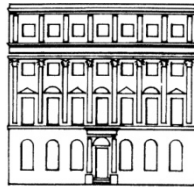


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Mirjam Brusius:
100 Histories of 100 Worlds in One Object
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100 Histories of 100 Worlds in One Object. Workshop held at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston (Jamaica), 9–13 December 2019. Concept and Convener: Mirjam Brusius (German Historical Institute London). Collaborators: Forum Transregionale Studien and Max Weber Foundation in co-operation with the GHIL, University College London (Alice Stevenson, Subhadra Das), and the University of the West Indies, Mona (James Robertson). Funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), Germany.

At the Jamaican National Heritage Trust, one of the destinations for a field trip during our workshop, colleagues are keen to answer our questions. We, an international and diverse group of people mainly from the ‘Global South’, have come to Jamaica to engage with heritage professionals in the West Indies, and to explore new avenues for developing stories about museum objects with each other. How many stories can one object contain?

At the Heritage Trust colleagues talk about the challenges of caring for heritage on an island with a rich history, but limited funding and infrastructure. After a warm welcome, director Michele Creed Nelson and her team surprise us with a buffet of coffee, fresh fruit, and triangle-shaped sandwiches. They are of the kind many of us know from Britain, and it is far from coincidental that we find these triangle sandwiches here, 4,688 miles from London. ‘But they are far better here’, a UK colleague remarks.

When I mentioned that I was organizing a workshop in Jamaica, the images that sprang to the minds of many were of beaches and reggae music. The reputation of the island as a tropical paradise is so engrained that it does not immediately register as an ideal venue for an event on colonial collecting. Jamaica, however, is a former colony of the British Empire, with all its odd material legacies, from triangle sandwiches, colonial style pediments, and squares, to Christmas

The full conference programme can be found under ‘Events and Conferences’ on the GHIL’s website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

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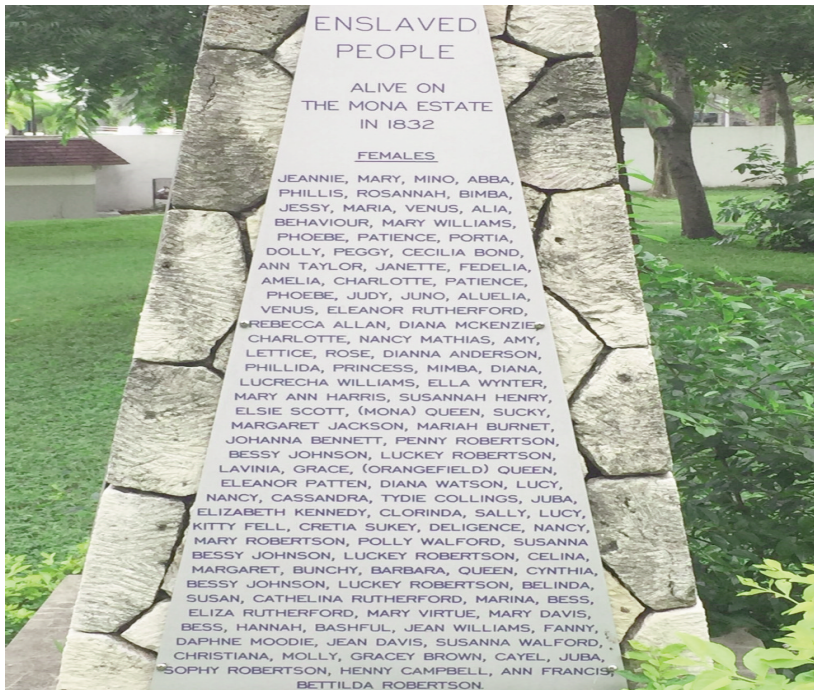
Christmas Tree, Emancipation Square, Spanish Town, Jamaica. Photo: private source.

trees in those very squares, surrounded by palm trees. It is also here that the kernel of London's British Museum and Natural History Museum collection was compiled by Sir Hans Sloane in the eighteenth century. The transatlantic slave trade provided the infrastructure that allowed Sloane and his European contemporaries to build their collections, and supplied specimens for Sloane and others, as James Delbourgo has compellingly shown in his book *Collecting the World*.¹

These histories would haunt us throughout the entire week and beyond. We stayed at the University of West Indies (UWI Mona) campus in Kingston, formerly a plantation site and graveyard for enslaved people. An enriching campus tour by Suzanne Francis-Brown and Zachary Baier enabled us to experience the site as multi-layered, inextricably and perennially linked to colonial trauma and

¹ James Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: The Life and Curiosity of Hans Sloane* (London, 2016).

violence, but also to more recent histories of migration, when the site was turned into a refugee camp for Gibraltarian and Jewish refugees from Portugal and Spain in the Second World War. Memorial stelae engraved with names of enslaved people now serve as places of commemoration for those seeking to engage with the site's dramatic history. It is the same complexity we also encounter in the display and storage areas of the museums of History and Ethnography at the Institute of Jamaica. Our local contact, James Robertson, a historian of colonialism and the Caribbean, had put us in touch with further heritage colleagues, and Education Officer Stephanie Rose was one of them. She, too, took us through layers of history enriched by indigenous Taíno communities, African influence, and, again, often troubled by slavery and colonialism. These layers all merge in Jamaica's rich and magnificent music culture, celebrated in an engaging and optimistic exhibition.



Monument for enslaved people, University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, Kingston, Jamaica. Photo: private source.

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It was these personal connections that had a lasting impact on workshop participants, who had come not only from Jamaica, but also from fifteen countries far afield, including Australia (Torres Strait Islands), Egypt, Ghana, Germany, Martinique, Mexico, Nigeria, Namibia, New Zealand, South Africa, Thailand, the UK, and the USA. Breaking down both cultural and professional boundaries, our group consisted of researchers, curators, activists, artists, and heritage stakeholders. The idea therefore was quite simply: to listen.

By shifting the geographical focus to a former colony and choosing Kingston as a venue my hope as the organizer was to find new pathways and avenues to these troubled histories in both a metaphorical but also a physical and material sense. Our discussions were thus informed by the workshop location itself. Where are the stories of museum objects presented as seen by people who once used them? Where is indigenous knowledge presented; who is at the centre of museum narratives, and who on their margins? How is knowledge about museum objects informed by colonial collecting practices; and how is this context presented in museums today?

We met under the premiss that the vestiges of empire extend beyond standard conventions of physical control and coercion. In Europe's museums, empire persists and proliferates in the present through material representations and celebrations of the past. Colonial exploration is still largely rendered as a triumphalist and heroic narrative, leaving little room for alternative interpretation. Museums, however, have a responsibility. The objects they contain play a crucial role in producing concepts of ethnicity, gender, class, and racial identity. They impact how audiences perceive not just artefacts in public life, but history itself. What if important aspects of history are eradicated? What if these legacies persist in ongoing global injustice, and do not just lie in the past? What if nations and communities desperately want some objects to be returned?

Not least in light of the repatriation debate, all workshop papers made clear that the ways in which objects are currently contextualized in many museums warrant urgent intervention.

We took Neil MacGregor's successful programme on BBC Radio 4, broadcast in 2010, and the subsequent book, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*,² as a starting point. The broadcast reached new audi-

² Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (London, 2010).

ences with the ambition to provide a global outlook and to present history through the lens of 100 objects. But the argument had its flaws. The programme was seen by some as a prime example of exclusion. Colonialism had ultimately produced not just inequalities of power but also a distorted view of history, and the programme was silent about the controversy raging over repatriating artefacts, and almost completely ignored the provenance of objects. Instead, it reinstated the idea of a 'view from nowhere' and everywhere at the same time. It presented the museum as a place to see the world, yet without reflecting on how the institution itself obtained and reframed the objects in order to create its own seemingly universal narrative.

Nearly ten years after the programme's release, we returned to the subaltern voices it had left out. But unlike the museum objects now in London, we also 'returned' to Kingston as an original site of collecting to make the point that *one object, in fact, contains 100 histories of 100 worlds*.

The speakers presented new methods, approaches, and formats to achieve more than an alternative history of the British Museum. Instead, they worked towards a multilateral fusion of object histories and present legacies in museums and their collections as seen by contributors from the 'Global South'. Doing more than filling a research gap, they presented a strong intervention in the current link between modernity, scholarship, and museums that dominates the Western narrative. They thereby developed a new vocabulary and discourse for an ongoing debate.

For the workshop, participants picked an object from the British Museum podcast and presented ideas on how its narrative could be expanded through new stories (and often also new objects), moving beyond it in material, archival, and philosophical terms. What can be said about British Museum attractions such as the Rosetta Stone, the Benin plaques, the Gweagal Shield, and Islamic talismans by people from the countries who once owned them, or still use them (or would, if they were around)? To what extent do the Parthenon sculptures, or Egyptian and Mesopotamian 'treasures' represent largely unquestioned ideologies about race and difference that ultimately imply that (white) Europeans are superior, and why is this historical context not explained on museum labels? Drawing on approaches in anthropology and other fields, speakers worked under the premiss that an object's original function and its later (colonial) appropriation

are integral parts of an object's biography. Such functions were often erased through its journey into the museum, and replaced by a 'European version' of the story.

Many papers shared one concern: the relationships between objects and the people, who care(d) for or about them. Indeed, the scarcity of attempts to illuminate the stories of people and (often ongoing) local practice in relation to objects is troubling. Instead, fixed in a postcolonial context, imperial vision underlies the master narratives of many European museums. Depending on their colonial past, their history has long been told as a continuing narrative of Europe's involvement in various regions of the world. This one-dimensional narrative was perpetuated by the 'two-dimensional' documents in archives that surround these objects. They are rarely neutral in value. Institutionally managed documents, practices, and ideologies thus often fail to give credit to engagement with the material past outside disciplinary frameworks, which museums often rely on. A collection of 'alternative object histories' (used here to indicate something deviating from the dominant, not from the 'normal') must therefore also go beyond established academic and curatorial approaches in order to address the absence of stories and people that remain invisible in archives. Addressing the functions objects had, or, indeed, still have, papers successfully showed how excluded voices can be empowered to tell their own histories beyond these frameworks. How can 'indigenous archives', oral histories, social media, personal memories, fiction, poetry performance, photographs, and artworks present alternative 'counter-archives' to construct new stories about objects?

Many presenters thus used a more inclusive range of philosophies that might inject a much needed critique into a discourse dominated by Western-style scholarship. Several papers addressed local resistance to colonial collecting and preservation practices, or the aftermath of scientific exploration and exploitation. Others showed how Western disciplines themselves, for example, the colonial field sciences of anthropology and archaeology, promoted and underpinned ideologies of human variation and 'race', and vice versa. Some talks alluded to the 'divide and rule' approach of museums: by neatly separating and 'handpicking' certain ethnic groups, they erased others from their not so universal narrative to make it their own, ignoring that both objects and people were, in reality, rarely stable, but in constant transition and movement.

Doubts were certainly addressed too. Could an entirely new History of the World be told through a certain number of objects at all? The concept as such, a highly reductive and yet, at the same time, seductive idea used by many since, deserves to be critiqued. As has been the case in India, the '100 Objects model' can be deployed at a time of vehement nationalist resurgence, a recurring theme in our discussion. This raised more general and important questions about the role of Western museums in shaping museological practices elsewhere, and the format we seek to pursue with our own work. Our 'new histories' must be not just different methodologically and multilingual, but also dynamic and open for additions and narratives that others might want to add in future. As a next step, the project therefore aims for an open and multiformat approach (for example, a website and blog with stories, podcasts, an open access book publication, and/or a collaborative re-display).

The discussion frequently returned to the increased pressure put on museums such as Berlin's Humboldt Forum to engage with the more uncomfortable parts of their collection histories, and recent debates surrounding France's plans for repatriation as announced by President Emmanuel Macron. With several curators on board, including those involved in projects at the British Museum and the Humboldt Forum, how can our project advance conversations about the 'difficult' aspects of their collection histories? If objects are repatriated, how do origin communities deal with the 'poisoned' history that adheres to these objects? And how can they deal with the void if no repatriation takes place to start a process of healing? Many agreed that the issue of who to return the objects *to*, for example, if nationalism is on the rise, remains problematic.

Even if all of this makes a strong intervention with new perspectives from a truly diverse group of people extremely timely, institutional barriers and ethnic discrimination in the museum and academic sector remain high. We therefore operated with the ultimate goal of supporting the democratization of often exclusive museum spaces. This would seek to recognize and empower diverse ethnic audiences and their material past. The discussion, in other words, also concerned the role of museums in the multicultural societies of tomorrow. How can museums respond to the demands of those who ask for new representations that reflect different senses of belonging and inclusion? How can they open up their complex collection histo-

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ries by displaying the objects in more inclusive ways? Finally, how could these interventions contribute to diversifying not only the visitors to museums, but also those who would like to work in and about them, and are often not given the chance?

After hundreds of emails, tens of thousands of flight miles (yes, also with a large carbon footprint), and dozens of visa support letters, and, sadly, not always successful visa applications, the workshop also created a platform for those who otherwise do not easily have access to this kind of exchange. Yet legacies of colonialism also became a hindrance and thus pertinent in the workshop planning itself. Although I started planning a year ahead and finalized a draft programme in summer 2019, the line-up kept changing until the very last minute. This was due to visa rejections or expiring residency permits; incidents rarely experienced by people with passports from 'the West'. Others, although they made it, were questioned at borders. Flight routes leading through former centres of power such as London meant that fares were either expensive or required further transit visas, and that routes were cumbersome. These issues, and the fact that many museums and countries do not have reliable internet connections to access our blogs and podcasts, were discussed at the workshop itself.



Workshop participants at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, December 2019. Photo: private source.

Diversifying is a challenging task and requires listening, empathy, patience, and stamina. It also relies on the support of those with privilege and power, and on funding bodies and institutions who recognize the urgent need to decentralize and shift power structures in research and curating, in particular, in the name of 'decolonizing the museum'. I am grateful for the generous funding provided by the BMBF/Forum Transregionale Studien, and the additional support and hard work of staff at the GHI London and UWI Mona.

As institutional barriers persist and many excluded voices are still not being heard, the question arises of how successfully the project itself will manage to plug into the museum landscape, public discourse, and mainstream media as a counter narrative to MacGregor's own project. A different way to ask this question is: how willing are institutions to put more care into people, rather than objects? And if people, who gets to speak? How willing are they to move beyond pure 'object fetishism' and the Western preservation paradigm? As one of the participants, Golda Ha-Eiros, a curator from Namibia, movingly put it: in German museum storage the object is just a number, in Namibia it has meaning to people.

MIRJAM BRUSIUS (GHIL)

Workshop participants: Heba Abd el Gawad (Egypt/UK), Sani Yakubu Adam (Nigeria/South-Africa), Mirjam Brusius (UK/Germany), Leah Lui-Chivizhe (Australia/Torres Strait Islands), Subhadra Das (UK), Rachel Engmann (Ghana/USA), Jonathan Fine (Germany), Jean-Sébastien Guibert (Antilles, Martinique), Latika Gupta (India), Golda Ha-Eiros (Namibia), Rachael Minott (UK/Jamaica), Maia Nuku (New Zealand/USA), Laura Osorio (Mexico/UK), Siriporn Srisinuraj (Thailand), Alice Stevenson (UK).