



HUMBOLDT
FORUM

(POST)
COLONIALISM
and
CULTURAL
HERITAGE

INTERNATIONAL DEBATES AT
THE HUMBOLDT FORUM

HANSER



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FOREWORD

Colonialism, coloniality, postcolonialism, decolonization: These terms comprise touchstones within a cluster of topics that is assuming increasingly greater prominence in politics and society, is reaching ever more people in their everyday lives and is being discussed worldwide. Museums, along with cultural and scientific institutions, are also more closely examining the issues involved: How are those currently in possession of collections stemming from colonial contexts dealing with them? How can Western perspectives be diversified? In what ways do descendant or source communities view their tangible and intangible cultural heritage in European collections? Which aesthetic, religious and ritual aspects come into play? How can researchers gain free access to archives, inventories and exhibits in museums worldwide? Addressing colonial history and (post)colonial continuities will be one of the central topics for the Humboldt Forum and will decisively shape the programme and profile of this new type of cultural institution.

This volume features contributions from renowned international museum experts who have supported and advised the Humboldt Forum in its development and who, with their outside perspectives, have also sometimes criticised it. Their essays and conversations draw from an individual wealth of experience that also shapes their assessment of the intense debate about provenance and restitution of ethnographic collections, especially in Europe. In the first part of the book, the experts address the role of museums and collections in defining the identity of communities; the second part of the book focuses on the relationship between research and exhibitions. The texts repeatedly approach the Humboldt Forum in different ways and encourage readers to question their own views.

This book enables the Humboldt Forum to provide insight into its substantive work and present itself as a forum in the literal sense: a space for diversity of opinion and international debate. ♦



STARTING FROM PLACE: *Claims to the Nation and the World*

NATALIA MAJLUF

Alexander von Humboldt held the ambition to speak not merely of the facts of the social or natural world, but of the entire cosmos, the broad expanse of terrestrial and celestial phenomena, in order to offer a “physical description of the universe, embracing all created things in the regions of space and in the earth.”¹ It is, in fact, hard to think of a single individual who could today aspire to such a narrative of totality and completion. Contrasting with that vast objective is the primary audience to which Humboldt explicitly addressed his book: the German public.² That community he envisaged formed part of the family structure that provided the resources that made his voyages possible, and to which he would return at the end of his travels. It was also where his prime network of intellectual support gathered and out of which the Germany he invoked came to be imagined. Behind the abstract discourse of modern universalism always lie the specific bounds of a nation.

Humboldt's name, and the promise of revisiting his engagement with the world, have given title and purpose to the new museum complex and cultural space in Berlin that together are the object of our discussion. The Humboldt Forum was originally touted as a place for world cultures, as a site that could open the Berlin museum system to a broader international dialogue: a global perspective, but one that conflictingly projected diversity through the homogeneous universality of the Enlightenment.³ The many debates that have surrounded its creation indicate that the true stakes are in what the project reveals about its emergence from the historical upheavals shaping modern Germany and the tensions that divide the city and the nation's public sphere. I do not pretend to understand the full complexity of that contested site under discussion. My aim here is to point to the very local constraints shaping the project's international perspectives. It has always interested me to see how the structures of place and nation form the often-unacknowledged framework within which museums operate on the shifting international stage of global capitalism. This is particularly true for those larger "universal museums" in tourist cities that, like the Humboldt Forum strategically located on Museum Island, represent a central part of sites conceived and marketed as international destinations. But the structures of place and nation also undergird museums in a more general sense. Museums are fixed in place by the buildings that house the objects they preserve, and they are dependent on the funds that – whether through taxes, ticket sales, or donations – are for the most part provided by their immediate communities. As basic infrastructures of the modern nation-state, there are also physical, economic and practical ties that are often less visible yet just as instrumental as the more evident ideological functions they serve. To stress location is

not, however, merely a descriptive gesture that accounts for specific contexts and the material conditions of practice: location is a critical contributor to the decentering of, or, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's useful figure, the provincialization of the project.⁴

Recognizing the situated nature of museums in general, and of the Humboldt Forum in particular, is thus a crucial point of departure for thinking through museums' founding premises – but also for critically imagining their future. In the case of the Humboldt Forum, the building's site itself determines many of its meanings. Its construction on Spree Island, a sector of the city historically conceived as a site of royal and national power – and, significantly, also as a museum district – somehow completes the encyclopedic aspirations that shaped its campus in the steady additive process that spans the period between the founding of the Altes Museum in 1830 and that of the Pergamon Museum precisely a century later. It is important to be attentive to broader readings of that totality (Thomas Gahtgens referred to Museum Island as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*) that go beyond the Humboldt Forum itself to its immediate context.⁵ Even if the integration of the Dahlem museums has the positive potential to unsettle the distinctions that placed “ethnographic” collections physically and conceptually outside the scope of the island's account of history, their incorporation still furthers the master narrative of encyclopedic completion that was implicit in the island's conception. This belated integration revives a museum history that can ultimately be found to have emerged in those large metropolitan museums that, in the midst of the nineteenth and dawn of the twentieth centuries, imagined they could literally collect the world. Traces of imperial projects still structure the collections and discourses of the museums the Humboldt Forum will house.

If, from the perspective of the present, Alexander von Humboldt's sense of competence to represent the world and entitlement to do so seem both imperious and naïve, so too the museological pretensions of universalism seem at best outdated. Like Humboldt's aspirations for totality, the universal museum is, as Kavita Singh has pointed out, itself the product of a moment in history that cannot be repeated.⁶ Yet the gathering of preexisting state collections in Berlin's museum complex is the only way a universal museum, itself a historical object, can be recreated today. Much is determined in advance, settled in registers of meaning that fix the Humboldt Forum within a long history of imperial and national imaginings. Despite the best intentions of those responsible for realizing the project, the reconstructed building on Museum Island inevitably actualizes the universal survey museum in the twenty-first century.⁷

This is a context from which the Humboldt Forum can only escape through critical confrontation – something that the conditions of the site itself seem to make possible in unexpected ways. The pretension of encyclopedic totality that was the promise of Museum Island is, in fact, overshadowed by the inconsistencies and competing perspectives that the actual space materializes. This incompleteness and the tangible contradictions of the whole endeavor give the project its potential to subvert and transform inherited structures and ideological projections. The proximity of collections, each with its own form of exhibition, will inevitably reveal different institutional histories and traditions of display; the conventions of archaeology, art history and ethnography will be exposed in their full arbitrary historicity. Rather than representing transparent vehicles of modern scientific and humanistic disciplines,

the distribution of collections reveals instead how these displays have come into being through a series of historical moments and institutional accidents: the rhythm of colonial expansion, the distribution of power in governmental units, the arbitrary projections of scholars, the unpredictable logic of bureaucrats, and even the divisive force of war. The combined presence of museums that engage the ethnographic present with those firmly anchored in the distant past (i.e., those that shaped the notion of exotic societies and those that forged as their opposite a Mediterranean culture) will generate a tense heterogeneous gathering of spatial and temporal references. The unsettled and eclectic disposition of buildings and the arbitrary distribution of objects can set up a productive point of departure for curators and those responsible for the programs at the Humboldt Forum. The gap between what the museum campus has historically intended and its always incomplete realization allows an opening for critical thinking that can overturn implicit colonial narratives and set the foundation for more equal terms of dialogue and exchange.

There are many ways to imagine the Humboldt Forum's place in wider contexts beyond the physical space it occupies on Museum Island. One could trace its impact on Berlin's larger museum map or discuss its symbolic weight in the imagination of a unified Germany. One could also project the course of the conversations already taking place within museums to intellectual communities and the places of origin of the objects its museums hold. It is not my purpose to explore all those possible perspectives, but to point out that it is from the specificity of the Humboldt Forum's physical and symbolic emplacement that it can best engage the discourses of internationalism that have framed its conception. Preserving objects

that have a particular historical, political or affective significance for nations or groups beyond the immediate public that an institution serves, or to which that institution is politically bound, involves great responsibility. There are issues of accountability for the uses to which these objects are put, as well as obligations with regards to accessibility for research and transparency regarding provenance and conservation. There are also obligations to return objects that were acquired through illegal or violent means, though restitutions alone will not undo the larger history of colonization. Curators are now responding to these issues as they contend with the questions and demands that continue to emerge from the public sphere. As they are interpellated, they become clearly localized. If that emplacement, with its full political and historical dimensions, is taken literally as a point of departure for reflection and deliberation, it can effectively change the terms of debate.⁸

Acknowledging the position from which one speaks helps set the stage for more open and symmetrical exchange. Yet the issue of the identity of the other party to this dialogue remains one of the great challenges for institutions like the Humboldt Forum, which holds collections from so many communities represented by nations in the current world order. Nations, for example, are defined as the central interlocutors in the most visible calls for the return of objects collected in the colonial process.⁹ They are, in effect, the agents of restitution, even where they may not always adequately represent the communities from which the objects in dispute were originally taken. It is only through an act of conscious reflection that one can separate the concept of cultural heritage from that of the nation-state, both of which emerged in the nineteenth century as part of the broader movements of modernity.¹⁰ The Humboldt Forum itself,

as an institution of the German government, is framed as its representative. In so many ways, whether they are made explicit or not, the ties that bind museums to the idea of the nation remain one of the key operating frameworks for the work they do. Yet the nation, whether as a political and administrative unit or as a cultural idea, is precisely not what I talk about when I talk about place.

Large metropolitan museums that have defined themselves as institutions representing universal human aims have claimed to stand above the parochialism of national identity and interest, ignoring their own localized positions and the uneven history that made their prerogatives possible. Seen from the vantage point of places where only local or national museums seem conceivable, the pretension to somehow engage the world is settled in layers of privilege. The world, of course, looks very different depending on where you stand and the context and conditions that frame your vision. This may read like a truism, but it is important to recall, especially when engagement with the world is the object of discussion. Switching places, I propose to look upon the Humboldt Forum from the perspective of a region where museums never stood the same sort of chances.

The situated nature of museums and their historical relationship with the idea of the nation has been one of the concerns, perhaps even one of the central obsessions, of my work as a curator and museum professional based in Peru. It was the basis of the institutional vision that I had a part in designing with the team at the Museo de Arte de Lima. To think through the politics of place, precisely at a moment when museums were reflecting on the promises of globalization, seemed perhaps out of sync. Aspects of the museum's mission had been set in advance by the scope of its founding collection,

created as a sum of objects that could recount the history of a national art. As the country's largest art museum, holding a broad survey collection of art produced in Peru from the pre-Columbian era to the present, it was inevitable that the museum should have implicitly evoked dominant fictions of the nation as a self-contained, somehow unchanging concept over time. The museum's administrative model as a foundation not dependent on political or government structures has given it a degree of independence that counters the official semblance potentially suggested by its emblematic building at the entrance of the city center and its visible place in a limited institutional landscape. Located in the capital of a centralized national administration, in a society marked by harsh inequalities and a long history of exclusions, the expectation that the museum somehow represent the nation was a calling to which we urgently attempted to respond by undoing received historical accounts and attending to the need for more inclusive narratives and exchanges.

The challenge we faced was walking the fine line between the politics of representation and actual political representation, between official identity narratives and a questioning perspective on the multiplicity of identifications, between the idea of the nation and specific communities. The strategy we devised to address this complex set of demands and expectations was to define the museum's institutional mission not as a national but as a local project: the museum as a specifically located site from which a number of relationships could be traced, reaching widely and extending beyond the national borders. The local was conceived not as a fixed position but as a site of convergence of ideas surrounding community and a network of specific connections and dialogues. Place was

regarded as a complex, contingent site, a relational concept framed by history and accident – far from the essentialist discourses of the nation.¹¹

The objective we set for the museum – and it remains for others to see how far we advanced in this mission – was to move beyond abstract markers of identity, to reach out and incorporate identifiable interlocutors, and to give specificity to general operative categories. We wanted to build on communities of practice, on the work of artists, curators, historians and other specialists, without consideration of place of origin. Collections were not to be bound to the present national territory, but the borders and limits of its scope were to be set by precise cultural circuits. Objects were to be considered within the specific trajectories that their history imposed, and not within general categories.¹² The themes through which to develop the collection were to be tied to concerns of local communities and groups in the present.

To make these general statements more precise here, take the cultural production of the Amazon region, a space that had remained outside of official narratives and histories. Lima, the coastal capital where the museum is located, is not only geographically distant from the Amazon but also disconnected from the paths of the region's historical memory and the issues with which it contends in the present. The collections, defined by a centralizing perspective, held hardly any works that could speak to the culture, history or concerns of the Amazon basin. At the same time, general migrations to the capital and the active insertion of artists from the region in the city's cultural circuit brought the subject ever closer to home. Our point of departure was a project to engage local artists as well as the artistic and scientific communities that had long worked

actively with the region.¹³ The Amazon gradually came to generate a regional nucleus that far exceeded the national borders, to include artists that came from present-day Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela, but also as far as North America and Europe. It put into focus the very different perspectives and ideas that have catalyzed imaginary projections on the Amazon from the vantage point of urban centers in the region and beyond. The museum could thus serve as a hinge between the perspectives of local cultural actors and the projections from neighboring regions or contemporary artists inserted in global commercial circuits. Subjects already developed through the collection, including issues central to the Amazon region, such as the impact of extractivist projects, the depredation of natural habitats and the processes of migration, have been strengthened and made more complex.¹⁴ The museum has established ties and entered into public debates that have brought different perspectives into contact with each other and have called the museum's work itself into question. These critical voices have been particularly important in making the institution more able to perceive the ripple of its effects. In so many ways, the engagement with the art and culture of the Amazon region, on the surface so distant from the immediate concerns of what could be considered the museum's immediate public, has helped break official narratives and disrupt the contained scope of national and international projections regarding the Amazon.

When the idea of the local is taken as a starting point rather than a destination, new possibilities open up for the transformation of the course of institutional priorities and engagements. Specificity is central to these debates. This is why it does not seem to make sense to refer to the "world" in general when discussing the Humboldt

Forum's scope or narrative. The term is but a fiction when not firmly tied to precise webs of relations, histories and dialogues. Making these frameworks evident is what supplies the notion of decolonization with tangible sense – and what makes it an effective concept for museums. The legacies of colonial power cannot be undone merely by the will of committed professionals working with the right intentions. To even begin to approach this undoing requires the establishment of a dialogue and an awareness of how others look upon that work from the outside, wherever that outside may be located. The struggle with the historical legacies and the sites of contention out of which we speak is a protracted process, an extended – perhaps unending – conversation, but one that must always start from a statement of position and from within a critical framework. ♦

- 1 Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*, 3 vols., transl. E. C. Otté (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1849–1858), vol. 1, x. For an early decolonial reading of Humboldt’s “planetary consciousness,” see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), ch. 6.
- 2 As he introduces *Cosmos*: “In the late evening of an active life I offer to the German public a work, whose undefined image has floated before my mind for almost half a century.” *Cosmos*, ix.
- 3 Friedrich von Bose takes note of some of the early statements on the Humboldt Forum in “The Making of Berlin’s Humboldt Forum: Negotiating the History and the Cultural Politics of Place,” in *Afterlives* 11 (November 2013), <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2013/11/18/the-making-of-berlin-s-humboldt-forum-negotiating-history-and-the-cultural-politics-of-place/>. This perspective has changed significantly over the past few years through the work of curators and project administrators, which is reflected in public pronouncements on the Humboldt Forum’s web page.
- 4 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 5 See Thomas W. Gaehtgens’ useful history of the site, “The Museum Island in Berlin,” in *Studies in the History of Art* 47 (1996), 52–77.
- 6 Kavita Singh, “Universal Museums: The View from Below,” in *Witnesses to History. Documents and Writings on the Return of Cultural Objects*, Lyndel V. Prott, ed. (Paris: Unesco Publishing, 2009), 123–129.
- 7 For an insightful critique of the Humboldt Forum from the perspective of the site see von Bose, note 3.
- 8 The term *emplazar* in Spanish carries associations more precise than its equivalent in English. It carries judicial meaning, as in a summons: to appear before a court, to account for something.
- 9 As the conclusions to the Sarr/Savoy report stress: “Restituting African cultural heritage in Africa re-establishes a relation between European nation-states – one being France – and African nation-states, notably built through the writing of a shared past.” See Felwine Sarr et Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*. trans. Drew S. Burk, 83. *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle*, November 2018.
- 10 Jane Anderson and Haidy Geismar, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Companion to Cultural Property*, Jane Anderson and Heidy Geismar, eds. (London: Routledge, 2017), 1–2. See also Andrew McLellan, “Nationalism and the Origins of the Museum in France,” in *Studies in the History of Art* 47 (1996), 28–39.
- 11 See David Harvey’s useful introduction to the concept: “Space as a Keyword,” in *David Harvey. A Critical Reader*, ed. Noel Castree and Derek Gregory (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 270–293.

- 12 For a discussion of this collecting strategy see Ricardo Kusunoki and Natalia Majluf, "Redibujar categorías. La incorporación del "arte popular" a las colecciones del Museo de Arte de Lima," *Goya* 367 (2019), 140–153.
- 13 The initial meetings with artists, anthropologists, collectors and other actors, organized with the Goethe Institut in Lima under the title "Encuentro hacia la construcción de un fondo amazónico. Una aproximación a la producción cultural de la Amazonía desde el Museo de Arte de Lima – MALI," were held at the museum in November 2016.
- 14 The museum's project in relation to the Amazon region was first presented in an exhibition at Matadero in Madrid between February 23 and May 5, 2019. See the catalogue edited by Sharon Lerner and Gredna Landolt, *Amazonías* (Madrid: Matadero, 2019).

