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Transforming the Ethnographic: Anthropological Articulations in Museum and Heritage Research

Sharon Macdonald

What transformations are underway within contemporary museums and heritage? Where are the points of – generative – disruption? And which ideas or ways of doing things – including in anthropologies and other areas of theorising and practice – can help release and realise the potential of museums and heritage to contribute to more positive futures?

These are some of the central questions that inform the research project *Making Differences – Transforming Museums and Heritage in the Twenty-First Century*, within which the current volume was conceived.¹ The project was designed to be broad in scope, purposely not restricted to only one type of museum or just to established organisations. Instead, my intention was that it would encourage exploration of how ideas and realisations of difference were being mobilised in various locations, in margins as well as in centres, and in the less remarked crevices of practice as well as in the public or academic spotlight. The idea was that this would highlight the resulting or imaginable constellations of difference above and beyond those of specific sites,² and that it would identify the actual and possible traffic of concepts, objects, people, and practices *across* locations. In this way, it would not only transgress conventional boundaries of research focus but would also go beyond anthropological documentation and analysis to propose new potential crossings and possibilities.

At the same time, however, museums with collections that are or have been called ethnographic or ethnological are given special emphasis in the

project. This is in recognition of their significant historical and contemporary roles in articulating for wider publics particular, often problematic, notions of difference. Condensation points for certain struggles, especially that of decolonisation, they are the impetus for one of the project's thematic areas, *Transforming the Ethnographic*, within which the editors of this current volume, Margareta von Oswald and Jonas Tinius, work.³ The aim of this area, as the project brief puts it, is to “begin from the challenges facing ethnographic and ethnological museums today”, especially their “difficult and contested heritage, with a particular focus on the enduring, problematic, and multiple legacies of colonialism”, and to pursue the question of “What curatorial strategies are being and could be developed to address” these challenges?⁴ This volume, with its selection of insightful essays and interviews with a wide range of actors who have been variously reflecting on and devising such curatorial strategies, shows an abundance of creative practice, and deep and critical thought, underway. Moreover, as it also shows, this is not restricted to the academy or established museums but is part of a dynamic distributed field whose frictions and connectivities are not only generating debate but are also transforming the nature of the field itself.

Below, I take up Margareta and Jonas' invitation to provide some comments on the project that formed the broader research context for this volume. In doing so, I first discuss some of the ideas that motivated the *Transforming the Ethnographic* area, noting how *Across Anthropology* addresses these. I then mention some of the other relevant research – and its context – that is also underway at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH) at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, where we are based. First, however, I offer a brief comment on the motivations behind the term “anthropological” that features in the name of our research centre.

Anthropological articulations

The A provided by “Anthropological” in the name of our research centre was partly acronymically inspired – it helped to produce an acronym that I hoped would be sayable and memorable. But it also stemmed from my conviction that social and cultural anthropology had much to offer museum and heritage research that, as yet, had not been substantially drawn out and developed beyond individual studies.⁵ A centre for ‘anthropological’ research would thus be an opportunity to do that and to see what else that might enable.

In planning this, I saw anthropology itself as plural – consisting not only of Anglo-American traditions but also as comprising many other European and Global South approaches, some of which put their emphasis more on ‘anthropology at home’ than at a distance, and that variously overlap and engage with sociology, history, or literary studies, among others.⁶ At the same time, however, I saw the following interrelated features of many of these anthropologies as especially promising for museum and heritage research. First, there is the commitment in most of them to highlighting the relativity of practice, by which I mean their showing how things might be otherwise (Macdonald 2018). While in some traditions this has been achieved through a focus on what – at first sight at least – appears to be radically other, in others it operates more through estranging the apparently familiar (see Taylor, this volume), perhaps through analogies and contrasts – a mode of operating that we might even characterise as *acrossing*. Second, and connected to the former, is the breadth of these anthropologies in terms of their collective geographical and topic range. What I saw this as capable of doing in relation to museums and heritage was enabling a form of *acrossing* that could unsettle assumptions within the field, as well as expanding it by opening it up to new input. Here, anthropological commitment, enabled by ethnographic methodologies, to engaging with what goes on at the usually hidden underbellies of practice – among those whose voices are less often heard in public debate or by other disciplines – seemed to me to be especially needed. At the same time, the emphasis in some anthropologies – including the German *Anthropologie* – on probing into commonalities (a term I choose to use here rather than ‘universal’, which risks being either banal or overblown) was one that I hoped the anthropological label might prompt.⁷

In addition, the very fact that many of these anthropologies have for decades now been in overt struggle with their own problematic heritages – especially but not only colonial – and modes of operation has led to high degrees of reflexivity within them. Of course, this is not ubiquitous or complete but it nevertheless indelibly shapes most contemporary anthropologies. It does so not only by giving attention to those histories and writing about them but also through a quest for alternative modes of engaging with those who might once have been only the objects of research study, and, partly as a consequence of this quest, it does so through considerable experimentation with the design of anthropological knowledge production. This has resulted in a flourishing of collaborative and action-oriented research, as well as in new formats, especially, and increasingly, those that themselves cross over with and into artistic practice – as is a key part of the focus of this volume and a key potential for transforming the ethnographic.

Troubling the ethnographic

In addition to indexing museums and collections that might be called ‘ethnographic’, the selection of the term “ethnographic” in the research area title *Transforming the Ethnographic* was also intended to prompt reflection on what might constitute ‘the ethnographic’ more broadly. This was not in order to come up with a definition but, rather, was to consider whether there were senses of ‘the ethnographic’ that might bring new angles into the debates about ethnographic (and maybe other) museums and their potentials. Here, the fact that anthropology and other social sciences have long deployed the term “ethnography” methodologically – to indicate particular modes of engagement and knowledge-making – and as applicable to any activities, rather than as a restricted socio-geographical designation, seemed to me to be especially worth exploring (see also Luntumbue, this volume). I should here give recognition to the fact that for museums across Europe (the scope of this volume) and even more so elsewhere, the geographical scope of ‘ethnographic’ or its near synonyms is not necessarily ‘overseas’, ‘beyond this continent’ or even ‘beyond this nation’, even though it is frequently used in this way in academic debate. Even though ‘ethnographic’ may encompass ‘local’ collections (often designated as folk culture or *Volkskunde*, to use the German term) – as Erica Lehrer describes in her chapter in this volume (see also the conversation below with Wayne Modest) – it nevertheless still carries a strong connotation of referring to ‘cultures’ (which in itself is problematic as Anne-Christine Taylor points out in her contribution) that are non-contemporary in Paul Rabinow’s sense (see Clementine Deliss, this volume). That is, they are regarded as somehow not of the here and now – as ‘elsewhere’ and ‘left behind’, two categories that elide together and become further self-reinforced in a process of ‘deadening’ (as Natasha Gimwala puts it, this volume).

Yet this understanding of the scope of the ethnographic has very little traction in contemporary social and cultural anthropology. This is partly because over decades now it has been subject to reflexive critique. It is also on account of the insights that can be gained from giving ethnographic attention to practices of many kinds. Ethnographic research has long been looking at locations such as scientific labs and the stock exchange, at space agencies or the film world; it researches robots or living with and dying from HIV/AIDS, video gamers and burn-out.⁸ Here, what ‘ethnographic’ means is in-depth, first-hand engagement with what goes on in practice, conveying the perspectives of those involved, perhaps critiquing established positions in the process, but also potentially highlighting dimensions that participants don’t

usually notice or give weight to. That might mean certain patterns or recurrences of action, or particular connections and relationships among participants, or the tracing of implications, including to beyond the immediate context or concerns, or to, say, the agency of the non-human (see Grimaud, *le peuple qui manque*, and Schneider, among others, this volume). While not always to the forefront, a powerful technique for bringing what is readily taken-for-granted to awareness is what Emmanuel Grimaud and Anne-Christine Taylor here call “estrangement”. This should not be confused with exoticisation – an unreflective reveling in otherness that serves to produce it – that has been so rightly criticised (Ndikung, this volume). It is, rather, a reflexive technique primarily for throwing one’s own presumptions into relief, and, as such, one that is deployed for raising questions rather than confirming expectations. Exhibitions such as *Persona* (which blurred the human/non-human distinction), at the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, discussed here by its curators Grimaud and also Taylor, are good examples of this kind of approach, and thus of the potential for opening up what is meant by ‘the ethnographic’ in the museum context. So too are others mentioned in this volume, such as *The Popular Culture of Illegality* at the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, which was co-conceived by Wayne Modest.

Such topics are important not only to show what ethnography can do and not even just because they make for fascinating exhibitions (though this should never be underestimated!). They also matter because they push against the grain of the ethnographic museum’s tendency to non-contemporaneity, and by so doing they repurpose it as a different kind of ‘ethnographic’. Whether this should even be called ethnographic remains open to question. Personally I don’t think the term “ethnographic museum” is especially helpful, and in the public arena it is probably counter-productive, but for now it is still worth thinking through and against. At present and as this volume shows in many contributions, this pushing against is especially underway in relation to the ethnographic museum’s coloniality. This is vital – as it is and has been for anthropology as a discipline – due to the formative role of colonialism in forming these institutions, and to the implications that continue to play out. Bringing these to light and addressing their continuing afterlives is necessary to avoid perpetuating violence. As *Across Anthropology* amply shows, interrogation of the ethnographic museum’s coloniality and developing strategies to highlight this and, in a further decolonising move, potentially leading to alternative but nevertheless thoroughly reflexive modes of engagement (as Nanette Snoep argues in this volume), are being undertaken by activists and artists, as well as curators and academics. Moreover, this is often being done – as is a key point of this volume – in collaborations

between, or across, these various players (see especially Demart, Seiderer and Schellow, Schneider, Snoep, Sternfeld), in new constellations of collaborative working, sometimes, indeed, with individuals occupying more than one subject position. As noted above and as Natasha Ginwala points out of contemporary anthropology, there is today an exciting expansion of forms – a going beyond the usual formats – that this takes, including artistic. Such expansion and experimentation is also underway in relation to the modes of engaging with the questions that have had some of their condensation points in the ethnographic museum – questions of transforming the ethnographic. As *Across Anthropology* shows so well, this engagement is also realised in a flourishing contemporary art practice, capable of sensitising and estranging, of creatively critiquing. Moreover, as we see in this volume, in the examples of the independent Berlin galleries discussed by Jonas Tinius or the HKW, also Berlin, discussed by Annette Bhagwati, this kind of transformation of the ethnographic takes place in many spaces other than in the ethnographic museum itself.

Making differences

The editorial work of assembling this volume is itself an important form of research – thus central to *Transforming the Ethnographic* – in its careful curation of voices from the wider field. It is one of a number of editorial collections undertaken or underway from the *Making Differences* project – with its broader focus on questions of how difference is being variously made and unmade in contemporary museum and heritage transformations.⁹ These collections give significant insight into the wider, translocal, and transdisciplinary field.

At the core of *Making Differences*, however, is a multi-researcher ethnography of ongoing museum and heritage developments in Berlin. The idea here was to mobilise the capacity of ethnographic research to attend carefully to practice – to what happens and to what is said – behind the scenes as well as in public, and to bring this together with anthropological expertise in the analysis of how differences (cultural, social, biological ...) are made and the effects that they have. The focus of this is Berlin. This focus was partly pragmatic, but it was also in recognition of significant museum and heritage developments underway, including as capital of the re-unified nation, engaged in grappling with multiple problematic pasts, as well as with changing demographics. Here, the planned reconstructed City Palace that would contain, among other things, displays of objects from the ethnological collections – in what came to be called the Humboldt Forum – was a major

impetus for this focus, especially for the *Transforming the Ethnographic* research theme (see also Oswald and Tinius, this volume). I had been following this from a distance for over a decade, having since the early 2000s been invited to participate in various events connected with it, and having been privileged to learn much from Friedrich von Bose, whose PhD on aspects of the process I had jointly supervised (Bose 2016). Significant as the Humboldt Forum is, however, it was not the only subject of the *Making Differences* project, partly for the above-mentioned reasons of seeking to consider a more diverse palette of heritage-making and in order to investigate connections, parallels, and divergences across and between sites and practices (Macdonald, Gerbich, and Oswald 2018).

As a result, the *Making Differences* project comprises some direct study of aspects of the making of the Humboldt Forum, as well as much that is more indirect – and all conducted in a lively research centre that is located just around the corner from the palace building site (as it still is at the time of writing). Margareta von Oswald's ethnographic research, as can be seen in this volume, is focused on the ethnological collections, partly picking up the making process where the study of Friedrich von Bose left off, though with some differences of emphasis. I too have conducted fieldwork on the making of the Humboldt Forum, doing so primarily with the team making the permanent exhibition, provisionally called *Berlin and the World*. This allowed me to see curators themselves actively and critically reflecting on other parts of the Humboldt Forum, including possible shortcomings of the ethnological displays, especially what they thought might be inadequate attention given to coloniality, and devising progressive alternative strategies. At the heart of this were a raft of participative approaches, including with various communities within Berlin. In their search for critical and insightful modes of display the curators also worked with artists, such as the graffiti artists How and Nosm who will create a work called *Weltdenken* (world thinking) that will include, among other things, reference to colonial exploitation.¹⁰

In addition to the relatively long-term fieldwork by Margareta and myself on the making of parts of the Humboldt Forum, other members of our team have looked at specific aspects of it. Duane Jethro has investigated the debates about the cross on the palace as part of his more wide-ranging research on post-colonial debates and activism in Berlin; and Debbie Onuoha has deployed her skills as a visual anthropologist to analyse the exhibition of African and European artefacts, *Beyond Compare* (Bode Museum 2017-2019) that is a precursor to display in the Humboldt Forum. In addition, Larissa Förster's *Transforming the Ethnographic* research tackles questions of provenance and restitution, for which the Humboldt Forum has been such

a focus in German debate (Förster 2018; Förster and von Bose 2018; Förster, Edenheiser, Frundt, and Hartmann 2018; and see also, Jethro 2019). As Jonas Tinius explains of his own research in this volume, the Humboldt Forum development was something about which not only he, as part of the wider research team, was thinking and experiencing but was one that his museum and gallery interlocutors, including Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, who is interviewed in this volume, were at least partly responding to in their curatorial work (see also Tinius and Macdonald 2020).

Most recently, in developments unplanned at the start of our research, some of Larissa Förster's ideas have helped prompt a project that will see objects from Berlin's Ethnological Museum travel to Namibia, where artists will work with them to produce new objects for a Namibian National Museum of Fashion that is currently in the making, as well as for the Humboldt Forum.¹¹ In addition, *Making Differences* artist-researcher Tal Adler has begun collaborating with Friedrich von Bose, who is now curator at the Humboldt Labor – the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin's exhibition space within the Humboldt Forum – to create an exhibition experiment – that is, a form of exhibiting that develops a new approach that is itself reflexive about its mode of exhibiting and that may also be research generating (Macdonald and Basu 2006). The exhibition experiment will focus on a contentious object from the university collections, namely a skull that has been used in the development of racial science. In doing so, it will also draw on ideas developed by Tal Adler and others as part of the *TRACES* Project – whose aim was to explore the potential for addressing contentious heritage with the arts – that was partly based at CARMAN, and which also included the work discussed by both Erica Lehrer and Arnd Schneider in this volume.¹² This project sought especially to go beyond the usual models of artists being deployed short-term by cultural institutions to create temporary installations and instead for them to work more closely and collaboratively as part of what Adler terms “creative co-production” (Adler 2020).

Beyond these direct engagements with the Humboldt Forum, the ethnographic work of our project team has also taken us to many other museum and heritage locations within Berlin. This includes the Museum of European Cultures (sometimes talked about as having been ‘left behind’ by the Humboldt Forum, as it will remain in Dahlem rather than moving to it), the Berlin Museum of Natural History, the Museum of Islamic Art, and the Holocaust Memorial, to name just those that have been the focus of the most intense research.¹³ In almost all of these locations – again to an extent unanticipated at the outset of the project – there has been engagement with art in some form. This has included research by Christine Gerbich in the Museum

of Islamic Art, which explores among other things the Eurocentric limitations set by the category of 'Islamic Art' (and see contributions to Puzon, Macdonald, and Shatanawi 2020). It also includes fieldwork undertaken by Katarzyna Puzon with *Kunstasyl (Art Asylum)* – a group of mainly refugees producing various forms of artistic engagements, including an exhibition at the Museum of European Cultures (Puzon 2019; see also Macdonald 2019). Also in the the Museum of European Cultures, Magdalena Buchczyk's research probes, *inter alia*, notions of folk art (cf. Lehrer, this volume) and craft, which she has explored in other contexts too (e.g. Buchczyk 2015). Our partner, the Berlin Museum of Natural History has itself developed a strong artistic programme, to which *Making Differences* researcher Tahani Nadim has contributed, including in a collaboration with the visual artist Åsa Sonjastdotter, as well as reflecting more broadly on the potentials of artistic engagements in such museum contexts (Nadim 2018). Chiara Garbellotto's collaborative research on the Berlin Museum of Natural History's citizen science projects has also involved the input of artists, as well as that of visual anthropologist Debbie Onuoha, who is also developing further creative visual work on the museum's Bobby the Gorilla. Beyond these sustained engagements, our project work has also involved us in complementary analysis of exhibitions and debates, beyond as well as in Berlin, as can be seen in the *Reflections* section of our website.¹⁴

In many ways, then, the project within which *Across Anthropology* was born has itself, as it has developed since it began in 2015, become even more trans-anthropological – and especially more entangled with artistic practice of various sorts – than was initially planned. It takes place within a very lively research culture of events and guests that brings together not only academics but also curators, activists, and artists from across Berlin as well as beyond.

What is underway is not only debate across and between different actors but also the forging of new coalitions of action, which themselves act as sites for further research, critique, and creative works in this dynamic – multiply trans – field. This volume itself is surely, then, not only an illuminating curation of current debates but also a vital stimulus to further critical and enlivening transformation.

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Notes

1. The project was funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation from 2015-2020 as part of my Alexander von Humboldt Professorship. Further funding was also received from the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the Berlin Museum of Natural History, and the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation. For further information see: <http://www.carmah.berlin/making-differences-in-berlin/> (last accessed 4 January 2020) and also Macdonald 2018.
2. See also Macdonald 2016.
3. They did so from January 2016 and June 2016 respectively, and were joined later that year by Larissa Förster. Other researchers within the project, starting subsequently, whose work was conceived at least partly within this research area, were Tal Adler, Duane Jethro, and Debbie Onuoha, as well as Magdalena Buchzyk (funded by an Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship, as was Duane Jethro, the Georg Forster Alexander von Humboldt Post-Doctoral Fellow between 2017 and 2019, before he became a post-doctoral fellow in the *Making Differences* project until September 2020).
4. <http://www.carmah.berlin/making-differences-in-berlin/> (last accessed 7 January 2020).
5. In *Memorylands* (2013) I sought to make this argument, as well as to make a start on showing that potential by gathering together existing research in relation to memory practices and heritage in Europe. The argument was also central to the application to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation that led to the establishing of CARMAH and the *Making Differences*, including its thematic area, *Transforming the Ethnographic*.
6. My personal experience has also been multi- and inter-disciplinary, from my undergraduate degree in Human Sciences, comprised of a mix of social and natural sciences, a DPhil in Social Anthropology in the UK, and since then posts in Sociology as well as in Social Anthropology and in Cultural Anthropology, and now working within an Institute of European Ethnology, as well as engagements with anthropologists worldwide, including, especially, in China.

7. I saw this as also potentially affording engagement with questions of the ‘post human’ or ‘more-than-human’ (e.g. Braidotti 2013). Although it can reasonably be argued that the “anthropos” emphasis is too narrow for this (as *le people qui manque* argue in their contribution to this volume), it is evident from the emerging work that anthropology has much to contribute (e.g. Kohn 2013; Smart and Smart 2017; Tsing 2015).
8. See, for example, Traweek 1988, Hertz 1998, Zabusky 1995, Ortner 2013; Robertson 2018; Guo 2016, Irving 2017; Bareither 2017; Löfgren and Ehn 2010.
9. Edited collections wholly or partly from the project that curate a wide range of inputs include Lidchi, Macdonald, and von Oswald 2017; Förster, Edenheiser, Fründt, and Hartmann 2018; Edenheiser and Förster 2019; Macdonald and Bock 2019; Bareither and Tomkowiak 2019; Puzon, Macdonald, and Shatanawi 2020. As regards only inputs from members of the research team, see CARMAH 2018 and an online volume called *Doing Diversity in Museums and Heritage – A Berlin Ethnography* that will appear on <http://www.carmah.berlin> in 2020.
10. See <https://www.stadtmuseum.de/aktuelles/375-quadratmeter-wandbild> (last accessed 4 January 2020)
11. See <https://blog.smb.museum/collaborative-research-with-namibian-colleagues-at-the-ethnologisches-museum/> (last accessed 4 January 2019).
12. The full project title is: *TRACES: Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritages with the Arts – from Intervention to Co-Production*. It was funded from 2016-2019 by the European Union Horizon 2020 scheme under grant agreement number 693857. Views expressed here are not those of the EU. For more information about the project see <http://www.tracesproject.eu> (last accessed 4.1.2020), Schneider 2019, and Hamm and Schoenberger 2020.
13. See <http://www.carmah.berlin> for more information about research at CARMAH.
14. <http://www.carmah.berlin/reflections/> (last accessed 03 January 2020).

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