

# Matters of Perspective at the Humboldt Forum

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**ABSTRACT:** *In this exhibition review I discuss the curatorial choices employed in the installation Matters of Perspective in the Humboldt Forum's Ethnological Museum, Berlin. I examine the exhibition's key framing elements, analyze the sub-installation entitled Das Deutsche in mir ist indirekt, which deals with Namibian children relocated to and educated in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the 1980s, and conclude with a discussion of the adjacent artwork Township Wall, interpreting its role in shaping perceptions about the African collections. I argue that Matters of Perspective is strident in revealing aspects of the German colonial past pertinent to the encounter with ethnological collections at a time of roiling public debate. It boldly introduces historical issues of race, difference, and German colonial legacies, and does especially well at profiling socialist histories of transnational solidarity during the Cold War. Yet, overall, the exhibition deals in a language of contrition that, while familiar in a German cultural context, from other vantage points may appear to some viewers as more self-congratulatory than critical. In other words, the exhibition's framing of perspectives is rather out of focus with the substantive matters of power, history, and structural racism at stake when addressing colonial legacies in a museum setting such as this one.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Africa, Ethnological Museum, Humboldt Forum, Matters of Perspective, post-colonialism*

**HOW TO CITE:** *Jethro, D. (2024): Matters of Perspective at the Humboldt Forum. In: Berliner Blätter 89, 61–70.*

There was great anticipation of the long-awaited opening, in September 2021, of the Ethnological Museum in the Humboldt Forum, Berlin. The first glimpses of the displays, revealed through the partial, mediated view of social media, especially the *Matters of Perspective* temporary exhibition at the entrance, showed that some bold strides had been taken in addressing the many criticisms directed at the museum.<sup>1</sup>

The Humboldt Forum is a heritage complex inside the Berlin City Palace (*Stadtschloss*) reconstruction that encompasses the Ethnological Museum, the Museum of Asian Art, the *History of the Site* exhibition, the *Berlin Global* exhibition, and the Humboldt Labor.<sup>2</sup> The building and site are controversial, marked by Prussian royal heritage and its colonial legacies, and by the contention over the religious decorations on the building's exterior (see Jethro 2023). This contrasts with the democratic, worldly, and inclusive conceptual space the Humboldt Forum claims to hold open as an institution inside the palace. In the years

leading up to the official 2020 opening of the Humboldt Forum, there had been significant local and international public criticism of the project as a whole and of the unaddressed colonial legacies of its institutional members, with the Ethnological Museum's collections attracting the sharpest critical responses. The protests associated with the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020 further amplified the existing activist-driven public debate about race, difference, and commemorations in Germany (see Jethro/Merrill 2023). Museums, and the Humboldt Forum especially, became a key reference point in German debates about diversity and change in the heritage landscape and wider society (see Macdonald 2023).

With heightened public scrutiny of ethnological museums generally, a lot seemed to be riding on the curation of the collections in Berlin. The *Matters of Perspective* exhibition was framed as a way of addressing some of these expectations. As the official description put it, »[i]n recent years, ethnological collections held by European museums have come under critical scrutiny. The Humboldt Forum seeks to meet this challenge head on.«<sup>3</sup> To do this, the Ethnological Museum used materials such as »photographs and school books, sculptures and interviews« as a »starting point for reflection on the views of colonisers and formerly colonised societies«, which were »typified by the distinction between Us and Them – the Othering of German society with regard to Cameroonian, Namibian and Oceanic societies, and their view of German society.«<sup>4</sup>

In this review, I discuss the curatorial choices employed in *Matters of Perspective*, reading the exhibition as a South African scholar and against the background of the debate swirling around the Humboldt Forum. The installation is strident and revealing. It boldly introduces historical issues of race, difference, and German colonial legacies, and does especially well at profiling socialist histories of transnational solidarity during the Cold War. But in doing so, I argue, the exhibition deals in a language of contrition that, while familiar in a German cultural context, from other vantage points may appear self-congratulatory and thus undermine the ›postcolonial‹ work it aims to do. In other words, I show how the exhibition's framing of perspectives is rather out of focus with the key matters at stake. Moreover, I demonstrate that, ironically, the exhibition is somewhat blind to its own positionality despite having the space to be transparent about the curatorial processes behind it and inclusive in accommodating different points of view.

In what follows, I briefly discuss the exhibition's key framing elements, analyze an installation within the exhibition entitled *Das Deutsche in mir ist indirekt*, which deals with the Namibian children of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and conclude with a discussion of the exhibition-adjacent *Township Wall* installation and its role in shaping perceptions of the African collections.

### *Matters of Perspective*

As you step off the escalator onto the second floor of the Humboldt Forum and walk through the entrance lobby leading into the Ethnological Museum, you encounter the black scaffold cube of the *Matters of Perspective* exhibition. The quotation »I have a white frame of reference and a white worldview« strikes you. *Matters of Perspective* claims to examine »the underlying ways of seeing that contributed to colonialism and were in turn shaped by it, many of them still very much in place today. This allows us to understand colonialism as a phenomenon that touches on all aspects of society.«<sup>5</sup> The exhibition's installations draw on material from Cameroon, Namibia, and Oceania, sites of German colonial contact. Drawing



Fig. 1: «I have a white frame of reference and a white worldview.»

attention to this material surfaces the »ways of seeing« characterized by »the distinction between Us and Them.« As an »interrogation of cultural and institutional ways of seeing«, *Matters of Perspective* uses texts and images as illustrative media, as a move away from »things« that have been »central in the restitution debates.«<sup>6</sup> Built in and around the black exhibition cube are installations that reveal different aspects of the colonial past in the above-mentioned regions.

The quote »I have a white frame of reference and a white worldview« is drawn from the work of the scholar and activist Robin DiAngelo. It is used to show that our worldview »is always influenced by our cultural environment and the specific groups to which we belong.«<sup>7</sup> Getting to grips with perspectives and changing them is a key step in positive social transformation. Or, as the panel text puts it, »[i]n order to understand and overcome present-day and historical injustices, it is essential that we become aware of the lens through which we view others.«<sup>8</sup>

The German colonial project, the text goes on, was enacted by »German military personnel, teachers, businesspeople and their families«; hence, people found themselves in a social milieu in which negative perceptions of others and their colonial surroundings were developed and shared. It is implied that Germans in the past shared a white frame of reference and a worldview that characterized colonialism and that we recognize as a feature of racism today.

The quote could also be read as a mode of address. As a person of color, I read it as a self-reflexive contrite announcement of the dominant perspective in the museum. This

was a refreshing declaration, as in the German context, positionality in museums and similar spaces is often assumed to be neutral, scientific, authoritative, and, hence, not worth making explicit. Curatorial registers, whether through displays or the tone and voice in accompanying descriptive texts, tend to project the museum's calm, rational voice. Moreover, in *Matters of Perspective*, there was a racialized subject position of address. This is not unusual in a South African context, where museums are often direct in invoking racialized perspectives as a curatorial strategy. At the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, for example, visitors are forced into racialized subject positions upon the purchase of an entrance ticket (Rankin/Schmidt 2009). Using a randomly assigned ticket, marked for whites or non-whites only, visitors enter the complex through the respective entrances and navigate an installation that highlights the history of apartheid-era race classification and its social and political consequences (Bremner 2007). Engagement with different, even racialized, perspectives is, therefore, a common curatorial strategy elsewhere.

The colonial gaze, more specifically, is a core theme in postcolonial studies and museology. Beyond unclear remarks on the gaze as othering, *Matters of Perspective* provides no detail, or systematic exposition, of its features and operations — in this installation or the Ethnological Museum in general. As it is used in postcolonial literatures, the term *colonial gaze* refers to a perspective of power produced in and reinforced by the colonial encounter. It is defined by a masculine, panoptic, even omnipotent singular viewpoint of the colonial world as territory and its people as subjects. There are several recent examples of productive elucidations of (and challenges to) the colonial gaze in the German museum world.<sup>9</sup> *Seeing the Other? The Colonial Gaze*, an exhibition on show at the German Maritime Museum, is one good example.<sup>10</sup> It explores the perspectives of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century mariners' travel photo albums and draws attention to their fascination with the ›foreign and exotic‹ in the colonies. It emphasizes how the colonial gaze surfaced through the visual genre of the picturesque: »tourist and colonial travel images [projecting] a pictorial cliché of foreign cultures seen as inferior and lower in civilisation.«<sup>11</sup> The colonial gaze fixed the colonial Other as foreign, exotic, inferior, and available for domination. It is a perspective that is often perpetuated in the ways ethnological museums curate and display material cultures from former colonial regions. Outside the museum setting, it manifests itself in racist perceptions and stereotypes.

In *Matters of Perspective*, this complex way of seeing in terms of a chain of contemporary social relations is eschewed and collapsed into the pithy slogan »I have a white frame of reference and a white worldview.« The installation thus leans more towards »showing off« than »telling off«, which Sharon Macdonald (2023) sees as an operating curatorial tension, that is, the way that national museums generally profile pasts in pride-inducing ways, alongside, in the German case, contrition around periods and aspects of the national past. Here, I see the gesture of a declarative telling-off as a mode of showing off. It does more to redeem the Ethnological Museum than to assist visitors in making sense of how viewing, seeing, and perspectives are historically constructed and continue to work in and beyond this museum setting.

## Postcolonial Curation

The emphasis on sight, seeing, and calling out a racialized perspective can be read as a postcolonial curatorial strategy and a reflection of the Humboldt Forum's attempt to confront coloniality.<sup>12</sup> As it is described on its website, »the Humboldt Forum hopes to play

its part in making visible the complexity of colonial histories and the extent to which they are enmeshed in our present and the reality of our lives.«<sup>13</sup> The Ethnological Museum and its collections, especially its Africa collections, are a site from which many of the thorniest issues about colonial legacies, diversity and inclusion, and post-reunification German national identity intersect and emanate. Percolating underneath these issues, and in reference to the perspectives discussed above, are questions of race, racism, and the recognition of difference in Germany.

*Matters of Perspective* does not explicitly refer to its curatorial work as postcolonial. Yet, its emphasis on the scopic regimes through which the colonial presents itself indicates that the installation attempts to situate itself in a postcolonial curatorial genre. The postcolonial refers to a condition after formal colonialism and, as an intellectual project, concerns the interrogation of its many social, cultural, and political afterlives. It is a vexing issue in art and heritage spaces and takes the form of research into how histories of colonial violence shadow and inform the art world and ways of challenging it. As a curatorial strategy, it involves, among other moves, highlighting colonial perspectives, the role of the colonial trade and commerce in shaping contemporary high and low art, and the emergence of categories of art; it also encompasses a special concern with artistic works and propositions that unsettle its ongoing structural and representational effects.<sup>14</sup>

Some of these strategies are clearly mobilized in *Matters of Perspective*. Yet, *how* some of these curatorial codes and tactics are employed makes for more gestural than substantive shifts. The installation's parts hang together rather clunkily, with the choice of some of the African artists being rather unusual. For example, it incorporates photographs by the South African photographer Roger Ballen, who, controversially, has worked with and supported Die Antwoord, a provocative rap group that many in South Africa criticize for cultural appropriation. What is important to note is that, for all the emphasis on perspectives, we are told neither how the exhibition was conceived nor who participated in materializing it. Such transparency is necessary for unsettling a homogenous perspective. *Matters of Perspective* therefore demonstrates a structural breakdown between an attempt to foreground a critical perspective on the colonial past and the contemporary curatorial perspective, itself a product of that past. This results in the exhibition's key propositions about perspective appearing unreflexive about – and even blind to – its political ambitions.

### *Das Deutsche in mir ist indirekt – The German in Me Is Indirect*

While the exhibition declares that it has a white frame of reference, it is ultimately black Africans who carry the burdens of racialization from the colonial past. This is revealed in the installation *Das Deutsche in mir ist indirekt* comprising »a photo collage and video conversations with the Berlin-based theatre maker Dirk Nelder and his team« about the lives and experiences of a group of children referred to as the Namibian children of the GDR. Transported to East Germany, these children received education and training there between the late 1970s and 1990. During this time, »the GDR took in over 400 children from Namibia while the Swapo (Southwest Africa People's Organisation) was fighting a war of liberation against the apartheid regime in South Africa.«<sup>15</sup> Identified as the future Namibian elite, the children were housed and educated in a manor house in the village of Bellin.

Surfacing a largely overlooked part of socialist history, the installation is a dignified portrayal of socialist solidarity from the vantage of stories of the Namibian children.<sup>16</sup> We see their lives unfold: their education, struggles, and joys while in Germany. The installation's



Fig. 2: »Das Deutsche in mir ist indirekt.«

design, using images of the children and their lives in Germany, accompanied by text descriptions placed on the reverse of rotating panels, adds to the story's depth. One must handle and rotate the installation's panels to take in the overall story of the group's experience. Flipping the panels and moving through the cube, one can take in each story from several perspectives. Moreover, with this constant rotation, between text and image, and between short video installations, the overall perspective in and around the *Matters of Perspective* exhibition constantly shifts and changes, which is a deft curatorial move.

Despite the exhibition's flaws, this installation is an important, fascinating profiling of the complex, intimate history of socialist solidarity, acting as an entry point for postcolonial questions of difference, race, and colonial legacies.<sup>17</sup> We see how »African and European perspectives intersect at a variety of levels.«<sup>18</sup> The Namibian children's postcolonial alienation following their German education and the turn to a postsocialist world following the fall of the Berlin Wall appear to be the main foci here. Many of the children had uncomfortable experiences in Germany: they found it hard to adjust to the climate, language, and education system. Upon their return to Namibia, they found it to be an alien place and were ostracized for having lived in Germany and learned German, the language of the former colonial power (see Schmitt/Witte 2018; Niekrenz et al. 2022).<sup>19</sup> As the installation text puts it, »[i]n 1990, they returned as teenagers to a newly independent Namibia. While their East German socialisation was a source of new opportunities, it also meant they were marginalised for speaking the language of the former colonial power.«<sup>20</sup> The children, who were meant to be the new Namibian elite, were therefore alienated from the (post)socialist world in which they had been trained, and ostracized due to postcolonial questions of colonial complicity. Marginalized for speaking German »despite having the same skin colour as the majority of the population«, the Namibian GDR children were, it is suggested, caught on

the horns of the Fanonian dilemma of being racially black yet wearing white masks of the former colonial master.<sup>21</sup>

The implied message points to a failed project that indicts the GDR and leaves the children as bearing the burden of this historic turn of events. Caught between the posts — the postcolonial and postsocialist eras — they struggle with an identity crisis of race and belonging. In this way, the installation is a striking provocation as to how and in what ways African and transnational socialist histories are being recruited to frame and work through contemporary postcolonial debates around race, identity, and the colonial past in Germany.

### *Township Wall*

In the entrance space that *Matters of Perspective* occupies, the Ethnological Museum has used postcolonial aesthetics in an attempt to playfully reframe relations between the past and the present, between art and the ethnographic. Situated at the entry to the Africa collections inside the Ethnological Museum, the installation *Township Wall*, adjacent to *Matters of Perspective*, forms part of the museum's introductory aesthetic ensemble, and for this reason it is given some attention here. *Township Wall*, by the Angolan artist António Ole, is composed of objects such as weathered door and window frames, ladders, and household leftovers, arranged like a visual collage of bright, discarded household detritus. It captures a bricolage township aesthetic visible in popular art and design worlds in South and Southern Africa, from high art in galleries and street art sold at traffic lights, to the textile design for cushions and lampshades in homes. It was instantly legible to me.

In a documentary accompanying the work, Ole explained that the installation had been inspired by the creativity and innovation he had observed in the post-independence town-



Fig. 3: António Ole, *Township Wall*.

ships of Luanda, Angola.<sup>22</sup> First exhibited at the Johannesburg Biennale in 1995, a version of the work was produced for the exhibition *A Short Century*, at the Gropius Bau in Berlin in 2001. It was later put on display in the Ethnological Museum in Dahlem, Berlin. The version in the Humboldt Forum is a faithful, slightly downscaled replica recreation of the Dahlem installation.<sup>23</sup> Created from objects found in Berlin, it makes a remarkable, site-specific comment on the city's history of boundary-drawing, while also rather cheekily suggesting that Berlin is an African city of a kind. It is an arresting work worthy of its place in a museum like this. It is also an interesting case of the long use and reuse of contemporary African art in the Ethnological Museum settings to shift perspectives about their collections.

With its bricolage and vivid colors, *Township Wall* marks a visual break with the aesthetic of *Matters of Perspective*. Further, it brings Southern Africa into a stronger focus, especially this region's traces of the socialist past: Ole's original reference for *Township Wall* was to a socialist urban Southern African past.

Yet, the placement of *Township Wall* structured an unclear threshold of entry and exit from the contemporary into the Africa collections that lie just beyond it. This made me uncomfortable. For just as you pass the vibrant *Township Wall*, you enter a dark space in which African objects are displayed as a ›visible storage‹ (*Schaudepot*), which I will refer to as *ethnographic excess in glass cases*. Here, collections of ritual and cultural objects are organized according to the research expeditions of German scientists and explorers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The objects are placed in dimly lit glass vitrines, alongside the names of their collectors, curation that emphasizes accomplishment, possession, and scientific ›discovery‹. Thus, this curatorial strategy largely reproduces the colonial categories of classification, collection, and possession that the Ethnological Museum and *Matters of Perspective* claimed to have been working to overcome.

The curatorial choice to place the *Township Wall* installation at this specific juncture and without any clear signage explaining why amplifies the problems around the curation of the Africa collections. The installation's placement creates the impression that one is symbolically entering a township of ethnographic things – the Africa collections. While the intention was presumably to use the work to open up conversations about materiality, making, and contemporary material worlds in Africa, there are other ways of reading this juxtaposition – a juxtaposition that Ole and sympathetic curators in Dahlem could not have anticipated. Its current curation, however, resulting from its placement within the exhibition and from a lack of clear contextualization, enables the pejorative interpretation that the Africa collections can in some way be equated with the material world of the African township.

Overall, then, the installations that make up the *Matters of Perspective* exhibition, together with those adjacent to it, perform a postcolonial criticality that seems blind to its own position. It is timely but still out of focus, overemphasizing contrition while failing to show who takes responsibility for it. Neither does it enable its visitors to do so. The ensemble left me confused, frustrated, and at times worked up. I was left with the impression that the ultimate problem that the installation was insisting upon was and remains a faulty *perspective* on race and the past. If that is where the problem lies, there is the promise of a neat resolution, namely, that the ills of the past can be resolved merely by confronting race negative perspectives. This thin emphasis on sight, seeing, and perspective is still inadequate. Looking at it from South Africa, where issues of race cannot be divorced from material, structural, and social worlds, I see colonial legacies as much more than a *matter of perspective*.



## Acknowledgments

Extracts from this review first appeared in a blog entry titled »The Township in the Humboldt Forum« <https://100histories100worlds.org/the-township-in-the-humboldt-forum/>, accessed on 1.3.2023. Many thanks to Mirjam Brusius, Alice Stevenson, Benjamina E. Dadzie, Naima Hassan, and the rest of the *100 Histories of 100 Worlds in 1 Object* editorial team for permission to republish them. Many thanks to the editorial team of this special issue for their generous and incisive comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this review.

## Notes

- 1 It is officially described as a temporary exhibition that, in the future, will accommodate changing installations.
- 2 See the Humboldt Forum's website: <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/>, accessed on 31.8.2023.
- 3 *Matters of Perspective*, <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/programm/dauerangebot/exhibition/ansichtssachen-51638/>, accessed on 1.3.2023.
- 4 *Matters of Perspective*, <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/programm/dauerangebot/exhibition/ansichtssachen-51638/>, accessed on 1.3.2023.
- 5 *Matters of Perspective* panel text, Humboldt Forum, November 2022. This emphasis on underlying ways of seeing does not appear in the description provided on the Humboldt Forum's website: <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/programm/dauerangebot/exhibition/ansichtssachen-51638/>, accessed on 1.3.2023.
- 6 *Matters of Perspective* panel text, Humboldt Forum, November 2022.
- 7 Panel text »I have a white frame of reference and a white worldview«, Humboldt Forum, November 2022.
- 8 Panel text »I have a white frame of reference and a white worldview«, Humboldt Forum, November 2022.
- 9 See *German Colonialism: Fragments Past and Present*, Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2016, <https://www.dhm.de/en/exhibitions/archive/2016/german-colonialism/>, accessed on 19.5.2023; *Der blinde Fleck. Bremen und die Kunst in der Kolonialzeit*, Kunsthalle Bremen, 2017; *Reinventing Grassi*, ongoing, <https://grassi-voelkerkunde.skd.museum/ausstellungen/reinventing-grassiskd/>, accessed on 19.5.2023.
- 10 *Seeing the Other? The Colonialist Gaze*, <https://www.dsm.museum/en/exhibition/exhibitions/seeing-the-other>, accessed on 19.5.2023.
- 11 *Seeing the Other? The Colonialist Gaze*, <https://www.dsm.museum/en/exhibition/exhibitions/seeing-the-other/the-colonialist-gaze>, accessed on 19.5.2023.
- 12 The Humboldt Forum claims to be actively contending with the notion of colonialism, coloniality, and postcolonialism. See *(Post)colonialism and Cultural Heritage: International Debates at the Humboldt Forum*. München, 2021, <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/programm/publikation/publication/postkolonialismus-und-kulturelles-erbe-73345/>, accessed on 19.5.2023.
- 13 See <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/colonialism-and-coloniality/>, accessed on 31.08.2023.
- 14 It is adjacent to – but somewhat different from – a decolonial curatorial practice that is located in the literatures of Walter Dignolo and Catherine Walsh and that seeks to delink from the modernity/colonial epistemic and conceptual frameworks. See Ivan Muniz-Reed, »Thoughts on curatorial practices in the decolonial turn«, <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-35-reader/thoughts-on-curatorial-practices-in-the-decolonial-turn.html#n10>, accessed on 1.5.2022.
- 15 *Das Deutsche in mir ist indirekt*, exhibition panel, Humboldt Forum, November 2022.
- 16 The installation's approach to the GDR past runs counter to mainstream profiling, as advanced by sites like the DDR Museum, which largely emphasizes life under dictatorship through the quotidian domestic world.
- 17 Much more could have been made of this story. For a start, more could have been said about the German colonial project in Namibia. More agency could perhaps have been ceded to the Namibian children. The perspective of where the (post)colonial and (post)socialist realities met could have been deepened and nuanced. There was also room for a richer story about the children's lives after

their return, especially in the context of perspectives of diaspora Namibian-German communities. Finally, a stronger profiling of the Namibian struggle for restitution and recognition of the Nama and Herero Genocide could have been brought in.

- 18 *Matters of Perspective*, panel text, Humboldt Forum, November 2022.
- 19 *Das Deutsche in mir ist indirekt*, exhibition panel, Humboldt Forum, November 2022.
- 20 *Das Deutsche in mir ist indirekt*, exhibition panel, Humboldt Forum, November 2022.
- 21 Space was made for the recuperation of identity and redemption after return, as related in the panel »Here I am Human.« The interlocutor, Naita Hishoono, explains: »I don't want to explain myself anymore, [I am] always explaining who I am and where I am from. I mean it really doesn't matter. I can feel comfortable anywhere, but I like it best in Namibia: here I am human. Here they let me be.« As quoted in *Das Deutsche in mir ist indirekt*, exhibition panel, Humboldt Forum, November 2022.
- 22 The first example of *Township Wall* was mounted for the Johannesburg Biennale in 1995, under the title *Na Margem da Zona Limite* (At the Edge of the Boundary Zone). In 2001, Ole was commissioned to produce a wall for Okwui Enwezor's exhibition *A Short Century* at the Gropius Bau in Berlin.
- 23 For more on the reconstruction in the Humboldt Forum, see »Township Wall: 100 piece artwork finds a new home«, <https://www.spkmagazin.de/en/township-wall-100-piece-artwork-finds-a-new-home.html>, accessed on 1.7.2023.

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Fig. 1–3 Photographer: Duane Jethro, 2022.