

## Buchbesprechungen/Reviews

**Von Oswald, Margareta: *Working Through Colonial Collections: An Ethnography of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin*.**

320 pp. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022. ISBN 978-94-6166-424-2.

Margareta von Oswald's *Working Through Colonial Collections: An Ethnography of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin* provides an extensive and critical analysis of the colonial histories and subsequent challenges faced by ethnological museums in Germany. Von Oswald provides insight into the complex interrelationships between the colonial past, museum practices and the necessity for decolonization through an ethnographic study of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. She analyses the ways in which colonial histories and power relations have shaped the collections and representations of cultures in the museum and how they continue to structure and organize museums today. The author's objective is to examine the potential for ethnological museums to evolve their practices to create more equitable and inclusive spaces for the representation of world cultures, given the changing nature of the field. She asks, 'if museums are no longer "ethnological" or "anthropological", which role do they choose to adopt?' (p. 49).

As a point of departure for her research, von Oswald situates ethnological museums as a colonial legacy, thereby establishing a framework that emphasizes the entanglements and colonial continuities with contemporary museum and exhibition practice and its impact on structures, orders, and logics in museums. In line with the existing literature, she conceptualizes museums 'as a dynamic and relational entity, made up of a variety of associations between people and things in a constant state of transition' (p. 50). Although this understanding of museums seems self-evident and contemporary, contrary to her expectations, von Oswald observed that this dynamic was not noticeable in the museum she researched. She links this observation to the persistence of colonial logics and highlights the influence of the colonial past of ethnographic collections and museums on the internal structures, processes and procedures of museum and exhibition practice in the 21st century. Von Oswald thus analyses the complexity of the dimensions and interrelationships between (colonial) histories and presents, material and immaterial heritage, and museum actors that characterize the transformation processes of ethnological museums in dealing with colonial collections. She asks to what extent museums can change under these conditions and what role they could play in the future.

Von Oswald's museum ethnography is divided into eight chapters that provide a systematic examination of the various aspects of colonial collections and their impact on museum work. The author opens with a historical classification of the emergence of ethnographic collections, situating them within the context of Germany's colonial histories and culture of remembrance. The following section introduces the field and presents the author's field research, with a particular focus on the organizational histories of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin and its collections. Von Oswald outlines the connection between colonial logics and museum knowledge systems and infrastructures and develops a framework for in-depth analysis of various museum areas, including object-based research, knowledge production, collections, and exhibition production processes, as well as curatorial practice in general. The author conducted ethnographic research by practising participatory observation, conducting interviews, and carrying out archive research with the objective of gaining insights into the emergence of these collections, their representation, and their significance for various agents and societies today. The ethnographic approach that von Oswald pursues suggests actively working together with museum staff, understanding their everyday life in the museum, and adapting the research to the dynamics of museum work. Therefore, she analyses how the collections reproduce or challenge colonial narratives, drawing on extensive field research, as well as on her own curatorial practice as co-curator in the Africa Department at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. Once her position changed from that of a 'participant observer to [an] observant participant' (p. 68), she began to examine the curatorial work not only for errors, but also to identify the complexities and contradictions of an insider. Von Oswald emphasizes how this shift in her position has changed her relation to the field. In the second chapter drawing on Jeanne Favret-Saada (1977), she elaborates how being "'affected" by the field' (p. 67) as an observant participant enables her to look critically beneath the surface. Her critical reflections on the research ethics that emerge from her specific position as a coworker and researcher show the in-depth discussion that von Oswald has undertaken to her research. The combination of ethnographic and historical analyses enables von Oswald to conduct a comprehensive examination of the continuation and manifestation of colonial structures of power and the museum.

The question of processes of decolonization and the transformation of museums constitutes a central aspect of the book. Based on her research, von Oswald concludes that, unless the foundational structures of museums undergo substantial transformation, efforts to bring about change within these institutions will continue to be difficult. In the final discussion, she revisits the central themes of the book, offering further insights into the issues of change and transformation within ethnological museums, and thus diving into the complexity, ambivalence, dissonance, and areas of tension that are evident in the negotiation of transformation processes in ethnological museums. By employing the strategy of 'working through', a reference to Wayne Modest's framing of the museum as a 'space for the process of working through' (p. 64) to her analysis, von Oswald examines how museums currently engage with and approach their historical

collections to address the legacy of colonialism and the ongoing influence of colonial power structures on contemporary museum and exhibition practice. The methodological and analytical framework of 'working through' points to the complex field of colonial collections and the effort of working through this complexity. Von Oswald demonstrates considerable skill in employing this strategy to justify her approach in a reflective manner, thereby establishing a well-founded, comprehensive, and reflective methodology, which is one of the book's most notable strengths.

Von Oswald's ethnographic and historical approach enables her to conduct an extensive analysis of the institutional structures and practices that shape the museum, and to highlight the often contradictory dynamics that exist within this cultural institution, for example, by creating asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South, even though the aim is to reduce them. Her analysis of the limitations of decolonization is particularly noteworthy. Von Oswald demonstrates the pervasive influence of colonial structures within institutional frameworks and the inherent challenges associated with their dismantling. It is important to note that the book provides a detailed account of the challenges and complexities associated with the decolonization of museums. To give one example, von Oswald observes that 'working through colonial collections always includes the risk of reproducing the mechanisms and logic one attempts to dismiss, erase, oppose, or counter' (p. 67). Dealing with the processes of how exhibitions are and were produced and the analysis of the curatorial cultures of the museum, the reproduction of existing (colonial) narratives and representations easily creeps in, and it takes a lot of self-reflective power to decolonize museums and exhibition-making. Therefore, it is acknowledged that von Oswald provides a thorough analysis of the complex processes and interwoven power relations that are inherent in colonial collections, as well as including critical reflections to highlight the ambivalences and dissonances evolving in changing museums and curatorial cultures. Her capacity to integrate theoretical concepts with practical examples makes the book an invaluable resource for anthropologists, museum professionals and cultural policy-makers alike. The detailed case study on the topic of the logic of the database, depot situation and structure, the paradox of provenance research on colonial collections, or the practice of musealisation, as well as the inclusion of voices from the affected communities, provide the book with distinctive depth and authenticity.

While the publication therefore demonstrates considerable strengths, it also exhibits certain weaknesses. The text may prove challenging for readers lacking a comprehensive understanding of postcolonial theories, while museum experts and anthropologists can gain a well-developed theoretical framework for their museum and exhibition practice. Furthermore, a more pronounced emphasis on concrete recommendations for action and the illustrative examples of successful decolonization and transformation processes could have made the book an even more practical resource. It would be beneficial to grant greater prominence to the perspectives of the so-called communities of origin and their demands for restitution and repatriation, particularly regarding postcolonial theories and the practices of decolonization. *Working Through Colonial*

*Collections* nonetheless represents a significant contribution to the ongoing discourse surrounding the decolonization and transformation of museums. Its insights are not only relevant to anthropology, they also extend to the fields of cultural studies, museology, and postcolonial studies. It facilitates interdisciplinary discourse and enhances comprehension of the multifaceted processes of decolonization. Despite some minor shortcomings, the book is a valuable resource for anyone engaged with the re-evaluation of colonial histories and the future of ethnological museums and its collections. The book provokes thought and encourages readers to become actively engaged with the significant changes that are required to create museums that are more equitable and inclusive. In conclusion, the book provides an exhaustive examination of the challenges and prospects that are inherent in the decolonization of ethnographic collections, offering invaluable insights into the role, responsibilities, and transformation of museums in the context of a postcolonial present.

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## References

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### **Henrich, Joseph: *The Weirdest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*.**

680 pp. London etc.: Penguin Books, 2021. ISBN 978-0-141-97621-1

Joseph Henrich is a scholar of many trades: anthropologist, behavioral economist, and evolutionary and social psychologist. Currently at Harvard University, he has so far come to the attention of a wider public mainly for his 2016 book, *The Secret of Our Success*, on human cultural evolution. His latest work, *The Weirdest People in the World*, is something of an extension to *The Secret of Our Success*, as it zooms in on the special path the 'West' has taken over the last two millennia.

In his new book, Henrich calls himself and all other Westerners 'weird'. He claims that most studies in modern experimental psychology and behavioral economics suffer from a fundamental bias: they have mostly been carried out among young, educated,