



NOT WHAT I EXPECTED  
H. GLENN PENNY

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H. Glenn Penny is Professor of Modern European History at the University of Iowa. Much of his work focuses on relations between Germans and non-Europeans over the last two centuries. He is the author of *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany* (UNC Press, 2002) and *Kindred by Choice: Germans and American Indians since 1880* (UNC Press, 2013). He is also the editor (together with Matti Bunzl) of *Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire* (University of Michigan Press, 2003) and (with Laura Graham) *Performing Indigeneity: Global Histories and Contemporary Experiences* (Nebraska University Press, 2014). He is currently engaged in an in-depth study of German interactions with Guatemala, and he came to the Wiko to complete a book manuscript titled *Unbinding German History, 1760s–1960s* for Cambridge University Press. That, however, is not what he did. – Address: Department of History, University of Iowa, 280 Schaeffer Hall, Iowa City, IO 52242-1409, USA.  
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It was the skulls that caused Greg Johnson to contact me; those and the bones; and the human teeth on an unusual sculpture with strong religious resonances: *Kihawahine* is one of some 500 objects the German physician Eduard Arning collected while studying leprosy in Hawai'i in the mid-1880s and that he gave to the Berlin Museum of Ethnology upon his return. Ostensibly, Arning retrieved *Kihawahine* from a burial site.

Greg teaches Religious Studies at the University of Colorado. He has spent his career focused on American Indian and Hawaiian encounters with US and international legal systems. He was traveling to Germany in October 2017 because the state of Saxony was

poised to return Hawaiian human remains housed in Dresden to a group of cultural practitioners and repatriation experts with whom he had been working for years. Five of them were traveling with him to claim the remains. It was a momentous, cathartic occasion, and he did not want to miss it.

Greg and his friends also had some questions about Berlin. Berlin's Ethnological Museum is one of the largest and most important in the world. It contains over 500,000 objects, including one of the most significant historical collections of Hawaiian artifacts outside of Hawai'i. Over the last decade and a half, its fate has also been closely tied to the controversies swirling around the new museum complex in the heart of Berlin: the Humboldt Forum. They wanted to know about that as well.

I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg to finish a set of projects on Germans living outside the German nation-state during the last two centuries. Over the last decade, much of my work has focused on Germans abroad, particularly in the Americas, and my questions have turned largely around migration, immigration, notions of belonging, and how to narrate German history without the nation-state occupying the center of that narrative and dictating its contours and content.

Soon after I arrived, however, I was catapulted back into my own past, as a former historian of German ethnology and ethnological museums. In addition to Greg and his colleagues, a series of museum directors, ethnologists, and historians contacted me. They were aware of my earlier work, and they wanted to talk to me about the history of German ethnology, the fate of German ethnographic museums, and the controversies around the Humboldt Forum. Initially, I chalked that up to the Wiko effect – many more people knew I was in Berlin than during one of my usual trips – so I politely declined most of the invitations and stayed focused on finishing my other projects. That all changed, however, after Greg's call and after I met him and his colleagues at the Berlin Ethnological Museum to help them negotiate the German language, the Museum's bureaucracy, and the structures of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation.

It was a tall order. From the perspective of someone who wrote a book on the history of German ethnological museums during the period in which they acquired the vast majority of their collections, it is hard not to notice how frequently participants in the last decade of debates surrounding the Humboldt Forum have misrepresented and misused the history of the collections. A striking number of people on both sides of the debates seem keen to instrumentalize those collections and their history for their own purposes. Perhaps that is why history seems to be repeating itself: a giant edifice that transforms

scientific collections into a municipal display? A building deemed inadequate before it is complete? Ethnologists and their efforts subordinated to the dictates of bureaucrats and politicians? *Bildung* usurped by “a showy collection” and edification by entertainment mixed with didactic displays? The gift shops and cafes are new. So too is the emphasis on *Veranstaltungen*, *Inszenierung*, and *Gastronomie*. The rest, however, sounds strikingly familiar. So too does the dramatic disjuncture between the funding for the municipal displays meant to impress visitors and the monies allocated to support the Ethnological Museum’s staff, their research, future collecting, and the kinds of collaborative work Greg and his colleagues were hoping to initiate.

I am not sure when the epiphany came. Maybe it was already there as Halealoha Ayau, who long worked with Hui Malama I Na Kupuna 'O Hawai'i Nei, a leading group in indigenous repatriation worldwide, emerged with the others from the taxi ready to talk. It was an impressive group: a Hawaiian Studies Professor and renowned sovereignty activist, a Museum Studies Professor, a representative of the Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation, who was the group's lead chanter and ritual protocol expert, and Kamana'opono Crabbe, CEO of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, which supported the trip. Maybe, however, it was the earnestness with which they looked at the books on the shelves of the curator's office where we met to talk about the collections. It might have been the way the group drew us together around the table after drinking coffee, stood up, had us clasp hands, and burst into a chant that lasted longer than the uninitiated might imagine. It might have been the seriousness with which Halealoha Ayau questioned the curator about the collections, the locations of objects and body parts, and the reasons for Arning's collecting practices. Perhaps it was because the curator was so forthcoming, so eager to work with them, making sure that objects they identified at the last minute could be seen. She never questioned the fact that the lead chanter, after ascertaining which objects would be seen, continued to leave the room to make international calls to older family members to determine which chants and procedures were necessary for initiating their relationships with the objects. There is no question that I felt lucky to have the chance to see them present the curator with a different ontology, to explain the ways they related to and communicated with the remains and culturally significant objects. But it was more than that. During that meeting I saw the need to intervene in the debates around the Humboldt Forum. I was reminded again that working relations like these are the future of German ethnological museums, and the best relations require openness to cultural difference as well as a keen understanding of the history of the collections.

As a result of my meeting with the Hawaiians and my subsequent discussions with German colleagues, I shifted my focus. With the help of Daniel Schönplüg, I acquired a German literary agent, and shortly thereafter I gained a contract with C.H.Beck. With their help, I fashioned a sketch for a book that would explain to a broad audience why there are more than a half million objects in the Berlin Ethnological Museum and millions more in similar museums across Germany. I set out to answer three central questions: how those objects came to Berlin and other German cities; what the people who collected these objects thought they were doing; and what we could and should be doing with those objects today. My central contention is that we cannot answer the third question without understanding the answers to the preceding two.

If the first half of my time at the Wiko was taken up by this transition, I spent the second half writing a book that eschews direct historiographical and theoretical arguments – my usual concern – in favor of narrating what is ultimately a tragic tale: how German ethnology emerged out of Humboldtian science; how Adolf Bastian, the father of German ethnology, and the thousands who joined him followed Alexander von Humboldt's example while attempting to construct a total history of humanity; how they embraced the promise of harnessing material culture as alternative historical texts; how they developed a vision of museums as archival work spaces dedicated to an inductive project meant to reveal a total world history; how the Faustian bargains they agreed to along the way undermined their goals; and how a confluence of forces curtailed, undercut, and ultimately buried that project over the last century. The book also advocates for excavating that project.

Most people who visit museums today are unaware that only a fraction of their collections are on display. Very few, in fact, understand that the majority of the collections in Berlin's Ethnological Museum have never been displayed for any significant length of time or that the piles of ethnologists' proposals written over the last century in an effort to free the objects from their containers continually failed. Even fewer visitors understand that while millions of euros have flowed into the edifice now deemed the Humboldt Forum, very little funding has been allocated for staffing the Ethnological Museum, for research within it, or for work with the collections. Stagnation and stasis dominate the museum's recent history. Therein lies the tragedy.

The Berlin Ethnological Museum, like many of its counterparts across Germany, is a treasure trove of German and human history. It is filled with the traces of global histories that have yet to be written and that will only emerge after the objects are released from

their confinement and space is created for working relationships between ethnologists and people like Halealoha Ayau and his colleagues. Those Hawaiians understand the power of the objects; many young curators do as well; but those who control the power of the purse pay them little attention.

Realizing the potential inherent in the collections will be impossible in the Humboldt Forum as it is currently conceived. Yet its creation has done some good. The controversies turning around it have illuminated a history of knowledge that has been undermined, obscured, and thus largely forgotten. That alone has done us a fantastic service. It has provided us with an opportunity to engage those hidden histories and call for their release. The potential of the collections, as Adolf Bastian and others once envisioned it, has diminished little over time. Bastian, too, understood the power of the objects, and thus he prioritized collecting. As he collected at an ever more rapid pace over decades, he knew that his was only the first of many acts in this play. He frequently wrote that it would be up to subsequent generations to realize his collections' potential. The central argument behind the book I drafted at the Wiko, *Die fliegende Schwan-Maske: Völkerkunde und die Entdeckung der Welt*, is that now is an excellent time to begin that process.