

**Von Oswald M (2022) Working Through Colonial Col-  
lections: An Ethnography of the Ethnological Museum  
in Berlin. Leuven, Leuven University Press. ISBN 978-94-  
6270-310-0**

Isabel Bredenbröker

*The February Journal*, Berlin; Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin; Herrmann von Helmholtz-  
Zentrum für Kulturtechnik / Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and  
Heritage (CARMAH), Germany

This item has been published in Issue 03 'Decolonizing the Self: How Do We  
Perceive Others When We Practice Autotheory?', edited by Shura Dogadaeva  
and Andrei Zavadski.

To cite this item: Bredenbröker I (2024) Book review. Von Oswald M (2022)  
Working Through Colonial Collections: An Ethnography of the Ethnological  
Museum in Berlin. *The February Journal*,  
03: 161–166. DOI: 10.35074/FJ.2024.16.47.010

To link to this item: <https://doi.org/10.35074/FJ.2024.16.47.010>

Published: 30 March 2024

ISSN-2940-5181

thefebbruaryjournal.org  
Berlin, Tabor Collective

## Von Oswald M (2022) *Working Through Colonial Collections: An Ethnography of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin*. Leuven, Leuven University Press. ISBN 978-94-6270-310-0

Isabel Bredenbröker

In the past years, museums that base their exhibitions on ethnographic collections have evolved from public sites of education, contemplation, and 'high culture' to sites of affective engagement with histories of violence and injustice. This development is driven by an emotional public debate that connects the everyday work routines carried out by museum staff with political actors and diverse publics.

In Germany, museums that rely largely on ethnographic collections have felt the resulting pressure immensely. Yet, Germany is unique among European countries in some aspects of the dynamics and debates around these institutions. Compared to the Netherlands and its museal moment of reckoning with colonial pasts, for instance, Germany is late to the party. This has to do with Germany's public commemoration of history and the dominant narratives of what it ought to performatively 'work through,' namely mainly its Nazi past (see Czollek 2023), which has led to an amnesia regarding German colonial history. Within the German landscape of research into heritage, provenance, restitution, and cultural dispossession, these two fields are currently somewhat in competition for funding as well as public recognition.

Recently, this political contradiction has come to the surface in the invocation of the German 'national interest' (*Staatsräson*, literally 'reason of state') to justify support for Israel. Domestically, the alarming vocabulary of the 'national interest' is playing out as an uncritical ban on public demonstrations that support Palestine and a censoring of critical voices (including within the academy) that speak out against Israel's large-scale killing of civilians in the Gaza Strip. This goes to show that incomplete repentance for German historical wrongdoings mainly translates into misdirected state doctrine at the expense of colonial victims. These same long-standing tensions around commemoration and national identity also shape Germany's engagement with colonially acquired things deemed 'cultural possessions' (*Kulturbesitz*, as in the 'Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz,' of which the Berlin Ethnological Museum is a part). Understanding the particularities of the German museum discourse is therefore a political obligation for German residents but also a highly interesting case study for an international readership interested in museum and heritage studies as well as the history of social and cultural anthropology.

Margareta von Oswald's (2022) book *Working Through Colonial Collections: An Ethnography of the Ethnological Museum in*

*Berlin* is an ethnographic account of the processes of reckoning with emotional states evoked by the Berlin Ethnological Museum's colonial history. The book is based on von Oswald's fieldwork at the museum. To this day, ethnography and fieldwork constitute the core methods of social and cultural anthropology. As such, the book turns out to be a thoughtful meta-meditation on largely historical archives of material culture assembled by a discipline that has evolved through various critical turns. The resulting perspective of a contemporary anthropology that is concerned with decolonial practices, multiperspectival representation, and autoethnographic positionality stands in contrast to the lingering shame and unreconciled guilt—both national and disciplinary—associated with ethnographic museum collections. Often, these have unknown provenances, stem from contexts of injustice and violence, and tell the story of empire and coloniality.

Von Oswald's book is primarily interested in understanding processes at the Berlin Ethnological Museum that directly relate to Germany's intensified public debate around colonial history since 2013, the year the foundations were laid for the museum's new home in the Humboldt Forum building and when the book's account begins. On another level of analysis, however, it is perhaps also the process of the museum staff's catching up with the state of academic thought that von Oswald traces in her observations, comments, and detailed descriptions of an institution as it 'works through' the emotional and historical baggage of the collections that can be termed 'colonial.' After all, many of the curators working directly with these collections have been trained as social and cultural anthropologists (also labelled 'ethnologists' in Germany), and as such they are directly related to the disciplinary history of anthropology and the modern museum, as well as to colonial history, which has been formative for both. The entanglement of museum collections, national identity, and the academic discipline of 'ethnology' or social and cultural anthropology in the German context has previously been discussed by H. Glenn Penny (2002, 2019). Von Oswald's book provides a contemporary ethnographic study that augments these historical analyses.

The book will be a great source of information for museum researchers; decolonial scholars, and scholars interested in German colonial history, cultural politics in Berlin and Germany, the nature of institutions and public political debate; as well as anthropologists who deal with material culture and the history of anthropology as a discipline. It is written by a researcher who had access to the museum's internal functioning, the privilege of a key to the depot where 98% of the museum's collections are stored, and clearing to use the museum's catalogue, of which only a fraction is available to the general public via the museum's website. As such, this account is informed by a wealth of knowledge and observations that could only be acquired through deep access to and participation in the work of the museum. Von Oswald

frames the book with reflections on her positionality in the field, a timely method of ethnographic writing that helps to understand how emotional and affective states of intensity are not just matters of public debate but also directly affect museum staff and, for that matter, visiting researchers. By speaking out about how researching and writing about the museum affected her, the author conveys an honest sense of discomfort that helps readers to empathize with the state of conflict that embroils 'ethnological museums' these days.

Delving into the museum's world and taking readers to meet various staff members and see locations that normally remain behind the scenes, the book provides unique insights into how the museum became what it is now. It honors the individual contributions of former and current staff in shaping collection storage systems, displays, and discourse about the museum. At the same time, the book does not shy away from pointing out how processes intended to express a critical perspective on German colonial history in the new permanent display of the Ethnological Museum at the Humboldt Forum largely failed to come to fruition over the past 15 years.

These observations are contextualized in a helpful overview of the activist engagement and protest over the Humboldt Forum project and the museum's involvement in it. A supplemental timeline points out the names and roles of political representatives in German federal and state cultural politics who shaped the format of the Humboldt Forum. These actors and their political agendas determined finances for museum work here, as well as appointments (and firings) of curators at 'ethnological museums' in Germany and Europe. Hereby, the book formulates a detailed critique of the museum's institutional functions as representative of national politics, academia, and research.

Without pointing a finger at individuals that work(ed) at the museum, the book conveys how the mechanism of feeling under attack produces zones on 'the inside' and 'the outsides' of such an institution, leading to a tightening of access and information around the collection. This is especially interesting since it is a phenomenon that has been observed by researchers of other museum-held ethnographic collections in various international locations over the same period of time that von Oswald's book covers. As von Oswald shows by relaying her own affects in the field and recounting the affective reactions of her interlocutors, matters that apparently belong to the past may be felt and experienced as something acutely personal when combined with public debate, but also with spaces and materialities dominated by the objects being debated.

To some degree, the discomfort and struggles that emerge are products of hierarchically structured institutions and can be understood as a systemic response to criticism. Von Oswald's ethnography draws a picture of how such reactions may look in a German context. Yet, her observations are by no means surprising or isolated finds, as shown, for example, in a recent paper by Clive Gray and Vikki McCall (2018),

who conducted a collaborative comparative study of different UK museums. Here, the authors also consider their affects and experiences as researchers within their field context, taking a view of museums as bureaucratically structured organizations. They write:

'Not only were there examples of top-down managerial control over access, but the organizational culture itself—with its formal and informal sets of rules—could also be a barrier to research. This often had added gender implications. For example, in one museum the male ground floor staff were careful never to talk to the female researcher, to the point of rudeness. Often as well when accessing senior (male) managers, this researcher was left waiting for hours to talk to them, including being left outside in the rain. These experiences emphasize the usefulness of an organizational focus for analysis as it helps us also understand that museums, as bureaucracies, also embody the prevailing cultural norms and social divisions of the societies within which they are located' (Gray and McCall 2018: 132).

In the context of heightened emotional debate in and around (ethnological) museums, such studies and observations are highly valuable, as they point out systemic issues related to the nature of museums as institutions. Museums as spaces of making heritage reflect national narratives of identity, functioning similarly to those larger systems. Using affect and positionality as frames of analysis in museum research can, then, help illuminate the effects of power in heritage contexts, placing the museums squarely at the center of the larger public debate about dealing with uncomfortable histories. Von Oswald's book also leaves hope that 'ethnological museums,' while in the line of fire, may possibly be places that help to transform ways of living together, to reconcile historical wounds, and to promote dialogue—although it constantly reminds its reader that the ancient bureaucratic processes of the museum as an institution never cease to hinder efforts towards such transformations.

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### **Author's bio**

Isabel Bredenbröker (PhD, they/them) is an anthropologist working between academia and art. They hold a DFG Walter Benjamin Postdoctoral Fellowship based between the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH) and the Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Their work focuses on material and visual culture, specifically the anthropology of death, plastics, and synthetic materials; the anthropology of art and museums; queer theory and intersectionality; situatedness and autoethnography; and colonialism.

**Address:** Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik, Campus Nord – Haus 3, Philippstr. 13, 10115 Berlin.

**E-mail:** isabel.bredenbroeker@hu-berlin.de.

**ORCID:** 0000-0002-9610-8918.