

## “Hello + invitation: ‘How Collections End’”: the fire at the Brazilian National Museum and shared stories

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*“Hello + invitation: ‘How Collections End’”.* That was the “subject” of an e-mail message I received on May 9, 2017, from Jenny Bangham, a British historian of science and colleague of mine. Professor Bangham was aware of my affiliation with the Brazilian National Museum and my interests in the areas of Anthropology of Science and History of Anthropology, and the invitation was to a seminar she was organizing in collaboration with Emma Kowal and Boris Jardine. The idea of the seminar was to convene researchers “...who write about biomedical collecting with those who study art and museum collections... We hope that talking about ‘endings’ – such as dispersal, completion, failure, loss, suspension, and recycling – will offer a new perspective on the dynamics that shape collections, and the differences (and similarities) between biomedical and museum practices”. The text describing the seminar cited widely varying examples. One was the ultimate destination of children’s collections (rocks, etc.) and how they tend to dissipate over the course of life. Another example, in the context of contemporary post-colonial debates, was the discussion on returning Greek art collections that have been housed in British museums since the 18th century, as well as the “repatriation” of indigenous artifacts stored in natural history museums and science laboratories all across the world. The organizers also highlighted: “*The end of collections is not always a passive process of neglect or absorption: ending can be violent and final*”.

The seminar sounded highly unusual to me at the time. Since I had an intense travel agenda, I chose to decline the invitation to participate personally (but not without regret). However, I did mention the invitation to my colleague Ana Carolina Vimieiro, a professor at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, who had done her post-doctoral work under my supervision in 2017-2018 at the Sergio Arouca National School of Public Health of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (ENSP/Fiocruz). We ended up writing a paper for the Cambridge seminar on biological anthropology collections related to indigenous peoples in Brazil. Ana Carolina and I had a lengthy discussion on how to connect our reflections to the “end-of-collections” theme. Our paper’s main argument was that, in recent decades, various Brazilian scientific collections in biological anthropology had undergone a radical transformation in their physical configurations. What had predominated almost exclusively for decades was a system of collecting and housing human skeletal remains in natural history museums (a prime example was the human bone collections at the National

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Museum), but now the collections' materiality had changed, as exemplified by the growing prominence of digital data repositories of genetic frequencies and sociodemographic information, now hosted in computational "clouds". Thus, the examples analyzed in our paper were less "ends of collections" than the reshaping of immaterialities. The seminar took place at the University of Cambridge (UK) on October 24-26, 2017, and was entitled *How Collections End: Objects, Meaning, and Loss in Laboratories and Museums* (<https://networks.h-net.org/node/9782/discussions/538466/how-collections-end-objects-meaning-and-loss-laboratories-and>, accessed on 25/Oct/2018).

When I began to draft this *Editorial* to introduce two articles <sup>1,2</sup> in the CSP *Thematic Section* on the "National Museum and Public Health", written in the aftermath of the devastating fire on September 2, 2018, that destroyed most of the museum's collections, last year's invitation to the Cambridge seminar immediately came to mind. The message from Bangham, Kowal, and Jardine included the question, "Do you have a story about 'endings' that you would like to share?". Over the months in which Ana Carolina Vimeiro and I discussed our paper for the seminar, I recall that we were constantly trying to draw closer to the theme of the "end of collections", which sounded rather remote to us, even ethereal. Very unfortunately, in the last two months since the fire, I myself and many other colleagues have not only one story, but many stories to share, all of them painfully close and real "stories on 'endings'".

I congratulate the editors of CSP for their sensitive and important initiative in opening the journal's pages to publish the articles *The Brazilian National Museum and Its Role in the History of Science and Health in Brazil* <sup>1</sup>, by Dominichi Miranda de Sá, Magali Romero Sá, and Nísia Trindade Lima, and *Meteorites, Dinosaurs, Butterflies... and Also Health* <sup>2</sup>, by Sheila Mendonça de Souza and Claudia Rodrigues-Carvalho. The authors and I are researchers affiliated with the National Museum and/or Fiocruz who work in such diverse fields as the History and Sociology of Science, Biological Anthropology, and Archeology, and who share careers associated with the National Museum's collections. We also share a deep involvement in partnerships between the two institutions in recent decades. The stories shared by the two articles illustrate the magnitude and capillarity of collaborative networks between two century-old institutions that are central to the history of sciences and public policies in Brazil.

Much has been written since that fateful September 2nd about the catastrophic fire at the National Museum and what it means both in terms of losses and reconfigurations for Brazil's collective historical memory and how the disaster reflects the way the Brazilian state has prioritized scientific development, nearly always insufficiently <sup>3,4</sup>. In recent years, unfortunately, Brazil has experienced many other examples of "violent endings" of important collections and cultural and scientific heritage, for example with the fires at the Historical Chapel of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro on Praia Vermelha, the Museum of the Portuguese Language in São Paulo, and the building that housed the zoological collections at the Butantan Institute, to name just a few cases.

I view these articles published in the *Thematic Section* as reflections that transcend the disaster at the National Museum, as food for thought about how we as a society conceive and endeavor to preserve and build our past, present, and future through our historical and scientific heritage.

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1. Sá DM, Sá MR, Lima NT. The Brazilian National Museum and its role in the history of science and health in Brazil. *Cad Saúde Pública* 2018; 34:e00192818.
  2. Mendonça de Souza S, Rodrigues-Carvalho C. Meteorites, dinosaurs, butterflies... and also health. *Cad Saúde Pública* 2018; 34:e00190918.
  3. Zamudio ZR, Kellner A, Serejo C, de Britto MR, Castro CB, Buckup PA, et al. Lack of science support fails Brazil. *Science* 2018; 361:1322-3.
  4. Graham F. Catastrophic fire at Brazil's National Museum likened to burning of library of Alexandria. *Nature* 2018; 3 set. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-06176-9>.