

CONTENTS

*List of Illustrations* · vii

*Acknowledgments* · ix

INTRODUCTION	<i>Kihawahine:</i> The Future in the Past	1
CHAPTER 1	Hawaiian Feather Cloaks and Mayan Sculptures: Collecting Origins	15
CHAPTER 2	The Haida Crest Pole and the Nootka Eagle Mask: Hypercollecting	48
CHAPTER 3	Benin Bronzes: Colonial Questions	80
CHAPTER 4	Guatemalan Textiles: Persisting Global Networks	108
CHAPTER 5	The Yup'ik Flying Swan Mask: The Past in the Future	149
	Epilogue: Harnessing Humboldt	189

*Notes* · 201

*Bibliography* · 207

*Index* · 215

INTRODUCTION

*Kihawahine*

THE FUTURE IN THE PAST

*KIHAWAHINE*, A STATUE of the mother goddess, a high-ranking Hawaiian deity, is one of some five hundred objects that Eduard Arning, a German physician, collected while studying leprosy in Hawai'i in the mid-1880s. Upon his return, he gave the collection to the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde, now the Berlin Ethnological Museum. About two feet high and carefully carved out of indigenous kou wood, *Kihawahine* spent many years secluded on the rocky coastline of Hāmākua, Hawai'i, an area accessible only by swimming. She was secreted in a hole lined with stones, covered by a flat stone slab, hidden together with a hermaphrodite god and a human skull. When local villagers first discovered the gods and brought them to the nearby Waimanu valley, disease spread among the people, leading to the gods' quick return to the stone-lined hole. Shortly thereafter, they became part of Arning's collection. There is some mystery about how Arning obtained *Kihawahine*, but there is no question that she came from a burial site.

Greg Johnson brought *Kihawahine* and the rest of the Arning collection to my attention in the fall of 2017. At that time, Greg was a professor of religious studies at the University of Colorado, as well as a close friend. He has spent his career focused on American Indian and Hawaiian encounters with United States and international legal systems. He was traveling to Germany that fall because the state of Saxony was poised to return Hawaiian ancestral remains housed in Dresden to an impressive team of cultural practitioners and repatriation experts, led by Halealoha Ayau, with whom Greg had collaborated for years.<sup>1</sup> Greg had made him aware of the *iwi kūpuna* (ancestral Hawaiian skeletal remains), *moepū*

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FIGURE 1.1. *Kihawahine*. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Ethnologisches Museum (VI 8375). Photo: Claudia Obrocki.

(funerary possessions) and *mea kapu* (sacred objects) in Berlin’s museums. Halealoha Ayau invited him to attend a repatriation ceremony in Dresden and to help support their discussions with the Berlin museums.

After twenty-six years of negotiations, the Museum für Völkerkunde in Dresden returned four *iwi kūpuna* taken from Hawaiian graves between 1896 and 1902. Halealoha Ayau’s team of native cultural practitioners, acting together with the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, received the remains from Saxon state officials during a public ceremony in October 2017.<sup>2</sup> Nanette Snoep, director of Saxony’s three ethnological museums, called it “perhaps one of the most important days of our museum history.” It marked the first time a Saxon museum had repatriated human remains back to the place from which they originated. For Halealoha Ayau, who had struggled for twenty-six years to “find the right words” to gain permission to “bring our family back together,” it was more than that. It was a highly emotional moment of closure, the completion of a morally imperative act.

The exchange also signaled a new beginning. Amid the ceremonial signing of documents and ritual chants, he and the others graciously praised the museum's action as one of "ultimate humility." They also characterized it as "a sea change" in the relationships between German museums and indigenous people. It marked, they noted, the beginning of an enduring relationship in the place of previously fraught political tensions.

After completing their work in Dresden, Greg Johnson, Halealoha Ayau, and their colleagues traveled to Berlin to continue their work there. The Berlin Ethnological Museum is one of the largest and most important ethnological museums in the world. It contains more than 500,000 objects, including one of the most significant historical collections of Hawaiian artifacts outside Hawai'i. Much of those Hawaiian collections came from Eduard Arning. When Arning presented his collection to the Berlin Anthropological Society at the Museum für Völkerkunde in February 1887, Adolf Bastian, the father of modern German ethnology and the museum's director, lauded the "treasures" in the collection and argued that Arning's singular gift had transformed their assorted Hawaiian items into a collection that was literally "one of a kind." He also congratulated Arning for the exacting information he had accumulated about the artifacts. He explained to the audience that Arning's collection demonstrated what could be achieved with "seriousness and efforts and the sensible implementation of both," even "within an almost hopeless field." Similarly, Rudolf Virchow, renowned pathologist, founder of the Berlin Anthropological Society, and liberal member of the Reichstag, praised Arning while introducing his lecture on the ethnological collection. Then he noted, "To the rich collection of skulls, which he brought us at the same time, and to the exquisite photographic images of indigenous people [*Eingeborenen*], which he mostly created himself, we will return another time."<sup>3</sup>

Arning was not an ethnologist; he was a dermatologist. He traveled to Hawai'i in 1883 to work for the Hawaiian government because the Hawaiian prime minister, Murray Gibson, needed help in understanding the spread of leprosy on the islands. Yet, when Arning arrived in Honolulu that November, he not only moved into the professional circles around King Kalākaua but also entered a crossroads of Polynesian trade. He saw circulating in markets artifacts brought by ships' captains from the Carolines, the Solomon Islands, and other ports in the Pacific. He also encountered other Europeans there, such as Prince Oscar of Sweden and Swedish archaeologist Hjalmar Stolpe, who arrived in Hawai'i soon after Arning and attempted, with little success, to collect archaeological and ethnographic objects.



FIGURE 1.2. *Kihawahine* with other objects collected by Arning in Hawai'i. From Adrienne L. Kaeppler, Markus Schindlbeck, and Gisela E. Speidel, eds., *Old Hawai'i: An Ethnography of Hawai'i in the 1880s Based on the Research and Collections of Eduard Arning in the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin* (Berlin, 2008), p. 41 © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum.

At Kalākaua's court, however, Arning moved among officials and royalty who possessed things from past generations—clothing, religious objects, tools, and weapons. The king himself was an avid collector. His own collections, in fact, are now in Hawai'i's Bishop Museum. As a physician, Arning also had contact with men and women of all classes, including fishermen. Their fish gods taught him that Christianity had not completely obliterated the old religion on the islands. Some of the more conservative noble families taught him that as well. Many earlier beliefs and practices were simply privately and quietly pursued.

Arning had access, in other words, to many levels of Hawaiian culture and society. He used that access to take part in what for him and many others was one of the most exciting scientific pursuits of his time: a vast ethnographic project meant to create what Adolf Bastian termed “a universal archive of humanity,” which he believed was the key to revealing a total history of humanity.

When Arning realized that despite reports to the contrary, it was still possible to collect historical artifacts in Hawai'i, he wrote excitedly to physiologist Émil du Bois-Reymond in Berlin suggesting that he could acquire a collection for Bastian's museum. His suggestion was forwarded

to Bastian along with greetings from King Kalākaua. Bastian, not surprisingly, had been to Hawai‘i during his fifth major scientific voyage (1878–80), and had already met the king. As a result of that encounter, he had produced *The Sacred Legend of the Polynesians* (*Die heilige Sage der Polynesier*) around his translations of the Kumulipo, a prayer chant of the Hawaiian king’s genealogy and divine origins, loaned to him by King Kalākaua. Bastian was delighted by Arning’s assessment. He also was happy to include him among the hundreds of people who, by the middle of the 1880s, were enthusiastically collecting for him all over the world. By the end of the century, that number had grown into the thousands.

### *Bastian’s Museum*

Bastian’s enthusiasm was infectious. He spent twenty-five years of his life traveling abroad, incessant, impatient, moving quickly from one experience to the next. Time, for Bastian, was always fleeting; he hated miscalculations or setbacks that might cause him to lose any of it. As a young man, he had a shock of dark hair and a modestly trimmed beard that matched his unassuming dress. As his hair grew first gray and then white, he became increasingly gaunt; yet age made him no less energetic or focused. He only became more harried, more aware of time passing and windows of opportunity closing. Personally, he was reticent despite his ever-increasing notoriety. In fact, as his reputation grew he found that notoriety uncomfortable, and he often made a point of disappearing during celebrations in his honor. Despite that, he was an enthusiastic and convincing speaker. His force of will and the perseverance that allowed him to overcome a wide range of challenges while abroad animated the reports of his travels and his arguments for pursuing a total history of humanity. It was that will, that enthusiasm, and those arguments that allowed him to win over many collaborators and also enticed people such as Arning to seek him out and to volunteer.

Bastian was born in 1826 into one of Bremen’s more wealthy merchant families. That wealth allowed him to travel unencumbered throughout his lifetime. Growing up among overseas merchants also made those travels second nature. He had a neohumanist education in Bremen, and by the time he left school, he had not only mastered Greek and Latin but also was fluent in English and French. He was, he later realized, particularly adept at language learning. As a result, he was able to speak the language of most places he visited. He quickly became conversant in new languages as he moved around, and he studied some intensely when he thought it necessary. That talent would not have surprised his teachers, who had reported to his parents that his intellect was excellent, even if his work was often “hasty.”





FIGURE 1.3. Bastian as a young man. *Illustrierte Zeitung* (1860).  
© bpk-Bildagentur / Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen  
Museen zu Berlin / Art Resource, NY.

Bastian became enamored with the natural sciences while in school, and he continued to study them at universities. He completed his doctorate in medicine under the renowned pathologist Rudolf Virchow, who later became his close colleague and friend. Yet the most important part of his education followed the model set out by his hero Alexander von Humboldt: a frantic pursuit of *Bildung* (self-edification) through travel and inquiry all over the globe.

Bastian first left Europe as a ship's physician in 1850. Over the next eight years he traveled to Africa, Australia, the South Seas, South and North America, and South Asia. Those voyages whetted his appetite for more. In the early 1860s he returned for five years to South and Southeast Asia, traveling first to India, and then to Burma (Myanmar), Siam (Thailand), Cambodia, Annam (Vietnam), Indonesia, the Philippines, China, Mongolia, and the Caucasus. Burma was the highlight of the trip. He spent half a year in the royal residences of Mandalay studying Buddhism and debating religious texts with local princes, scholars, and the king; in 1873 he traveled to the Loango coast in West Africa; in 1875–76 to Central and South America;

from 1878 to 1880 he traveled from Persia to India, Indonesia, Australia, and Polynesia before returning to South America; at the end of the 1880s, he spent three years traveling from Russia, to Asia Minor, into Egypt and East Africa, and then across to India, down to Australia, and through Oceania again; in his seventieth year (1896), he embarked on yet another two-year excursion to Java, Bali, and Lombok, where he once again pursued an intensive study of Buddhism; from 1901 through 1903 he continued those studies in India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka), two of his favorite places. From 1903 to 1905 he traveled to the West Indies, and he died in Trinidad.

In many ways, Bastian was a loner. He never traveled with friends, groups, or as an expedition leader. Rather, he traveled lightly and quickly, with guides and sometimes porters who often taught him local languages and offered him windows into their communities' worldviews. His needs were few while under way. He was just as content sleeping outdoors with his guides and porters as in the homes of German merchants, officials, or in various hotels. The latter, he thought, slowed him down, even if they offered him opportunities for sharing his vision and recruiting more people to his cause.

Convinced by Alexander von Humboldt that the natural sciences offered a means for understanding the cosmic harmony of the world, Bastian returned from his first set of voyages eager to harness Humboldt's scientific methods to explore the total history of humanity. He began with the premise of a unitary humanity—one people in one world. Human cultures in all their multiplicity were, he believed, simply variations on a common theme, differences within a psychic unity shared by all peoples across space and time. The *Weltanschauungen* (worldviews) of any culture, he was convinced, expressed the commonalities and variations one could observe among cultures. His first goal was thus to understand that commonality in all its variations across space and time; his end goal was to use that information to fashion a total history of humanity. He never thought, however, that he could achieve those goals on his own. Nor did he expect them to be achieved during his lifetime. Yet he was convinced it could be done, and thus he dedicated himself to pursuing a vast ethnographic project that would bring together all the data necessary for this effort, and he committed himself to convincing as many people as possible to join the cause.

The first step in his project was to collect as much information as he could about all the peoples of the world. Part of that information could be gained through discussions, observations, and written records. He explored them all during his first voyages. Yet, because so much of the



world had always been and still was illiterate, Bastian soon turned to the analysis and collection of material culture—to all of the things people make and use, from their great monuments and highest art to their most simple crafts and everyday things. He was particularly concerned with prioritizing the cultural material produced by illiterate societies, because for those people, he argued, the things they produced and left behind were the only records of their relationships with the surrounding world and the history of their cultures as they developed over time.

For Bastian, then, the objects a group of people produced and used were first and foremost “impressions of that people’s spirit [*Völksggeist*],” and consequently the vast majority of his publications were concerned less with the things he and others collected for his museum than with what those things could tell him about people’s customs, ethics, practices, and religious ideas. In short, he used the objects to understand the formation of the ideas behind them, and he used the ideas behind the objects to understand the emergence of those people’s worldviews. His hope was that he and those who joined him would be able to do that for people everywhere. Thus he brought tens of thousands, and ultimately hundreds of thousands, of such objects together in the museum he directed in Berlin in order to engage in a vast, comparative analysis of those worldviews. That was the whole point of the museum. That is why it and the collections are there.

This was, in fact, a much different kind of collecting and display than had been common in the past. Bastian was not interested in focusing on trophies; he was not keen to fill his museum with exceptional things. He saw little value in that. As he argued again and again, anyone the museum sent abroad, or anyone who, like Eduard Arning, chose to join his cause, “would be strongly advised not to allow themselves to be blinded by the exceptional showpieces, which, following the earlier style of the curiosity cabinet, would seem suitable to display as trophies.” Rather, what they needed to do was “contemplate the typically average character of ethnic life in each moment and collect the corresponding tools and implements with all of the associated detail (from the different stages of the manufacturing process) to the last differential.”<sup>4</sup> Those objects, and the differentiated information surrounding them, would provide ethnologists with the data they needed to achieve their goals, to reveal a total human history. That was the vision.

There were, of course, other anthropologists and ethnologists in the Americas and Europe during the middle of the nineteenth century engaged in studying human cultures, collecting material culture, writing

human histories, and filling museums. Yet Bastian's ethnographic project, and thus the ethnology that channeled and shaped the ethnological museums that sprang up throughout the German-speaking lands during the second half of the nineteenth century, was different. Unlike their counterparts in most of Europe and the United States, German ethnologists did not use objects simply to confirm or illustrate theories of human development; nor did they seek to use them to legitimate cultural or racial hierarchies. Rather, they began with a rejection of race science and an assumption that there were no inherent mental differences among people. Bastian, Virchow, and their colleagues believed that nature had endowed all humans equally; no group had inherent genetic advantages or disadvantages. Thus they created their museums as spaces for the study of human cultures and histories in all their variations, not to support or illustrate politically useful theories of human difference.

Their greatest challenge was locating and acquiring the objects, those records of human cultures and histories, and bringing them together in their museums. That challenge also seemed to increase with each day. That is why Bastian became so harried and his work remained "hasty." For, just as the nineteenth-century's growing industrialization rapidly eased Europeans' transport and travel to faraway lands, it also increased disparities of power, leading to wider-ranging and quicker conquests. In turn, those conquests transformed many non-European societies, reducing cultural differences, eradicating older forms of production, and eliminating the material culture produced by earlier generations and along with it the records of their history before the conquests. Similarly, just as the increasingly global competition for territory and power might facilitate Bastian's scientific collecting, it also made that collecting competitive, as his counterparts in other countries tried to acquire objects first or control the acquisition of objects within their domains. These factors undermined Bastian's ability to travel where he wanted and to collect where he found it most imperative. Time, in other words, seemed more fleeting with each passing year, leading him and his counterparts to engage in a series of compromises and Faustian bargains with government officials, military forces, and patrons that later undermined his project.

Yet his successes were many: by the time Bastian returned from his first trip in 1858, he had dedicated himself to pursuing a total history of humanity, and he quickly became the leader of German ethnology—the study of human cultures in all their variations. Over the next forty-five years (1860–1905), Bastian built the world's largest and most important ethnological museum; he shaped the science of ethnology in the

German-speaking world; he inspired generations of scientists to join him; and he fashioned a vision of ethnology that drew thousands of Germans around the world into his networks of acquisition and collecting. Eduard Arning was only one of many. Between the late 1860s and World War I, their joint effort filled his museum until it overflowed with objects from every corner of the globe and threatened to burst at the seams. That success astounded Bastian's counterparts and his competitors in other countries, who regarded it with envy, and left his coworkers and those who followed him with both a wealth of material and an array of challenges. His is a controversial legacy.

For not everything ended well. Bastian knew the power of objects. He also knew that knowledge, science, and display should not be divided. He knew that his museum had to be more than a municipal or national display, more than a statement of grandeur—static, didactic, and, to his mind, boring. The central point of drawing together those hundreds of thousands of objects was to allow them to interact through juxtapositions that would be dynamic, active, enlightening. The point was to have the objects teach us to see, to have them teach us about the areas of human history for which there are few or no written records. The point was to use the visual displays to help locate the consistencies that cut across the endless variations in humanity. The value of the objects never lay merely in their possession, and their purpose was never to be used as simple illustrations in didactic *Schausammlungen* (public displays; literally, show collections), which, he thought, were a poor use of museums. Ethnological museums, as he made clear in his instructions to collectors and his criticisms of the old *Kunstkammern* where these objects were displayed, should be first and foremost laboratories, places for the production of knowledge, not its mere articulation.

Yet that is what they became after his death. In part, bureaucracy and politics began undercutting Bastian's vision already during his lifetime, and they overwhelmed it after his death in 1905. While his success at inspiring people and growing his collections impressed, many challenges undermined his project: his museum lacked the space needed to display all of his ever-expanding collections and put them to use; its budget was too small to support enough assistants; and those assistants grew increasingly frustrated with the conditions. The youngest ones, eager to make careers, searched for alternatives to working in the collections made chaotic by the limited funds and space.

At the same time, just as Bastian's life was nearing its end, Wilhelm von Bode, an art historian who became general director of the Royal

Museums during the year of Bastian's death, began lobbying for conformity among museums. He had his own vision, and Bastian's project had no place in it. As general director, Bode consistently channeled funds away from the sciences and into the arts, and he tried for decades to make Bastian's museum conform to the other museums under his auspices. He tried to force Bastian's followers to transform the very character of the institution by making it a place more pleasing to the public, by reducing its total number of collections, by moving the vast majority of objects behind closed doors, and by following a didactic aesthetic of display meant to entertain and teach.

Already in 1911, Bode issued a report that sought to reduce the Museum für Völkerkunde to a focus only on *Naturvölker*, or "natural peoples," not on all the peoples of the world. He also demanded a "reasonable reduction" of the museum's collections through donation, sale, or trade. Most of all, Bode wanted the museum converted into spacious halls filled with representative objects, precisely the kinds of didactic *Schausammlungen* Bastian abhorred. In 1926, just three years before his own death, he finally got them.

We lost a great deal as a result. We lost the recognition that Völkerkunde museums were unlike art museums. They were never meant to articulate, demonstrate, or illustrate. They were built to be workshops in which data could be assembled and knowledge produced. Over time, we also all but forgot that nineteenth-century German ethnology, or *Völkerkunde*, was incredibly pluralistic, characterized by its practitioners' refusal to entertain unproven racial hierarchies and by their quest to analyze and understand the great diversity of a unitary humanity across space and time—a quest that set German ethnology apart from its counterparts in America, Britain, France, and much of the rest of Europe. Yet that too was forgotten, and with that moment of forgetting we lost as well the understanding that these museums, as houses of human history, were never meant to be sites for the exhibition of exotic others. They were meant to be locations for helping people better understand the human condition, and thus themselves.

The twentieth century, however, changed all that. At first, those younger generations of ethnologists looking for career opportunities began working with Bode and others to develop didactic displays. Increasingly, those exhibits were meant to tell tales that fit the needs of national politics rather than Humboldtian science. They began leaning toward discussions of cultural hierarchies that could justify colonial systems. Then the Nazis transformed the German cultural sciences into racial sciences; they recast the associations, the institutions, and even the meanings of

their names. It took decades after World War II for those academic disciplines, their associations, and their institutions to recover. Perhaps they never did. Völkerkunde today is only a cipher of what it once was. Even the name has gone out of fashion, forever tainted by Nazi misuse. Meanwhile, the collections Bastian and his counterparts painstakingly assembled over generations have been largely frozen in time for over a century—waiting to share their secrets with the world.

The central argument of this book is that it is time to release those objects and put them to work. In many ways the debates around the Humboldt Forum in Berlin since the summer of 2017 have made that possible. The arguments about building a modern version of the old Prussian Palace in central Berlin and the decision to place a fraction of the collections from the Berlin Ethnological Museum in that edifice together with collections from the Asian Art Museum, Humboldt University, and a display devoted to the history of the city have been heated.

Driven by a kind of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—a painful reckoning with the past common to all areas of German history—those debates have been animated by tensions between voices that emphasize the cosmopolitan visions epitomized in Alexander von Humboldt’s writings, which inspired Bastian and his counterparts to create and fill the largest collecting museums in the world, and those voices that wish to underscore the roles (whether inadvertent or intentional) such scientists and institutions played in the crimes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly the legacies of colonial and Nazi violence. Those voices make completely different arguments about *Kihawahine*’s journey to Berlin and about her future. The first group emphasizes her value in the totality of the collections, the second underscores the questionable means of her acquisition and her place in Hawai‘i today.

In part, global efforts, driven largely by indigenous activists such as Halealoha Ayau’s team of native cultural practitioners, who have been working transnationally to “decolonize” historical institutions for decades, have also fueled the debates. Over the last three decades, such activists—arguing for sovereignty, human rights, and protections for their cultures, languages, and religions—have had tremendous success on the world stage: before the United Nations and the World Court, and in the media. They have also been winning victories regarding land rights, based often on religious arguments, in national courts, particularly in Australia, Brazil, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. The field of indigenous studies, led by indigenous scholars like those who accompanied Halealoha Ayau, is also booming, and many of the activists today are highly educated

and politically savvy. Those activists and their supporters in Europe and the United States have focused considerable attention on institutions that contain the funeral objects and physical remains of non-Europeans, and much like Halealoha Ayau and his team in Dresden in the fall of 2017, they have been achieving striking successes globally during the last decades as they have called for repatriation of these objects.

The best thing about the debates around the Humboldt Forum in Berlin is that they have pulled German ethnology out of the shadows and placed it on a public stage where it can be scrutinized, argued about, and, if we are lucky, saved. I wrote this book to remind people about the value of the collections in Berlin's Ethnological Museum and the other ethnological museums in German-speaking lands because, if there is one thing that most disturbs me about the debates of the last decade, it is the degree to which the original purposes behind the creation of the collections and the value inherent in the objects has been overlooked and remains lost.

The most heated question raised during the debates around the Humboldt Forum has been about the repatriation of objects such as *Kihawahine*. The heat has come from further accusations that Germans have been far too slow to come to terms with their colonial pasts, and that the Humboldt Forum, through the combination of the building's imperial façade, its nationalist symbolism, and the decision to display state collections of non-European objects within that edifice, demonstrates that Germans still have a long way to go before a reckoning can take place.

Yet the question we should be asking is not repatriation yes or no. The question that most needs to be answered is, what should we do with these collections today? Repatriation is only part of the answer, and it is my contention that we cannot answer that question fully without a clear understanding of the objects' histories and Bastian's purpose. The basic point is that if we do not understand the history of the collections and the origins of the objects, we cannot understand what Bastian knew long ago: ethnological museums are filled with historical traces, material objects that contain vast amounts of information about human history. And they are more than that: as Halealoha Ayau and his colleagues made crystal clear in Dresden and Berlin, objects like *Kihawahine* have much to teach us about different ontologies—different ways of being in the world and relating to the world as human beings. At the most basic level, they have much to teach us about human difference and about ourselves as people in the world.

We should let them do that. But the collections cannot do anything in their current conditions. For most of the last century, the majority of the



collections have been locked away in depots, separated from the didactic and entertaining Schausammlungen. Meanwhile these Schausammlungen, the kinds of displays Bastian never wanted and would never have tolerated, have come to dominate these museums to such a degree that many have forgotten the museums' original purposes. Indeed, for most people, even those who work in museums, these permanent public displays seem so natural, so essential, so fundamental to what any museum should be. Most people have long forgotten why Bastian and the thousands who joined him dedicated so much energy to creating these institutions in the first place. It is time to remember, time to free the objects, time to return German ethnological museums to their original purpose: the production of knowledge about human cultures and human histories.

## INDEX

Page numbers in italics refer to figures.

- Academia de Geografia e Historia de Guatemala, 122, 131–32
- Aguilar, Vincent, 40
- Alaska Commercial Company, 52
- Alavardo, Pedro de, 133
- Alexander von Humboldt Association, 143
- American Museum of Natural History (New York), 94
- Anchorage Museum of History and Art, 186
- Anda, Pedro de, 45
- Ankermann, Bernhard, 97, 164–65, 167
- The Antiquities of Benin* (Luschan), 83, 107
- Arning, Eduard: Bastian and, 8, 10; in Hawai'i, 1, 3–5, 53, 61, 113, 189–90, 194–95; skulls and, 95, 189–90
- Arthur Baessler Foundation, 73
- Association of German Science, 124
- Ayau, Halealoha, 1–3, 12–13, 189–90, 194–96
- Baessler, Arthur, 73, 84, 88, 95
- Basel: Museum für Völkerkunde, 109–10
- Bastian, Adolf: in the Americas (1875–76), 6–7, 33–34, 35–46, 39, 41–43, 196; Arning and, 3, 4–5; Boas and, 58–59, 60; colonialism and, 97–100, 103–4, 106; competition and collaboration with other museums and, 108–10; as controversial character, 32–33; in East Asia (1861–65), 6–7, 24–32, 25; funding and, 54–55; *Gedankenstatistik* (systematic tabulation of ideas) and, 23, 25–26, 32, 46–47, 53–54, 71, 74–75; in Hawai'i, 4–5, 61; Humboldt and, 6, 7, 12, 20–21, 23, 37–38, 45; hypercollecting and, 53–55, 74–75; Jacobsen and, 48–49, 50–51, 52, 55–58, 61, 96–97; legacy of, 33–34; life and travels of, 5–7, 6, 20–21, 76; race science and, 58–59; as *Seelenfischer* (fisher of souls), 32–46, 61–62; Termer and, 131, 196; on total history of humanity, 7–10, 20–24; vision for Museum für Völkerkunde and, 9–11, 13–14, 20, 46–47, 63–77, 162–67, 178, 186–88, 194–96; writings and academic career of, 20–24, 32, 33–34, 54, 75, 196–97; Yup'ik Flying Swan mask and, 149, 150–51. *See also* Hilfs-Comité
- Becker, Carl Heinrich, 163, 165
- Benin bronzes and ivories, 80–92, 81, 83, 103, 106–7, 164–65
- Berendt, Karl Hermann, 205n15
- Berlin: Egyptian Museum, 19; Kaiser Friedrich Museum, 77–78; Kunstgewerbemuseum, 19; Museum für Naturkunde, 18; Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, 19, 94, 153, 171; Museum Island in, 19, 77–78, 157; New Museum, 19, 46–47, 65–66. *See also* Museum für Völkerkunde (Berlin)
- Berlin Anthropological Society, 3
- Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory, 32, 33, 36, 57, 190
- Bernoulli, Carl Gustav, 205n15
- Bingham, William T., 17
- Bishop Museum (Honolulu), 4, 17
- Bismarck, Otto von, 74, 98, 171
- Blücher, Gebhard Leberecht von, 16
- Boas, Franz: collecting methodology of, 61, 80–81; Jacobsen and, 58–60; race science and, 58–59, 173; skulls and, 95; Termer and, 130–31, 138–39; in the United States, 62–63, 130–31
- Bode, Wilhelm von, 10–11, 77–79, 153, 162–63, 165
- Bois-Reymond, Émil du, 4–5
- Bredenkamp, Horst, 191–92
- Bremen: transoceanic trade networks of, 15; Übersee Museum Bremen, 109–10, 168
- Brinckmann, Justus, 85–86, 87
- British Museum (London), 84, 87, 89

- Buddhism: Bastian and, 6, 23, 24, 30, 75, 194, 195; Grünwedel and, 62  
*Bürgertum* (German middle classes), 58  
Burma, 6, 26–31
- Calista Elders Council, 186  
Carnegie Institution for Science  
    (Washington, DC), 141–42  
Celle Castle, 153–54  
Charlotte Agnes, Princess of Prussia, 122–24  
Chicago: Field Museum, 88  
China, 103–4  
Chinchilla Aguilar, Ernesto, 131  
Christianity, 49–50  
Christie, Manson, and Woods (auction house), 80, 86  
Cologne: Museum für Völkerkunde, 89, 109–10, 176–77  
colonialism. *See* German colonialism and imperialism  
Colwell, Chip, 198–99  
Crabbe, Kamana’opono, 201n1  
Cuervo, Rufino José, 44  
cultural anthropology, 58–59  
*The Cultural Lands of Ancient America* (Bastian), 34
- Dall, W. H., 53  
Dalton, O. M., 91  
Darmstadt: Hessisches Landesmuseum  
    Darmstadt, 109–10  
Darwin, Charles, 20, 21  
*The Descent of Man* (Darwin), 21  
Deutsche Auslands-Institut (Institute for Germans Abroad), 109–10  
Dieseldorff, Erwin Paul, 133–36, 147  
Dieseldorff de Quirn, Matilda, 147–48  
Dorsey, Charles, 88  
Dresden: Museum für Völkerkunde, 2–3, 89, 95, 101, 109–10, 168  
Dube, Wolf-Dieter, 158–59  
Dubois, W.E.B., 92
- East Germany, 157–58, 176–77  
East India Company, 26–27  
Edenshaw, Albert Edward, 50  
Edith Kanaka’ole Foundation, 201n1  
Egyptian Museum (Berlin), 19  
Ehrenreich, Paul, 72–73  
elementary ideas, 54  
Elmenhorst, Carlos W., 108, 111–13, 147–48
- England and British imperialism, 15, 26–27. *See also* British Museum (London)  
“Ethnological Considerations” (Bastian), 196–97  
evolutionary theories, 59
- feather cloaks, 16–19, 17  
Field Museum (Chicago), 88  
Fienup-Riordan, Ann, 182–87  
First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–26), 26–27  
Fischer, Eugen, 172, 173  
Fischer, Manuela, 46  
folk ideas, 54  
*Forschungen und Fortschritte* (journal), 136  
France and French imperialism, 15, 26–27  
Frankfurt: Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, 109–10, 168  
Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, 16  
Frederick William, Elector of Brandenburg, 18  
Free University (Freie Universität Berlin), 153, 177  
Freiburg im Breisgau, 109–10  
Friedrich Wilhelm III, King of Prussia, 16–18  
*From the Highlands of the Maya* (Lentz), 126
- García Moreno, Gabriel, 37  
Gavarrete, Juan, 45  
*Gedankenstatistik* (systematic tabulation of ideas), 23, 25–26, 32, 46–47, 53–54, 71, 74–75  
Geographical Society (Berlin), 36  
Geographical Society (Hamburg), 124  
German Anthropological Society, 86  
German colonialism and imperialism, 74, 93–95, 97–107, 111, 174–77, 192–200.  
    *See also* *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (reckoning with the past)  
German Ethnological Society, 167–70  
German-speaking communities in Latin America: Bastian and, 34–38, 40, 44–45; Termer and, 44–45, 110–11, 113–15, 116–17, 118–19, 121–24, 130, 133–38, 140–41, 142, 145–46  
Gibson, Murray, 3  
Gildemeister & Co., 36  
Göttingen: Sammlung für Völkerkunde, 168

- Grassi Museum für Völkerkunde (Leipzig):  
access to sources on, 174; Benin  
bronzes and ivories and, 89; colonial-  
ism and, 100, 101-2; competition and  
collaboration with other museums  
and, 73, 109-10; Soviet trophy bri-  
gades and the Leningrad collections  
and, 157-60, 159  
grave robbing, 96-97  
Grube, Wilhelm, 62  
Grünwedel, Albert, 61-62, 77, 79, 80,  
82-84, 88  
Grütters, Monika, 192  
Guatemala: Bastian in, 44-46, 196; Ger-  
man communities in, 44-45, 110-11,  
113-15, 116-17, 118-19, 121-24, 130,  
133-38, 140-41, 142, 145-46; Termer  
in, 110-11, 113-31, 120, 123, 125, 127, 129,  
132-33, 132, 137; textiles from, 108,  
109, 111-13, 127, 128, 144-48, 146  
Guatemalan revolution (1944-54), 141
- Haberland, Wolfgang, 113  
Hagenbeck, Carl, 55  
Haida, 48-50, 51, 59, 160, 161. *See also*  
Northwest Coast tribes  
Hamburg: MARKK: Museum am  
Rothenbaum: World Cultures and  
Arts, 108, 109, 111; transoceanic trade  
networks of, 15. *See also* Museum für  
Völkerkunde (Hamburg)
- Hansa, 15  
Hauptmann, Dr., 78-79  
Hawai'i: Arning in, 1, 3-5, 53, 61, 113,  
189-90, 194-95; Bastian in, 4-5, 53,  
61; feather cloaks from, 16-19, 17;  
human remains from, 189-90; *Kiha-  
wahine* statue from, 1, 2, 4, 12, 189-90,  
195-96; Oswald in, 15-18; repatria-  
tion of human remains from, 1-3, 13,  
189-90; skulls and, 95  
Heger, Franz, 88  
Heidelberg: Völkerkundemuseum der J. und  
E. von Portheim Stiftung, 109-10  
Heinrich Bey and Co., 86, 87  
Herero Wars (1904-7), 94  
Herrnhut: Völkerkundemuseum Herrnhut,  
109-10  
Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt,  
109-10  
Hilfs-Comité, 54-55, 61, 69, 83, 110  
Himmler, Heinrich, 171-72  
Hitler, Adolf, 172  
Honolulu: Bishop Museum, 4, 17  
Höpfner, Gerd, 158-59  
Hudson Bay Company, 48, 49  
Hui Mālama I Nā Kūpuna 'O Hawai'i Nei,  
2011  
*The Human in History* (Bastian), 20-24  
Humboldt, Alexander von: Bastian and,  
6, 7, 12, 20-21, 23, 37-38, 45; Boas  
and, 58; legacy of, 190-91  
Humboldt Forum, 12-13, 186, 190-200  
Hunt, George, 51  
hypercollecting, 53-55, 74-75, 79
- imperialism, 26-27. *See also* German  
colonialism and imperialism  
indigenous activism and indigenous stud-  
ies, 1-3, 12-13, 181-87  
inductive science, 21  
*iwi kūpuna* (ancestral Hawaiian skeletal  
remains), 1-3
- Jacobi, Arnold, 101  
Jacobsen, Johan Adrian: collecting meth-  
odology of, 60-61; collections at  
Museum für Völkerkunde (Berlin)  
and, 69, 151; criticisms of, 58-60, 62;  
on Northwest Coast, 48-53, 50-51, 55-58,  
56; skulls and, 95, 96-97; Yup'ik Flying  
Swan mask and, 149, 150-51, 182-87  
Johnson, Greg, 1-3, 190
- Ka`eo, Kaleikoa, 2011  
Kahanu, Noelle, 2011  
Kaiser Friedrich Museum (now Bode  
Museum) (Berlin), 77-78  
Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology,  
Human Heredity, and Eugenics, 172  
Kalākaua, King, 3-5, 53, 195  
Kamehameha I, King, 16  
Kamehameha II, King, 17  
Kamehameha III, King, 15-18  
Kanter, Gustavo, 130  
*kapu* system, 17  
Karlsruhe, 109-10  
Kassel, 109-10  
Keli'ikanaka'oleoha'ililani, 2011  
Keller, Fritz, 142  
Keller family, 118-19  
Kidder, A. V., 141-42

- Kiel: Museum für Völkerkunde der Universität Kiel, 109–10
- Kihawahine* (statue), 1, 2, 4, 12, 189–90, 195–96
- Koch, Gerd, 178–80
- Kossinna, Gustaf, 170–71, 172
- Kraemer, Augustin, 167
- Krause, Fritz, 138–39
- Kuhlmann, Elly von, 137, 146–47
- Kuhlmann, Wilhelm von, 136–37
- Kumulipo, 5
- Kunstgewerbemuseum (Berlin), 19
- Kunstkammern* (cabinets of curiosities), 10, 18–19
- Kwakiutl, 51
- Le Coq, Albert von, 54–55
- Lehmann, Walter, 122, 133
- Leiden: Museum Volkenkunde, 84
- Leipzig. *See* Grassi Museum für Völkerkunde (Leipzig)
- Lengemann, Wilhelm, 115, 129, 136–37
- Lentz, Franz Joseph, 126, 128
- Lima, Federico, 114, 119
- Linden, Karl von, 89, 100, 101, 107
- Linden Museum (Stuttgart), 73, 89, 100, 109–10, 168
- Lips, Eva, 176–77
- Lips, Julius, 176–77
- London: Benin bronzes and ivories and, 80–84, 86–88, 89; British Museum, 84, 87, 89
- Londoñez, Alejandro, 42
- Lübeck: Museum für Völkerkunde, 109–10
- Luschan, Felix von: Bastian and, 62, 76; Benin bronzes and ivories and, 80–92, 81, 83; Boas and, 60; colonialism and, 93–95, 100–101, 102, 104–7; race science and, 91–93, 172, 173; retirement of, 172; skulls and, 94, 97; vision for Museum für Völkerkunde and, 77
- MacGregor, Neil, 192
- Mann, Jorge (Georg), 145–46
- Mannheim, 168
- MARKK: Museum am Rothenbaum: World Cultures and Arts (Hamburg), 108, 109, 111. *See also* Museum für Völkerkunde (Hamburg)
- Maya. *See* Guatemala
- mea kapu* (sacred objects), 1–3
- Meinhoff, Carl, 167
- Melle, Werner von, 102
- Mexico, 142, 143, 144
- Meyer, Hans, 83–84, 85, 87
- Meyer, Hermann, 73
- Mindon, King of Burma, 27, 29–31
- moepū* (funerary possessions), 1–3
- Mühlmann, Wilhelm Emil, 175
- Müller, F.W.K., 62, 77, 104
- Munich: Museum für Völkerkunde, 73, 109–10, 168, 174
- Museum für Deutsche Volkskunde (German Folk Customs), 76–77
- Museum für Naturkunde (Berlin), 18
- Museum für Völkerkunde (Basel), 109–10
- Museum für Völkerkunde (Berlin): access to sources on, 174; Arning collections at, 1–2, 2, 3; Bastian's vision for, 9–11, 13–14, 20, 46–47, 63–77, 162–67, 178, 186–88, 194–96; Bode's vision for, 10–11, 77–78; colonialism and monopoly on ethnological collections of, 99–107, 176; competition and collaboration with other museums and, 73–74, 108–10; future of, 193–200; Hawaiian human remains in, 189–90; Humboldt Forum and, 191–94; impact of World War II on, 149–53, 168; Luschan's vision for, 77; in new building on Königgrätzer Strasse, 63–73, 65, 67–68, 195; in New Museum, 19, 46–47, 65–66; new museum complex in Dahlem and, 70, 76–77, 78–79, 95, 103, 153, 154–57, 154, 162–63, 165; postwar stagnation and, 177–79; prehistory section in, 171; *Schausammlungen* (public displays) in, 149, 163–67, 164, 169, 178–81, 179; Soviet trophy brigades and the Lenin-grad collections and, 151–52, 156–62, 159–60; *Studiensammlungen* (study collections) in, 165; Yup'ik Flying Swan mask and, 149, 150–51, 151–52, 182–87, 184. *See also* Bastian, Adolf
- Museum für Völkerkunde (Cologne), 89, 109–10, 176–77
- Museum für Völkerkunde (Dresden), 2–3, 89, 95, 101, 109–10, 168
- Museum für Völkerkunde (Hamburg): access to sources on, 174; Benin

- bronzes and ivories and, 84, 86–87, 88, 89; colonialism and, 100–102; competition and collaboration with other museums and, 73, 109–10; Guatemalan textile collections at, 108, 109, 111–13, 128, 144–48, 146; impact of World War II on, 168; World War II and, 139–41
- Museum für Völkerkunde (Lübeck), 109–10
- Museum für Völkerkunde (Munich), 73, 109–10, 168, 174
- Museum für Völkerkunde der Universität Kiel, 109–10
- Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte (Berlin), 19, 94, 153, 171
- Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte (Frankfurt), 109–10, 168
- Museum Island (Berlin), 19, 77–78, 157
- Museum Volkenkunde (Leiden), 84
- Napoleon and Napoleonic Wars, 16, 103
- National Academy of Sciences, 62–63
- National Science Foundation (NSF), 186
- Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990), 198–99
- Natural History Museum (Berlin), 18
- Naturgemälde* (representation of the whole of nature), 38
- Nazi Germany: race science and, 11–12, 169–73; Termer and, 115–17, 135–41; *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and, 12, 174–77, 198
- Nelson, Edward, 53
- Neumann, Rudolf, 52
- New Museum (Berlin), 19, 46–47, 65–66
- New York: American Museum of Natural History, 94
- Nootka Eagle mask, 59–60, 69
- Northwest Coast tribes, 48–53, 50–51, 55–58, 56, 69, 96–97. *See also* Yup'ik Flying Swan mask
- North West Trading Company, 57
- Nottebohm, Carl Ludwig, 137–38
- Nuremberg Laws, 172
- Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2–3
- On the Origin of Species* (Darwin), 21
- Oscar, Prince of Sweden, 3
- Ostforschung* (history of German culture in the East), 171–72
- Oswald, Wilhelm, 15–18
- Overseas Museum (Bremen), 109–10, 168
- Ovonramwen, King (*Oba*) of Benin, 85
- Parzinger, Hermann, 192
- People, Race, and Language* (Luschan), 92–93, 95
- The Peoples of East Asia* (Bastian), 32, 33
- Pergamon Altar, 157
- Philippi, Federico, 36
- physical anthropology, 97, 171–73, 189–90. *See also* skulls
- Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford), 89
- Plischke, Hans, 137–38, 173, 175
- Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits* (Colwell), 198–99
- prehistory, 170–72
- Preuss, Konrad Theodor, 165–67, 170, 178–79
- Prinzessin Louise* (Prussian merchant ship), 15–18
- Prussia: dissolution of, 152; Hawai'i and, 15–19; Royal Ethnographic Collection of, 18–19; transoceanic trade networks of, 15, 27
- Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, 155–56, 186, 190
- race science, 9, 11–12, 58–59, 91–93, 169–73
- Rasmuson Foundation, 186
- Raubkunst* (looted art), 107
- Read, C. H., 91
- Reche, Otto, 175
- repatriation, 1–3, 13, 189–90, 198–200
- Richter, Isidor, 54–55
- Rockefeller Foundation, 186
- Rockstroh, Edwin, 205n15
- The Sacred Legend of the Polynesians* (Bastian), 5, 75
- Sammlung für Völkerkunde (Göttingen), 168
- Sapper, David, 118, 134–35, 142
- Sapper, Karl: Dieseldorff and, 133–35; Lentz and, 126; Termer and, 110–11, 114, 115, 122, 123–24, 128, 129, 130–31, 134–36, 137, 140–41, 167
- Sapper, Richard, 124–25
- Sapper, Richard, Senior, 134
- Savoy, Bénédicte, 192



- Schausammlungen* (public displays): Bastian and, 10–11, 13–14; in Museum für Völkerkunde (Berlin), 149, 163–67, 164, 169, 178–81, 179
- Schliemann, Heinrich, 66
- Schmidt, Eduard, 87
- Schöne, Richard, 78–79, 98
- Schulbach, Sapper & Co., 122–24
- Schulze, Paul, 57–58
- Science* (journal), 59
- Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852–53), 27
- Seler, Eduard: Bastian and, 62; Boas and, 60; Preuss and, 165; Termer and, 116, 131, 133, 142
- Sherman, Lucian, 167
- Sigismund, Prince of Prussia, 122–24
- skulls, 94, 95–97, 189–90
- Smithsonian Institution (Washington, DC), 48, 53, 96
- Snoep, Nanette, 2–3
- Sombart, Werner, 105
- Stein, Lothar, 158–59, 174, 176–77
- Steinen, Karl von den: Bastian and, 33, 34, 47, 61, 75; in Central America, 35–36, 61, 72–73
- Stoll, Otto, 131
- Stolpe, Hjalmar, 3
- Studiensammlungen* (study collections), 165
- Stuttgart: Linden Museum, 73, 89, 100, 109–10, 168
- Termer, Franz: academic career of, 116, 140; Bastian and, 196; Boas and, 130–31, 138–39; Dieseldorff and, 133–36; on ethnology under National Socialism, 167–70, 172–73, 175; in Guatemala, 110–11, 113–31, 120, 123, 125, 127, 129, 132–33, 132, 137–38; Guatemalan textile collections and, 128, 145–47; Kidder and, 141–42; in Mexico, 142, 143, 144; Nazi Germany and, 115–17, 135–41; scholarly debts of, 131–33; in the United States, 142–43
- Thilenius, Georg, 100–102, 110
- Third Anglo-Burmese War (1885), 27
- Übersee Museum Bremen, 109–10, 168
- Uhle, Max, 72–73, 167
- United States: Boas in, 62–63, 130–31; Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990) in, 198–99; Termer in, 142–43; transoceanic trade networks of, 15. *See also* Hawai'i
- Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (reckoning with the past), 12, 174–77, 198
- Vienna: Völkerkunde Museum, 84, 88, 89, 109–10, 168
- Virchow, Rudolf: Arning and, 3; Bastian and, 6, 32; Boas and, 58–59, 60; colonialism and, 97–98; political views of, 9, 94–95, 171–72; race science and, 58–59, 92, 171, 173; skulls and, 96–97
- Völkerkunde Museum (Vienna), 84, 88, 89, 109–10, 168
- Völkerkundemuseum der J. und E. von Portheim Stiftung (Heidelberg), 109–10
- Völkerkundemuseum Herrnhut, 109–10
- Völkerschauen*, 55
- Voss, Albert, 62, 66, 76–77
- Vossische Zeitung* (newspaper), 71–72
- Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution for Science, 141–42; Smithsonian Institution, 48, 53, 96
- Webster, W. D., 87–88
- Weimar Republic, 163, 169–71
- Weisbach, Valentin, 54–55
- West Germany, 141, 155–56, 157–58, 176
- Westphal-Heilbusch, Sigrid, 156, 162
- Weule, Karl, 100, 101–2
- Wilhelm II, German Emperor (Kaiser) and King of Prussia, 79
- World War I, 162–63
- World War II, 139–41, 149–53, 167–68
- Wunderkammern* (cabinets of wonders), 166–67
- Yup'ik Flying Swan mask: Jacobsen and, 149, 182–87; Leningrad collections and, 149, 151–52, 157, 160–62; photographs of, 150–51, 162, 184; in *Schausammlungen* (public displays), 163; Yup'ik delegation and, 182–87
- Zahn and Co., 35–36
- Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (journal), 32