While the nation-state gave rise to the advent of museums, its influence in times of transculturality and post-/decolonial studies appears to have vanished. But is this really the case? With case studies from various geo- and sociopolitical contexts from around the globe, the contributors investigate which roles the nation-state continues to play in museums, collections, and heritage. They answer the question to which degree the nation-state still determines practices of collection and circulation and its amount of power to shape contemporary narratives. The volume thus examines the contradictions at play when the necessary claim for transculturality meets the institutions of the nation-state.

With contributions by Stanislas Spero Adotevi, Sebastián Eduardo Dávila, Natasha Ginwala, Monica Hanna, Rajkamal Kahlon, Suzana Milevska, Mirjam Shatanawi, Kavita Singh, Ruth Stamm, Andrea Witcomb.

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Museums, Transculturality, and the Nation-State
Some Remarks on Their Entanglement

Susanne Leeb

The starting point for thinking about the intertwining of ‘museum’, ‘transculturality’, and ‘nation-state’ is owed to one of the most obvious contemporary contradictions in (post)migrant societies with regard to museums: museums in the Global North represent a glorious past and the so-called heritage of mankind, yet huge parts of this mankind are excluded via economic inequalities as well as restrictions of mobility and accessibility, and are thus cut off from this very same history. The same applies to the value creation that has taken place as cultural practices and their artefacts have been transformed into museum treasures.\(^1\) Since the nation-state and capital are not separable in their current formation, the nation-state is still an agent of appropiative and accumulative economies, in short, ‘economies of enrichment’, as Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre write in their article ‘The Economic Life of Things’ and elaborate on in their book *Enrichment*.\(^2\) This holds true especially for the ‘collection form’ and ‘its orientation towards the past’: as Boltanski and

\(^1\) For a more detailed argument, see Susanne Leeb, ‘Local Time, Or the Presence of an Ancient Past’, *Texte zur Kunst* 105 (March 2017), 99–118 (in German and in English). For the violent transformation into museum treasure, see the case of a ship investigated by Götz Aly in his book *Das Prachtboot. Wie Deutsche die Kunstschätze der Südsee raubten* (Munich: Beck, 2021), in which he narrates the ultraviolent context in which the ship was ‘acquired’, i.e. stolen, by Germans in the Pacific region, in today’s Papua Neu Guinea. The ‘magnificent ship’ was supposed to be exhibited in the entry hall of the recently opened Humboldt Forum in Berlin as one of the museum’s most prominent ‘treasures’.

Esquerre state, ‘While the standard form assessed the value of new objects, intended for use, the collection form establishes the worth of older things, independently of their possible uses’—and, as one could add, commodifies the past as art.

Whereas at the beginning of the museum era, ethnographic and archaeological collections in particular supported and served imperialism and colonialism, and were constitutive for the invention of the nation-state, it seems that the nation-state is no longer a useful category for framing and situating art and culture. On the contrary, international forms of cooperation and the fact of globality have overtaken it—unless it explicitly reappears in the nationalist demands of authoritarian populisms. Whereas art history has necessarily discarded the national framework in recent decades and research in the discipline has shifted to transculturality, contact zones, transmodernisms, and discrepant cosmopolitanisms, the contradictions mentioned above remain too obvious to let the question of the nation-state and its agendas rest.

To this day and in the field of museums, the nation-state plays a decisive role less for the national imagination than for the institutions’ material structures in terms of their foundation, financing, and ownership (an observation which holds true at least for Europe, not necessarily for the US, and in times of rising private funding). At least in the so-called West, it is rather rare that museums today explicitly tell the success story of a nation and base a national identity on it. Instead, they emphasize their cosmopolitan qualities or euphemistically claim a ‘common’ heritage or a transnational, transcultural or polyperspectival approach. But this claim is part of the above-mentioned contradictions between the rhetoric of cosmopolitanism, with which museums like to decorate themselves and which they legitimate through their international collections, and a transculturality that would also entail material conditions, i.e. accessibility and property relations.

There are at least two current occasions to (re)pose the question of the nation-state. In their 2001 States of Imagination: Ethnographic Explorations of the

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Postcolonial State, Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat start from what today is a still-contemporary situation when they write that

the current rethinking of the state occurs at a juncture where the very notion of the state as a regulator of social life and a locus of territorial sovereignty and cultural legitimacy is facing unprecedented challenges. Ethnic mobilization, separatist movements, globalization of capital and trade, and intensified movement of people as migrants and refugees all tend to undermine the sovereignty of state power, especially in the postcolonial world.\textsuperscript{5}

If contemporary migration complements historical (post)colonial relations, the other occasion that does so is the debate around restitution and the issues in the wake of restitution: accessibility and ownership.

Therefore, we transfer the diagnosis of Hansen and Stepputat to the context of museums and cultural heritage. Many artefacts and works of art that are today under the umbrella of the nation-state or its federal system in terms of representation and property date from times before territories throughout the world were shaped as colonies, when culture and museums became important instruments for national agendas. This is true not only for the so-called West and former colonial powers but also for newly established nation-states after independence, as Elizabeth Harney has set out in the case of Nigeria, for instance.\textsuperscript{6} The conflicts that arise in this process were already described some time ago by Partha Chatterjee in his 1986 book Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse, where they are described as an unresolved tension between the ‘people’s nation’ and the ‘state nation’, whereby the latter has absorbed ‘the political life of the nation into the body of the state …, while striving to keep the contradictions between capital and the people in perpetual suspension’.\textsuperscript{7} This unresolved tension appears in many places, and museums often play a very dominant role in it. Daniel Herwitz, for example, shows in his text ‘Heritage and Legacy in the South African State


\textsuperscript{7} Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 168.
how the country’s national museums serve as agents of the South African state, performing a quasi-police function, neutralizing undesirable so-called traditional practices by turning them into museum objects. The essayistic documentary Le terrain du peuple by Anja Göbel provides another account of this dynamic. In her film, she examines the consequences that the establishment of a national museum in Burkina Faso had on local government groups organized along tribal lines. In the national museum, each grouping represented in the state is given its own pavilion to establish a national imagination, and the nation-state has used this form of representation as a political tool to dissolve local forms of governance—the ‘terrain du peuple’ referred to in the film’s title.

‘In country after country,’ as James Oles writes in a book about the artist Eduardo Abaroa, who proposed the total destruction of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico,

the nationalist projects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the relocation of cultural markers from archaeological sites to urban museums (Maya reliefs sent to Mexico City, Hittite bronzes to Ankara, Assyrian bulls to Mosul: the list is endless) in order to forge a national identity based on territory rather than direct ethnic descent or religious affiliation.

While this secularizing role of the nation-state is generally known, less known are the concrete conflicts and the specific practices of domination that are associated with it. In regard to the Mexican context, the art historian and artist Mariana Botey asserts the following:

This discipline [anthropology/archaeology] has played a central role in the ideological construction of the Nation State arguably to such an extent that the specific form of discourse that it has generated—Mexican indi-
genismo—has not had the Indian as object of study, but the nation itself as its true and essential object.\textsuperscript{11}

Botey’s suggestion responds to the contradiction of the nation performing a self-image that builds upon ancient indigenous communities and their heritage as it, at the same time, pursues a destructive politics towards contemporary indigenous communities and first nations. ‘The state’s emphasis on the importance of studying, archiving, and displaying indigenous cultures within the museum—or space of historical record—is matched by its neglect of those same cultures and people beyond the institution’s walls.’\textsuperscript{12} What is very obviously described here as a conflict emerges as well in the heart of Western democracies in the face of migration policy: on one level wanting to represent the world that remains excluded on another level. In this book, for instance, Mirjam Shatanawi shows the extent to which Jean Baptiste vanmour’s paintings have been instrumentalized ‘as part of national policies to integrate Turkish migrants in the Netherlands.’

Although in this volume we turn primarily to areas where museums and cultural practices are more visibly in conflict, where the role of the museum has been and continues to be more contested, its range includes both the obvious and less obvious cases. A 1971 text by Stanislas Spero Adotevi (translated here) attests to the conflict that the global imposition of the museum form has meant for African countries. This tension, however, is also at the heart of so-called Western democracies. In a lecture on the recent topplings of monuments that occurred in major European cities in the course of the Black Lives Matter movement, Norman Ajari argues against the historical relativism that was vehemently deployed by French politicians in the case of the painting over of the pedestal of a statue of Jean-Baptiste Colbert.\textsuperscript{13} Colbert was


\textsuperscript{12} Eduardo Abaroa and Jennifer Burris Staton, ‘Introduction’ in Abaroa, \textit{Total Destruction}, 12.

finance minister under Louis XIV, responsible for laying the economic foundations of French colonialism and for inventing and implementing the Code Noir in 1685. The infamous Code Noir, with its sixty articles, regulated the treatment of slaves and was in force until 1848. On 23 June 2020, the Brigade Anti-Négrophobie (BAN) wrote ‘Négrophobie d’État’ (State Negrophobia) in red paint on the base of the Colbert statue that stands in front of the National Assembly in Paris. Ajari analyses the ‘contextualist argument’ (at 55’ of the webstream of the conference), which calls for taking into account the ‘context in which historical figures made decisions’ (54′50″). Ajari wonders to what extent this claim to context can be reconciled with the self-understanding of a nation-state whose foundations contradict everything the absolutist state represented and which itself was based on the overthrow of that very state. ‘To support Colbert amounts to supporting absolute monarchy, economic dirigisme, enriching the elite, absence of freedom of speech’, he asserts, concluding that ‘Colbertism is the absolute opposite of modern ideas’ (56′00″). The contextual argument might be a historian’s argument, Ajari maintains, but not a ‘political approach’, and he recalls what is known as Taubira Law, enacted by the former French Minister of Justice Christiane Taubira in 2001, a law that recognizes the Atlantic slave trade and slavery as crimes against humanity. Why then, Ajari wonders, was there such an outcry against BAN on the part of French politicians? His answer, which is transferable to numerous other political contexts within the sphere of culture, is that the ‘contextualist’ defence of Colbert allows the fictional continuity of the nation-state into times predating its existence. It supports, as Ajari argues, the pure strength of the nation-state and the state’s fundamental attachment to white supremacy (see 1:08″). What Colbert provides us with, so he continues, is the production of the ‘white race as pure and superior’: ‘the idealized projection of us as pure whites and as heirs of an unchanging or powerful and sovereign state’ (1:11″).

Since today’s museums are heirs and representatives of this history, the question arises as to what this means for transcultural museology, in times when museums have significantly changed their rhetoric. The question of ownership—who owns cultural heritage from a material perspective—is crucial in this context, since property rights are a political instrument of the nation-state. In her recent book Afrikas Kampf um seine Kunst (Africa’s fight for its art), Bénédicte Savoy shows how, with the independence and transformation of former colonies into nation-states, the great powers rushed to enact laws
that immediately blocked possible claims for restitution. But the question of material possession is also particularly evident when state entities are divided into new nation-states and their collections thus divided as well (see Kavita Singh’s contribution to this volume). And it is evident in the continuous refusal, now only very slowly crumbling, to return artefacts looted during the period of colonialism and imperialism. The restitution issue has become more urgent since the 2018 Sarr-Savoy report. The still very unequal exchange between European and African and other formerly colonized territories that are now partners refracts through the question of property, not least because the nation-state is the decisive vehicle for negotiations on restitution. This is why Achille Mbembe has called for a distinction to be made between legal and ‘legitimate’ heirs in order to shift the discussion from law to ethics.

What museums and exhibitions are there that take into account the fact of migration societies and provide alternative models of narrating transculturality without falling prey to a critique of, in this case, transnationalism that David Lloyd and Lisa Lowe formulated already in 1997:

We understand the transnational to denote the stage of globalized capitalism characterized by David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, and others as the universal extension of a differentiated mode of production that relies on flexible accumulation and mixed production to incorporate all sectors of the global economy into its logic of commodification.

But if transculturality is not to serve only to cover economies of enrichment, we want to ask: What is necessary to arrive at a non-idealistic understanding of transcultural art histories and museologies? What are the material conditions for transcultural art histories? What museums and exhibitions that take the fact of migratory societies into account operate alternative models

15 For the German context, see Savoy’s reconstruction of the history of refusal: Savoy, Afrikas Kampf.
of narrating transnational cultures and are not merely agents of the nation-state but rather actors of other conceptions of global coexistence? And here we begin again with Benedict Anderson’s question of national imagination. According to Hansen and Stepputat, the myth of the state is so persistent ‘because the state, or institutionalized sovereign government, remains pivotal in our very imagination of what a society is.’

If other imaginaries play out at the level of signifiers, the question is how to get from signifiers to material conditions. We are not the first to ask this question. Wayne Modest and Helen Mears suggest that

identifying the structures that discourage the inclusion of diverse populations and removing those from the museum organization; asking how collections can be used to combat societal prejudices and facilitate a better way of living with diversity; could serve as a more meaningful and impactful way to address the injustices embedded in society.

In this volume, we do not follow a historical line that would show the role of the nation-state in different times as a historical development in the transition from the colonial to postcolonial state. Rather, we assemble historical as well as contemporary case studies that confront the necessary claim to and practices of transculturality, or even more broadly, a ‘worldliness’ (see Natasha Ginwala’s contribution to this volume) with the hidden or overt role of the nation-state. By compiling texts from different sociopolitical contexts, we hope to shed light on the elephant in the room of transculturality.

Museums, to cast a more ambivalent light on the matter, stand in the middle of the ‘conflict zone’ (Kavita Singh) between at least two fields of force: their inherent transculturality, grounded in the most diverse forms of migration and violent transfer politics, and their role as the executing organ of a raison d’état. This contradiction underlies them, and the question arises as to how this can be overcome if the question of property, state power, and law is

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18 Hansen and Stepputat, States of Imagination, 1–2.
not to reinscribe any narrative transgressing the national back into the frame of the national by praising an idealistic world-culturalism. This book at least allows contradiction to emerge—and the introduction by Nina Samuel goes into more detail about its individual contributions. We have assembled historical as well as contemporary case studies, ranging from the implementation of the nation-state qua art in North Macedonia (Suzana Milevska) to dealing with postmigrant societies in Australia (Andrea Witcomb), reporting on the complicated intertwining of different social forces, actors, and agencies in contemporary Guatemala (Sebastián Eduardo), to claiming one’s own history in Egypt (Monica Hanna). And with excerpts from Rajkamal Kahlon’s series *Die Völker der Erde (People of the Earth)* (2017—onward), we present a work of art that seeks to engage with ethnographic collections and the racisms stored in their archives—a racism which was also foundational for the nation-states founded in the nineteenth century.  

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