us afford ourselves the luxury of making a couple of suppositions related by analogy to choking...

The institution of the ethnological museum or world museum seems to be in the midst of a serious crisis of choking. The delicacies that most of these museums have acquired, which is to say co-opted, which is to say ingested – usually under the most dubious of conditions, ranging from blatant looting to petty theft,¹ blackmail and acquisition for little money, preying on the greed and naivety of some sellers, in the best spirit of predatory capitalism – including historical and ritual sculptures, fabrics, artworks and artefacts of all kinds, human skulls and skeletons, over the course of the history of ethnological museums, seem to

¹ For instance, as reported by Michel Leiris in his description of the French-led *Mission ethnographique et linguistique Dakar-Djibouti* in his travel journal, *Phantom Africa* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2017).

have collectively missed the track to the oesophagus and got stuck in the respiratory tract. Actually, they have been stuck there for as long as the history of mass collections, acquisitions and looting, for as long as the ruthless and ongoing extraction of cultural property has occurred in the former colonies outside of Europe. In the case of the Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin-Dahlem, this has been since its foundation in 1873 and its opening in 1886.

The coughing caused by the choking throes of the ethnological museum / world museum / universal museum is becoming loud and blaring, and while some people are dashing off in a helter-skelter panic, others are running to slap the ethnological museum on the back – or punch it beneath the diaphragm – with the hope of rescuing it at this late stage of choking. But just like in every choking situation, rescue is only possible if the delicate morsel blocking the windpipe is spat out.

Act II

These hits and punches have come in a multitude of forms and with varying intensities. Since the summer of 2017, particularly, they haven't stopped, and while momentum is growing, optimism is also dwindling as time passes by. In that blessed July of 2017, as the prominent French historian, professor at TU Berlin and Collège de France, Bénédicte Savoy stepped out of the blue onto the pages of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* to vent her frustrations and raise serious allegations against the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, SPK) and Berlin Humboldt Forum's lack of provenance research, lack of autonomy, dearth of transparency, inadequate scientific prowess and general irresponsibility, I was sure that this blow to the back was one to reckon with.² A blow that could either thrust the blockage out of the windpipe, if heeded, or sound the ground for demise, if ignored. In this famous interview, Savoy lamented that the Humboldt Forum was like Chernobyl, a comparison which drew venom from the founding directorate, SPK President Hermann Parzinger and art historian Horst Bredekamp, as well as from the former British Museum and current Humboldt Forum director Neil MacGregor.³ Beyond the polemics the interview brought

² Bénédicte Savoy, 'Das Humboldt-Forum ist wie Tschernobyl', *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 20 July 2017, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/benedicte-savoy-ueber-das-humboldt-forum-das-humboldt-forum-ist-wie-tschernobyl-1.3596423?reduced=true>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

³ Christiane Peitz, 'Kunsthistorikerin Savoy: "Da herrscht totale Sklerose"', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 20 July 2017, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/streit-ums-humboldt-forum-kunsthistorikerin-savoy-da-herrscht-to-%20tale-sklerose/20092228.html>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

with it, one could finally hear from someone, who once had the privilege of being an insider, and who had once thought it possible to change things from within, step out and reveal to us that the within is just as much of a fiction as those on the outside imagined it would be. The revelation that all the discourse about provenance and multiperspectivity, all those aurally charming concepts like ‘shared heritage’, were mere slogans, hashtags, pop political bling bling, came as less of a surprise.

While further jabs here and there followed, the next full blow came from a rather unexpected source. In November 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron gave a speech at the University of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso stating that: ‘African heritage must be highlighted in Paris, but also in Dakar, in Lagos, in Cotonou.’ He went on to add: ‘In the next five years, I want the conditions to be met for the temporary or permanent restitution of African heritage to Africa.’⁴ The world since then has gained another temporal annotation or demarcation, namely the pre-Macron-Ouaga age and the post-Macron-Ouaga age. In celebration of Macron’s call and in critique of the German context, Dr. Kwame Opoku noted that ‘German officialdom is indeed at a loss; they do not realize that in this post Ouagadougou period, the old arguments and methods are no longer applicable. The only choice available is to keep up with Macron or to out-macron Macron; they can either follow the steps of the bold and imaginative French leader or take a step ahead of the Élysée: i.e. implement some of the implications of the Ouagadougou Declaration.

⁴ Annalisa Quinn, ‘After a Promise to Return African Artifacts, France Moves Toward a Plan’, *The New York Times*, 6 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/06/arts/design/france-restitution-african-artifacts.html>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

They could do this, e.g. by returning without any further delay or discussion some of the 508 or more Benin artefacts they have been holding in the Ethnological Museum, Berlin since 1897.⁵ Another blow aimed at forcing the blockage out of the windpipe. Now the choking persists and the coughing is becoming desperately tedious, and every ounce of air a battle. With the open letter initiated by Berlin Postkolonial,⁶ signed by artists, activists and intellectuals, and addressed to Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel, forcing her to take a stance on looted art and artefacts in German museums, as well as the appointment of Bénédicte Savoy and Senegalese writer and economist Felwine Sarr as consultants for the repatriation of African artefacts held in French museums, pressure is mounting.

⁵ Kwame Opoku, 'Parzinger's Cri De Coeur: Genuine Plea For Un/unesco Assistance Or Calculation To Delay Restitution Of Artefacts?', *Modern Ghana*, 24 January 2018, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/830590/parzingers-cri-de-coeur-genuine-plea-for-ununesco-assista.html>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

⁶ Berlin Postkolonial e.V. is a non-governmental organization founded in 2007 that seeks to confront Germany's colonial past and critically examine colonial history in its global dimension through numerous initiatives.

Act III

The very strange thing about choking is that one can choke even while eating the most delicious of foods out there. To diagnose the choking, one might have to look at hubris. There is a certain arrogance of strength and greatness that would restrain one from pleading for help even if one were at the threshold of the yonder. Even when one is choking and air is tight. The kind of condescension not only for the other, but also for oneself, masked under the guise of power. The power that typically accompanies and emanates from patriarchy. The hubris which smells of the debris of coloniality or the longing for a time gripped by the claws of the colonial enterprise. When Paul Gilroy wrote in *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* that the inclination to romanticise colonial times reveals itself in our contemporary as ‘an unhealthy and destructive post-imperial hunger for renewed greatness’,⁷ he could just as well have been writing an essay on the Humboldt Forum. It is this hunger for greatness that urged the rebuilding of a former Prussian Palace in the middle of Berlin. This could be held as a masterclass on the reconstruction, the rewriting of history through architecture: the one-to-one reimagination of the Hohenzollern residence, whose foundations were laid in 1443; reconstructed around 1700 as a baroque residence; demolished after the Second World War; restructured from 1973 as the Palace of the Republic, in which the People’s Chamber of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) met, but which was also a ‘place of happiness and sociability’ for citizens; shut down

⁷ Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 331.

after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and from 1998 to 2008 gradually demolished to make space for this rebuilding of the palace.⁸ Perhaps this wouldn't be a problem if this building and the institution it represents didn't symbolise a manifold erasure of histories and an exultation of monarchial and imperial systems.

It is not unusual to hear that after the fall of the Wall and the reunification of Germany, West Germany usurped and moved on to fully replace East Germany. Every effort was made to wipe out a system deemed retrograde and to implement a capitalist democratic system befitting the twenty-first century that lay ahead. Not only did the people of the former GDR lose, expeditiously, their social, economic and political structures and ways of life, they also lost their bearings, as their street names were changed, monuments were contested, political figures chastised, identity questioned and shamed, and history challenged, in an effort to erase the communist past. This – what is considered by many as a takeover of the GDR by the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) – is at the root of a lot of frustration in the Eastern part of Germany today, which has led to proto-fascist sentiments, a radical shift to the right, and xenophobic attacks on foreigners, who have become the scapegoats of both the political system and the *'besorgte Bürger'*. Director of the Berliner Festspiele Thomas Oberender, ruminating on why the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD or 'Alternatives for Germany' party) became so successful in the former GDR region, stated:

Thirty years after the fall of the Wall, Germany is building a Humboldt Forum to bring Humboldtian surveys of the world

⁸ Truc Vu Minh, 'Tagung: Ein öffentlicher Ort. Berliner Schloss – Palast der Republik – Humboldt Forum', *Research Center Sanssouci Für Wissen und Gesellschaft*, 19 September 2016, <https://recs.hypotheses.org/718>, (accessed 10 July 2018) my translation.

in line with German colonial history. For this the Palace of the Republic was demolished and in its place nothing reminds one of it. How does one reflect on this inner German colonialism? This national ‘roof damage’, does it imply that there is nothing left to worry about regarding the history of the GDR, except the deaths at the Wall and the Stasi? What remains of the GDR is a reminder of victims and perpetrators, of injustice and failure and misbelief, this is the whole truth.⁹

Architecture as tool for the erasure of history – or, construction as eraser. The destruction of the Palace of the Republic as one coordinate in the tradition of tabula rasa urbanism.¹⁰ Tabula rasa and *Wiederaufbau* (reconstruction) as means of maintaining what Aníbal Quijano calls the coloniality of power.

⁹ Arno Orzessek, ‘Humboldt Forum statt Palast der Republik’, *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 27 September 2017, <http://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/kulturpresseschau.media.fe4c31b0b0d0521ea48a732768d73078.pdf>, (accessed 10 July 2018) my translation. The german idiom ‘damaged roof’ is used to refer to someone suffering from mental problems.

¹⁰ ‘The demolition of the Palast der Republik in 2008 is rooted in the tradition of tabula rasa urbanism. Le Corbusier’s Plan Voisin for Paris (1922–25) and also Oswald Mathias Ungers’ idea of a green urban archipelago in Berlin (1977) are the artistically outstanding urban models with a history of city planning that includes demolition, new building and reconstruction: urbanism as curatorial practice that views buildings as objects on display and the city itself as an exhibition. The Plan Voisin explicitly made room also for historical buildings; once historical monuments had fallen victim to the tabula rasa approach, they could, according to Le Corbusier, be rebuilt at any other random location in Paris. In his urban archipelago Ungers planned—subsequent to the destruction of entire city neighborhoods—to reconstruct historical architectural projects unrealized until today.’ Stephan Trüby, Heiner Mühlmann, and Wilfried Kuehn, ‘Display Architecture’, *Displayer 03*, 2009, 247–257, <http://kuehnmalvezzi.com/media/publikationen/Disp03.pdf>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

On the other hand, the rebuilding of this palace in which objects and subjects – war booty and otherwise – from all over the non-West will be displayed and framed under the auspices of Humboldt must also be seen as a re-membling, as in re-piecing together as well as reminiscing about, and as a reinstituting of a historical era of Prussian greatness. This greatness was also characterised by the Brandenburg-Prussian endeavours to set up colonies on the West African coast in the seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries. With the establishment of the Kurbrandenburg Navy around 1676 and the Brandenburg African Company (BAC) in 1680, the Great Elector Friedrich Wilhelm sent commercial and military vessels to set up forts and colonies in West Africa. The frigate *Morian* reached the Guinea coast in January 1681 and facilitated the building of a fort on the land of the Ahanta people on the coast of present-day Ghana, as well as commercial posts for the trading of gold, pepper, ivory and people as slaves. So did Brandenburg-Prussia enter the transatlantic slave trade, selling an estimated 15,000 to 24,000 Africans in the years between 1680 and 1717 over 124 trade journeys. It should be noted that approximately 10 to 15 percent of these human resources did not survive the sheer brutality and harsh conditions of these trades. King of Prussia, Friedrich I continued the colonial endeavour after the death of his father the ‘Great Elector’ in 1688, but later sold Prussia’s colonies to the Dutch West India Company in 1717.¹¹

¹¹ Elisabeth Nechutnys, ‘Bradenburg’s Colonial Past’, *Postcolonial Potsdam*, May 2014, <https://postcolonialpotsdam.wordpress.com/2014/05/27/brandenburgs-colonial-past/>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

Act IV

So, what does it mean to rebuild a Prussian base of power, name it after the brothers Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, fashion it as the world centre for culture and cultural dialogue housing works from the Ethnological Museum of Berlin and the Museum of Asian Art? Did this provoke the choking? How did these arts and artefacts, objects and subjects get into these collections in the first place? And what does it mean to have one of the founding directors, Horst Bredekamp, claim openly – as one could hear in Lorenz Rollhäuser's 'Haus der Weißen Herren: Humboldt Forum, Shared Heritage und der Umgang mit dem Anderen' (House of White Men: Humboldt Forum, Shared Heritage and Dealing with the Other)¹² – that unlike other European cities like London, Brussels or Paris, Berlin did not collect colonially? Kwame Opoku have published numerous essays such as 'Benin to Berlin Ethnologisches Museum: Are Benin Bronzes Made in Berlin?', discussing the colonial contexts and dubious means through which too many of these 'objects' were stolen, sold or conned out of the African continent or other parts of the world, and found themselves in European and North American museums.¹³

¹² Lorenz Rollhäuser, 'Haus der Weißen Herren: Humboldt Forum, Shared Heritage und der Umgang mit dem Anderen', *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 23 September 2017, http://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/raubkunst-im-humboldt-forum-haus-der-weissen-herren.958.de.html?dram:article_id=391520, (accessed 10 July 2018).

¹³ Kwame Opoku, 'Benin to Berlin Ethnologisches Museum: Are Benin Bronzes Made In Berlin?', *Modern Ghana*, 13 February 2008, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/157501/1/benin-to-berlin-ethnologisches-museum-are-benin-br.html>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

Bredekamp's comments also stand in stark contrast to what Richard Kandt, resident of the German Empire in Rwanda, wrote in 1897 to Felix von Luschan, Head of the African Department of the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde (Royal Museum for Ethnology) Berlin, about the provenance of the 'objects' in the museum: 'It is especially difficult to procure an object without at least employing some force. I believe that half of your museum consists of stolen objects.'¹⁴ This fact of 1897 is the fact of 2018.

Though this surpasses the frame of this paper, it is worth briefly mentioning some very clear cases, much discussed in the past years. The invasion and destruction of the Edo Kingdom of Benin and the humiliation of the Oba Ovonramwen by the British in 1897 was accompanied by the mass looting of an estimated 3,500 valuable bronze statues from the King's palace.¹⁵ These were later taken to the British Museum or sold to museums and individuals across the Western hemisphere. The very well-documented correspondences of Felix von Luschan as well as other archival materials reveal that he was fully aware of the illegitimacy of the acquisitions, of their provenance and the blood that was attached to his purchases.

¹⁴ Cornelia Essner, 'Berlins Völkerkunde-Museum in der Kolonialära: Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis von Ethnologie und Kolonialismus in Deutschland', *Berlin in Geschichte und Gegenwart – Jahrbuch des Landesarchivs Berlin*, Hans J. Reichardt (ed.) (Munich: Siedler Verlag, 1986), p. 77 (my translation).

¹⁵ Kwame Opoku, 'We Will Show You Looted Benin Bronzes But We Will Not Give Them Back: Second Deafeat And Permanent Humiliation for Benin?', *Modern Ghana*, 2 October 2017, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/806847/we-will-show-you-looted-benin-bronzes-but-will-not-give-them.html>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

The throne of a king does not belong to the king, but to his people. The Bamum people of Cameroon have had to do without their throne ever since it was allegedly given as a gift by Sultan Ibrahim Njoya to Emperor Wilhelm II in 1908. Ever since, the 'Mandu Yenu' has been an economic and political gravitational force in the Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin-Dahlem. A blatant question arises: What is a gift in the context of colonialism? It is no secret that colonialism – in all its forms and shades – was 'a crime against humanity', as Macron pointed out.¹⁶ What is a gift in this context of extreme power gradients and colonial violence? If a thief came to your home, pointed a gun to your head and asked for you to offer up your most valuable goods as a gift, what chance is there for you to say no? The extortion of Makabu Buanga by Ludwig Wolf, colonial officer Hermann Wissmann's doctor, from the Congolese Prince Ischiewu is another such case, with evidences of the extortion documented in Wolf's travel diary.

¹⁶ Michael Stothard, 'Macron calls France's colonial past a "crime against humanity"', *Financial Times*, 17 February 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/87d6f430-f521-11e6-95ee-f14e55513608>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

Act V

The very strange thing about choking is that one can choke even while eating the most delicious of foods out there. To diagnose the choking, one might have to look at the entanglements of science and race.

At the height of Germany's colonial era in the African continent, the Germans perpetrated what is widely regarded as the first genocide of the twentieth century in Namibia. Between 1904 and 1908, German troops in the former imperial German colony of South West Africa massacred – by shooting, hanging from trees, starving to death by banishing into the desert – an estimated one hundred thousand Hereros and Namas, leaving only fifteen thousand survivors. These survivors were forced into concentration camps, women and girls were raped, and even more people killed. As if the killing wasn't enough, the skeletons and skulls of the Herero and Nama people were shipped to Germany for 'scientific' racial experiments.¹⁷ Even more recently, more than one thousand further skulls were found, until the last decade purportedly unknown to the institutions housing them, having been taken apparently from Rwanda and former East African colonies for Germany's racial research.¹⁸ Due to enormous pressure from groups within and outside of Germany, the Prussian Cultural

¹⁷ 'Namibia: Skulls of my People', 26 May 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2017/05/namibia-skulls-people-170524084141641.html>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

¹⁸ 'Germany to investigate 1,000 skulls taken from African colonies for "racial research,"' *The Guardian*, 6 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/06/germany-to-investigate-1000-skulls-taken-from-african-colonies-for-racial-research>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

Heritage Foundation has been forced to step up efforts to research and publish information on the provenance of the skulls, as well as to repatriate them. While Germany has started repatriating some of the skulls, an important consideration arises, one that is not easily understood within Western epistemological and spiritual frameworks. The souls of the people killed, and whose skeletons were shipped out of the country, as well as the soul of their nations, will not be healed just because the skulls were sent back. The healing commences only when the provenance is cleared, which is to say, only when one can put a name on each skull. The spirits of the dead will linger and seek abode until they are named and laid to rest in their homes. The choking persists as bones are unpacked, cleaned and debated upon, while the ghosts of the assassinated hover in a wondering state of anchorlessness.

Act VI

Spirits inhabit
The darkness that lightens, the darkness that darkens,
The quivering tree, the murmuring wood,
The water that runs and the water that sleeps:
Spirits much stronger than we,
The breathing of the dead who are not really dead,
Of the dead who are not really gone,
Of the dead now no more in the earth.

Listen to Things
More often than Beings,
Hear the voice of fire,
Hear the voice of water.
Listen in the wind,
To the bush that is sobbing:
This is the ancestors, breathing.
—Birago Diop, *Spirits*

One must acknowledge that the readiness of some Western museums to send back the human remains – skeletons and more – to the previous colonies is a great moral and ethical gesture towards humanity; finally a recognition of their humanness. After centuries of objectification of other humans as tools, resources, utensils and labour that enabled slavery, colonialism and racism, these museums and other scientific institutions seem to have realised that it was and is improper, unethical, immoral, illegal to have used other human beings for their experimentations, for their purposes of constructing otherness, for their goals of dehumanising fellow human beings. Or have they? It is important that we remind ourselves that other

humans were treated in this way under the guise of promoting Western civilisation, Christianisation and 'modernity'.

Let's assume that the days when you would go to an ethnographic museum and see the skull of your great-grandfather are over. Let's assume that morality and ethics permit the skulls to be locked up in boxes and stored in cellars, but not kept in the open. Let's assume that one day, when their provenance has been properly sorted out, all these humans will be laid to rest alongside their people. All of this because it has been finally understood that Africans, Latin Americans and Asians too have subjecthood and possess subjectivity. Since Western institutions now recognise that these human beings are not objects but subjects, who once upon a time possessed personhood, agency, consciousness and realness within their societies, these supposed 'objects' must be sent back.

Yet what many Western museums and institutions wrongly and forcefully harbouring many so-called objects from the non-West do not understand, or have not yet recognised, is that most of the so-called objects have never been and will never be objects. The objectification of these ritual and spiritual beings, historical carriers, cultural entities, orientations and essences is in line with the de-humanisation and objectification of humans from the non-West. If the skeletons have been delivered from objecthood, it is about time that the so-called objects also be freed from the bondages of objecthood, in which they have been detained ever since they were taken away from their societies as captives, as were humans as slaves. Understanding these so-called objects as subjects necessitates a radical shift from Western understandings of subjecthood, personhood and community, as well as a drastic shift from a Western understanding of art, authorship and society, and subsequently a profound reconfiguration of what it means to be human.

Firstly, to understand the subjectivity of the so-called objects, one must be able to understand that some of them are indeed the ancestors of and for some of us. Not representations of ancestors, as might be the case with a painting in a church or an effigy of Jesus or a portrait of one's great-grandfather – no – rather, some of the so-called objects must be seen as incarnations, embodiments or personifications of our ancestors. The transformation from a life of flesh to a life of wood or metal or clay. The corporealisation of some of those who have passed over to that place of yonder. Indeed, one must see some of these so-called objects *as* the yonder. In this case, how do the 'objects', that we now begin to see contain subjects, differ from the skulls that are currently being repatriated? They too have personhood, agency and consciousness. I for one do not have any interest in seeing my ancestors, in whatever form – skeletons, wood or otherwise – in a museum.

Secondly, to understand the subjectivity of the so-called objects, one must be able to understand that some of them are indeed ritual entities that too possess subjectivity. As such they contain the possibility for healing, mediating between wo/men and gods, and conscious of the dynamics of communities as they protect individuals in society. The so-called objects have feelings and desires; they hunger and thirst, and this is why they are fed, given sacrifices, prayed to and appeased in various ways, to avoid them shedding their wrath on us. If agency is the capacity to act and make choices, then the so-called objects also possess agency, as they determine, act upon and wield power over individuals and societies, and most especially hold perspectives for their societies. As Alain Resnais and Chris Marker pointed out in their 1953 classic *Statues Also Die*, the placement of these ritual beings in glass vitrines in well-tempered museums in the West is a form of murder.

Thirdly, to understand the subjectivity of these so-called objects, one must be able to understand that some of them were created or emerged within traditions or understandings of arts that stand at a yawning gap from Western traditions of artistry. In *Tlilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes: 'My people [...] did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life.'¹⁹ Where Anzaldúa was heading to here was a differentiation of what she called an 'invoked art' – an art invested in performance ritual – from the non-West, and Western artistic practice. Anzaldúa points out that invoked art is dedicated to the validation of humans, whereas most Western art is dedicated to the validation of itself. Invoked art, she writes, is communal and speaks to everyday life. Anzaldúa thus argues that in Indigenous cultures, art-making aligned aesthetics with spiritual, functional and social contexts. She points out that making art for art's sake, or for the purposes of mastery, as is common in Western cultures, leads to the objectification of art. Anzaldúa believed, just as her people did, in art's capacity to make change, to heal, to mend, to validate humanity. The difficulty for Western museums to recognise these qualities of the so-called objects as subjects lies then in the sheer discrepancy in perceptions of what art is and can do. In this light, subjects from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Native American cultures, lying captive in ethnographic museums around the world are condemned to objecthood until they are repatriated and rehabilitated to subjecthood.

¹⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, 'Tlilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink', in Rick Simonson and Scott Walker (eds.), *The Graywolf Annual Five: Multicultural Literacy* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1988), p. 30.

Act VII

The very strange thing about choking is that one can choke even while eating the most delicious of foods out there. To diagnose the choking, one might have to look at the politics of hunger and toxicity.

One of the weapons implemented by the Germans during the Herero and Nama genocide was the weapon of starvation. Those who survived the severe military attacks were sent into the desert without food and water. In *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, Mike Davis states that in the later part of the nineteenth century, ‘millions died, not outside the “modern world system”, but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures.’²⁰ He explores how colonialism and capitalism in British India and other British colonies increased rural poverty and hunger while economic policies exacerbated famine during the El Niño–Southern Oscillation-related famines killing between thirty and sixty million people due to the Malthusian economic ideologies of the colonial governments. Similarly, in Cormac Ó Gráda’s *Famine: A Short History*, he expatiates on the history of famine in relation to political and economic histories, for example in Mao’s China, Stalin’s Ukraine or the 1943 Bengal famine. With regards to the latter, one of the worst famines of all times, Rakhi Chakraborty in ‘The Bengal Famine: How the British engineered the worst genocide in human history for profit’ writes:

²⁰ Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001).

Winston Churchill, the hallowed British War prime minister who saved Europe from a monster like Hitler was disturbingly callous about the roaring famine that was swallowing Bengal's population. He casually diverted the supplies of medical aid and food that was being dispatched to the starving victims to the already well supplied soldiers of Europe. When entreated upon, he said, 'Famine or no famine, Indians will breed like rabbits.' The Delhi Government sent a telegram to him painting a picture of the horrible devastation and the number of people who had died. His only response was, 'Then why hasn't Gandhi died yet?'²¹

Hunger, in the context of colonialism, has always been one more tool in the efforts to dehumanise, de-motivate, de-spirit and torture the colonised. An engineered hunger was a way to strip subjects of their subjectivities, in order to expose them as bare objects.

These same methods of objectification used on humans were and are still being exercised on the so-called objects in Western museums. It is very common that people in many non-Western cultures bring food of all kinds and make sacrifices to their ancestors. Just as it is normal to see people pour libation to their ancestors. If one acknowledges that the so-called objects have feelings and desires, hunger and thirst, then one must consider a discourse of starvation when one thinks of them in the glass boxes of museums. The hunger here is a concrete and physical hunger, but it must also be seen as a spiritual starvation.

²¹ Rakhi Chakraborty, 'The Bengal Famine: How the British engineered the worst genocide in human history for profit', *Yourstory*, May 2017, <https://yourstory.com/2014/08/bengal-famine-genocide/>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

Another means of elimination and dehumanisation adopted in cases of extreme power abuse and oppression is the use of toxic gases. So the relation with the gasification of humans comes in as a parallel.

The fumigation of objects in museums to eliminate woodworms or moths, for instance – that is to say to take away all life so as to certify and reiterate the objecthood of what has been made an object. The museum transforms our ancestors into dead wood without any trace of life.

It is said that around 90 percent of the so-called objects harboured by many ethnographic museums have never been displayed and most likely will never be seen. This is in part because in the huge storage spaces they have been banished to, these beings have been gassed with arsenic and a cocktail of other gases, in an effort to sustain them and eventually make them immortal.

Act VIII

Got to survive inna disyah ghetto, yeah
Roots natty roots
Dread binghi dread
Remember that I and I are the roots
Roots natty roots
Dread binghi dread
Whoa, I and I are the roots
Some are leaves, while some are branches
But remember I and I are the roots
Some are dry wood
Fe catch up the fire
Whoa, look at that
—Bob Marley, *Roots*

One of the many complaints that people who come from societies that have lost spiritual beings, historical artefacts or ancestors to Western museums make is that they feel an extreme sense of deracination and a loss of bearings. Many of the Benin Bronzes for example are carriers of historical accounts. Whenever something special happened in the society, the Oba asked his guild of artists to record the event by making a sculpture. This is to say that without these historical scripts in the forms of artworks, the society loses its past, and its history is bound to be narrated by the scripts and languages of those who plundered the Benin Palace. This sort of deracination has been said to have led in many cases to waves of rural-urban or Northern migration, as humans do not want to inhabit spaces devoid of their histories.

If we agree with Anzaldúa that such spirited and living artworks have the potential to validate humanity in certain societies, then a loss of such beings which serve as coordinates of existence, coordinates that aid in one's navigation through life and society, produces as a consequence disoriented societies with extreme psychogeographic problems. A society that has lost its spiritual base is a de-rooted society. Though the physical spaces of dwelling might still be inhabited, their deprivation of gods, mediums and deities leaves them in a state of divine barrenness, which is a form of deterritorialisation. Divinity and spirituality are territories which once taken away leave gargantuan cavities that can only be filled by restituting, re-instituting and rehabilitating the spiritual and sacred beings. What is the psychological burden of a people which has had to exist for more than a century without their sacred throne?

Act IX

Don't let them fool ya
Or even try to school ya!
—Bob Marley,
Could You Be Loved

The very strange thing about choking is that one can choke even while eating the most delicious of foods out there. To diagnose the choking, one might have to look at rhetoric, at propaganda as pedagogic method, and the politics of commodification.

As the debates surrounding the legitimacy of the so-called objects from Africa, Asia, Oceania and Native American cultures in Western museums get louder, and as the pressure to repatriate them to their places of origin intensifies, some museum directors have sought to come up with smart-ass concepts that might make one misunderstand Marley as having sung, 'Don't let them fool ya / Or even try to screw ya!' instead of 'school ya!'. Again, it seems there is a thin line between 'schooling' and 'screwing'. The reasons given by the colonialists to set up the colonial enterprise around the world was often related to setting up or instituting a universal knowledge, which was synonymous with Western epistemology. The excuse was to bring civilisation to the uncivilised. To liberate them from savagery. To free them from false gods and introduce them to the one and only jealous God with a capital G. While the colonial soldiers, merchants and priests paved their way on these missions, telling people to give up their false gods, others like Felix von Luschan were loitering in the metropole waiting for the seized and stolen 'goods' to be sent over. The schooling in the Western epistemology came hand in hand with a screwing of Indigenous knowledge and ways of being.

It is thus no wonder that as the air gets tighter people like Hermann Parzinger have come up with ‘wonderful’ concepts like ‘shared heritage’. In his by now notorious 2016 ‘manifesto’, ‘Shared Heritage Is a Double Heritage’, Parzinger spells out what his concept is all about.²² It sounds so well intentioned and full of goodwill. As full of goodwill as the words of a spin doctor about to sell you a political or economic agenda you would tend to be against. As full of goodwill as the words of a 419 or Feyman, who earnestly promises to double or triple your money, if only you would give him 100,000 euros.²³ As full of goodwill as trying to sell to those once colonised the idea that their gods, ancestors, mediums, historical entities and arts, which were for a large part forcefully or cunningly taken from them, are now humanity’s heritage; that they belong to the world. Indeed, ‘shared heritage’ seems to be the new star in the planet of Feymania.

Let’s then take a look at Parzinger’s concept of ‘shared heritage’ through a detour into a few key points from his manifesto-like text.

²² Hermann Parzinger, ‘Geteiltes Erbe ist doppeltes Erbe’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Feuilleton*, October 2016, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/shared-heritage-geteiltes-erbe-ist-doppeltes-erbe-14481517.html>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

²³ ‘419’ (four-one-nine) refers to the paragraph in Nigerian law which regulates fraud-related crimes. Consequently, four-one-nine has become a term used to refer to fraud and fraudsters. See Stephen Ellis, ‘The Origins of Nigeria’s Notorious 419 Scams’, *Newsweek*, May 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/origins-nigerias-notorious-419-scams-456701>, (accessed 10 July 2018); Dominique Malaquais, ‘Anatomie d’une arnaque : feymen et feymanie au Cameroun’, *Les Études du CERI*, n. 77, June 2001, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr/ceri/files/etude77.pdf>, (accessed 10 July 2018); Sarah Sakho, ‘Feymania, l’arnaque à la camerounaise’, *Slate Afrique*, December 2011, <http://www.slateafrique.com/1775/feymania-arnaque-cameroun>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

First of all, he writes:

‘We manage the cultural assets of humanity together. So we should also share them with the nations that we once subdued as colonies.’²⁴

While it is good intentioned to share the cultural assets at hand with the former colonised, the first question that arises is: Who gives *you* the mandate to manage the cultural assets of humanity? What does it mean to talk about the cultural assets of humanity that your nation once took from people who at the time were not even considered human? How is this sharing supposed to happen and under which power dynamics? Are nation states the right mediation or communication partners in such a venture?

When the Afo-A-Kom, a deity of the Kom people of Cameroon, was found in the collection of Furman Gallery, New York in 1973 after it was stolen from Cameroon in 1966 (allegedly bought for \$100 and sold on to a New York art dealer), the gallery requested \$60,000 from the government of Cameroon. The cultural attaché of the Cameroonian Embassy in the US, Thaddeus Nkuo, made a strong plea for the repatriation of the Afo-A-Kom: ‘[It] is beyond money, beyond value. It is the heart of the Kom, what unifies the tribe, the spirit of the nation, what holds us together. It is not an object of art for sale, and could not be.’²⁵ But still the government was not ready to go the extra mile to get it back to Cameroon. Eventually, Furman Gallery sold the Afo-A-Kom to a businessman, who returned it to the Kom people.²⁶

²⁴ Parzinger, ‘Geteiltes Erbe ist doppeltes Erbe’ (my translation).

²⁵ John H. Merryman, Albert E. Elsen and Stephen K. Urice, *Law, Ethics and the Visual Arts* (Alphen aan den Rijn: Kluwer Law International, 2007), pp. 364-365.

Nowadays, with African nation states headed mostly by stooges of the West, with minimal interest in cultural heritage, many African nation states have become an even worse or careless force to reckon with. Also, from a historical point of view, it is hardly the nation that one should be negotiating with, in cases where the kingdoms – no matter how small they might be these days – still exist. That is to say, if the kingdom of the Kom still has a legitimate chief, why limit negotiations to the nation of Cameroon, and since the Benin Kingdom, founded in 1180, still has an Oba, why negotiate with the nation of Nigeria that is barely 104 years old?

Next, Parzinger goes on to write:

‘At the heart of shared heritage is the idea that the cultural heritage is merely kept by the museums, but in principle is considered the property of all humanity. However, this principle can only apply under the condition of legal acquisition.’²⁷

As many before me have stated, the problem is not the idea of sharing heritage per se.²⁸ The issue is about who calls the shots.

²⁶ Alessandro Chechi, Anne-Laure Bandle, Marc-André Renold, ‘Case Afo-A-Kom – Furman Gallery and Kom People’, *Platform ArThemis*, Art-Law Centre, University of Geneva, February 2012, <https://plone.unige.ch/art-adr/cases-affaires/afo-a-kom-2013-furman-gallery-and-kom-people>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

²⁷ Parzinger, ‘Geteiltes Erbe ist doppeltes Erbe’ (my translation).

²⁸ Regarding this polemic, see Kwame Opoku’s writings about looted cultural objects, available in their entirety here: <https://www.toncremers.nl/category/dr-kwame-opoku-writings-about-looted-cultural-objects/>. See also certain interventions of Berlin Postkolonial geared towards the development of a ‘culture of remembrance’ regarding the role of colonialism in the cultural construction of contemporary Germany.

Who gets to choose which museums may determine and declare what humanity's cultural heritage is and who gets to 'host' it? Further, who has the right to determine what a museum actually is, and under whose conditions this so-called property of all humanity is stored and displayed? It goes without saying that the Benin Bronzes were never made to be presented in glass boxes in well-tempered rooms. So how can this property of all humanity be a shared heritage, if the host considers themselves omniscient and claims to know best how this heritage should be kept? Most importantly, what is a legal acquisition and what is shared heritage when one's partner is on the other end of the barrel of a gun?

Referring to Germany's brutal suppression of the Maji Maji uprising of 1905–7, Parzinger stresses the need 'to work through the Maji Maji uprising with scientists from Tanzania and narrate this in the Humboldt Forum. This path may be difficult, thorny and not risk free; but it is mandatory for the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation and its state museums.'²⁹ Fair enough. It is indeed the duty of German institutions to narrate their brutal histories of colonialism, which is an all-too-often ignored chapter of German history. This history of colonialism is an entangled and shared history, which should be told from multiple perspectives. The telling of this story will not be done by inviting, once in a while for a brief time, a colleague from Tanzania, but rather by acknowledging that a sustainable structure must be built in which both the descendants of the former coloniser and the colonised will be represented within the thematics, the personnel, and the audience of the programme. However, one must continue to be careful about any further instrumentalisation of the so-called objects in ethnological museums as surfaces on which all kinds of histories are projected.

²⁹ Parzinger, 'Geteiltes Erbe ist doppeltes Erbe' (my translation).

According to Parzinger:

It is conceivable to enter into a much closer cooperation with the museums of the countries of origin and exchange stocks temporarily for temporary exhibitions, one way or the other, which is of particular concern to our colleagues in Africa. The Humboldt Forum could be the *epicentre* of such a novel relationship with the world. [...] an equal partnership in a particular case may well include the return of individual objects, if they are proven to have been illegally acquired. Because shared heritage can only ever be as good as the corresponding provenance research, and a maximum of transparency about the acquisition circumstances is [...] an indispensable prerequisite for any cooperation.³⁰

The most fascinating thing about Feymania is the packaging. The fine gold lookalike with which faeces can be beautifully packaged is an art of its own. The idea of the Humboldt Forum as the epicentre of a relationship with the world is a narrative that is at least five hundred years old. It is the aftershock of an old fantasy that saw Europe at the centre of the world and its colonies at the peripheries. While the repetition and representation of fantasies doesn't make them any more real, the repetition and representation of violence does amplify violence. And as we all know, sometimes the aftershocks of a quake can be deadlier than the quake itself. Oh and by the way, transparency without further qualification is just... transparent.

One can't fail to notice Parzinger's over-stressing of temporality in his proposal of a possible temporary exchange of stocks for

³⁰ Parzinger, 'Geteiltes Erbe ist doppeltes Erbe' (my translation).

temporary exhibitions. Who gets to determine how long this temporary exchange could be? And how come we are talking about the host loaning the works to the country of origin instead of the other way round? The return of 'objects' should not be an exception, but rather the norm. Then at that point, after the return, one could start talking about shared heritage, wherein the 'countries of origin' could decide to loan some of the so-called objects to Western museums, in exchange for a handsome remuneration.

It is interesting that Parzinger goes further to propose his concept of 'shared heritage' and the Humboldt Forum as a solution to the 'clashes of civilisations', the recent rise of xenophobia in Germany and Europe despite increasingly multi-ethnic populations. He writes in this regard:

What we are currently experiencing is not just a consequence of poverty and lack of prospects. Education is one of the crucial weapons against prejudice and extremism, and that's what museums and cultural institutions in general can do to combat isolation and xenophobia: they have the potential to give people tolerance and respect for other cultures. This is perhaps the most important mission of the Humboldt Forum in the new Berlin Palace.³¹

Education as weapon? What kind of education by the Humboldt Forum would help fight xenophobia? Education about the history of Prussia's greatness as a monarchy? Education about the collection of Germany's war booties from its former colonies, labelled as Prussian Cultural Heritage? Education about the Christian cross on the Humboldt Forum? The education of othering that is insinuated by putting all non-Western cultures under a single umbrella?

³¹ Parzinger, 'Geteiltes Erbe ist doppeltes Erbe' (my translation).

Maybe instead of becoming a place where isolation and xenophobia are combated and where tolerance and respect for other cultures are practiced, the Humboldt Forum could turn out to be the place where the supremacy of Prussia, whiteness, colonial dominance and the monotheism of Christianity will be celebrated and commemorated, by those who were meant to learn the opposite. As for those of us born and bred in the colonies, as well as those Germans of colour, the way the Humboldt Forum sounds in Parzinger's depiction, it will be a place where we are reminded of times when we were dehumanised, othered, humiliated and subordinated. So, education as weapon? As the mighty Fela Kuti would have said: 'Teacher Don't Teach Me Nonsense.'

What Fela meant to say is that what is considered good sense by the one, is not the good sense of the other. The field of play has changed, and not only do we have to change the language of 'education', we also need to change the curriculum. Radically so. 'Shared heritage' as it is proposed today belongs to the old curriculum. The curriculum of the metropole. The yearning for a nucleus in a decentralised world.

In this light, two further anecdotes are worth mentioning. Firstly, after giving an interview on the Humboldt Forum in the German newspaper *Die Zeit*,³² among the reams of hate mail that came my way I received a letter from a German medical doctor who had travelled the African continent for forty years.

³² Werner Bloch & Bonaventure Ndikung, 'So etwas wie Unterwerfung', *Zeit Online*, January 2016, <http://www.zeit.de/2016/02/humboldt-forum-documenta-kurator-bonaventure-ndikung>, (accessed 10 July 2018)

He wrote that in his travels around Africa, especially in Cameroon, he hadn't seen one institution worthy of the name 'museum'. His concern was that if this African heritage were to be repatriated, where would it be housed? And wouldn't it be destroyed by Islamists or other barbarians? He went on to say that I should invest my energy in ousting corrupt African leaders and building museums before wasting my time advocating for repatriation. This too is part of the old language of education and the old curriculum. Needless to mention here, before the Europeans set foot on the African continent, people had been making, exhibiting and preserving their cultures for thousands of years. Some of the bronzes, masks and other beings taken away were between eight hundred and more than one thousand years old. Who says one needs a Western museum to accommodate them? After the age of the colony and imperialism we will all need to find new ways and spaces – in form and in content – to accommodate this heritage, rather than have it assimilated within a Western paradigm.

Secondly, when the Deutsche Historische Museum held *Deutscher Kolonialismus*, its first exhibition on the colonial history of Germany in 2016–17, I received an invitation to be part of a panel discussion with Paul Spies and Neil MacGregor, amongst others. When I accepted the invitation on the condition that my participation would be a speechless one, and that every question on the podium directed to me would be answered by a performance from the audience, I was disinvited. Language as we know it, especially colonial languages, can no longer carry our concerns. Language as we know it, and as used by those trained in the prestigious academies of Feymania, cannot advocate for us. Our bodies have to speak for us. Our bodies are impregnated with our burdens. It is through the phenomenological and through performativity that we will speak and manifest the agendas of the new curriculum.

Act X

*You wan damé you mimbe wi,
you wan soulé you mimba wi*
—Lapiro de Mbanga, *Mamba Wi*

A much too sidelined conversation around issues of ethnological museums and heritage from other parts of the world is the economic question. As Lapiro de Mbanga rightfully put it in his song ‘Mamba Wi’, directed at the political and economic elites, ‘*You wan damé you mimbe wi, you wan soulé you mimba wi*’ – ‘If you want to eat think of me, if you want to eat think of me.’ The Humboldt Forum is said to be a more than 600 million-euro project with a yearly budget of circa 60 million euros. It is estimated that roughly 3.5 million people will visit the museum each year. The Quai Branly by comparison receives 1.4 million visitors per year and the British Museum 6.7 million visitors. If one considers this in addition to advertising, merchandising, and other means of commodification, the maths is easy.

‘Shared heritage’ must be dissected from an economic perspective. ‘*You wan damé you mimbe wi, you wan soulé you mimba wi*’. If this much money must be made from our ancestors, spiritual beings and historical vessels, ‘shared heritage’ must also mean having them in Cameroon, Nigeria, Mexico, Iraq or Egypt, and having people from all over the world pay visa fees and air tickets to fly to these places, pay hotels and food, pay entrance fees to see the throne of Sultan Njoya, the Benin Bronzes, the headdress of Montezuma, the Ishtar Gate or the Nefertiti Bust.

This is also a matter of economy.

Act XI

On the Sanctification of Humboldt

The very strange thing about choking is that one can choke even while eating the most delicious of foods out there. To diagnose the choking, one might have to look at processes and strategies of sanctification, beatification and canonisation. As usual in such a context, Alexander will take too much space from Wilhelm.

In Andrea Wulf's *The Invention of Nature: The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the Lost Hero of Science*, we are told that the Prussian polymath, naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt transformed the sciences, revolutionised physical geography and meteorology, and dedicated his life to understanding the Earth and the cosmos. That Humboldt was a genius is almost an indisputable fact. In his eloquent speeches and vivid writings, he exposed European readers to the realities of colonialism and slavery, as well as to the human and ecological degradations he encountered in the New World. In another recent publication – one of many that pop up like mushrooms – Rüdiger Schaper's *Alexander von Humboldt: Der Preuße und die neuen Welten* [The Prussian and the New World] we will learn that Humboldt was a humanist and stood against slavery. His diaries and other notebooks were found, and in these documents, we are told, one can see that he was the best Prussian. A Prussian who was against the empire and who simply wanted to explore the Americas. Humboldt's shining credentials of identifying two thousand new plant species, discovering the magnetic equator, being the first European to explore and map the Casiquiare, the Orinoco and the Amazon rivers, or the first to conduct experiments on electric eels are widely known and celebrated.

One must acknowledge also that in comparison to his contemporaries, Humboldt was progressive, as he criticised the social and political systems in America, and his critiques of colonial society in Spanish America were used as an ideological base for some resistance movements.³³

While there is a discourse in Europe that we have to revive Humboldt's legacy, to many people in the world, especially in the Americas, Humboldt was and still is omnipresent. Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Humboldt Mountain, Humboldt ranges in China, South Africa and Antarctica; Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt, Humboldt Falls, Humboldt Glacier, Humboldt Bay, the Humboldt River, the Humboldt Sink... These are just a few of the many traces of Humboldt around the world. But what should also be discussed is the politics of naming. What does it mean to name a plant, river, mountain or animals after Humboldt? What were these called before? What knowledge is lost when a name is changed? One of the strongest tools of coloniality is the ability to name. The power of nomenclature and taxonomy. How does un naming lead to deterritorialisation and disorientation? This too is a reality of the colonised.

While the myth of an innocent, pacifist, abolitionist Humboldt is cultivated and disseminated, we must also remember that his travels through and information on the colonies (maps, political essays, data collected about agriculture, geology, manufacturing, zoology, botany, and meteorology) were very important both for his contemporaries and the next generation's efforts to invade and occupy the colonies. In more direct terms, it is also known

³³ Sandra Rebok, 'Alexander von Humboldt's perceptions of colonial Spanish America', *Dynamis*, no. 29, 2009, pp. 49-72.

that in 1804 Humboldt landed in the US after five years in Latin America, where he spent a week in Washington with President Jefferson, Secretary of State James Madison, and Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin, feeding them valuable information about the Spanish colonies he had just explored. It is thanks to this information from the anti-colonialist, pacifist Humboldt, and to the explicit advice he gave to Jefferson that it was worth fighting for the land between the Sabine and Rio Grande rivers, that what is today Texas was colonised and annexed. While Humboldt told Americans that slavery was a ‘disgrace’ and that the oppression of Native Americans was a ‘stain’ on the nation, he didn’t deem it necessary to emphasise this to Jefferson.³⁴ There is also little evidence of Humboldt critiquing the Spanish Kingdom for their roles in transatlantic slavery and colonialism, as he always bore of gratitude towards King Carlos IV (1788–1808) for granting permission for his expedition through the American colonies.

While the myth of an innocent, abolitionist Humboldt is cultivated and disseminated, one should still listen attentively to the likes of Mary Louise Pratt, when she writes, ‘Humboldt’s eye depopulates and dehistoricizes the American landscape even as it celebrates its grandeur and variety.’³⁵ It is also important to scrutinise Humboldt

³⁴ Nathaniel Rich, ‘The Very Great Alexander von Humboldt,’ *The New York Review of Books*, October 2015, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/10/22/very-great-alexander-von-humboldt/>, (accessed 10 July 2018).

³⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, ‘Humboldt and the Reinvention of America’ in René Jara and Nicholas Spadaccini, *American Images and the Legacy of Columbus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 592. This view has though been contested by Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert in ‘A “Romantic” Encounter with Latin America’ in Raymond Erickson, Mauricio A. Font, and Brian Schwartz (eds.), *Alexander von Humboldt: From the Americas to the Cosmos* (New York: Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, 2004), pp. 41–55.

with regards to the politics of knowledge generation and dissemination – with regards to authorship. As Margarita Serje points out in ‘The National Imagination in New Granada’,³⁶ Humboldt was also a controversial figure when it came to where he got his information from and how, who he credited in his writings and who he didn’t. Serje points at the 1887 article in the celebrated *Papel Periódico Ilustrado* in Nueva Granada devoted to Alexander von Humboldt. Like many chronicles of the era, this one complained about ‘the ingratitude of foreigners who forget to acknowledge the merits of people’ in their work. The chronicle stated that in Santafé (Bogotá), Humboldt met more than a dozen Native natural scientists who helped him by providing local and practical knowledge on the country, its topography, mines, production and climates. However he failed to mention these scientists in his writings. Specifically, the case of Francisco José de Caldas, a *criollo*³⁷ scientist and politician, aka *El sabio Caldas*, who invented a method for measuring altitude through boiling water, without the use of a barometer, as well as early ideas on plant geography. Both these concepts were used by Humboldt without acknowledging or referencing Caldas in his writings.

Serje also points out how Humboldt’s aesthetic and scientific representation of nature and landscape, as well as his political representations, were inscribed in the consciousness of the new nations in the Americas.

³⁶ Margarita Serje, ‘The National Imagination in New Granada’, in Raymond Erickson, Mauricio A. Font, and Brian Schwartz (eds.), *Alexander von Humboldt: From the Americas to the Cosmos* (New York: Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, 2004), pp. 83–95.

³⁷ *Criollo* refers to the white descendants of the Spanish colonists.

Humboldt's dramatic depiction of the tropical American landscapes [...] was actually a re-enactment of the notions the *criollos* had developed about their "new world" and about the way they had occupied its territory. This re-enactment was performed by disembedding landscapes and peoples from their own historical and geographical continuity to place them in the context of modern natural (Universal) history.³⁸

Serje also argues that in his efforts at 'reinventing' America, as Marie Louise Pratt put it,³⁹ 'Humboldt inscribed on the scenic images of the American tropics a set of colonial notions about landscape, culture, and history, granting them scientific and aesthetic legitimacy.'⁴⁰ By drawing from the imagination of the *criollos*, who had imposed a certain vision of nature, geography and cartographical knowledge from the metropole on to the land, Humboldt legitimised colonial constructs, for example of hierarchical spaces.

³⁸ Serje, 'The National Imagination in New Granada', in Erickson, Font, and Schwartz (eds.), *Alexander von Humboldt*, pp. 84–85.

³⁹ Marie Louise Pratt, 'Alexander von Humboldt and the reinvention of América', in *Imperial Eyes: Travel writing and transculturation*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp 109–140. 'Alexander von Humboldt reinvented South America first and foremost as nature. Not the accessible, collectible, recognizable, categorizable nature of the Linneans, however, but a dramatic, extraordinary nature, a spectacle capable of overwhelming human knowledge and understanding'. [...] 'three images in particular [...] combined to form the standard metonymic representation of the "new continent": superabundant tropical forests (the Amazon and the Orinoco), snow-capped mountains (the Andean Cordilleras and the volcanoes of Mexico), and vast interior plains (the Venezuelan *llanos* and the Argentine pampas).

⁴⁰ Serje, 'The National Imagination in New Granada', in Erickson, Font, and Schwartz (eds.), *Alexander von Humboldt*, pp. 84–85.

Another epistemic violence Serje points to is that in *Vues des cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique*, Humboldt writes about a 'natural' distinction between biogeographical strata – the highlands, *tierra fría*, with cold and temperate climates, and the low- or hot lands, *tierra calientes* – as well as cultural differences between the highlands and lowlands. These distinctions, imported from the European idea that civilisations develop in temperate, 'rational' regions, still stand as ethnographic and social knowledge of the region, maintaining the constructs of social orders.⁴¹ Biogeographic stratigraphy is transformed into caste stratification. According to Serje, Humboldt's *Geography of Plants* naturalises one of the cornerstones of the colonial order of things: its geopolitical imagination.

Finally, while the myth of an innocent, pacifist, abolitionist Humboldt is cultivated and disseminated, one shouldn't forget that Humboldt's work was first of all facilitated by the colonial structures in place at the time. During his 1799 visit to Madrid before heading off on his Spanish American expedition, with the help of politicians and scientists like Mariano Luis de Urquijo and Gonzalo de O'Farrill y Herrera, Humboldt obtained a personal interview with King Carlos IV, which led to the vast royal endorsement that enabled his travel to Spanish America.⁴²

⁴¹ Alexander von Humboldt, *Vues des cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique* (Paris: Librairie Grecque-Latine-Allemande, 1816).

⁴² Serje, 'The National Imagination in New Granada', in Erickson, Font, and Schwartz (eds.), *Alexander von Humboldt*, pp. 83–95.

Act XII

When someone is in a choking fit, circular culture demands that one is hit hard on the back to kick out the piece stuck in the trachea.

For the Humboldt Forum to get out of the choking, the kicking out would have to involve an urgent study of provenance, a matter-of-fact dealing with the repatriation and rehabilitation of the so-called objects in their collection, an apologetic confrontation of and with its entangled colonial histories, as well as the acknowledgment of the thoroughly erased GDR histories and identities.

For the Humboldt Forum to get out of the choking, the kicking out would have to involve a rigorous reconception of the understanding of what a museum is supposed to be and do. Who is and what is the museum, and what are its goals? *'Nihil de nobis, sine nobis'*, as they say. Within the process of beatifying Humboldt one must narrate the multiple histories and facets of his being, as related to his position within the history of colonialism and to the imaginary geographies and geopolitics of his time, as well as to the politics of epistemology.

For the Humboldt Forum to get out of the choking, the kicking out would have to mean listening to other voices. Listening to the whispers in the corners. Listening to the voices that do not occupy the epicentre. Dismantling the epicentre as a whole.

So what are we to do with concepts and spaces like the Humboldt Forum and other ethnological museums in the twenty-first century?

I would like to finally think of such concepts and spaces in terms of queering and queerness. Perhaps it is the queering of the Humboldt Forum and others that could deliver such institutions from the perils of their own violent histories.

At the beginning of *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz writes:

QUEERNESS IS NOT yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet Queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.

The future is Queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. [...] Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.⁴³

⁴³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), p. 1.

I would like for us to replace every 'we' in Esteban Muñoz's quote with 'Humboldt Forum'. I would like to think of ways in which it could be possible to queer Humboldt by looking for, imagining and enacting futurities of the then and there. Ways of dreaming new and other pleasures, ways of enacting other ways of being in the world. Ways of propelling ourselves beyond romances of the negative, in order to acknowledge that this world is not enough.

I would like for us to think of the body as the primary museum. If a museum is a space in which knowledges are kept and disseminated, then the body is that quintessential space of cognition and experience. How then does this primary museum of the body encounter the secondary museum, which tends to be those spaces in which 'objects' are 'conserved'? How does the secondary museum reflect on or influence the primary museum? If the secondary museum becomes a site of concern, of insult, of epistemic violence; a site of the erasure of histories, a site of hubris... then what impact does that have on the beholder, the visitor, the citizen, the human?

Queering the Humboldt Forum should therefore imply a radical renegotiation of the encounter between the primary and secondary museum, which must involve questioning the limited understanding of the museum in currency today. The museum must be discharged and liberated from the burden of its normativity of whiteness, maleness, straightness, Western- and anthropocentrism, and freed from its onus of trying to recount a single narrative or a linear history. The museum today, Humboldt Forum and others, must be able to negotiate to and fro between the norms through which dominance of various kinds is constructed and perpetuated, and become fully conscious of the ways societies are constituted through the exclusion, silencing and mis- or underrepresentation of a majority of their subjects.

Queering the museum means detaching from these norms, delegitimising the marginalisation and subordination of others. The concept of the museum has to be more fluid; it will have to remain in flux and to resist any rigid understanding of what a museum is or can be. The museum needs to be perpetually reconceived and rearticulated.

As much as this might sound like a dream, it is such a dreamscape that we should be able to enact and navigate... or as Toni Cade Bambara said, 'The dream is real, my friends. The failure to realize it is the only unreality.'⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (London and New York: Vintage, 2011), p. 126.

Listen to things
More often than beings,
Hear the voice of fire,
Hear the voice of water.
Listen in the wind,
To the sighs of the bush;
This is the ancestors breathing.

Those who are dead are not ever gone;
They are in the darkness that grows lighter
And in the darkness that grows darker.
The dead are not down in the earth;
They are in the trembling of the trees
In the groaning of the woods,
In the water that runs,
In the water that sleeps,
They are in the hut, they are in the crowd:
The dead are not dead.

Listen to things
More often than beings,
Hear the voice of fire,
Hear the voice of water.
Listen in the wind,
To the bush that is sighing:
This is the breathing of ancestors,
Who have not gone away
Who are not under earth
Who are not really dead.

Those who are dead are not ever gone;
They are in a woman's breast,
In the wailing of a child,
And the burning of a log,
In the moaning rock,
In the weeping grasses,
In the forest and the home.
The dead are not dead.

Listen more often
To Things than to Beings,
Hear the voice of fire,
Hear the voice of water.
Listen in the wind to
The bush that is sobbing:
This is the ancestors breathing.

Each day they renew ancient bonds,
Ancient bonds that hold fast
Binding our lot to their law,
To the will of the spirits stronger than we
To the spell of our dead who are not really dead,
Whose covenant binds us to life,
Whose authority binds to their will,
The will of the spirits that stir
In the bed of the river, on the banks of the river,
The breathing of spirits
Who moan in the rocks and weep in the grasses.

Spirits inhabit
The darkness that lightens, the darkness that darkens,
The quivering tree, the murmuring wood,

The water that runs and the water that sleeps:
Spirits much stronger than we,
The breathing of the dead who are not really dead,
Of the dead who are not really gone,
Of the dead now no more in the earth.

Listen to Things
More often than Beings,
Hear the voice of fire,
Hear the voice of water.
Listen in the wind,
To the bush that is sobbing:
This is the ancestors, breathing.

—Birago Diop, *Spirits*

This essay is dedicated to those who just went, but are never gone: Cecelia Kein Mofor and Tah Ngu Mofor.

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The very strange thing about choking is that one can choke even while eating the most delicious of foods out there. Maybe, especially with such foods, as the greed to devour that delicacy rapidly – with little focus on mastication, more on consuming – might lead to the diversion of a piece from its track towards the oesophagus into the trachea...

The institution of the ethnological museum or world museum seems to be in the midst of a serious crisis of choking. The delicacies that most of these museums have acquired, which is to say co-opted, which is to say ingested, seem to have collectively missed the track to the oesophagus and got stuck in the respiratory tract. They have been stuck there for as long as the history of mass collections, acquisitions and looting, for as long as the ruthless and ongoing extraction of cultural property has occurred in the former colonies outside of Europe.

A twelve-act essay on the maintenance of supremacy, the ethnological Museum and the intricacies of the Humboldt Forum.

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