Is Bigger Better? Postcolonial Memory and the Politics of Expansion at the Humboldt-Forum

by

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For my parents
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Introduction

The image above depicts the Humboldt-Forum, a new museum scheduled to open in Berlin this fall. It is a sunny day, and the museum’s palatial architecture rises above Unter den Linden Street in Berlin Mitte. The ornate façade gives off the impression of aged authority, brought further into view by the white, classical-looking sculptures that adorn the bridge in front of it. Small figures wander the bridge and the sidewalk in front of the building, dwarfed by the statues on their gleaming white pedestals. The Humboldt-Forum stands there, looking like a remnant of a bygone era filled with palaces, great art, and learned men with fancy embroidered coattails.
The second image also shows the Humboldt-Forum, from its opposite side. It is a modern building from this angle, with minimalist, geometric windows. This Humboldt-Forum is populated by a crowd of people who meander its back steps, gazing out at the Spree river. The tiny bodies of the people, shown from far away, convey a feeling of liveliness, that there is something organic and unpredictable about the scene. It is, again, a sunny day. The smooth stone of the building’s façade reflects the light, while the blue water of the Spree reflects the sky.

Both these images are imaginary—they are computer-animated constructions of what the Humboldt-Forum is supposed to look like when it opens in November of this year. These images circulate widely, appearing in news articles and books on the Humboldt-Forum, on the future museum’s website, and in its many promotional pamphlets that I collected during my fieldwork in Berlin. But the Humboldt-Forum in its current physical manifestation does not match up to the vision created by either of the animated images. When I visited it in Berlin, I walked around it, glimpsed its baroque façade through the scaffolding, and saw its dome taking shape, but there was
a wire fence surrounding the construction area, and even if I had been allowed into
the building, there would not yet have been a museum to see. In its nascent form, the
Humboldt-Forum is ugly, surrounded by cranes and adorned with large advertising
banners for Samsung phones. It is something that passersby see, then look away from
toward the classical beauty of the buildings that surround it on Berlin’s Museum
Island—the ornate dome of the Berlin Cathedral and the Greek columns of the Altes
Museum. The museum’s construction site is null space, space in the process of
becoming itself.

Ethnographies often begin with an arrival story, the moment when the
ethnographer first encounters the object of her study. She will see for the first time the
strange people and places with which she will later grow familiar, echoing the
reader’s journey from distance to familiarity with the ethnography’s subject material.
In my case, such an introduction to my field site would be impossible, as I have not
yet arrived at the place I am studying—or rather, it has not yet arrived in the material
world. The Humboldt-Forum currently exists in two dimensions. It exists in the
snapshots of its architecture that circulate widely on paper and online, in the
bureaucratic structure tasked with bringing it into the world, and in the varied and
contradictory ways that people across the political spectrum describe it. It is,
nevertheless, a virtual place with surprising potency, whose ins and outs are
intertwined with complex political structures and historical problems.

When it opens in November 2019, the Humboldt-Forum will be a self-
described “world museum,” which will display primarily non-Western art inside a
building modeled after the Berlin Palace, the old residence of the former kings of
Prussia (Parzinger 2011:6). For an institution that does not exist yet, the Humboldt-Forum takes up more than its fair share of cultural and political space. The German government has allotted nearly 450 million euros for its construction, added onto the 30 million euros provided by the city of Berlin and the 100 million euros that were privately fundraised by the Förderverein Berlin Schloss [Foundation for the Berlin Palace].

Hermann Parzinger, one of its former directors, describes it as “das bedeutendste kulturpolitische Projekt in Deutschland zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhundert” [“The most meaningful cultural-political project in Germany at the beginning of the 21st century”] (Parzinger 2008). While the museum remains in virtual form, expectations for it soar to hyperbolic proportions. In the way its various promoters describe it, it is at once a palace and a forum, a global museum and a distinctly German one, entirely innovative but also historically authorized; it is a museum, public meeting space, place of world cultures, place of critical reflection, and beautiful sightseeing stop, all wrapped into one.

One would never guess from looking at the pristine animated images of what it is supposed to look like when it is finished, but the construction of the Humboldt-Forum has been the subject of intense public debate in Germany for many years. The architecture of the building is a modernized reconstruction of the Berlin Palace, where the former kings of Prussia and emperors of Germany used to reside. It is designed so that the outside façade will mimic the façade of the old palace, while the interior and the eastern side will look completely modern. Unlike other similar reconstruction projects of buildings that were damaged in the war, the Humboldt-
Forum is being reconstructed entirely from scratch, as the original palace was demolished by the government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1950 (Berliner Extrablatt 2015:53). The museum’s critics claim that the project to partially reconstruct the Berlin Palace façade glorifies the histories of the Prussian monarchy and the German Empire while erasing the difficult 20th century histories of fascism and communism (Dolgoy 2017:331; Youssefi 2017:42). Its proponents lament the oppressive modernism of Berlin’s architecture and see the partial reconstruction of the palace as a means for Berlin to retrospectively create a beautiful historic center like those of other famous European cities.

The collections that will be displayed inside the Humboldt-Forum are equally controversial. The museum will display the collections from the Berlin Ethnological Museum and Museum of Asian Art, much of which, particularly the collections from the Ethnological Museum, was stolen or coerced from former European colonies. Critics point out that for the Humboldt-Forum to display objects stolen from former German colonies in a reconstruction of the Berlin Palace is especially disingenuous, as the Berlin Palace was the residence of the German emperors and symbol of German imperial power (Ha 2017:25). They point to the German government’s reluctance to fund research on the history and provenance of objects in the collections that would allow for many stolen objects to be returned to their communities of origin. The museum’s proponents, however, see the museum as a predominantly progressive project, which will open up the non-Western collections to broad publics and give them the place they deserve in a museum on Berlin’s Museum Island (Lehmann 2016:96). Like the many snapshots of the museum that show the same
building from different angles, the Humboldt-Forum means different things to
different people.

It is this controversial, contradictory, as of now immaterial object that makes
up the “field” of this ethnography. In this thesis, I examine the way that proponents of
the Humboldt-Forum talk about the Humboldt-Forum. Using information collected
from interviews I conducted with the museum’s administrators in the summer of
2018, as well as a wealth of published articles and advertisements about the museum,
I examine how its administrators defend and critique its entanglements with various
histories and how they understand its function within the broad field of contemporary
German politics. In the ways that its creators describe it, I ask, what does the
Humboldt-Forum do for Germany? How do the museum’s administrators make sense
out of all the Humboldt-Forum’s contradictory facets? Answering these questions
about the Humboldt-Forum offers insight into the workings of German politics,
museum practice, and liberal discourse as a whole.

I do not attempt to come to a moral judgment of the Humboldt-Forum through
my examination of it, nor do I attempt to neutrally tell “both sides” of the Humboldt-
Forum’s story—rather, I begin from a moral judgment, which colors my
interpretation of the museum throughout this thesis. I begin from the assumption that
the Humboldt-Forum’s display of stolen and coerced objects from the ethnological
collection is wrong. Not all of the objects in Berlin’s ethnological collection were

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2 There are many voices that speak against the Humboldt-Forum, and their critique of the museum forms an important backdrop against which the Humboldt-Forum’s administrators must work to respond. However, the pushback against the museum is itself not the main object of my analysis. In this thesis, I have limited my critique to the many conflicting voices within the museum itself in order to draw into relief—and into criticism—the institution’s own discourses.
stolen, and not all of the objects need to be returned, but many of them were stolen and do need to be returned. The process of determining which objects German museums should offer to repatriate (and, importantly, to whom) takes committed historical research, and the German government’s culture ministry has not funded this research in a substantial way (Deutscher Museumsbund 2018). This neglect of the labor needed to address the museum’s historical wrongs, particularly given the hundreds of millions of euros Germany invested in the construction of the museum building, is an injustice. It is complicit in broad neocolonial power imbalances that advantage former European colonial powers and disadvantage former colonies. I take this injustice as a given and dedicate this thesis in part to interrogating the ways that the discourse of the Humboldt-Forum’s administrators functions to obscure it.

My central claim in this thesis is that the Humboldt-Forum operates according to a logic of expansion—of broad, endlessly accumulating multi-perspectivity, multiculturalism, and multi-sidedness. This logic can be observed in the very words that its promoters use to describe it; it is a “global museum,” an “Ort der Weltkulturen” [“place of world cultures”], a “palace for all,” and a “kosmopolitische Perspektive” [“cosmopolitan perspective”], all wrapped up into one institution (Lehmann 2016:96; Gross 2018:10). It is a museum attracted to superlatives—“bedeutendste” [“most meaningful”), “größte” [“biggest”], and “richest,” not to mention most expensive (Parzinger 2013:19). The Humboldt-Forum is endlessly capacious, able to hold many conflicting goals and perspectives within its virtual walls. This discourse of expansion

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is very useful for the administrators of the Humboldt-Forum, allowing them to cast the museum as almost anything they want it to be. It enables the museum to diffuse many of its internal contradictions by allowing modes of thinking that might otherwise come into conflict with each other endless space to reside next to each other in peace. I claim, however, that this subversion of conflict ultimately reproduces neocolonial power relationships by avoiding confrontation with them.

In my first chapter, I argue that the Humboldt-Forum presents a rhetorical means of merging a historically-rooted German identity with a contemporary multicultural identity. I hone in on several specific words that the Humboldt-Forum’s proponents use to describe the museum’s expansive relationship to the world—cosmopolitanism and globalization—and one word that they conspicuously avoid—multiculturalism. I employ a method somewhere between close reading and thick description to unravel what each of these words means in the context of the Humboldt-Forum, and what work each word does for the museum and for the German public figures who use it. By representing the Humboldt-Forum as a cosmopolitan venture, I argue, its promoters maneuver a way of casting contemporary multiculturalism as having a historical root in the German Enlightenment. This is useful for politicians like Angela Merkel, who invokes the Humboldt-Forum as a symbol for Germany’s openness to the world against the background of increasing migration and globalization. Rather than recasting Germany as multicultural, the Humboldt-Forum allows for a way in which Germany can be seen to have always already been multicultural.
For the Humboldt-Forum’s administrators to be able to call upon the useful history of cosmopolitanism requires a great amount of rhetorical work to sidestep the other, unpleasant and un-useful histories in which it is entangled. In chapter two, I examine the ways that proponents of the Humboldt-Forum neutralize the threat that these unsavory histories pose to its expansive, liberal mission. While opponents of the museum criticize it for not dealing with histories of colonialism, fascism, and communism, the museum’s proponents often see themselves to be more than adequately dealing with those histories. I read closely into the way that the Humboldt-Forum’s various proponents and administrators describe this relationship with unpleasant histories, and I argue that their descriptions portray the museum to be grappling with history according to an additive logic that is connected to the logics of neoliberalism. I use the word “addition” in this chapter as a halfway synonym for “expansion,” as a way to describe how the Humboldt-Forum administrators’ responses to the various problems of history are usually to add on more perspectives rather than alter the core of what is being criticized. In a way that harmonizes with the flexible, dematerialized logics of neoliberalism, this additive logic enables the museum to partially solve the problems of colonial history without having to truly confront them. Chapter two takes a more ethnographic route than chapter one, examining the way that the Humboldt-Forum’s discourse of addition perforates throughout its bureaucratic structure, appearing in the language of both its public and the individual curators I interview during my fieldwork.

In my last chapter, I draw on the empirical work that I do in the first two chapters to engage with contemporary scholarship in museum studies. I problematize
the influence of postmodernism and anthropological reflexivity on the field of museum studies and museum practice, arguing that the postmodern emphasis on the multiplicity of truth provides an avenue for the Humboldt-Forum (and perhaps other museums like it) to avoid confrontation with ongoing postcolonial power imbalances. In doing so, this postmodern commitment to many perspectives reproduces the very relationships it was intended to criticize. Finally, I offer a provocation: what if, instead of trying to endlessly expand, to unproblematically incorporate every possible perspective, the Humboldt-Forum were to contract? That is, what if it were to directly condemn the histories of violence in which it is embedded, rather than simply incorporating those histories into its milieu of expanding perspectives?

**Colliding Histories: The Berlin Palace**

The Humboldt-Forum refracts history in complex ways. It draws out specific histories and deflects from others, but the histories from which it deflects have a habit of showing up anyway. The pristine, classical image of the museum’s West façade seen in the first image at the beginning of this chapter consciously calls back the 18th century, the time of the Berlin Palace’s construction. Andreas Schlüter designed the Baroque architecture of the palace in 1700, under the reign of Friedrich I (Berliner Extrablatt 2015:51). It was, and will be once again, a beautiful work of architecture, with its high dome and ornamented baroque façade. The reconstruction of the palace manifests a desire for wholeness in a city whose landscape has been the subject of constant disruptions in the past century. During my fieldwork, I visit the Humboldt Box, a temporary exhibition space about the Humboldt-Forum located adjacent to its
construction site. In its front lobby, the Humboldt Box boasts a giant papier mâché scale model of Berlin from around the turn of the 20th century. The model shows what the city center looked like before the Allied powers bombed it in the Second World War, intact and scenic, and crowned by the Berlin Palace, whose dome is the highest point of the diorama. Gazing at the display, observing the details of the tiny Berlin buildings that no longer have life-sized referents, I feel a twinge of loss. Even after having read a wealth of literature that criticized the project to rebuild the Berlin Palace façade, I find myself in this moment sentimentally mourning the loss of the palace that occurred more than seventy years ago. Reconstructing the Berlin Palace, says Wilhelm von Boddien, the head Förderverein Berlin Schloss, will enact a “Schließen der Wunde” [“closing of the wound”] of history (Bose 2016:53), making the city whole again after the turbulent 20th century. The reconstructed Berlin Palace façade will join other historic buildings in its vicinity that have had to be partially rebuilt since the war: the other museums on Berlin’s Museum Island, the main buildings of Humboldt University, and the National Opera (Parzinger 2013). When the Humboldt-Forum is completed, these buildings will all look intact, although many have been modernized. It will be difficult to tell for those who are not in the know that the Humboldt-Forum was reconstructed entirely from scratch, as opposed to the other historical buildings that surround it, which were only damaged in the war.

Promoters of the reconstruction emphasize not only the architecture’s classical beauty but also its connections to several big men in German intellectual history.

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Friedrich I was a patron of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s scientific endeavors as well as the power behind the construction of the Berlin Palace. Alexander von Humboldt, after whom the Humboldt-Forum is named, donated a sizeable collection of artifacts from his voyages in South America to the private collections at the palace (Bredekamp and Eissenhauer 2013:53). Former director of the National Museums of Berlin Peter Klaus Schuster makes an even simpler association between the brothers Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt and the Berlin Palace: one of proximity. He describes the historical architecture of the palace and its neighboring buildings as “ein Ort, an dem man sich sehr wohl Wilhelm und Alexander von Humboldt as Passanten auf der Straße imaginieren konnte” [“a place where one can easily imagine Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt as passerby on the street”] (Schuster 2016:39). These various associations with the Baroque and the Enlightenment eras are all, one curator tells me, hankering toward an “age of innocence” for Germany, an era of advancement in the arts and sciences that can seen to be removed from the militarism and imperialism of the Wilhelmine era, the fascist nationalism of the Third Reich, and the traumas of the war, the Holocaust, and the East/West division.

Critics of the Humboldt-Forum claim (rightly) that the project to rebuild the Berlin Palace literally covers over the history of the GDR. The GDR demolished the remains of the Berlin Palace in 1950 as a statement against the former monarchy (Berliner Extrablatt 2015:53). The building that replaced it 20 years later, the Palast der Republik [Palace of the Republic], was intended—and indeed functioned—as a people’s building. It functioned as a government building, housing the Volkskammer.

[people’s chamber], the GDR’s legislative chamber (Weizman 2013:135). It was also a cultural center, incorporating an art gallery, bowling alley, movie theater, and numerous restaurants and bars. The Palast der Republik was in many ways a foil to the Berlin Palace: its smooth, minimalist, reflective façade was the aesthetic opposite of the Berlin Palace’s baroque ornamentation; its function as a public center contrasted with the palace’s exclusively aristocratic use. By the time of Germany’s reunification, the building violated numerous health codes because of asbestos contamination, and it was shut down in 1990 (Berliner Extrablatt 2015:54). However, it was not immediately apparent whether the building would be demolished or repaired, and if it were demolished, what would go in its place. One curator I speak to is adamant that the route the federal government and the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz [Foundation of Prussian Cultural Heritage] (SPK) took to completely destroy all traces of the Palast der Republik was too simplistic, and that whatever structure replaced the Palast der Republik might have at least acknowledged the existence of the former building instead of bulldozing over it.⁶

**Colliding Histories: The Ethnological Collections**

In 1904, German General Lothar von Trotha ordered the forced expulsion of the Herero ethnic group into the Omaheke Desert, following an uprising of Herero against the German colonial regime in present-day Namibia (Cooper 2006:113). Tens

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⁶ The SPK is the institution that oversees all of Berlin’s national museums, as well as many architectural heritage sites across former Prussia. It is the legal owner of the collections from the Berlin museums, including those that will be displayed in the Humboldt-Forum. See “Kulturgutschutz,” *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/schwerpunkte/kulturgutschutz.html, accessed April 13, 2019.
of thousands of Herero, and about ten thousand people of the Nama ethnic group, perished of starvation and thirst in the desert; German forces imprisoned many more in concentration camps, where many died (Cooper 2006:113). The exact number of deaths is unknown, anywhere between 60,000 and 100,000 people (Sarkin-Hughes 2009:5). The Herero Genocide is generally thought of as the first genocide of the 20th century, as well as the first widespread use of concentration camps against a population (Cooper 2006:113). The German government issued its first apology for the genocide a century later in 2004 and agreed to return the remains of Namibians that had been collected by German museums for research after their deaths (BBC News 2004). However, Germany did not offer reparations for the crime and still has not, despite the protestation of Namibian lobbying groups (Taylor 2018).

The Herero Genocide is the most extreme example of German colonial violence. It is often referenced in relation to the Holocaust, as a foreshadow for the devastation of German genocidal violence later in the century (Berman et al. 2014:4). However, German colonialism and German involvements with other European colonial powers should not be reduced to a single, viscerally horrifying event. Colonialism was and continues to be an exploitative political and economic structure, a relationship of taking from the global south, an institutionalized theft (Tully 2009). The extent of German collections of objects from Namibia, many of which were taken through coercive means, and many of which will be displayed in the Humboldt-Forum, is only one marker of the way Germany continues to benefit from these power imbalances. Objects in museums are direct and highly visible evidence of the ongoing relationships of exploitation between former colonizers and former colonies.
Repatriating objects—doing the work necessary to reconceptualize who should have sovereignty over the objects in German collections—is one way that Germany can begin to address its colonial entanglements, although it is certainly no end-goal or solution to the problem of colonial history.

Although many of the Humboldt-Forum’s public advertisements insist that Berlin’s non-Western collections originated in the 17th century in the Berlin Palace’s royal Kunstkammer [cabinet of curiosities], the bulk of objects came to Berlin in the late-19th century at the height of European colonialism (Bose 2016:113). Many of these objects were from German colonies in present-day Namibia, Cameroon, Tanzania, Papua New Guinea, and other smaller colonies in the South Pacific. These countries tend to be particularly well-represented in the present-day collections of the Ethnological Museum. However, the museum’s collections span many different geographic regions, most of which were colonized by other Western countries with whom Germany had trade relationships. The Berlin Ethnological Collections are disproportionately large compared to the diminutive size of Germany’s actual empire—indeed, at the turn of the 20th century, Berlin had the largest ethnological museum in the world—and they bear testament to the many interweaving colonial channels that brought objects into the collections (Penny 2002:2).

Not all of the Berlin ethnological collection is made up of stolen objects. Although German colonizers certainly did steal some objects outright, more often,
objects were sold or given to European collectors under coercive conditions from which it is more difficult to distinguish gifts from theft (Deutscher Museumsbund 2018:18). Under conditions of oppression, it is difficult to draw a line between which transactions were consensual and which were not. Colonialism operated through many different collaborators, and often objects were stolen or coerced by non-Europeans working within colonial structures (Njoya 2017:65). Artists in colonized places often took advantage of the market for native artworks and created artworks expressly to be sold to European collectors. Germany also benefitted from the colonial ventures of other countries, and in fact most of its ethnological collections are from places that Germany did not colonize (Penny 2002:7). Faced with the task of repatriating these objects today, people who research provenance must grapple with the fact that the political entities from which objects were coerced by and large no longer exist. Against this background, repatriation does not mean giving everything back indiscriminately, but rather reworking the structures of power that reify Germany’s ownership of former colonies’ objects (Graham and Murphy 2010:105). It requires a real monetary commitment to researching the history and provenance of the objects in the collection, delving into the messy space between theft and coercion.

The Humboldt-Forum has brought colonial history more into view than it has been before, in part inadvertently and in part deliberately. The Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art used to be located in Dahlem, a neighborhood in the far west of Berlin near the Free University. Their number of visitors declined sharply after reunification because of their remote location, and this was a large part of the

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9 This will be thematized, one curator tells me, in one of the Humboldt-Forum’s exhibits on art from the Pacific Northwest Coast.
reason why Klaus Dieter Lehmann, the former director of the SPK, originally suggested that the collections be moved to the site of the reconstructed Berlin Palace (Lehmann 2016:97). Displayed inside a high-profile building in a central location, the collections and the histories they carry with them will receive much more public attention than they had received in Dahlem. I learn from several curators I interview that the Humboldt-Forum will actively thematize colonial history and attempt to educate its audience about historical wrongdoings connected with the collections, like the Herero genocide (in ways, I will argue, that are not thorough enough). Even before the museum opens, the collections have already begun to garner more public attention than ever before, which has created a platform for activist groups on the left to stage their opposition to the project’s colonial legacy. No Humboldt 21!, the most prominent of these groups, is an independent activist organization that protested the creation of the Humboldt-Forum, calling in 2013 for a stop to the construction.¹⁰

The construction of the Humboldt-Forum is happening concurrently with a wave of renovation projects of ethnographic museums across Europe. Against the background of the colonial histories embedded in their collections, many ethnographic museums are struggling to re-brand themselves. Several have literally changed their names: the museum formerly known as the ethnological museum in Vienna is now called the Vienna “Weltmuseum” [“World Museum”] (Leyrer 2017); Munich’s ethnological museum is now called the “Museum Fünf Kontinente”

[“Museum of Five Continents”]. The Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, which opened in 2004, re-presents the objects from Paris’s non-Western collections in a very aestheticized, depoliticized manner. The museum’s structure was intended to break down the boundaries between European fine art and non-European visual culture, but it has been criticized widely for exoticizing non-Western art and ignoring oppressive histories (Dias 2008).

Several European countries have taken steps recently to repatriate objects that were stolen during the colonial era. Most notably, French President Emmanuel Macron announced in 2017 that France would commit to returning objects that were stolen from its former colonies in West Africa (Macron 2017). Macron spearheaded the creation of a committee to work with museums and governments in West Africa to figure out how to implement his goal (Quinn 2018). France has already begun to repatriate several important collections, including its collection of artworks from the Benin Kingdom in present-day Nigeria, British soldiers looted in 1892 (Ross 2018). It is unclear, however, the extent of how much will actually be repatriated through this process. The Benin collection that is being repatriated only consists of 26 objects, whereas the Musée du Quay Branly alone has approximately 46,000 objects from Africa in its collection that could potentially be repatriated (BBC News 2018).

Kwame Opoku writes an opinion piece published on the No Humboldt 21 website about the speech Macron gave in Ouagadougou in which he announced his commitment to returning stolen objects; Opoku points out that Macron’s speech, while straightforwardly admitting theft, was also more than a little paternalistic. He

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notes the emphasis that the French president put on the fact that objects would only be returned to African museums that would take good care of them, and he argues that this caveat in Macron’s speech reinforces prejudices that imagine Africans to be incapable of taking care of their own cultural history. Despite its commitment to returning objects to West Africa, Macron’s speech made it clear that it would be France, not the states and museums of West Africa, that would determine the conditions under which objects were returned.

Shortly after Macron gave the speech announcing France’s new commitment to repatriating stolen objects, the German Ministry of Culture published a set of guidelines for German museums on the question of repatriation, which took a decidedly more conservative stance than the French one. The guidelines suggested that objects only be offered for return if the entities requesting them had legal claim to them, a policy that greatly constricted the category of what could be considered eligible for repatriation (Deutscher Museumsbund 2018). The guideline seemed a clear rejection of Macron’s grand statement of apology for the theft and coercion of cultural heritage, limiting rather than broadening the avenues for returning objects. In March 2019, however, Monika Grütters, the German Minister of Culture, along with several regional cultural ministers, released a joint resolution pledging a heightened commitment to supporting transparency, documentation, and provenance research on objects obtained during the colonial era (Grütters 2019; Brown 2019). Grütters announced that the federal government would begin offering 1.9 million Euros worth of grants to museums wanting to pursue provenance research. An article in The Art Newspaper compares the recent resolution to the French policies on repatriation,
writing that although the culture ministry’s pronouncement is not as grand of a
gesture as Macron’s speech, it does show a renewed commitment to the process of
repatriation that contrasts against the conservatism of the 2017 guidelines (Hickley
2019). It remains to be seen what effect the new fund for provenance research will
have as implemented by actual museums.

The “Who” Question: On Agency and Accountability

Writing about the Humboldt-Forum, I have found it difficult to figure out who
the subjects of my sentences are. I find myself defaulting to the passive voice more
often than I would like. This is in large part because the structure of the Humboldt-
Forum obscures the actors who work within it. The museum in its current form, with
its disjointed juxtaposition of the historic façade on the outside and the ethnographic
collections on the inside, is the result of many years of compromise and collaboration
among many different entities. It has no single author, although several key figures
have been prominent in conceiving and defending it. The Förderverein Berliner
Schloss, an independently organized foundation, initially spearheaded the push to
rebuild the palace. In 1993, the foundation organized a demonstration in which they
covered a giant scaffolding with a tarpaulin printed to represent the Berlin Palace
façade, in order to show what Unter den Linden street would look like if the palace
were rebuilt (Berliner Extrablatt 2015:54). In 1994, the federal government and the
Berlin regional government commissioned a competition for the architecture of the
new structure that was to replace the Palast der Republik (Berliner Extrablatt
2015:54). The judges of the competition chose the current design by Italian architect
Franco Stella, which reconstructs the Berlin Palace’s façade but with a completely modern interior. A separate committee met in 2001 to decide what would go into the palace. At the suggestion of former director of the SPK Klaus Dieter Lehmann, the committee came up with the plan to display the non-Western collections in the new building, and to christen it the “Humboldt-Forum” after Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt (Bose 2016:71). Bundestag voted to approve the plan in 2002, which officially funded the new museum, and construction began in 2013 (Bose 2016:72).

From its very beginning, thus, the Humboldt-Forum was brought into the world by many different voices and institutional processes. Its bureaucratic structure is, in fact, so multi-voiced that it has become infamously difficult to work with. It is funded largely by the federal government of Germany (although a sizeable portion of it is funded by private donations), and different segments of the building will be overseen by different institutions. The Ethnographic Museum and the Museum of Asian Art are two separate institutions that are both under the purview of the SPK, and they will reside in the upper two floors of the building, with the Museum of Asian art on the top floor and the Ethnological Museum on the second floor. The city of Berlin is sponsoring an exhibit about the history of Berlin on the ground floor, and Humboldt University is moving its sound archive to the Humboldt-Forum and curating a small exhibition space on the second floor. Until May 2018, the institution had three separate directors who worked in collaboration with each other: Hermann Parzinger, the head of the SPK; Horst Bredekamp, an art history professor at Humboldt University; and Neil MacGregor, former director of the British Museum. In May 2018, Hartmut Dorgerloh, who formerly had worked as director of the
Foundation for Prussian Palaces and Gardens Berlin-Brandenburg, took over as the museum’s first solo director, but his power as director of the museum is still constrained by collaboration with all the Humboldt-Forum’s component institutions (Süddeutsche Zeitung, June 2018).

The thick bureaucracy makes change within the museum difficult and time consuming. As the planning for the construction of the museum moved forward, there was no single actor who intentionally ignored the question of the ethical implications of displaying the ethnological collections—rather, it was an issue that the process of the museum’s creation simply did not prioritize. It remains a problem of inaction because repatriation takes concerted labor, time, and money. The administrators at the Humboldt-Forum whom I asked about the issue of repatriation all told me that they thought repatriation was important, but that it was not their job to research the provenance of objects. There is a dearth of people whose job it is to do this research, although I am told that several individual curators have conducted projects that include some kind of provenance research of their own accord without institutional support. It is unclear as of yet whether the Berlin Ethnological Museum in the Humboldt-Forum will take advantage of the grant money that Grütters recently announced, although it is likely that they will. All these factors make repatriation a difficult and imperfect process, but not an impossible one.

**Methods and Previous Literature on the Humboldt-Forum**

I spent one month in Berlin in the summer of 2018, during which I interviewed eight people involved in various facets of the museum administration,
including a curator from the Ethnological Museum, a worker in the design firm, a member of the organization that promoted the reconstruction of the palace façade, and several people from Humboldt University. My intent was to gather a broad smattering of perspectives, but I make no pretense to have conducted an exhaustive analysis of the many different voices involved in the museum’s planning process. Rather, I linger in the specifics of each interview, finding generative information in the patterns and dissonances among different people’s perspectives. Each interview went differently, but I asked many of my interlocutors similar questions based on my interests coming into the project—what they thought about the Humboldt-Forum’s controversial histories and how they viewed their own role within the museum’s bureaucracy. Everyone except one person I spoke to was an employee of the Humboldt-Forum or one of its component organizations, and they tended to be very careful about what they said about the institution. I am grateful to everyone who spent time to talk with me about such a controversial subject, and I have taken precautions to assure anonymity, using pseudonyms when necessary. I did not record any of my interviews, but I took thorough notes. The perspectives I interpret throughout this thesis are paraphrased to the best of my ability and included with the permission of my interlocutors.

I make my claims about the Humboldt-Forum based on many different kinds of sources, including the interviews. Because the Humboldt-Forum is an institution that is so much in the public eye, it is written about constantly in German newspapers. The Humboldt-Forum itself provides a wealth of images and information and has published several books about the project. The SPK also publishes a quarterly
newspaper that is specifically about the Humboldt-Forum; placed strategically around the museums of Berlin’s Museum Island, it is geared primarily toward tourists to promote the construction of the palace internationally. I take all of these sources as important ethnographic information regardless of how biased they may be (indeed, perhaps because of it). Many of the perspectives gleaned from this wealth of sources contradict each other, and I thematize these contradictions instead of trying to smooth them over.

My work on the Humboldt-Forum follows a short history of other literature about the new museum. Although there is not as much written about the Humboldt-Forum (yet) as there is about other comparable museums that have been around for a longer amount of time, there have been several significant academic works written about its planning process and the public controversy it has stirred up. Most work tends to focus on the institution’s architectural engagement with Berlin’s history, which has been an issue for a longer time than the display of the ethnological collections. Beate Binder’s book, Streitfall Stadtmitte [“the dispute over Berlin’s city center”], uses the debate over reconstructing the Berlin Palace as a lens for understanding German post-reunification identity formation (2009). Rebecca Clare Dolgoy offers a more straightforward critique of the Humboldt-Forum’s architectural nostalgia, criticizing the way that it cherry picks certain histories to monumentalize and erases other histories from view (2017). Sean Franzel offers an analysis of the Humboldt-Forum’s name, arguing that it is an unsuccessful attempt to recycle the concept of Bildung in the neoliberal, post-reunification era (2014).
Friedrich von Bose’s ethnography, *Das Humboldt-Forum: Eine Ethnografie seiner Planung* [“The Humboldt-Forum: An Ethnography of its Planning”], takes a very similar methodological approach to my own (2016). Bose conducted extensive interviews with administrators of the Humboldt-Forum in order to come to a nuanced understanding of the complex institutional dynamics that underpin the museum’s planning process. Like I do in this thesis, he takes as his object of study the ethnographic information he collects during his interactions with curators, in conversation with the museum’s official promotional texts. Much of his theorization is intended to work through the gaps between these two primary sources. He found during his fieldwork that curators’ opinions about the museum’s colonial history were much more critical than he had expected, in contrast to the simplistic way that the museum’s public advertisements lauded every aspect of the project. He comes up with the term, “strategische Reflexivität” [“strategic reflexivity”], to describe the way that, despite the critical historical reflectiveness of many individual curators, the museum as a whole still reiterates postcolonial power imbalances. He looks at the plans that the museum had in place (in 2016 when he published the book) for its exhibition of non-Western cultures, which emphasized the inclusion of non-Western voices and perspectives, and he argues that these attempts at inclusion are merely gestural, doing little to combat neocolonial logics that place the West at the center and the Rest at the periphery of the cultural imagination (Bose 2016:260).

In my own interviews, I noticed a similar trend to the one Bose pinpoints: the individual people I spoke to seemed much more critical about the Humboldt-Forum than the museum’s public narrative was. They told me about the multiple perspectives
and partnerships from which exhibits at the Humboldt-Forum would be crafted. I found Bose’s theory of strategic reflexivity to be a generative way of looking at this contradiction, a way of holding together both the critical narratives of curators and the problematically uncritical narratives of the museum’s public advertisements. In my own analysis of the expansive logics of the Humboldt-Forum, I push the notion further. Rather than characterizing the Humboldt-Forum’s smattering of critical postcolonial perspectives as exceptions to the rule of neocolonial cultural exploitation, I look at ways in which these instances are not exceptions at all but are in line with the expansive, evasive logics of the Humboldt-Forum as a whole. I move away from describing these traits as “strategies” or “gestures” because of the intentionality implied by those terms. Rather, I look at the curators’ inclusion of multiple perspectives in the Humboldt-Forum’s planned exhibits as part of a larger liberal discourse of broad, additive thinking, which articulates the bounds of what can be said and what is allowed to make sense within the institutional culture of the Humboldt-Forum (Fergusson 1990:19).

The object of this thesis is representational—doubly so, as I am looking at how people talk about how the museum will eventually represent cultural encounters—but ultimately the stakes are material. I examine discourse in order to come to a better understanding of a material injustice: the Humboldt-Forum’s display of objects with coercive colonial histories. I analyze the ways that the Humboldt-Forum’s various disembodied liberal discourses of expansion ultimately deflect from the real postcolonial power imbalances of possession and dispossession in which it is
embedded. In doing so, I hope to make the discursive mode of expansion less common-sensical and carve out a space for thinking beyond it.
CHAPTER 1: Globalism, Cosmopolitanism, Multiculturalism

On April 19th, 2018, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron stood in front of a large image of the Humboldt-Forum on national television. After having conducted diplomatic talks at the construction site of the Humboldt-Forum, the two European leaders gave a press conference in which they emphasized their “shared vision” and commitment to partnership between France and Germany. The leaders’ statements had an urgent air about them, and both underscored the need for European unity in what Macron called “a unique moment in the European adventure” marked by increasing migration and globalization. Although the talks did not iron over disputes between Merkel and Macron about reforms in the Eurozone (Süddeutsche Zeitung, April 2018), the politicians nevertheless expressed optimism about their partnership and committed to keeping Europe “ein Friedensprojekt” [“a peace project”].

In her introductory statement in the press conference, Merkel referenced the image of the Humboldt-Forum behind her: “Dies ist ein sehr europäisches Projekt, und es ist ein Projekt, in dem wir darstellen wollen, dass wir Teil einer großen globalen Welt sind” [“This is a very European project, and it is a project in which we want to represent that we are part of a large global world”]. She continued, calling up the legacy of Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, who both visited Paris, and telling the room full of journalists that a museum in their name represents a long history of international collaboration. The image of the Humboldt-Forum in front of which they stood was black and white, and it showed the front entrance of the

building, with its historicist façade, while the modernist wing of the museum on the other side was out of view—indeed, looking at the film of the press conference, it is difficult to tell whether the image is of the future Humboldt-Forum or the former Berlin Palace. Both images might have done the same work for Merkel, representing a historically grounded commitment to European internationalism. The temporal ambiguity of the image of the Humboldt-Forum is perhaps the most literal manifestation of the museum’s entanglement of past and present. In the context of Merkel and Maron’s diplomacy, certain pasts gain urgency, flashing up in this particular moment in the “European adventure” when the borders of Europe, both around it and within it, are unsettled. Called upon for its connective power, the Humboldt-Forum relates Germany to Europe and Europe to the world.

When rhetorically relating Germany to the world, Merkel has a variety of languages at her disposal. In the press conference, she mentions several times that Germany is part of a “globalized” world, and she also crafts this relationship in line with the historically rooted cosmopolitanism of the Humboldt brothers. However, she might have phrased the relationship in terms of pluralism, referring, like many contemporary voices, to Europe’s increasingly multicultural/multiethnic makeup (El-Tayeb 2008:649). She might also have described the contemporary connectivity of the world as postcolonial, as many of the structures that make today’s world “global” have colonial origins (Hulme 2005). These subtleties of language—which words are used and which are not in which contexts—carry massive weight. As an ideological object, the Humboldt-Forum opens up to discourse to contain multiple orientations toward the world at once, which Merkel’s public relations department evidently finds
quite useful. By foregrounding certain discourses (globalism and cosmopolitanism) and de-emphasizing or even obscuring others (multiculturalism and postcolonialism), the Humboldt-Forum does rhetorical work for itself and for German liberalism in a time of perceived crisis.

Merkel’s strategic use of the Humboldt-Forum as a rhetorical object is metonymic of how many people, both within the institution and without it, conceptualize the new museum. In this chapter, I will present an analysis that lies somewhere between translation and thick description, in which I hone in on specific words that connote the Humboldt-Forum’s openness to the world. Two of these words, globalization and cosmopolitanism, appear often in discourse on the Humboldt-Forum. The other word, “multiculturalism,” is significant because of its conspicuous absence from the Humboldt-Forum’s lexicon; although the Humboldt-Forum itself is a profoundly multicultural project in its strategic use of cultural diversity, its promoters rarely use the word, “multiculturalism.” Examining these languages and silences offers insight into how liberal international discourse functions in the specific German context as well as internationally. While globalization connotes a threat to German national borders and identity, multiculturalism constructs an inadequate compromise, carrying with it a fraught history in German politics. Cosmopolitanism, I argue, offers the administrators of the Humboldt-Forum and the politicians who use its image strategically a historically and nationally authorized solution to the tensions of globalization.
Globalization [“Globalisierung”]

“A true place of world cultures will emerge here, in the heart of Berlin, in conjunction with the World Heritage site, the Museuminsel. We hope it will provide orientation in our globalized world” (Neumann and Wowereit 2013:8).

Bernd Neumann, the former German Minister of State for Culture and the Media, and Klaus Wowereit, the former mayor of Berlin, write this statement in the introduction to a 2013 promotional guidebook on the Humboldt-Forum. The book, printed in both English and German, continues to be distributed in the gift shops of Berlin’s museums and is intended as an introduction to the future museum for lay audiences. For Neumann and Wowereit to be able to make the claim that the Humboldt-Forum intervenes in the cultural atmosphere of a “globalized world” requires certain assumptions about what that world looks like. Who are the agents of globalization? How long has the world been a “globalized world”? Against what global forces must the Humboldt-Forum “orient”? Neumann and Wowereit are not the only authors who uses the term, “globalization,” in reference to the Humboldt-Forum. The word crops up constantly—indeed, on the very next page of the guidebook, Hermann Parzinger uses the exact same phrase, “a globalized world,” to describe the conditions to which the new museum must respond (Parzinger 2013:12). The ways that various authors imagine the Humboldt-Forum to reflect, synthesize, and orient within a globalized world offers insight into the museum as a contemporary object that responds to the threats and opportunities of the world in which it is embedded.

As an academic concept, “globalization” is a slippery term that has accrued a slew of contradictory meanings. The term rose to massive popularity among both
academics and the mainstream media in the 1990s at the dawn of the digital age. Globalization describes a shrinking world, and it describes a fast world, in which places are connected to each other with ever-accelerating efficiency by an ever-growing array of networks (Steger 2009:8). It references broadly the structures that break down national boundaries within the world, such as the growth of corporations as transnational world powers, as well as the increasing, both voluntary and involuntary, mobility of the world’s populations (Hardt and Negri 2000). Globalization also describes the emergence of extra-national political structures like the European Union, presumed sometimes to be a first step in dissolving nations entirely (Telo and Shaw 2016:11). Globalization constitutes a threat to the boundaries and authority of the nation state, carrying with it a sense of anxiety that the world is connected increasingly by the uncontrollable forces of technology and the market.

Although the word, “globalization,” certainly connotes modernity, it is unclear just how modern the structures that it describes actually are. There is no discernable “beginning” to globalization. After all, there have been structures that connected the world across disparate geographic regions for millennia, with trade routes across the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and South Pacific originating well before the modern period (Steger 2009:22). Peter Hulme argues that the Spanish formed the first truly global trade routes when they began to colonize the Americas in the 16th century (2005). Sebastian Conrad suggests that the cultural force of globalization was also an important constitutive aspect of European nation-making, arguing that the construction of German identity in the 19th century occurred in productive conversation with global trade and international media (2010). As a mode of
understanding the connectivity of the world often set up in opposition to nationalism, globalization might be rooted in the 1960s when multi-national corporations gained strength and technologies for mass media reached worldwide audiences (Steger 2009:1).

In an essay about the initial planning process of the concept for the new museum, former director of the SPK, Klaus Dieter Lehmann, writes: “Was ist heute in einer globalisierten Welt spannender, als den Kulturdialog—ohne Arroganz und Hierarchie—gleichwertig zu führen” [“What today in a globalized world is more exciting than conducting—without arrogance or hierarchy—equal-grounded cultural dialog?”] (Lehmann 2016:96). The operative word in this statement is “today.” Although the connective structures of contemporary globalization have been around for a long time, Lehmann’s globalization seems to have taken on a fresh urgency. What about “today’s world” makes global structures so important for Lehmann? The differences between the “globalized world” of today and the globalized world of, say, the nineteenth century are on the one hand differences in magnitude; digital technologies connect more of the world at a faster tempo than mechanical technologies, for instance, and commercial airlines make distances between continents negligible for those who can afford it. They are also, vitally, differences in visibility. For Germany, becoming part of the contemporary “globalized” world means becoming a home for migrant populations, whose racial and religious differences are everyday reminders of how connected Germany is to the rest of the world (Gögtürk, Gramling, and Kaes 2007:16). When Lehmann references the globalization of “today’s” world, he is referencing the way that the forces of
connectivity in contemporary Germany are more intensely felt and seen than ever before.

For Lehmann, a globalized world calls for a global museum. He describes the globalism of the Humboldt-Forum as “spannend,” a German word that stems from the verb, “spannen,” which means “to tense,” and literally translates as “exciting.” “Spannend” connotes an excitement that involves tension, and it is often used to describe forms of popular entertainment such as movies that market suspense. His statement indicates causality: the Humboldt-Forum’s exhibition of world cultures is “spannend” not only for its own sake but because it reflects Germany’s increasing connectivity to the world. The Humboldt-Forum thus takes on a metonymic quality in Lehmann’s description, reflecting and embodying the already-existent conditions of globalization. Bringing Berlin’s non-European collections onto the Museum Island and into closer proximity with the works of Western art displayed there correlates to the processes of migration and global technology that bring the world into Germany. This metonymy has a transformative power, having the potential to turn the tensions of a global world, often coded as quite negative, into productive “Spannungsverhältnisse” [“relationships of tension”] within museum display cases (Bose 2016:91).

Bernd Neumann and Klaus Wowereit, quoted at the beginning of this subsection, use the language of “orientation” to describe the Humboldt-Forum’s response to the conditions of globalization, implying that it will provide its visitors with a way to make sense out of their shrinking, accelerating world: “we hope it will provide orientation in our globalized world” (Neumann and Wowereit 2013:9)
Hermann Parzinger’s introduction on the next page elaborates on this notion, writing that the Humboldt-Forum will “contribute to a sense of reassurance about ourselves [Selbstgewisserung] in an increasingly globalized world” (Parzinger 2013:12). He continues: “Cultural exchange on an equal footing must be the benchmark.” The juxtaposition of these two sentences, one saying that the Humboldt-Forum will reassure Germany of itself and the other saying it will open up to the world, is missing a connecting preposition to indicate their relationship to each other. It is unclear whether Parzinger implies a causal relationship between self-assurance and cultural exchange, and if so, which one causes the other. By associating the two ideas in quick succession, however, Parzinger entangles them, implying that the act of orienting one’s (individual and national) self within a global world is, in some way, inextricably connected to the act of responding to its demands for openness. An authentic self-reassurance, Parzinger’s statement implies, reassures the self in the company of others, and Germany’s task of learning how to facilitate cultural dialogue is part and parcel of its task of finding itself within a global milieu. “Orientation” is thus simultaneously orientation inward and orientation outward—both contemporary and historical, progressive and conservative. By characterizing the Humboldt-Forum as a mediator for globalization, its promoters neutralize the perceived threat that globalization poses to nationhood because a global world can be made to make sense within the space of the museum.

Anna Tsing’s book, *Friction*, puts forward a theory of global connection that involves looking closely at the specific moments of tension where the global and the local collide. She calls these moments “friction,” which she describes as “the
awkward, unequal, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (Tsing 2005:4). She writes that, while globalization is often theorized as an abstract, homogenizing force of connection in the world, in practice it is very messy. This messiness forms a realm where relationships of power and exploitation can be established and solidified, but also where they can be unsettled. It is precisely this quality of messiness that Lehmann, Parzinger, and other promoters of the Humboldt-Forum eschew in their aspirations for the future museum. The Humboldt-Forum embodies a frictionless globalization—or rather, a globalization whose frictions (tensions/Spannungen) can be contained within the virtual, representational field of the museum.

“Multiculturalism” [“Multikulturalismus” / “Multikulti”]

The language of multiculturalism can be used as a strategy of smoothing away the frictions of globalization. Multiculturalism, broadly construed, is a model for accepting cultural difference within a nation state. In opposition to a cultural model of assimilation, which foregrounds similarity as a necessary condition of membership in a nation, multiculturalism accepts—indeed, reifies—diversity (Povinelli 2002:39). Multiculturalism is incorporative in its logic, involving the inclusion of cultural difference within a unified political framework, and as such multicultural frameworks are more prone to accepting certain differences than others. Differences in artistic expression and in cuisine, for instance, are often incorporated relatively unproblematically within multicultural discourse, whereas differences in political organization, religion, or family structure are less easily integrated. Brett Klopp
relates one man’s definition of multiculturalism from his field work on immigration in Frankfurt am Main:

“for example, when I see three girls in the streetcar. One appears German, and the other two appear ‘foreign’ with dark hair. One of them has a baseball cap on backwards and the other is wearing a headscarf—and all three are speaking fluent German and making no distinctions between themselves, despite obvious outward differences” (Klopp 2002:26).

The acceptable multicultural differences Klopp’s interlocutor identifies are all, he says, “outward.” The girls’ differences in race, in dress, and in religion (implied here by the mention of the woman’s headscarf) make up their various markers of diversity. *Inside*, implies the speaker, all three girls are essentially similar, and it is their shared ability to speak “fluent German” that allows them to recognize this essential similarity. The multiculturalism of Klopp’s description is thus only partially accepting of cultural difference, celebrating difference only to the extent that it remains surface-level and does not interfere with the essential commonalities necessary for nation-building, like a shared language. In order to make these commonalities possible, it is the immigrant, not the European, who has to learn a new language and conform to the national habits of the dominant culture. It is when these essential commonalities are breached, when cultural practices infringe on the liberal democratic political structure of individual rights, that Jean and John Comaroff argue is the source of conflict within the framework of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism embraces diversity, up to the point at which diversity threatens the sovereignty of the nation state (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003:447).

According to the framework laid out above, the Humboldt-Forum is a profoundly multicultural project. The symbolic act of bringing “world cultures” to the
center of Berlin and into a space of greater visibility aligns well with Klopp’s definition of multiculturalism as cultural incorporation without assimilation. The diversity that promoters of the Humboldt-Forum emphasize consists primarily of the “outward differences” of Klopp’s description, with differences in aesthetic expression taking center stage. The space of the museum will showcase diversity as a primarily visual phenomenon, as well as an auditory one, as the Humboldt-Forum will include a large sound archive (Koch 2013). Like the shared language that Klopp writes is often necessary for multicultural interactions, the sensorial distinctions the Humboldt-Forum will bring out are all contained within the common spatial language of the museum.

And yet despite the seemingly obvious relevance of the term, the word, “Multikulturalismus,” is virtually absent from literature on the Humboldt-Forum. This absence came as a surprise to me, as I had come into the “field” steeped in anthropological literature critiquing multiculturalism and assuming that the Humboldt-Forum would draw upon this language. Sitting down to write this chapter, I searched my field notes, interview transcripts, stack of publications, and the Humboldt-Forum’s own website, but found no direct reference to the Humboldt-Forum as a multicultural project. Once, the word appeared in relation to other cultural events occurring in Berlin around the same time of the Humboldt-Forum (König and Scholz 2012:39), and once it appeared in a news article as something of a backhanded insult, used to describe the Humboldt-Forum’s fetishization of cultural others (Bisky, quoted in König and Scholz 2012:73).
The discourse of multiculturalism gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s in Europe and North America. In settler colonial nations like Canada, multicultural discourse has functioned partly as a way of reconciling liberal nationhood with indigenous interests, an alternative to indigenous erasure or genocide as a way of legitimizing a colonial state (Dhillon 2017:13). In Western European countries, multicultural discourse functions largely as a way of grappling with recent, growing populations of migrants from outside Europe (Modood and Werbner 1997:1). As Europe faces a new level of ethnic heterogeneity, there have been efforts to develop new ways of conceptualizing what it means to be a European (or German/French/etc.) public, often with and often against cultural others. Drawing conceptually on multiculturalism allows people like the German man quoted in Klopp’s book to reconcile their understandings of nationhood with a growing everyday reality of people who look and dress differently.

Nevertheless, the discourse of multiculturalism, which came to prominence in the 1990’s in Germany, has been met with great ambivalence. Multicultural discourse gained urgency in 1989, when Germany’s reunification prompted a resurgence of German nationalism and subsequent scourge of anti-immigrant violence (O’Brien 1996). Many political figures argued that Germany’s rising immigrant populations mandated the inclusion of cultural pluralism into their concept of nationhood, while others endorsed the assimilationist notion that immigrants should adhere to a German Leitkultur [“lead culture”]. Proponents of Leitkultur

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13 The issue of multiculturalism brings up tensions not only between Germans and immigrants but also between German identity and European identity. The construction of an international, European identity interacts in complex ways with the already existent constructions and reconstructions of German identity. See El Tayeb 2008.
asserted that a common culture was important for national unity and that all other
cultural influences should be included within the national cultural setting only on a
secondary level (Jahn 2015). The debate between Multikulti and Leitkultur became
very polarized in the first decade of the 21st century, and Multiculturalism took on
quite negative connotations, signifying for many Germans not just the inclusion of
new cultures within the national cultural constellation but the threat that an originally
German culture would be lost in the mix. Multikulti accrued a pejorative tinge,
signifying superficial, commercialized diversity rather than substantive cultural
dialog (Klopp 2002).

The conception of the Humboldt-Forum happened concurrently with these
debates over Leitkultur and Multikulturalismus, and the discussion around the future
of the museum dealt with many of the same questions as the national culture debate.
The Förderverein Berliner Schloss was first formed only a few years after Germany’s
reunification, and the organization’s push to reconstruct the Berlin Palace was an
explicit attempt at articulating a unified German culture through the architectural
cohesiveness of the palace. The idea to reconstruct the palace was taken up by leaders
in the SPK like its former president, Klaus Dieter Lehmann, who argued that this
symbol of (a Baroque, Prussian, and aristocratic) German culture should also contain
within it samples of non-Western cultural production (Lehman 2016). Lehmann’s
idea to combine the external façade of the Berlin palace with a museum of world
cultures inside eased the passing of a resolution in the German Bundestag in 2002 to
fund the construction of the museum. The inclusion of non-Western cultures appeased
liberals, who were more concerned with promoting an image of a multicultural
Germany than with reconstructing the palace, while conservatives approved of the reconstruction of the palace despite the non-Western collections that were set to be displayed inside of it (Bose 2016:72). In its political life, thus, the Humboldt-Forum dealt explicitly with two conflicting imaginings of the inclusivity and exclusivity of German culture and came out neither on the side of Multikulti nor Leitkultur but rather on both sides simultaneously, depending on who the audience was. Its promoters attempted to emphasize its cultural inclusiveness for liberal audiences and its historic architecture for conservative audiences. By distancing themselves from the language of multiculturalism, the promoters of the Humboldt-Forum escape from having to choose whether the museum is primarily multicultural or primarily German.

“Cosmopolitanism” [“Kosmopolitismus” / “Weltbürgerlichkeit”]

In an article in a recent promotional newsletter for the Humboldt-Forum, Raphael Gross, the director of the German Historical Museum, writes that the Humboldt-Forum will embody a “cosmopolitan perspective” [“kosmopolitische Perspektive”] on the world (Gross 2018:11). Several different proponents of the Humboldt-Forum use the word “cosmopolitanism” to describe the Humboldt-Forum’s openness to the world. In German philosophy, “cosmopolitanism” (translated both as “Kosmopolitismus” and “Weltbürgerlichkeit”) calls up the legacy of Immanuel Kant, the oft-cited father of modern cosmopolitanism (Kleingeld and Brown 2014). Kantian cosmopolitanism advocates for cooperation among the nations of the world along common moral/rational principles. Kant’s essay, “Toward Perpetual Peace,” sets up the conditions for a peaceful world governed by a “league of nations,” in which
nations retain their individuality but are governed by universal, rational, republican
principles (Kant 2006). The Humboldt-Forum’s mythic persona takes on many of the
qualities of Kant’s league of nations, portrayed often as a metaphor for international
cooperation. As the 2018 talks between Merkel and Macron show, the museum has
already been the literal site of international diplomacy. On a metaphorical level,
Wilhelm von Boddien writes that the Humboldt-Forum will embody “die Welt in der
Mitte Berlins” [“the world in the middle of Berlin”], acting as a unifying agent
between the artworks—and by extension the cultures—of the people represented in
the Humboldt-Forum and the Museum Island across the street (Bose 2016:61).
Boddien’s description of the Berlin museums not just as representations of the world
but as “the world” itself extends the unifying force of the Humboldt-Forum’s
cosmopolitanism from the objects themselves to the cultures they represent.

Gross’s article invokes cosmopolitanism, however, not explicitly as a political
conviction but rather as a spiritual state of open-mindedness. In the 18th century, the
word “cosmopolitan,” used as a noun, connoted a specific kind of (gender exclusive)
man who was able to nurture a perspective on the world that transgressed the
boundaries of nationhood (Kleingeld and Brown 2014). Cosmopolitanism, in this
sense, was a descriptor of character, describing someone who was able to be at home
intellectually, spiritually, and usually also physically regardless of national borders.
Gross finds this spiritual cosmopolitanism embodied in the historical characters of the
Humboldt brothers. He writes that, even more than philosophy, the lives of Alexander
and Wilhelm von Humboldt demonstrate the spirit of cosmopolitanism that infuses
the Humboldt-Forum:
“To a greater degree than Kant and Hegel, the great system-building philosophers of German Idealism, the Brothers Humboldt stand for a non-dogmatic school of thought in which humanistic ideals, joy in researching and discovering the natural world and human cultures, appreciation for individual self-determination and historic-cultural uniqueness, cosmopolitanism and sound political judgment all combine with diplomatic finesse” (Gross 2018:11)

Gross’s statement portrays this “Humboldtian” cosmopolitanism as a personal disposition, the propensity to be curious about the world and to take “joy” in researching it. It involves the cultivation of these characteristics through education, embodied by Wilhelm, the founder of Humboldt University. It also necessitates that, once educated, the cosmopolitan subject balance prudently and “with diplomatic finesse” the many different, sometimes contradictory traits that Gross lists—knowing, for instance, when to balance “humanistic ideals” with “historic-cultural uniqueness.” The Humboldt brothers as models of and for cosmopolitanism were curious about the world but cautiously so, open to different world cultures but grounded in liberal, rational principles.
Alexander von Humboldt in particular embodies this Humboldtian cosmopolitan character in a very visual manner. The graphic display next to Gross’s article in the newsletter underscores the Humboldt-Forum’s emphasis on Alexander’s physical voyages as an embodiment of the spirit of cosmopolitanism. The designer of the page cut out, colored, and enlarged a print depicting Alexander von Humboldt and Aime Bonpland on their South American voyage. In the original print, Humboldt and Bonpland are depicted gazing up at a cascade of falling stars off the coast of South America, but the graphic designer has edited out the background of the print so that
the two figures now gaze with rapt attention at blank white paper. This stylistic omission emphasizes the postures of the men themselves, turned toward an invisible other, taking in the world with stern expressions. The editor of the print has removed not only the image of the stars but the image of a black man in the background of the print, occupied in the same act of gazing as Humboldt and Bonpland. The white, male, well-dressed bodies of Humboldt and Bonpland—not the body of the anonymous black man who has literally been cut out of the picture—represent on a very literal level the face of Gross’s “Humboldtian cosmopolitanism.” This face is not an image of the world itself but of a gaze toward the world, which de-emphasizes the objects of the gaze and over-emphasizes the fact of looking.

Like this image of Humboldt and Bonpland with the background cut out of it, the Humboldt-Forum’s rhetoric of cosmopolitanism is less about the world cultures on display there and more about the fact that they are on display in the first place. It represents Germany as the kind of country that encourages acting and thinking in cosmopolitan ways, and it represents the German visitors to the museum as cosmopolitans in their own right. Although on its website the Humboldt-Forum emphasizes that it will be “a palace for all”—rich and poor, young and old, German and non-German—there are also instances when its promoters imagine visitors to be specific kinds of people. For instance, an article in the same newsletter that printed Gross’s article promotes a digital interface for visitors to the museum that is currently being designed that will put visitors in the place of Alexander von Humboldt by

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15 See again “A Palace For All,” Humboldt-Forum im Berliner Schloss
leading interactive, exploratory exhibit tours (Holzer and Gourdin 2018:35). This didactic technology, the author hopes, will engage visitors’ potential for curiosity and spark interest in the museum among younger visitors. This projection into the future imagines a visiting public that is literally in the image of Alexander von Humboldt, promoting a technology that encourages a younger generation of museum-goers to discover their inner cosmopolitan.

In the way that both Gross and Holzer and Gourdin portray it, the Humboldt-Forum grafts cosmopolitan qualities, seen here to be individual and embodied, onto large publics. It enlists this particular valence of cosmopolitanism in the service of a national project of opening Germany and Germans up to the world. In this way, the Humboldt-Forum’s cosmopolitanism is similar to multiculturalism, embracing—indeed, actively taking pleasure in—cultural difference, but always in a way that reinforces the nation. As a mode of conceptualizing Germany’s openness to the world against the encroachment of globalization, cosmopolitanism has several advantages over multiculturalism. Whereas multiculturalism is a relatively recent phenomenon tied to the particular political event of immigration and changing population demographics, cosmopolitanism lays claim to universal applicability. It stands upon the shoulders of beloved (white, male) historical figures like the Humboldts and Kant who lived in the 18th century but aspired to think in universal ways that would carry them beyond the confines of their own time. As a cosmopolitan project, the Humboldt-Forum can claim not only to be responding to particular political buzzwords but to be acting according to a universalized, historically authorized drive for cultural understanding.
Claiming the cosmopolitan legacy of Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt also allows the Humboldt-Forum’s narrators to locate the museum within a specifically German historical narrative. Michelle Müntefering, the head of the newly created national German office for foreign cultural affairs, exemplifies this ability in a statement she made in an interview on the Humboldt-Forum and other topics in March 2018, in which she tells the interviewer that German cultural values are grounded in an Enlightenment-inspired openness to the world. She says that as a worker in cultural foreign policy, she is concerned with specific values: “Wir glauben an Demokratie, Meinungsfreiheit, und die Kraft der Aufklärung” [“We believe in democracy, freedom of opinion, and the power of the Enlightenment”] (Zekri 2018). In the next sentence, she tacks on the value of “Weltoffenheit” [openness to the world] to the list. The “we” in her sentence is vague, implicating perhaps Germans, perhaps Europeans, perhaps the world. As such, it extends itself across all those categories, giving these liberal, Enlightenment values at once a universal and a distinctly German tinge. As opposed to the mainstream discourse of European multiculturalism, which operates under the premises that traditionally homogenous European countries must be changed in order to incorporate cultural difference (Modood 1997), Müntefering’s invocation of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism implies that Germany was already, on a spiritual, philosophical level, open to cultural pluralism. Along the same lines, Gross’s Humboldtian cosmopolitanism finds the potential for pleasure in cultural difference from within German intellectual history rather than without. Neither figure claims that this particular openness to the world is something exclusively German, but the association itself between the German
enlightenment and the modern-day Weltoffenheit of the Humboldt-Forum is enough to symbolically Germanize the museum’s multicultural project.

**Conclusion**

When Angela Merkel announced in the press conference at the construction site of the Humboldt-Forum that the future museum represented Germany as part of a “global world,” she drew strategically upon the Humboldt-Forum’s power to embody multiple different orientations toward the world at once. The Humboldt-Forum configures Germany as global and as having always already been global, in a way that is open, curious, but grounded in itself. 2018, the moment in the “European adventure” to which Macron refers, is a different national moment than that in which the Humboldt-Forum was conceived. Marked by the unsettling rather than the strengthening of the European Union and an unprecedented resurgence of right-wing nationalism, the time in which the Humboldt-Forum will come into physical existence is one in which the museum’s capacity to Germanize multiculturalism is all the more urgent. Merkel made use of the unifying discourses that the Humboldt-Forum enabled at the March 2018 press conference, which allowed her to invoke both liberal and conservative values at a time when she was head of a coalition government between Germany’s liberal and conservative parties (Wüst 2018). She showed the Humboldt-Forum to be a rhetorical object that was and is quite practically useful for holding onto liberal values of inclusion against the threat of right-wing xenophobia.

For promoters of the Humboldt-Forum, however, the museum’s capacity to open up to the world is often not only a useful rhetorical tool but a value in and of
itself. The Humboldt-Forum, according to many of its administrators, has a tremendous capacity to break down boundaries: between the humanities and the sciences, art and ethnographica, past and present, left and right, self and other, East and West (and East and West Germany). This propensity for broad, boundaryless openness to the world, which Horst Bredekamp and Peter-Klaus Schuster describe as an “emphatischen, kritischen und permanent in Bewegung befindlichen Universalismus” [“emphatic, critical, and always-in-motion universalism”], is constructed by these authors to be important not only today but universally, across times, from the era of the Baroque palace to the Ancient Greek forums from which the Humboldt-Forum gets its name (Bredekamp and Schuster 2016:13). Like the tradition of German Idealism from which promoters like Lehmann and Bredekamp draw inspiration, the Humboldt-Forum embodies values of progress and an ever-broadening understanding of the world that lays claim to universal applicability. The cosmopolitan worldview of Alexander von Humboldt that valued knowledge for its own sake extends across time to the Humboldt-Forum’s mission as a universal museum.

Merkel’s use of the Humboldt-Forum’s cosmopolitanism to relate Germany to the world and Lehmann’s and Bredekamp’s use of the museum to come to a broader, more universal understanding of the world, are both reliant on an interpretation of a specific history, that of an enlightened, cosmopolitan 18th century. Real history, however, is unruly, and the Humboldt-Forum must contend with a slew of historical legacies that are not as useful for its mission of openness to the world as Alexander von Humboldt’s narrative. In order to successfully use the histories of the 18th
century, the administrators of the Humboldt-Forum must bypass the histories of imperialism, fascism, and communism from the 19th and 20th centuries. To some extent, their emphasis on Enlightenment-era cosmopolitanism itself deflects from other, unsavory histories. The image of Alexander von Humboldt, the independent, intellectually curious observer, stands in implicit contrast to the image of later German ethnographers, who were inextricably entangled in the exploitative structures of empire. Bose points out that although Alexander, too, was enabled by colonial structures, the empire he dealt with was Spanish and not German, which allows the promoters of the Humboldt-Forum to label his travels as pre-imperial, even anti-imperial (Bose 2016:123). While cosmopolitanism references a (fictionally) precolonial past, globalization emphasizes a postcolonial present. The forces of connectivity in “today’s globalized world” are more dispersed among nations, technologies, and transnational corporate powers than ever before; the power relationships between the first and third worlds are less easily discernable than in times when European countries explicitly held empires. As such, the language of “globalization” connotes dispersal of power, deemphasizing the role that unequal and oppressive colonial structures continue to play in the connectivity of the world.

The Humboldt-Forum’s administrators deal with the problems of history, however, not merely by avoidance but by incorporation. Just as proponents of the Humboldt-Forum aspire to neutralize the threat of globalization by containing it within the representational field of the museum, so too does the museum neutralize the threat of colonial and fascist histories by addressing them in its exhibits. In my next chapter, I examine the ways that administrators at various levels of the
Humboldt-Forum’s bureaucracy conceptualize the museum’s engagement with unsavory histories. I will argue that although many of the museum’s creators are critical of its history and intend to incorporate historical critique into the museum’s exhibits, these incorporations end up sanitizing history so that it is not a threat to the open-to-the-world liberal order to which the Humboldt-Forum’s administrators aspire.
CHAPTER 2: Additive (Neo)Liberalism and Historical Memory

“Ehm, warum ist die Historismus des Schlosses wichtig für die moderne Stadt?” I ask Wilhelm von Boddien, the head of the Förderverein Berliner Schloss, in an interview in June 2018. I stutter as I translate imperfectly into German a question that I had written out carefully in English, asking how the historicism of the Humboldt-Forum’s façade interacts with the modern city.

“Es ist kein Historismus,” he tells me immediately—“It is not historicist.” I am confused. To me, “historicism” had seemed an appropriate architectural term with which to describe the Humboldt-Forum, with its meticulously detailed reconstruction of the Berlin Palace’s façade. Boddien insists, however, that because the architecture of the Humboldt-Forum reconstructs the palace only partially, the project cannot be labeled historicist. Rather than merely imitating the architecture of pre-War Berlin, he continues, the Humboldt-Forum’s architecture will “rehabilitate” the city and “give back the dignity” (he switches into English) to Berlin’s architecture that was interrupted by the Second World War. In other published interviews, Boddien has been quoted saying that the reconstruction of the palace would constitute a “Schließen der Wunde” [“closing of the wound”] of the twentieth century, an act of making the city whole again after its division between East and West (Bose 2016:53).

Boddien’s sensitivity to my question about the Humboldt-Forum’s architectural nostalgia, as well as his curt, somewhat exasperated response, is evidence of the fact that he hears this complaint often. The Humboldt-Forum has been criticized left and right in popular newspapers, academic journals, and outright physical protests for its failure to adequately deal with unsavory histories—its critics
accuse it of erasing architecturally the histories of the Second World War and the
GDR and benefitting from neocolonial power imbalances by exhibiting the
ethnological collections. One article coins the term, “Entinnerung,” to describe the
Humboldt-Forum’s evasion of all these unsavory pasts, a play on words that replaces
the prefix in “Erinnerung” [“memory” or “remembrance”], with a negative prefix,
“ent:” the word might be translated as “unmemory” or “memory removal” (Youssefi
2017). As Boddien makes clear to me in our interview, however, the Humboldt-
Forum’s biggest proponents often see no problems with their own memory. Boddien
references the palace’s hybrid architecture as proof that the Humboldt-Forum is not a
mere recreation of an idealized past but rather a reinterpretation of it. Other prominent
museum administrators respond to critiques of the collections’ colonial history by
pointing to ways in which the future museum will represent this history. One
administrator I interview is confident enough in the museum’s historical
reflectiveness to tell me that the Humboldt-Forum “is going to be the chance finally
to bring in the center of Berlin [a museum that] deals at every turn with colonialism.”

The Humboldt-Forum’s critics’ claim that the museum erases troubling pasts
is at odds with its administrators’ claim that it will “deal” with them “at every turn.”
This disjuncture forms the foundation of this chapter, in which I analyze the various
ways that the Humboldt-Forum’s administrators address the unsavory histories of
Nazism, communism, and colonialism in which the museum is entangled. By whose
definition of “dealing” with history, I query, is the Humboldt-Forum dealing with its
pasts? What mechanisms allow the Humboldt-Forum’s administrators to see the
museum to be appropriately historically reflective when so many people outside the
institution criticize it for its historical forgetfulness? To examine the Humboldt-Forum’s approach to historical memory is to examine two distinct points of conflict: the conflict over Berlin’s architectural history incited by the Humboldt-Forum’s palatial façade and the conflict over Germany’s imperial history embedded in its collections. These debates have traditionally taken place separately, in separate moments in time, usually involving separate actors. Indeed, workers and administrators in these various fields often articulate a distinct divide between the outside and inside of the museum. Several of the curators I interview tell me emphatically that their work has nothing to do with the museum’s exterior architecture, and when I interview Boddien he is adamant that the ethnographic exhibits are none of his concern. Nevertheless, there is significant isomorphism between the way that the Humboldt-Forum’s advocates defend against each historical critique, and I have chosen to analyze both historical conflicts in this chapter, under the assertion that putting them into conversation with each other will offer insight into the broad discursive logics of the institution.

Throughout this chapter, I develop a concept of “addition” to theorize the Humboldt-Forum’s various ways of dealing with history. The structure of the Humboldt-Forum does not remove the memory of unsavory histories entirely, as some critics claim—rather, it incorporates historical reflectiveness into the broad schema of the museum in such a way that it does not threaten its existent narratives and display structures. Like the recurring motifs of globalism and cosmopolitanism described in the first chapter, the Humboldt-Forum administrators’ approaches to the challenges of history occur on the register of expansion; rather than altering the
underlying structure of the Berlin Palace or the ethnological collections, this logic puts forward, the Humboldt-Forum’s creators need only add to them, include more people, and incorporate more perspectives. This logic pervades the Humboldt-Forum differently at various levels of its administration, reflected in its architecture, taken up with vigor by its public voices, and taken up with much more ambivalence by individual actors within the institution.

Bose’s ethnography of the Humboldt-Forum also addresses the ways that various actors involved in the museum’s creation rationalize the colonial history of the collections. He coins the term, “strategic reflexivity” [“strategische Reflexivität”], to describe how the Humboldt-Forum promotes a certain amount of historical reflectiveness and anthropological “reflexivity” (self-reflectiveness) in its planned exhibits, but only in ways that do not disrupt the underlying power relationships involved in the Humboldt-Forum’s display structures (Bose 2016:260). Elizabeth Povinelli makes a similar claim in her critical examination of indigeneity and multicultural discourse in Australia, teasing out the ways that strategies of liberal multicultural inclusion reiterate settler colonial power relationships even as they expand definitions of what constitutes the cultural makeup of the nation state (2002). Museum anthropologist Nélia Dias critiques the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris along the same grounds, arguing that the museum’s aestheticizing gaze, which seeks to expand the definition of art to include non-Western artistic production, is another act of imperialism, which subsumes non-Western objects into European structures of viewing (2008).
I use the word, “addition,” in this chapter rather than using Bose’s term, “strategic reflexivity,” or calling on Povinelli’s critique of multiculturalism, in order to distinguish not only that the Humboldt-Forum’s historical reflectiveness reiterates postcolonial power imbalances but how it does so. I examine the Humboldt-Forum’s historical memory through a political economic lens, arguing that its moments of reflectiveness follow a logic of constant adding-on that is linked to capitalist expansion. This has, to some extent, always been true for ethnographic museums, whose collections were explicitly dependent on colonial channels of trade during the era of European imperialism (Penny 2002), but it might be seen to be especially true in the neoliberal era. In *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown argues that neoliberalism can be characterized as the application of economic logics to areas of political life previously governed by other logics. The neoliberal state, for instance, is managed increasingly as if it were a corporation, aiming to attract investors and facilitate growth (Brown 2015:25). The individual manages herself, Brown asserts, along the same “model of the market,” configured as a market actor even in spheres that do not directly involve money (Brown 2015:25). Economic logics themselves under the conditions of late capitalism shift to become more flexible, demanding flexibility of time and skills from both workers and corporations (Harvey 1989:147). They also shift to become more immaterial, reliant on the production not only of material commodities but of information (Harvey 1989:159). Brown portrays these pervading logics in Foucauldian terms, writing that “neoliberalism governs as sophisticated common sense,” shaping the bounds of what can be said and acted (Brown 2015:35).

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16 Brown articulates this trend in 2015. Looking back at the argument since the 2016 election, it is easy to see its enactment on an even grander scale in the Trump presidency.
I use Brown’s portrait of neoliberalism as a model for understanding the application of neoliberal economic logics to the Humboldt-Forum. The Humboldt-Forum’s logic of addition is a manifestation of capitalist expansion with a distinctly neoliberal tinge, as the solutions it generates to the problems of history not only require expansion but flexibility. In the era of the information economy, the museum’s collections no longer expand materially, as they had done in the 19th century, but rather they expand on ideas and networks. As opposed to an explicitly colonial register of expansion, which subsumes and assimilates the areas over which it expands, the Humboldt-Forum’s expansiveness adds on perspectives but does not assimilate or homogenize them. This amalgamation of perspectives diversifies the museum’s representation of the world and ultimately obscures the continuing material injustices in which the museum is entangled.

**The Humboldt-Forum’s Architectural Histories**

Berlin’s architectural landscape is a testament to a myriad of approaches to what Boddien would describe as the “wounds” of the city’s history. The city is overwhelmingly modern, on both its east and west sides, a result of post-war development projects in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s (Stangl 2008:249). Several people I interview emphatically lament the ugliness of these mid-century modernist buildings. Boddien tells me that “Berlin lost its history” when it was reconstructed after the war, as the modernist architects who designed the new city had paid little heed to historical continuity. One Humboldt-Forum administrator I speak to tells me a bit facetiously that “Berlin was destroyed twice”—once by the bombs in World War Two and once
by the modernist architects.” Nevertheless, Berlin is also home to several notable reconstructions of historical buildings, like the Schloss Charlottenburg, another former Prussian palace in the far west of the city, and the Alte Museum on the Museum Island. In both cases, the building planners meticulously researched the histories of the buildings and rebuilt them to look as if they had not been bombed in the war (Eissenhauer et al. 2012). The Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche [memorial church] was famously never reconstructed, and its remains still stand on Kurfürstendamm street as a reminder of the destruction of the war (Zill 2012). Other reconstruction projects have taken a halfway path, like the Neue Museum on the Museum Island, which the SPK reconstructed post-reunification in such a way that visitors can see a marked difference between the original structures and the new aspects of the architecture, making apparent the lines along which the building was repaired (Dolgoy 2017:331).

Another such hybrid of old and new structures that was constructed post-reunification, and which resembles the Humboldt-Forum itself, at least superficially, is the Bundestag (former Reichstag) building. Norman Foster, the head architect for the project, designed the building in the 1990s—not long before Franco Stella designed the Humboldt-Forum—to include a modern interior that nevertheless preserved the exterior façade (Koepnick 2001). Like the east wing of the Humboldt-Forum, the glass dome on top of the building is the only hint from the outside that the interior is completely new. Foster stated in an interview that the hybrid architecture was an attempt to engage with the building’s troubled history without erasing or romanticizing it (Dempsey 1994). Foster intended for the floor plan of the building,
which emphasized one central first floor, to underscore equality, and for the glass aspects of the building to emphasize transparency (Koepnick 2001:311). There are spots on the old walls that still have bullet holes in them from the Battle of Berlin in 1945, a conscious decision to keep the memory of the building’s history alive (Kluth 2014). The reconstruction of the Bundestag after Germany’s reunification was in line with a postmodern strain of architectural thought in which architects sought to express a more active relationship to history than modernism’s relentless forward-looking. They did so by fusing modernist aesthetics and technologies with historical structures, taking inspiration from history but not necessarily copying it (Otero-Pailos 2010). In Germany, Foster’s postmodern ideas for the Bundestag’s architecture met a resurgence of nationalism after reunification and an animosity toward the ugly modernism of the Soviets (Binder 2010:28). A hybrid architecture for the Bundestag allowed a symbol for the city that was at once modern and historically rooted, a statement on the democracy and transparency of the modern German government that did not require the demolition of older structures like the GDR’s demolition of the Berlin Palace had.

Despite their outward similarities, there is one essential difference between the Humboldt-Forum and the Bundestag: unlike the Bundestag, the Humboldt-Forum was reconstructed entirely from scratch. The GDR’s destruction of the Berlin Palace in 1950 had left no façade to preserve, and indeed the construction of the Humboldt-Forum necessitated the further destruction of the Palast der Republik. Its façade is thus not as much a testament to history as it is an imitation of it, a structure that looks historical from afar but does not bear any indexations of the passage of time. It is
seamless, uneroded, and unlike the Bundestag, void of bullet holes. Critics accuse the Humboldt-Forum of cherry picking a favorable history at the expense of an uglier one. The fact that the construction of the Humboldt-Forum necessitated the destruction of the Palast der Republik leads authors like Rebecca Clare Dolgoy to write about the Humboldt-Forum as a form of erasure that literally covers over the history of the GDR. Dolgoy argues that the SPK ought to have chosen a messier architectural scheme for the Humboldt-Forum, one that would incorporate the Palast der Republik and, like the Neues Museum, make visible the process of reconstruction (Dolgoy 2017:331).

Proponents of the Humboldt-Forum argue that the building is not intended to recreate the past but to reimagine it for modern Germany. Principally, assert several prominent leaders of the Humboldt-Forum, the reconstructed palace will be open to a much broader public than the old palace. Franco Stella, the project’s architect, writes that one of the chief differences between the Humboldt-Forum and the former Berlin Palace will be one of accessibility. The building includes several large open spaces, which echo the old palace courtyards but are intended to be used for different purposes—Stella asserts, more as town squares or public “Agoras” than aristocratic pleasure gardens (Stella 2013:37). In his article on the Berlin Palace’s Kunstkammer as the inspiration for the Humboldt-Forum, Horst Bredekamp writes that the Humboldt-Forum will recreate the essence of a Kunst- or Wunderkammer, a precursor to modern museums common to many 16th- and 17th-century aristocrats’ palaces that displayed exotic valuables from around the world. He writes that the Humboldt-Forum will preserve the playful eclecticism and inherent interdisciplinarity of the
Kunstkammer, but it will do so in a way that invites audiences in rather than keeps them out (Bredekamp and Eissenhauer 2013:50).

That the substance of both Bredekamp’s and Stella’s critique of the history of the Berlin Palace hinges on the issue of accessibility is no accident. Bredekamp might have chosen a number of aspects of the Berlin Palace’s Kunstkammer to critique other than the exclusivity of its audience. For instance, he might have condemned the institution’s exoticization of foreign cultures or its ties to European imperial pursuits in the Americas, a relationship that the Humboldt-Forum’s critics have certainly been quick to point out (Bose 2016:123; Ha 2917:28). Instead, he holds the essence of the Kunstkammer up as an example of the kind of affective, playful relationship with objects the Humboldt-Forum ought to foster and amends its history only by saying that such an orientation toward the world should be accessible to everyone. Historical reflectiveness, in his piece, thus only functions in one direction: one can condemn the Berlin Palace’s Kunstkammer for not having enough of something—visitors—but not for having too much of something else—exoticism, imperial history, etc. Bredekamp’s amendment to the Berlin Palace’s history manifests itself as an addition, which preserves the core of one of the palace’s former functions and moves outwards from it.

Ultimately, this additive approach to historical reflectiveness creates the impression that the Humboldt-Forum is an amendment to the city’s architectural history, as opposed to a violent intercession in it. The architecture, with its modernist wing fitted neatly between two baroque wings, juxtaposing but never mixing the two styles, makes it seem as if the Berlin Palace had already been standing and the
architect had simply added modernist elements to it. It looks from the outside as if its history were akin to that of the Bundestag, which preserved an old façade rather than building a copy. In effect, it embodies a less radical form of change than the Berlin Palace’s actual history does. The building puts forth an image of a past that can be drawn on and altered to accommodate modern needs but not one that poses a problem to the present. Like the history of the Kunstkammer, the problems with the palace’s past—both the history of aristocracy that Bredekamp and Stella critique and the histories of fascism and communism that caused its destruction—are never so dire that they cannot be somehow turned productive.

This additive approach to the past is thus an easy history, encouraging contemplation but never necessitating confrontation with traumatic pasts. It makes history useful, bringing to the fore the aspects of the space’s history that, as I show in chapter one, can be instrumentalized in the service of contemporary crises of liberalism and relegating to the background historical moments that do not serve these ends. Boddien’s description of the reconstruction project as an attempt to “rehabilitate” the city and close its “wounds” is apt in that closing wounds lessens pain. The Humboldt-Forum’s postmodern combination of old and new architectural elements make it impossible to pretend as if the 20th century never happened and the old Berlin Palace were still standing, but it takes away the eyesore from those histories, the lingering everyday ugliness that the Palast der Republik had embodied. The histories of the GDR and the Second World War that it papers over can be conceptualized, but for a passerby walking past the new building, they do not have to be immediately, aesthetically felt.
Colonial History

During my fieldwork, I had many casual conversations with everyday people who were not involved in the Humboldt-Forum. In several of these conversations, when I told people that I was studying the Humboldt-Forum, they did not know what museum I was referring to until I told them that it was located in the rebuilt Berlin Palace. The pattern confirmed what one curator I interviewed had told me: that the architecture of the Humboldt-Forum and the debate surrounding it are much more publicly visible than the collections that will be displayed inside it. There has nevertheless been significant public controversy over the Humboldt-Forum’s entanglement with imperialism. The activist group, No Humboldt 21, protested the museum’s construction in 2013 on the explicit grounds of colonial history. The group organized alternative museum exhibits like the “Anti-Humboldt Box,” a play on words referencing the Humboldt-Forum’s promotional exhibition space, the Humboldt Box, in which they made explicit their opposition to the project and hoped to garner support for its cancellation.17 The Humboldt-Forum was, of course, not cancelled, but No Humboldt 21 still exists and has supported the publication of several important articles urging that the new museum endorse more active repatriation policies (Heller 2017:10). There has thus been significant opposition to the Humboldt-Forum on the grounds of its colonial history for quite a long time. These debates entered into a broader public consciousness as a result of a scandal in the summer of 2017. Art historian Bénédicte Savoy publicly quit the Humboldt-

Forum’s advisory board, calling the museum out for refusing to engage substantively with colonial history, particularly for neglecting to take seriously issues of postcolonial provenance. Newspapers quoted Savoy telling an interviewer that “das Humboldt-Forum ist wie Tschernobyl” [“the Humboldt-Forum is like Chernobyl”], in reference to the incompetence of its bureaucracy (Häntzschel 2017). One exhibit designer tells me that since the Savoy scandal, the museum as a whole has been more cautious about how it represents colonial history; however, another administrator tells me that the affair has had minimal effect on the museum’s plans.

The bulk of this subsection analyzes a document written before the events of 2017 but that nevertheless still reflects the Humboldt-Forum’s position in relation to colonial history. In 2016, the former director of the ethnological museum, Viola König, published an article entitled, “Versuch einer Kritik der Kritik” [“Critique of the critique”], in which she responded to criticism that opponents leveled against the Humboldt-Forum’s entanglement with colonial history. She responds to one author who accuses the Humboldt-Forum’s curators of erasing imperial history, writing that the Humboldt-Forum will recall colonial history—indeed, that it will actively thematize it (2016:223). König references the Humboldt-Forum’s “modular” exhibit structure as one aspect of the museum that will enable this level of historical reflectiveness. The permanent exhibits in the Humboldt-Forum will be structured not into comprehensive exhibits but into individual, flexible “modules,” each approaching the objects from its own perspective (2016:237). Certain modules will focus on individual geographic regions, others on specific narratives or social processes, but there will be no central narrative to any of the exhibits other than a
broad organization of space by continent. König asserts that the “multiperspectivity” enabled by the museum’s modular structure allows curators more room to include postcolonial perspectives than a traditional museum would. Flexible exhibits can adapt more easily to evolving conversations on race and otherness. They can more easily incorporate postcolonial perspectives without unsettling too drastically the museum’s existing narratives.

The multiperspectivity to which König refers might best be exemplified by the Humboldt-Forum’s exhibition plan for the Benin bronzes. British colonial authorities looted the majority of sculptures from the Benin Kingdom in present-day Nigeria in 1897, and the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office sold much of the collection to European and American museums (Wood 2011:121). The sculptural work gained fame in Europe for its naturalism, in contrast to the abstraction of much other African Art (Chapuis et al. 2017:36). The French government recently announced its intent to return its collection of bronzes to Nigeria; the British Museum has agreed to “return” its collection of bronzes to the National Museum of Nigeria, but only on loan (Monks 2018; Ross 2018). The Berlin Ethnological museum, however, which holds the second largest collection of the bronzeworks, has not demonstrated any intention to return the artworks, and there is currently an entire exhibit module being planned for the bronzes in the future Humboldt-Forum. The exhibit plan for the bronzes as of summer 2018 shows a wall of bronze panels, on the other side of which, I learn in an interview with an exhibit designer, will be displayed a collection of narratives from
various perspectives on the history of the objects. The back side of the wall will include perspectives from Nigerians, Brits, and Germans, among others, about the controversy surrounding Western Museums’ possession of the sculptures. The goal behind the exhibit, I learn, is to encourage visitors to question the presence of the sculptures in the museum and come to their own conclusions about them. It will leave the answers to these questions purposefully open, shying away from endorsing the Berlin museum’s possession of the objects but also from openly rejecting it.

In her article, König references the Humboldt Lab Dahlem as another step the Humboldt-Forum is taking to address colonial history. The Humboldt Lab Dahlem was a series of workshops involving scholars and museum professionals who met between 2013 and 2015 to think up innovations in museum exhibit design with an eye to critically examining colonial histories (Bose 2016:263). The initiative resulted in several temporary exhibits at the Ethnological Museum in Dahlem, as well as a slew of performances and art installations, many in collaboration with artists and scholars from source communities. König references in particular one chapter of the workshops entitled, “Fragen Stellen” [“Asking Questions”] in which participants addressed the questions and crises of representing cultural others in a Western museum (2016:238). She holds this colloquium up as an example to show that, contrary to what critics may say, there are significant people involved in the museum who “interessieren sich für aktuelle Fragen und Entwicklungen” [“are interested in current questions and developments”] in anthropology and museum studies.

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18 The exhibit designer I interviewed showed me a large folder with images and text on the current museum plan, but she was adamant that the plans were not set in stone and were subject to change. Ten months later, in April 2019, they may have changed significantly.
König’s emphasis on the question as a mode of dealing with the problems of postcolonial power dynamics in the museum is telling. Questioning, like the “multiperspectivity” of the exhibit design, opens up discourse to many possible answers; it broadens the scope of what can and cannot be said. This broadening effect is often very generative and can lead to provocative answers. König’s description of the exhibits’ questioning process, however, reifies the process of questioning as a goal in itself rather than an activity intended to produce possible answers. The reified question waylays the possibility of direct critique, making it difficult to make statements that outright condemn the actions of the museum or the former German empire.

Here, once again, appears the underlying additive logic of the Humboldt-Forum. There are multiple ways that König might have phrased the Humboldt-Forum’s response to the colonial history of the collections. Instead of demonstrating how the museum will include historically reflective elements, she might have written that the museum itself will be historically reflective. The Humboldt-Forum’s promoters do not shy away from throwing around broad descriptors to articulate the museum’s being—“a palace for all,” “a true place of world cultures,” “a town square” (Neumann and Wowereit 2013:9; Stella 2013:39). Postcolonial reflectiveness, it seems, does not make the cut as an appropriate descriptor; it is an adjective added as an afterthought to a list of identifiers that remain themselves essentially unaltered. Just as Bredekamp’s and Stella’s emphasis on the inclusiveness of the new and improved Berlin Palace does not alter the core of what the palace stands for, König’s emphasis on multiperspectivity creates room for postcolonial critique but does not
make the museum itself a postcolonially critical institution. It implies that historical self-criticism can only be present if it exists in addition to the already established narratives of Western knowledge production and Humboldtian exploration.

König is not the only person who relies on the logic of addition as a defense against postcolonial critiques of the museum. Neil MacGregor gave an interview in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung shortly after the scandal with Bénédicte Savoy, which the newspaper titled, “Wir sind Teil der Lösung, nicht das Problem” [“We are part of the solution, not the problem”]. In the transcript of the interview, he argues that the Humboldt-Forum will deal with its colonial past by facilitating open dialog between Germany and its former colonies and by including representatives from formerly colonized countries in a meaningful way on the museum’s Foundation Council (MacGregor 2017). MacGregor, like König, evokes the “multiperspectivity” trend in a later op-ed, referencing a TED talk by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie titled, “The Danger of a Single Story.” In the talk, Adichie criticizes narratives about Africa that are limited to portrayals of poverty and powerlessness—a lesson that, MacGregor writes, the Humboldt-Forum takes to heart. He writes that the Humboldt-Forum will present a portrait of formerly colonized peoples that is nuanced and multi-sided, resulting from generative cooperations with museums and artists from around the world (2018). He furthermore accuses the Humboldt-Forum’s critics of having too narrow a story about the Humboldt-Forum, asserting that critics can only see the imperial roots of the Humboldt-Forum rather than the good it might

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do in today’s world. Like König, MacGregor’s solution to the problems of colonial history is to add on top of the colonialism a dash of postcolonial reflectiveness and to condemn opponents’ attempts to make a straightforward critique. The problem is not, according to this logic, that colonial narratives are wrong but that there simply are not enough critical narratives to balance them out.

At the center of the Humboldt-Forum’s entanglement with colonial history lies the unavoidable material fact from which König and MacGregor both deflect deftly: the Humboldt-Forum displays things—physical objects—of which Germany never should have come into possession in the first place. The steps that the Humboldt-Forum’s leadership is taking to include the voices of non-Western people in the exhibit design, to represent cultural others in nuanced ways, and to be open about colonial history within exhibits are important and meaningful changes to the museum’s politics of display. According to one curator I speak to, the Humboldt-Forum’s plans to represent colonial history are much more thorough than those of the British Museum or the Museé du Quai Branly, the two museums to which it is most often compared. They are nevertheless only changes on the level of representation, none of which correlate to a serious reevaluation of German possession of the objects on display. In her article, König writes as if rethinking the Berlin museums’ representation of cultural others were the same thing as reevaluating their possession of cultural others’ objects. She addresses criticism of the Humboldt-Forum, the most prominent of which has to do with the museum’s display of stolen objects, but instead of answering the question of whether objects with colonial histories should be displayed in the Humboldt-Forum—or on whose terms—she answers the question of
how colonial history should be represented. An anthropologist, König references the oft-cited “crisis of representation” [“Krise der Präsentation”] in the field of anthropology, explaining how it is important to unsettle essentialist assumptions of “was ist ‘afrikanisch’ und was ist ‘arabisch’” [“what is ‘African’ and what is ‘Arabic’”] (2016:238). This comparison conflates the academic discipline of anthropology with the institution of the ethnographic museum, treating the museum as if it were a book or a lecture rather than a material institution in charge of physical objects. That the “crisis” facing the Humboldt-Forum is not only a crisis of representation but of material inequality is obscured in König’s account. König’s and MacGregor’s attempts to add on historically reflective narratives to the Humboldt-Forum’s structures of display waylay the possibility of subtracting physical objects from the collections. The museum’s leaders phrase the problem of its past and inherited historical legacy as one of chronically not having enough—visitors, voices, and perspectives—deflecting as they do so from the crises of the museum’s legacy that cannot be solved by adding on.

Bureaucracy

I do not suggest that König and MacGregor are the sole authors of this narrative of addition, nor do I claim that their reliance on this discourse is intentional or even conscious. The Humboldt-Forum as an institution is, indeed, beyond any one person’s ability to control; its very structure eschews individual authorship. Subject to frequent changes in leadership and reliant on cooperation between multiple different organizations, the Humboldt-Forum is a bureaucratic creation. König herself
describes the institution in a 2012 report on the history of the museum’s development as a “Maschine, die weiter läuft…” [“machine that keeps running”] in reference to its by now infamous bureaucratic structure (König and Scholz 2012:7). Bose quotes this passage in the introduction to his ethnography, pointing out how König’s construction of the sentence obscures the subjects that cause the museum to move forward, implying that the “machine” of the institution moves itself forward, outside the control of human agents (Bose 2016:1). That König, a person in a position of leadership within the Humboldt-Forum, should make such a claim is an indication of how intensely it is felt that the museum’s bureaucracy has a mind of its own. Lower-level curators with whom I speak during my fieldwork confirm to an even greater degree that their own words and actions interact in ambivalent ways with the broad bureaucratic structure of the museum. The work of the many administrators of the Humboldt-Forum both shapes and is shaped by the museum’s bureaucracy.

The “multiperspectivity” that König attributes to the Humboldt-Forum’s exhibits is enacted materially in its bureaucratic structure. Just like the plurality of historical perspectives that visitors will be able to see within each exhibit, the museum itself is shaped by a plurality of institutional perspectives. Until May 2018, the museum had three directors—Horst Bredekamp, Hermann Parzinger, and Neil MacGregor—and even now that Hartmut Dorgerloh is the museum’s sole director, his directorial power is limited. He still must pay heed to the Humboldt-Forum’s various component organizations—the Ethnological Museum, the Museum of Asian Art, Humboldt University, the city of Berlin, and the SPK—relying on their cooperation

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20 The phrase might be literally translated as, “machine that runs forward,” implying movement in a specific direction.
and subject to their timelines and structures of work (Häntzschel 2018). Neither the Humboldt-Forum nor the Ethnological Museum inside it actually own the objects set to be displayed in the new museum: like all collections in Berlin’s national museums, the ethnological collection belongs legally to the SPK.21 From this perspective, König and MacGregor’s neglect of the issue of possession in their defenses of the museum is intimately related to the fact that under the museum bureaucracy’s layout of power, neither König nor MacGregor has the authority to offer objects for repatriation. The jobs of König and MacGregor, as the former director of the ethnological museum and former co-director of the Humboldt-Forum respectively, are exclusively concerned with the display of the objects. Multiperspectivity, as enacted in the museum’s bureaucratic structure, thus disperses institutional power in a way that defers accountability. The logic of addition, which manifests itself in the material adding-on of institutions to the Humboldt-Forum’s organizational structure, thus hinders repatriation in a very literal way, creating a bureaucratic milieu in which structural change is, if not impossible, certainly discouraged.

In June 2018, I interview Max Müller, a researcher who works for the Humboldt-Forum Kultur GmBH, an intermediary organization created to oversee the museum’s opening and coordinate between the various institutions involved.22 Müller is the administrator who tells me that the Humboldt-Forum will be “the chance” to create a museum “that deals at every turn with colonialism.” The relationship he communicates with me between himself and the institution is much more complex

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than those communicated by the museum’s public figures like König and MacGregor who must to some extent act as voices for the entire museum. During our conversation, I notice many of the same additive discursive patterns that are present in König’s and MacGregor’s public defense of the museum, but Müller is more ambivalent, seeming at times to move away from the museum’s public narrative and at others to embrace it.

Müller expresses great excitement about his involvement in the ways that the Humboldt-Forum is “dealing” with colonial history, if not on the level of repatriation then certainly on the level of representation. He tells me in detail about the educational modules that the Humboldt-Forum Kultur GmbH is administering, which will be interspersed among the ethnological exhibits and will offer audiences of all ages critical perspectives on the histories of the objects. Temporary exhibits, created in tandem with artists and curators from “source communities,” will delve into “the more relevant, contemporary” issues facing the objects’ countries of origin. His earlier claim that the museum will “deal at every turn” with colonial history is meant quite literally. He tells me that he thinks the design of the Humboldt-Forum (as of June 2018) will make it impossible for visitors to avoid confronting colonialism and its legacies. Although similar to König’s and MacGregor’s descriptions of how the Humboldt-Forum will address colonial history, Müller’s description is more radical, claiming that the Humboldt-Forum will not only include postcolonial perspectives but make them an unavoidable aspect of the visitor’s experience. It is impossible to know at this point who is right or how present the issue of colonial history really will be in the Humboldt-Forum’s exhibits because the museum has not yet taken physical form,
and its designs are still in flux. I do not make an attempt in this thesis to predict the future layout of the Humboldt-Forum, but it is telling ethnographic information in and of itself that Müller’s account varies so significantly from those of König and MacGregor. Perhaps they are looking at the same display plans and emphasizing different aspects; perhaps there is a discrepancy between the layout of the museum in 2018 when I spoke to Müller and in 2016 when König published her article; or perhaps the museum’s bureaucratic structure makes it unclear for even those deeply involved in its planning process to know for sure what it will look like.

Müller is, however, not entirely divorced from the additive discourse that pervades the Humboldt-Forum. As much as he emphasizes historical critique in the exhibits, there are also times in our interview where he comes off as much more conservative. He tells me that while Germany’s critical attitude to the past is admirable, from an outsider’s perspective it often seems excessive, such that Germany cannot effectively celebrate and advertise its positive aspects. He gives me the example of how everyone knows that the Rosetta Stone is at the British Museum and the Mona Lisa is at the Louvre, but few people know that the famous bust of Nefertiti is at the Neues Museum in Berlin. “It’s time to get around,” he says, to talking about the good things that German institutions have to offer, in addition to being appropriately critical of the past. These notes of competition between Berlin and Paris and London are strange because a few minutes earlier he had criticized other Western European global museums for their lack of postcolonial reflection. It seems to be of little import to him that many of the good things that the British Museum has to offer are precisely the things about which he complains it is not
adequately historically reflective—the Rosetta Stone, the Elgin Marbles, and the largest collection of Bronzes from the Benin Kingdom, among many other things. He makes no attempt to reconcile this disjuncture between wanting the Humboldt-Forum to more effectively advertise its assets and wanting it to more radically criticize them. He aspires to the broad, expansive globality of the British Museum but condemns the British Museum’s entrenchment in colonial history, as if they were not connected. In fact, he does not acknowledge a disjuncture at all between these two orientations.

Here Müller reiterates the same fundamental disconnect between saying and doing that König and MacGregor do. He focuses on the museum’s ability to do representational justice to the original owners of the objects it displays, but simultaneously he lauds its expansive global character and compares it favorably to the British Museum and the Louvre. These two attitudes can only exist together if material justice does not accompany representational justice, if the museum’s postcolonial reflectiveness does not go as far as to threaten the presence of the objects themselves in the collections. Although Müller is more explicit than König or MacGregor about the bureaucratic barriers that prevent the Humboldt-Forum from being the agent of repatriation, the very logic of his aspirations for the museum is precipitated on the difficulty of returning objects. The ambivalence of his approach to colonial history shows how the logic of addition works on both a discursive and a bureaucratic level. It is embedded in the Humboldt-Forum’s convoluted mishmash of organizational cooperations and also in the structures of language that even critical participants like Müller take up.
Conclusion

The logic of addition economizes on history, minimizing historical waste. Museum administrators’ attempts to make right the colonial history of the Humboldt-Forum’s collections are all premised on doing so without sustaining material losses from the collections. They condone historical reflectiveness, but only insofar as the net benefit for the museum is positive—only if the past does not become a problem for the present. While the administrators’ approach to colonial history does less to confront this history than it seems on the outside to do, the palace façade functions in reverse, creating the impression of an intervention into history that is less radical than it actually is, imagining an alternative history in which Berlin never lost the aesthetic resource of the palace in the first place. Instead of portraying an already existent past as unproblematic for the present, the architecture inserts an unproblematic past (or less problematic past) in the place of a problematic one. Both ways of dealing with the past avoid confrontation with it, making the past work in the service of the contemporary liberal order.

The museum’s solution of adding on more and more ideas and perspectives to unsavory histories in order to make them less unsavory echoes the underlying logics of capitalism, which are predicated on the need for constant, regular growth. Marx pinpoints this tendency in Capital, writing that capitalism not only produces surplus but requires surplus (Marx 1977). It was this need for permanent growth that fueled European colonialism, as European companies needed to expand to new suppliers of raw materials and consumers of commodities in order to sustain their own production (Nimtz 2002). From the beginning, imperial expansion along economic grounds was
tied to the expansion of museums—from the eclectic collections of exotica that populated the early Wunderkammer to the systematic collections of artifacts (and remains) of so-called primitive people in 19th-century ethnographic museums (Bose 2016:125; Bennett et al. 2017). As colonial political structures extracted economic resources from colonies, they also extracted cultural resources, which accumulated in European museums and fueled an ever-expanding body of academic knowledge about the world (Said 1979). It is no coincidence that the peak of museums’ aspirations to academic universalism happened concurrently with the peak of European empire—ever expanding economic resources corresponded, it would seem, with an ever-expanding drive to know and contain the world.

The Humboldt-Forum is being built well after this era of explicit colonial expansion and was indeed designed to eschew the universalizing, hierarchical impulses of 19th-century museums. Its expansiveness is more easily divorced from the literal processes of imperial expansion that initially made the collections possible. Rather than expanding its collection of objects, the museum’s administrators focus on expanding its collection of ideas. In accordance with the underlying logics of neoliberalism, the museum will foster a multi-sided, flexible, and ever-changing representation of the world. It will add on many different perspectives without seeking to directly assimilate those perspectives into one, universalized worldview. While this additive valence of the motif of expansion might on the outside seem to be less oppressive than direct colonial expansion, it is nevertheless still premised on the same material collections. Its reiteration of colonial power dynamics is more insidious than the colonial museums of the 19th century, obscuring the continuing material
imbalances that make it possible. In my next chapter, I examine what consequences this analysis of the Humboldt-Forum’s additive discourse has for the study of museums and liberalism in general.
CHAPTER 3: The Problem with Postmodernism

Having established an analysis of the Humboldt-Forum’s discourses of addition, expansion, and evasion in the previous two chapters, I turn in this chapter to academic literature on museums and the politics of representation. I suggest that my analysis of the Humboldt-Forum can offer new perspectives on the way that museums work with and against oppressive colonial politics. The Humboldt-Forum crafts new relationships between itself and the world that are expansive and multi-sided—and that reproduce neocolonial structures of power not despite but because of their expansiveness. I problematize the influence of postmodernism and anthropological reflexivity on the field of museum studies, asserting that in the case of the Humboldt-Forum, a postmodern commitment to the multiplicity of truth has a nullifying effect on the possibility of change. In the last section, I push back against the pervasiveness of the Humboldt-Forum’s discourse of expansion and briefly foray into what it might look like to think outside this discourse.

Foucault, Postmodernism, and Museums’ Relation to the World

In his essay, “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault coins the term, “heterotopia,” which he defines as a space in a culture or society in which “all other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 1986:24). He details several examples of heterotopic spaces, including cemeteries, prisons, gardens, libraries, and museums. These spaces are located inextricably within the cultural contexts they represent, but they are also usually separated from the outside world by barriers and rituals that
make them “other” from it. They fulfill various functions: many, including museums, take on an ordering function, reflecting and reproducing relationships of power. Much anthropological scholarship on museums since Foucault has borrowed from this framework for understanding how museums interact with the world outside their walls. Tony Bennet’s genealogy of 19th-century museums, for instance, examines museums’ role in the creation of new, bourgeois publics in 19th-century Europe (1995). He argues that museums were sites in which the changing role of the state to its population could be reinforced, both through the order of museums’ exhibits and the management of visitors’ behavior while inside them. As heterotopias, they reproduced power relationships in a way that was both mimetic and embodied, both on the register of representation and on the level of the conditioning of bodily habits in real, physical space.

*Collecting, Ordering, Governing*, a collectively written volume edited by Bennett, takes a similar look at museums’ governing capacity with a specific focus on colonialism. The central tenet of the book is that museums reproduce colonial orders through the material ordering of their collections. The first chapter points to an example of an ethnographic exhibit from around the turn of the century in Australia, which displayed an array of aboriginal weapons organized according to a cultural evolutionist logic that depicted aboriginals as having evolved from using sticks to boomerangs to swords (2017:11). This display reproduced in material form the cultural evolutionist theories in anthropology at the time that insisted that the direction of human progress was always inevitably toward the technologies and aesthetics of the West. The Australian state’s policies toward indigenous peoples at
the time followed the same logic, seeking to assimilate aboriginal people into the settler colonial culture and perpetuating their erasure through the myth that they were already, inevitably dying away. These representations of indigenous people thus reproduced state violence by mimicking the logics of indigenous erasure visually and materially, feeding off of and into the power structures of settler colonialism (2017:13).

Scholarship on contemporary museums’ relationship to ongoing colonial histories tends to focus on the ways that museums either carry forward, in generally more nuanced ways, the same ordering colonial logics, or try to break from them. Nélia Dias’s critique of the Musée du Quai Branly, for instance, argues that the museum’s aestheticization of its objects perpetuates older French colonial logics of assimilation by subsuming non-Western objects into Western conceptions of fine art (2008:305). In her book, *Decolonizing Museums*, Amy Lonetree examines several case studies of both Western museums and tribal museums, looking at the positive ways that these museums tackle the settler colonial history of museums in the United States. She asserts that the museums’ commitment to telling critical histories and creating exhibits collaboratively have a decolonizing power within the oppressive structures of settler colonialism (2012).

Within the field of museology itself, museum practitioners address these same questions from a practical standpoint. In her article, “The Real Multiculturalism,” Amalia Mesa-Bains addresses the problems of museums in a postcolonial era, asking how museums should respond to entrenched structures of racial violence. Her conclusion is that, against the background of museum’s historical entanglement with
structural oppression, “outreach” programs are not enough to democratize museums; rather, museums must involve the publics they serve and the cultures they display in the process of creating exhibits (2012:113). Mesa-Bains problematizes the way that colonial practices of collecting created false divisions between “fine art” and “folk art” (between West and Rest), and she says that museums ought to work to blur these boundaries (2012:107). The Humboldt-Forum takes after these postcolonial developments in museology. The emphasis that its creators put on its openness and flexibility is in part a reaction against the totalizing, ordering logics of colonial-era ethnographic museums. In opposition to colonial order, the Humboldt-Forum markets disorder—an amalgamation of perspectives rather than a unifying organizational structure. Its promoters characterize this chaos as democratic, even anti-colonial; Horst Bredekamp and Peter-Klaus Schuster call it an “antikoloniale[n] Universalismus” [“anti-colonial universalism’”] (2016:15).

These developments in the critical field of museum studies and the practical field of museology are both in keeping with the postmodern moment in culture and academia. Notoriously difficult to define, “postmodernism” refers generally to an ongoing trend in interpretations of the world that eschews the positivist assumption of a singular, universal truth (Calinescu 1987:275). It involves a blurring of distinctions—between representation and reality, self and other, fact and fiction, subject and object. In blurring these distinctions, postmodernism brings to the fore the involvement of the author, the academic, and the narrator in the stories they tell, doing away with the perceived objectivity gained by the construction of distance between the author and the object of representation (Connor 2004). Postmodernism
was one of the theoretical inspirations for the “reflexive turn” in anthropology in the 1980s, in which anthropologists interrogated their own roles and positions of power in relation to the people they studied (Clifford 1984). It is this commitment to blurring boundaries that led Michael M. Ames, former director of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, to write in 1992 that contemporary museums participated in an age of “deconstruction”—that the movement to make museums more critically self-reflective and open to pluralistic authorship was part of a postmodern turn toward breaking down boundaries between self and other (2012:89). Against the history of colonial ordering logics, academics like Ames saw postmodern boundarylessness and self-reflection to have a decolonizing potential, disrupting colonial order by renegotiating authorship.

Escape from hierarchical structures of display, however, does not necessarily mean escape from colonial power dynamics. If the ethnographic museums of the 19th century reproduced colonial violence by mimicking hierarchical order, the Humboldt-Forum might be seen to mimetically reproduce new kinds of postcolonial governmentality. The postcolonial structures of inequality in today’s world are not always hierarchical in nature or appearance. In the post-/neocolonial era, the power relationships established in the era of European franchise colonialism have become more informal and indirect, manifested in relationships of economic exploitation rather than direct state authority (Tully 2009:6). The agents of colonial power are less easily discernable since the end of formal colonialism in much of the world. Although franchise colonialism has always been economic and state projects of colonial conquest always operated in the interest of capital, the primary authority of
corporations in the neoliberal era has begun to bypass the state altogether (Hardt and Negri 2000:31). In “Neocolonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism,” former Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah asserts that the (post)colonial structures of economic exploitation in Africa post-1960 are virtually the same, except they are no longer governed by state authority (1965:ix). It becomes impossible to say directly, “England colonizes Ghana” or “Belgium colonizes the Congo;” rather, former colonizers benefit indirectly from the exploitation of the formerly colonized. Germany’s relationship to ongoing postcolonial power dynamics is particularly indirect, as Germany lost its colonies after the First World War. As Neil MacGregor points out, Germany does not have the same ties to former colonies that countries like France and England do, and its contemporary conflicts around otherness and immigration do not revolve around any of the countries that were once its colonies (2017).

Against this world of dispersed power that follows the irregular logic of the market rather than the guidance of official state imperial policies, the Humboldt-Forum’s dispersed, irregular structure of display does not upend postcolonial power relationships but rather mimics them. Its drive toward expansive, “multiperspectival” cosmopolitanism is in line with the oppressive structures of global capitalism—what they look like and how they are organized (or disorganized) in the contemporary world. As with the neocolonial order of the world, the Humboldt-Forum will have no immediately discernable hierarchical structure of display, but its display structures nevertheless benefit some parts of the world over others and perpetuate unequal
relationships of possession and dispossession. In resisting old colonial orders, the Humboldt-Forum now echoes new ones.

The additive logic of the Humboldt-Forum, however, does not only mimic new colonial orders but actively (or perhaps passive aggressively) reproduces them by making confrontation with them difficult, if not impossible. The previous two chapters of this thesis both examine ways that the Humboldt-Forum creates a space intended to circumvent conflict. It brings together disparate, conflictual approaches to the world into a space where they are not in conflict with each other. In chapter one, I argue that the museum’s use of the Humboldtian, cosmopolitan narrative reconciles a historically-rooted German national identity with a multicultural identity by casting them as the same thing. Rather than requiring compromise between identities that would otherwise be at odds with each other, the Humboldt-Forum allows for them to never have conflicted in the first place, or to seem as if they had never conflicted. Similarly, the museum’s intended addition of postcolonial perspectives to its exhibits places them in “multiperspectival” relationships with each other, in which they reside next door to each other but do not undermine each other. The Humboldt-Forum allows for endless space for the accumulation of ideas, but it facilitates no means by which these ideas work against each other. It sanitizes conflict, contains it. In an almost magical feat of reconciliation, it turns even the ideas and histories that might have undone it into perspectives that can be added to its already expansive collection of material and discursive objects. The Humboldt-Forum’s discourse of expansion is thus also a discourse of evasion. As earlier museums might have sought to contain the
world or to order it, the Humboldt-Forum seeks to not have to confront its rough, contradictory edges.

The reflexive, postmodern tools of openness to the world and non-hierarchical cultural dialog turn out in this case to be less liberatory for the museum’s source communities than authors like Ames and Mesa-Bains expected them to be—indeed, they take an active role in the continuation of colonial injustices. The Humboldt-Forum’s additive, nonconfrontational orientation toward the world functions both by mimesis and by avoidance to reproduce neocolonial power relationships. In emphasizing so emphatically the museum’s expansiveness, its promoters reproduce the neoliberal order of the world by creating a space in which the ongoing material imbalances of the postcolonial world never have to be confronted.

This interpretation of the Humboldt-Forum demands a more critical interrogation of the relationship between postmodernism and museum practice than has been attempted before. Bose’s notion of strategic reflexivity comes close, with its critique of the way that the museum curators’ commitment to anthropological reflexivity does not actually undermine the power relations of colonialism. His critique, however, retains an attachment to reflexivity itself, implying that the Humboldt-Forum is doing reflexivity wrong, or perhaps not enough (2016:258). He phrases the relationship between the museum’s reflexivity and its colonial history as a “but;” the museum’s curators are embracing contemporary trends of museum practice, but it still does not undermine the power imbalances involved in the museum’s conception. I propose to change Bose’s “but” to a “because.” The Humboldt-Forum—and by extension the German ministry of culture and the SPK, the
real owners of the ethnological collections—are able to avoid grappling materially with the residues of empire not *despite* the museum’s expansive, postmodern amalgamation of perspectives but because of it. The academic trends from which various creators of the Humboldt-Forum derive inspiration are not innocent of the museum’s participation in ongoing colonial power dynamics.

In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri offer a critique of postmodernism along similar lines. They note the parallels between postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon and the market logics of neoliberalism, in that both emphasize “hybridity,” “flexibility,” and “mobility.” Although postmodern thought was originally thought of as a liberatory mode of thinking that would break through the oppressive positivism of modernist thought, Hardt and Negri point out that in many instances, hybridity, flexibility, and mobility, are increasingly not liberatory at all, describing displacement, poverty and precarity (2000:155). Postmodernism’s eschewal of the Enlightenment idea of a singular truth is also, they assert, not universally resistant to structures of domination. They write, “in the context of state terror and mystification, clinging to the primacy of the concept of truth can be a powerful and necessary form of resistance” (2000:155). Postmodernism, this example indicates, is contextual, and under the conditions of neoliberalism, it can take on oppressive, authoritarian forms.

Hardt and Negri’s assertion that postmodernism is not liberatory everywhere can be applied to museums. Postmodernism as it appears in academic writing is distinct from postmodernism in the museum—this is a fact that the promoters of the Humboldt-Forum and scholars in the field of museum studies in general have not
made explicit. As much as the world of museums resembles the world of academia, and as much as they have historically had very a close relationship, museums are not academic journals, and the postmodern turn in museums does not have the same repercussions as in academia. Whereas academic writing is concerned exclusively with representation, museums take up physical space and display real, material collections. They are bound up in the material power relationships of the things they describe. The move toward openness, multiperspectivity, and self-reflexivity in anthropology may often (although not always) be radical and anti-colonial, but in the Humboldt-Forum these same trends are colonial in nature. They enable the museum to evade responsibility for its display of stolen objects, perpetuating the material injustice of possession. This violence calls into question whether postmodernism ought to have any influence at all on museum practices. At the very least, it shows that museologists ought to engage with postmodern multiperspectivity more critically than they have been engaging with it thus far, understanding the differences in stakes between postmodernism in the museum and postmodernism in academia.

**Is this the only way?**

In chapter 1, I argue the Humboldt-Forum’s expansive, cosmopolitan discourse is useful, perhaps necessary, for German liberal politicians in the current political climate. Making the institution open to the world and making this openness palatable to as many people as possible takes on special urgency in times when it seems like the liberal order of the world is in crisis. 2019 is certainly one of those moments, against the background of the disturbing rise of the far-right across Europe.
George Heartfield, a curator at the Ethnological Museum tells me that he believes open minded cultural dialog to be “especially important at this juncture,” when the Western world is “lurching towards a narrower idea of what is important, is constitutive of identity.” German Minister of Foreign Cultural Affairs Michelle Müntefering expresses a similar sentiment in her interview with the Süddeutsche Zeitung in 2018, telling the interviewer “derzeit sehen wir eher ‘shrinking spaces,’ statt ‘open spaces’” [“currently we see ‘shrinking spaces’ more often than ‘open spaces’”] (Zekri 2018). The obvious mode of resistance to the threat of right-wing closed-mindedness for both Heartfield and Müntefering is to double down on open-mindedness (and open spaces), to remind people that Germany can be multiple things at once, home to a multiplicity of cultures and perspectives. Moreover, it requires that this multiplicity of perspectives not come into conflict with existing ideas about Germanness and the German state.

But do museums necessarily have to be “open spaces”? Is conceptual broadness really the only thinkable defense against the crisis of right-wing narroness? As a project steeped in Foucauldian understandings of discourse, part of my aim here is to unsettle what seems to be common sense. In this last section, I attempt to open up space to think what has been rendered unthinkable in the discursive field of the Humboldt-Forum. There is—there must be—an alternative to the Humboldt-Forum’s discourse of expansion. What if, instead of trying, unsuccessfully, to contain conflict, the leaders of the Humboldt-Forum and the SPK chose sides? What if instead of trying to incorporate every perspective, they did not shy away from saying outright that oppressive colonial structures were wrong? The problem with the far-right is not
only that, as Heartfield would have me believe, their politics are too narrow; it is that
they are wrong. Racism is wrong. Imperialism is wrong. These are facts that should
not have to be debated. In 2018, journalist Hanno Rauterberg wrote about an exhibit
in Hamburg that displayed another collection of Benin Bronzes in a similarly
multiperspectival manner to the Humboldt-Forum. He writes: “Drei Wörter hätten
genügt: Sie gehören euch!” [“Three words would have been enough: they belong to
you!”]. Instead of endlessly expanding to incorporate every possible perspective, the
Humboldt-Forum could invoke those few words, the words that desperately need to
be said: these objects belong to you.

In order to truly “deal at every turn with colonial history,” as Müller claims it
will, the Humboldt-Forum would have to accomplish the scary task of doing away
with some of its multiple perspectives. Uni-perspectivity over multiperspectivity—
narrowness over broadness. In an era of “fake news” and “alternative facts,”
postmodern multiperspectivity is dangerous. The Trump era has taught us that,
however pleasurable and intellectually stimulating the idea of multiple truths might
be from a theoretical standpoint, it is quite horrifying when it is enacted in the service
of right-wing politics. In this political milieu, there is something radical in saying that
there is a difference between what is and what is described. If we do not want to fall
back on an Enlightenment-era notion that there is a single, universal truth, perhaps we
can recognize that at least certain truths are singular. Certain ideas are right, certain
ideas are wrong, and most ideas are somewhere in between. The Humboldt-Forum
shows us that knowledge must not be expanded indiscriminately but rather surgically,
with an understanding of its ineffable destructive power.
As I have shown, there are a myriad of institutional barriers to saying—and acting on—these principles. The Humboldt-Forum is caught in between multiple different institutions and political agendas and is the love child of compromise. But it is not altogether impossible in the German context to imagine an institution that comes down squarely in opposition to a historical event. Holocaust memorials, after all, are not multiperspectival; they condemn genocide, unabashedly and unreservedly (Dekel 2009). It is not beyond precedent to suggest that the Humboldt-Forum might do the same with imperial history—that it might start from the premise that injustice is a central feature of the ethnographic collections, not an exception to it. If the Humboldt-Forum continues to beat around the bush, to only include postcolonial critique if it does not come into conflict with the museum’s established narratives of progress and cosmopolitanism, it will continue to reproduce the power dynamics it critiques.

Resistance to the additive discourse of the Humboldt-Forum calls for a somewhat old-fashioned distinction between real and representation. Within the museum, it requires a conviction that solving problems of representation does not solve the underlying problems of possession in which the museum is entrenched. Outside the museum, it requires a knowledge that the museum’s problems of possession are metonymic of much larger relations of economic exploitation that cannot be solved from within the museum. Liberal politicians often fail to see—or refuse to see—this distinction. Macron’s speech in Ouagadougou, in which he promised that France would repatriate stolen art objects to former colonies in West Africa, may have been a step forward in terms of museums’ practices in response to
colonial history, but it did not alter the real, continuing power relationships between
France and West Africa. In an opinion piece, Cody Delistraty argues that Macron’s
statement set itself up as a false synecdoche for postcolonial justice, making it seem
as if righting museums’ material power imbalances were enough to get rid of
postcolonial injustice outside the representational sphere of the museum (2017).
Moving away from the conciliatory discourse of the Humboldt-Forum requires an
acknowledgment of the museum’s limits, understanding the connections between the
museum and world but not conflating the two.

Perhaps it is to the holes in the Humboldt-Forum’s own narrative that we can
look to discover alternatives to its discourse of expansion. As much as the museum’s
creators’ own discourse about the Humboldt-Forum is non-confrontational, the
museum itself, even in its planning stages, has been one of the most controversial
cultural projects of the century. The Humboldt-Forum is unrivalled among German
museums in the controversy it has stirred up. Müller tells me that its intended
reconciliation between historically-rooted German nationalism and contemporary
multiculturalism has led to ambivalence on both sides from conservatives who
disapprove of the non-Western collections and liberals who are uncomfortable with
the palace façade. Despite its evasion of the question of repatriation, the prominence
of the museum in the public eye has sparked far more public debates on provenance
and colonial history than ever before. When the museum opens in November, it will
be subject to even more such unpredictable misinterpretations. Opposition to the
Humboldt-Forum’s colonial history like that leveled by No Humboldt 21 shows that
not only is resistance to continuing colonial histories possible—it may even be unintentionally spurred on by the very structures that evade confrontation with it.
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