'Guardians of Beautiful Things': The Politics of Postcolonial Cultural Theft, Refusal, and Repair

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
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The Politics of Postcolonial Cultural Theft, Refusal, and Repair"**

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‘Guardians of Beautiful Things’:

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A dissertation presented

by

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Abstract

My dissertation examines how the retention, management, possession, ownership and control of material heritage looted from colonized nations during imperial wars helps create, shape, and maintain the enduring legacies of cultural and social imperialism. It then uses these insights to build a theory of imperial repair, which considers the restitution and repatriation of spoils of war an essential component of the modern decolonization process, and the rebalancing of relations of power between Europe and Africa. I develop these arguments through an in-depth analysis of the restitution debates surrounding the Benin Bronzes. On one side of the debate, the Nigerian government argues that the Benin Bronzes are central to their ancestral heritage, and continues to petition the United Kingdom for the restitution of these Bronzes, which were violently looted from the Benin Kingdom by British soldiers in 1897, and still reside in British museums today. On the other side, officials in British cultural and political establishments have consistently argued that the looted artifacts should stay in their "world culture" museums, even as their rationales for why they should keep the looted Bronzes have varied over the years.

In studying the evolution of these debates, I demonstrate that the plunder of cultural patrimony is a constitutive, if understudied, element of past colonization and racial capitalism processes. Importantly, I also show how this past looting continues to actively perpetuate cultural neoimperialism and global racial domination in the present. The control, distortion and eradication of cultural materiality and national memory is an insidious form of hegemony that often goes unexamined in socioeconomic and political analyses of postcolonial inequality, yet is critical in

understanding the persistence of uneven state development. As such, this project advocates for a revision of the ways in which sociologists conceptualize the constitutive elements of the colonial process, neoimperialism, and decoloniality. I argue that a full understanding of a country's postcolonial development trajectory is incomplete without an exploration of the impacts of the legacies of cultural dislocation, theft and, ultimately, restoration.

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CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

On January 4, 1897, at the height of the Scramble for Africa, an elite force of 1,200 British soldiers marched along the muddy banks of the Benin river, having made the 4,000 mile trek from London, Cape Town and Malta to the ancient Kingdom of Benin in West Africa, along with thousands of porters brought from a British military base in Sierra Leone. The troops were seeking to depose the Benin King and take control of the region, which had an abundance of rubber-producing forests. The force torched the royal palace and compounds, and for three days the fire burned to the ground what had been a flourishing city at the heart of the Kingdom, killing thousands in the process. The vast majority of carved woodwork was lost in the fire, but thousands of brass, ivory, and coral sculptures, masks, statues and other artifacts dating back to between the 13th to 16th century were spared. An estimated 10,000 of these sacred Benin artifacts, often referred to as Benin bronzes, were looted from the smoldering palace, some of which were retained by the military officers and colonial anthropologists who had made their way to the scene, but the majority were auctioned off to European museums and private collectors, or were retained by the Crown and subsequently turned over to the British Museum.

For the next 63 years, the region remained under British imperial control until 1960, when it was incorporated into what is now Nigeria and the nation won its independence and the territory which encompassed the Benin Kingdom became Nigeria's Edo State. In 1960, as Nigeria set out on a mission to develop its postcolonial cultural identity as part of the project of nation building, one of the priorities of the country became securing the return of the artifacts plundered during the 1897 invasion. Since the 1960s and 1970s Nigeria has lobbied several European and North American governments for restitution, or the return of their artifacts, but were largely unsuccessful.

One such case was in 1977 when Nigeria hosted the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77), a major international, Pan-African festival. The Nigerian festival organizers had adopted the image of Idia, the ancient Benin queen mother, as the event

symbol. Prior to the 1897 invasion, five ivory masks of the queen mother were carved, each of which had been worn by various *obas* (kings) during ceremonial rituals. All five of the masks were looted during the 1897 invasion and subsequently sold to various museums and private collections. At the time of the 1977 festival, the British Museum held the most well-known copy of the mask. Festival organizers requested the return of the mask from the British Museum, but their request was denied. As a compromise, organizers requested that the Museum lend them the mask on short term loan for the duration of the festival, and this request too was denied on the grounds that the mask was too fragile to travel from the UK and Museum curators were concerned about the safety of the mask while in Nigeria. Eventually both the British Museum and the Nigerian government made replicas of the mask to be displayed at FESTAC '77, though the British replica was never sent due to a host of political challenges described later.

On February 17, 2011, British auction house Sotheby's announced they were planning to auction one of the five queen mother masks for a projected value of £ 4.5 million. This particular mask had not been sourced from a famed national museum or gallery, but from a family. The family were the descendants of the late Lieutenant Colonel Sir Henry Lionel Galway, who was a military officer and one of the commanders of the 1897 invasion of Benin, and the mask had been in the Galway family for 114 years since the invasion. Yet the auction never happened due to an enormous groundswell of outrage and protest by the public and many cultural authorities in the art world who were aware of the dark history of the objects' relocation to England and Nigeria's attempts to recover them. While there have been some small-scale repatriations in Britain of Benin artifacts from private families and smaller institutions back to Nigeria in recent years, the British Museum—which holds the single largest collection of Benin bronzes, an estimated 900 pieces—remains resistant to the idea of returning their Benin collection and still has the queen mother mask on display to this day.

RESEARCH STATEMENT

My dissertation examines how the retention, management, possession, ownership and control of material heritage looted from colonized nations during imperial wars, helps create, shape, and maintain the enduring legacies of cultural and social imperialism. It then uses these insights to build a theory of imperial repair, which considers the restitution and repatriation of spoils of war an essential component of the modern decolonization process, and the rebalancing of relations of power between Europe and Africa. I develop these arguments through an in-depth analysis of the restitution debates surrounding the Benin artifacts. On one side of the debate, the Nigerian government, community-based actors, and allies argue that the Benin artifacts are central to their ancestral heritage and continue to petition the United Kingdom for their restitution and which still largely reside in British museums today. On the other side, officials in British cultural and political establishments have consistently argued that the looted artifacts should stay in their "world culture" museums, even as their rationales for why they should keep the looted Bronzes have varied over the years.

Social scientists have, since the mid-20th century, in the wake of decolonization and independence movements across the industrializing world, measured and examined the lasting effects of colonization. Sociologists, in particular, have analyzed metrics of poverty, conflict, and other development indicators to understand how a country's colonial past continues to impact its developmental growth. The control, distortion and eradication of cultural materiality and national memory is a somewhat more hidden form of hegemony that often goes unexamined in socioeconomic and political analyses of postcolonial inequality. Extending this literature, I advocate for an understanding of decolonization and the lasting effects of empire that considers the role of culture, specifically cultural heritage and patrimony.

In studying the evolution of these debates, I demonstrate that the plunder of cultural patrimony is a constitutive, if understudied, element of past colonization and racial capitalism processes. Importantly, I show how the history of looting continues to actively perpetuate cultural neoimperialism and global racial domination in the present. The control, distortion and eradication of cultural materiality and national memory is an insidious form of hegemony that often goes unexamined in institutionalist and economic historical analyses of postcolonial inequality, yet is critical in understanding the persistence of uneven state development. As such, this dissertation advocates for a revision of the ways in which sociologists conceptualize the constitutive elements of the colonial process, neoimperialism, and decoloniality. I argue that a full understanding of a country's postcolonial development trajectory is incomplete without an exploration of the impacts of the legacies of material cultural dislocation, theft and, ultimately, repair. These debates invite us to reframe how we think about the contemporary landscape of global decolonial action. At the height of the global Black Lives Matter movements in 2020, the world witnessed a surge of actions calling for the decolonization of 'world culture' museums and other public cultural institutions and monuments. I consider this dissertation to be a pre-history of the conditions which facilitated the rise of the decolonial activism against cultural hegemony at the heart of the current movement for reparations.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BENIN KINGDOM

By the end of the 19th century, nearly all of Sub-Saharan Africa had been annexed by European imperial powers as part of what is commonly known as the Scramble for Africa, a period in which European colonial powers violently carved up and negotiated control of the continent. One exception was the Benin Kingdom (present day Nigeria), which was among the last sovereign nations that maintained its own trade routes throughout West Africa and had been ruled by a

succession of *obas* since the 11th century. Eager to exploit the Kingdom's natural resources, which included palm oil, rubber and ivory, British troops mounted a sustained attack on the Kingdom following failed trade negotiations. While early British sources claim that the invasion was a response provoked by Benin aggression, there is a significant amount of evidence which suggests the invasion was an attempt to secure one of the last remaining holdouts of sovereignty during the British colonial expansion throughout the region and to disrupt the monopoly the Benin Kingdom had on the autonomous region's natural resources. One contemporary British news source notes that the lieutenant responsible for the mission requested permission from the Crown to "depose and remove the King of Benin" prior to the initial visit (The Independent 1997). Prior to the invasion, James Robert Phillips, Britain's Acting Consul-General responsible for the region, wrote in a letter to his superiors in London of his plans to sack the Kingdom, noting that he planned to pay for the expedition with the ivory artifacts he hoped to remove from the king's palace (Home 1982, Drewal and Schildkrout 2010, Platte 2010), an indication that the well-known artifacts were yet another motivation for the invasion.

On February 9, 1897, 1,200 British troops defeated the Benin military and burned down the vast majority of the city, looting sites of cultural and historical significance in the process. Over the course of several days, Benin City was torched to the ground, the royal palace was destroyed, and troops, archaeologists and surveyors looted an estimated 10,000 sacred artifacts made primarily of brass, ivory, and coral dating back to as early as the 12th century.[1] The pieces, often referred to as the 'Benin bronzes' due to the bronze-looking nature of the collection's infamous plaques, were

[1] Due to the number of artifacts that were destroyed or lost during the invasion, it is unclear exactly how many were removed and transferred to Western institutions. Conservative estimates suggest that there are 3,000 Benin objects in museums, while others suggest the figure is closer to 10,000 objects. See B. Phillips, Loot, New York: Oneworld Publications, 2021; D. Hicks, The Brutish Museums. London: Pluto Press, 2020; and K.W. Gunsch, The Benin Plaques: A 16th Century Imperial Monument, Milton, Routledge, 2018 for more details on the specific locations and holdings of the artifacts. In addition, Digital Benin (digital-benin.org), a forthcoming online platform that seeks to digitally reunite globally dispersed Benin antiquities, is expected to be the most comprehensive archive of its kind to date and seeks to recover information of this nature.

removed from the royal palace, religious venues, heritage monuments, and other sites and were subsequently dispersed across Europe. The Scramble for Africa, as such, was simultaneously accompanied by a scramble for art which saw the widespread looting of cultural artifacts and their indiscriminate dispersal across the Western world as museums increasingly became sites through which nations put their colonial exploits on view to their citizens.

While the Benin artifacts were sold to several dozen European and North American museums, galleries and private collectors, creating a global art market of imperial plunder, the vast majority of Benin artifacts were retained by the British government and subsequently transferred to the British Museum. Today, the collections of many of the world's most revered museums contain hundreds of thousands of pieces from this period acquired under violent circumstances. It is estimated that roughly 90 to 95 percent of sub-Saharan Africa's cultural artefacts are held on other continents, primarily Europe and North America (Sarr and Savoy 2018), the vast majority of which were was looted or purchased under duress during this period of imperial conquest, and their ownership, possession and the context and conditions under which they were removed remain deeply contested.

British troops eventually deposed the sitting oba, installed a colonial administration, and established British-controlled trade throughout the region. In 1914 Nigeria's statehood was established through the administrative consolidation of the Northern Nigeria Protectorate and the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. That same year the Benin monarchy was revived under colonial rule and remains today, though the oba retains more ceremonial, cultural and religious authority instead of political power given that the Kingdom is now subsumed within Nigeria's Edo State. Nigeria remained under British colonial influence from the early 19th century until gaining its independence in 1960, and the country soon emerged as one of the most prominent cultural hubs of the continent. Benin City, which was the seat of the ancient Kingdom, was then

named the political and economic capital of Edo state and the center of culture for Edo people, boasting a large national art museum as well as being home to the palace of the sitting oba, Oba Ewuare II.[2]

Many sources representing the perspective of Western universal museums--sites that claim to educate and represent the world through their global collections--and cultural institutions argue that the 1897 British invasion of the Benin Kingdom was a "punitive expedition" that was a justifiable response to an earlier attack on British forces that had paid an unsolicited visit to the kingdom. A group of Western museum directors who hold sets of the Benin bronzes in their collections recently claimed that though such military action today "seems unjustifiable," we must nevertheless "recognize the role it played in bringing these works of art to far broader attention" (Plankensteiner 2007: xx). As of June 2019, the audio guide commentary of the British Museum's collection of Benin Bronzes states that the artifacts were discovered only after the sacking of the palace where they "were found half-buried in a storehouse" on the palace grounds, supporting the belief the objects were no longer useful to the palace heirs and Kingdom's citizenry.[3]

The Edo community and their sympathizers, on the other hand, have largely disputed this interpretation of events and suggested that the looting of the Benin artifacts was forceful, unwarranted, immoral, and violated international wartime conventions, and continues to have consequential impacts on the Edo community given the continued significance of the artifacts within Edo culture. In a 2007 letter included in the catalog of an exhibition of Benin bronzes that toured Western Europe and North America, Omo N'Oba Erediauwa, then Oba of Benin, argued

[2] Throughout the dissertation I refer to Nigeria when discussing an issue most relevant to country-level political issues, Edo when discussing issues that are specific to Edo state and the cultural community, Benin when discussing largely historic matters relating to Edo state, and Edo/Nigeria when discussing issues that are relevant to both state- and country-level populations. I discuss the interactions between the state and federal government, as well as their relationship to the Benin monarchy, later in the dissertation.

[3] British Museum audio guide commentary, Benin Bronzes permanent exhibition, Sainsbury African Galleries; recorded by author June 16, 2019.

that Benin was a "civilization truncated by the imperial forces of the colonialist." He explained the importance of the artifacts to Benin culture, noting that, "they were objects with religious and archival value to my people" and represent "pages torn off from the book of a people's life history" (ibid: xi). Many artifacts taken from the palace were brass plaques that depicted the Kingdom's early history and are the only remaining local sources of such information. "They were not originally meant to be mere museum pieces simply to be displayed for art lovers to admire. They were objects with religious and archival value to my people." noted Oba Erediauwa (ibid: 13). Despite their dislocation from Benin, the objects remain a critical component of the heritage and sense of cultural identity for the contemporary Edo people.

POSTCOLONIAL BENIN ARTIFACT RESTITUTION CLAIMS

In recent years, as calls to decolonize cultural spaces have mounted in the wake of global racial justice movements, museums have been at the center of debates on, and demands for, the restitution of objects, particularly those that were looted during imperial wars. Yet, as Benedicte Savoy (2002) has recently argued, a large number of African nations have been engaged in longer-term struggles with Western museums over the ownership and possession of their cultural patrimony. Nations the world over have, for decades if not centuries, been pursuing strategies for return—from First Nations groups in Canada to Jewish families across Europe whose family heirlooms were looted during the Holocaust to Greek activists seeking the return of the Parthenon marbles statues housed in the British Museum, but African calls for restitution have become the most prominent in recent years. Former African colonies began requesting the return of their artifacts during colonial occupation and calls have intensified significantly in the post-independence period beginning in the 1960s, as colonized nations sought to establish full cultural sovereignty from former imperial powers. Debates about cultural ownership and reparations have ebbed and flowed

since this period, and have recently spiked in sub-Saharan Africa, in part due to recent moves by the French government to reckon with the material manifestations of its colonial past. In 2017 President Macron of France held a press conference in Burkina Faso where he announced that the French government intended to begin the process of repatriating many of the artifacts back to former Francophone colonies in Africa, citing a moral imperative to restore the nations' cultural heritage that had long been obstructed by French legal code. This declaration—coupled with the 2018 release of the Sarr-Savoy report, a study commissioned by Macron that urged the full repatriation of artefacts held in all French museums and cultural institutions—sent shockwaves through the art world globally.

In 2002, in response to these growing demands, 18 Western museums which hold collections from across the globe published the "Declaration on the Importance and Value of the Universal Museum," which affirmed the institutions' commitment to retaining their looted artwork, arguing that such objects have become part of the culture of the host nation, that museums have a responsibility to act as agents for education and cultural development for all mankind, and that universal museums provide an important context in which to understand displaced objects in relation to one another (Directors of Universal Museums 2002). The statement, in part, reads: "Objects so acquired--whether by purchase, gift, or partage--have become part of the museums that have cared for them, and by extension part of the heritage of the nations which house them." Yet, those supporting restitution argue that such museums suffer from "volitional amnesia" in their refusal to acknowledge the violence embedded in their collections and resist the notion that museums have any moral entitlement to the objects. As Louise Tythacott et al have argued, "The right to administer one's own heritage is the right to one's own past" (Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014: 11). As such, heritage objects become a prism through which to grapple with the question of who owns the past.

Of the 10,000 objects looted in 1897, roughly 900 remain in the British Museum, one of more than 150 museums and galleries believed to hold Benin artifacts in their collections, according to Dan Hicks (2020). After the UK, Germany and the US are believed to hold next largest collections of Benin artifacts in national and private institutions. For decades, the Nigerian government and cultural establishment have appealed to the British government and museums within the country for their return to Nigeria (BBC News 2002). The Nigerian government established an Antiquities Service in 1943 with the intent of preserving the nation's heritage and retrieving that which had been lost, and following the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, attempted to use the instrument in their first post-independence restitution attempt (Shyllon 2000).

From 1993-1995 the Museum of Mankind, a display hall belonging to the British Museum's Department of Ethnography, staged an exhibition of Benin bronzes, one of the first of its kind since the objects arrived in the museum more than a century prior (Picton 1997). The museum described the exhibition as one that "draws on the Museum's fine collection of ivory, brass and coral artefacts from Benin, and examines the relationships between Edo and Europeans," a benign reference to both the mutual exchange between the people of Benin and various European traders, including early Portuguese and British merchants, as well as the violent conquering of Benin by British forces in 1897. The display included a replica of a sacred ancestral altar found in the Oba's palace alongside work commissioned by European traders.[4] Word of the exhibition spread quickly to Benin City and across the black diaspora, soon becoming the target of scrutiny as more people became aware of the magnitude of the British Museum's collection of Benin bronzes. Newspaper articles in Nigerian

[4] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2. Museum of Mankind exhibition brochure, London, 1993-4. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

news outlets condemning the British Museum began circulating in global media, highlighting the frustration felt in Nigeria and across the diaspora over their alienation from their heritage (Iziren 1996).

In the last several years, discussion of repatriation in international media and across popular culture has peaked due, in part, do some high-profile cases and dramatizations. From the 2018 release of *Black Panther,* which presented a fictionalized account of British forces pillaging artifacts from Wakanda and retaining them in their state museum, to actor Nicolas Cage receiving pressure to return a looted dinosaur skull, artifact repatriation has become a source of public intrigue in recent years. Museums have been under immense pressure in recent decades, and even more so in the last two years since the global Black Lives Matter movement focused its attention not just on violence against the black body, but against cultural forms, expressions and institutions, including museums and monuments, which perpetuate the logic of white supremacist ideology. Bodenstein and Pagani have argued that the concept of decolonization in museums came into vogue toward the end of the 1980s and designates "a process in which a postcolonial discourse serves to progressively singularise the ethnographic object and extract it from former systems of museum classification that *de facto* maintained the object in its 'colonised' status" (Bodenstein and Pagani 2014: 47-8).

In 2018 the Benin Dialogue Group, an organization comprised of representatives from Western museums and governmental bodies who hold looted artifacts and are committed to their preservation, announced plans to build a new Benin Royal Museum in Benin City, Nigeria that will house several hundred original pieces (Cultural Property News 2018). The Group announced that some partners museums would retain ownership of the artifacts which would be on display in the new museum on loan, while other museums have announced that they will return the objects to Nigeria permanently and transfer ownership. Museums seeking to decolonize their collections, working alongside multilateral cultural institutions such as the Benin Dialogue Group, have taken a

number of different steps toward this end, from converting 'artifacts' to 'art', engaging more closely with source communities, modifying and enhancing their interpretive principles (including updating labels) and educational programming, but many remain hesitant on the question of permanent repatriation and the transfer of ownership to Nigeria.

WHAT IS RESTITUTION?

Restitution has, over the last decade, become mostly synonymous with efforts within the art world, yet the concept has far broader reach across disciplines and subject areas. In his essay on the sociological contributions of Mexican literary critic and poet Octavio Paz, Oliver Kozlarek argues that the artist used the term restitución to refer to a critical reconstruction of colonial and postcolonial experiences:

> Methodologically speaking, "*restituir"* can be understood as a reciprocal movement, one that makes it possible to dive back into the past, while at the same time bringing the past back into the present. This is done by establishing a dialogue between the reader of history and selected historical agents, whose subjective experiences are reconstructed and endowed with a general meaning for the society in which they lived. Through this process, colonial and postcolonial realities come to life, and allow for an empathetic understanding among human beings, rather than an abstract understanding based on equally abstract concepts (Kozlarek 2013: 188).

The pursuit of restitution may be understood as part of a larger strategy of decolonization and the pursuit of reparations, but it is not only limited to material return given that it also includes other forms of repair between the museum and source community. Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy--in their landmark 2018 report commissioned by the French government which is considered to be one of the most influential factors which contributed to the recent large-scale movement for restitution—suggest that restitution is not simply the return of an object to its original owner, but is a process which bears moral critique of the reprehensible act of removal, whether that be through pillaging, forced consent, or spoilation. The term clarifies the legitimacy of ownership for the source

community and, conversely, the illegitimacy of ownership for the looting party. "The act of restitution attempts to put things back in order, into proper harmony. To openly speak of restitution is to speak of justice, or a re-balancing, recognition, of restoration and reparation, but above all: it's a way to open a pathway toward establishing new cultural relations based on a newly reflected upon ethical relation," the report states (Sarr and Savoy 2018: 29). Beyond simply a legal designation of ownership, restitution is concerned with the political and symbolic order of relations between parties often occupy starkly different positions within any given power structure. Tristram Besterman describes restitution as an ethic which "demands of the museum the confidence, maturity and generosity of spirit to let go, to take risks and to cede or at least to share, control of the narrative vested in and around the object; and to involve the citizen in selection" while others have characterized the process as one that addresses shifting relations and rebalances power between institutions and source communities while providing mutual benefit. (Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014: 27, 105, 121).

Many proponents of restitution conceive of the movement as part of a larger shift in global power relations between the North-South, colonial-colonized, and metropole-periphery. They argue that restitution is not simply about the act of returning objects, but a redistribution of resources of material and knowledge that, through the present, have been unequally held, which has facilitated global inequality. The Sarr-Savoy reports argues, "The project of restitution undertaken by France is inscribed within a threefold logic of reparations, a re-harmonization of a veritable global cultural geography, but also and above all, within a new point of departure" (2018: 3). This new point of departure seeks to address what the authors refer to as "an asymmetrical history" which has traditionally favored "the benefactors of an excess of privilege and mobility" (ibid: 4). Thus, the issue of restitution is, at its core, about the restoration of an egalitarian system of relations that govern interactions between Western superpowers and former colonial nations.

Throughout this dissertation I use the term restitution primarily to refer to the return of the Benin artifacts to Edo/Nigeria, as this is this is the strategy that the community has most commonly pursued, yet with the recognition that restitution is a much more holistic and encompassing process, even in the Edo/Nigerian context. In those times when I am referring to larger processes beyond return, I do my best to clarify the specific nature of the exchange.

THE ROLE OF PROVENANCE

Provenance--or knowledge about an object's history and trajectory, including its sales and transfers-- is an important factor in museums' knowledge of their collections, and is also a cornerstone of the process of restitution. At times it is straightforward to trace where an item originated, the hands and institutions through which it has passed, and how it arrived to its current space, but often this task is more complex. Incomplete, forged, missing and otherwise difficult to navigate documentation is common in the area of provenance research. Thus, the technologies and resources related to provenance research are an integral component of conversations about ownership, possession and power. The ability to make decisions about restitution depend on an understanding of an object's background in order to make the case that it was removed from the source country illegally, which requires extensive research on the object's provenance. This type of research often entails a significant amount of resources in terms of financial and labor costs, as the process requires highly specialized and trained staff and an abundance of time.

The burden of proving an object's illegal or improper seizure has, historically, largely been the responsibility of the source community. Yet most ex-colonies are unable to afford the resources to carry out extensive provenance investigations. This inability to conduct appropriate research on their heritage has long been a rationale for a museum being unable, or unwilling, to consider restitution. Yet, in many situations, Western museums themselves have incomplete provenance

records, making the justification for the lack of proper object biography information a difficult one to maintain. A 1974 letter from the Museum of Mankind's head curator read, "Although we do not know for certain the source of some pieces, it is very probable that everything we got from 1898 to 1910 or 1911 was taken on the 1897 punitive expedition. Many later acquisitions probably come from the same source."[5] This lack of clarity about the museum's provenance records regarding the Benin artifacts has led many restitution advocates to label what they consider the museum's expectations on research part and parcel of the maintenance of double standards around expectations for the museum relative to what Benin is able to produce.

There are also significant gaps in the provenance of Benin artifacts which both obscures the long history of the objects and makes it more difficult to prove that they were looted and, therefore, should be considered for return. There is a tendency in provenance documentation to start dating the origins of the objects only after the colonial encounter. For example, a 1994 "Tribal Art" catalog which advertised pieces of African art for sale in London featured a number of Benin artifacts whose histories only began in 1899, two years after the invasion and looting, despite the pieces being produced sometime between the 11th and 13th centuries.[6] Despite the fact that the history of these objects is widely known and documented, the provenance record never mentions Benin as the source country and the ways in which these objects arrived in London. From the perspective of the seller, the object's history only begins in 1899 after its first European sale, effectively erasing Benin and the object's history since its production centuries prior. At times museums are simply unaware of the full histories of many of their objects, but in the case of the Benin artifacts in Europe, their provenance history is well documented, so such omissions of their history in the advertisement of

[5] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2352. Letter from M D McLeod to George B Morris Esq, London, 12 September 1974. Consulted on 2 July 2019.
[6] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, BG 2137. 'Tribal Art' Catalogue, London, 27 June 1994. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

these objects on the open market only serve to obscure the past in order to minimize any contention around their sale. There are examples of deliberate attempts to erase the provenance of objects. In a 1993 meeting of the Edo State Centenary Committee, one member recalled that the University of Oxford "deliberately destroyed [sic] the notice/label on the object," which has been sold to the university in order to escape the reality that the object had been looted.[7]

Adjusted provenance timelines which begin only after the point of European intervention can be read as deliberate attempts at colonial erasure. The origin story of Europe, and in particular the Western museum, being the site at which an object's provenance is initiated results in two forms of erasure—the first erases the subject, the colonial actor, as they are spared from being named as thieves and looters, a narrative which then leaves space for them to claim the position of benevolent artifact 'rescuer.' Secondly, it erases the object of colonial invasion, the native, who is constructed as absent, not involved in the production of the object—as the artisans who physically made the object, or as spiritual and cultural leaders and royalty who imbued the objects with symbolic significance. The location of the provenance timeline erases agency of both the subject and object in the 1897 encounter by supporting the idea that the objects were birthed in the Western museum in 1899 with no life between the 11th and 13th centuries when they were produced in Benin. Provenance, as such, is a European construction that makes the value and worth of foreign objects legible to the West; thus, their usefulness, place, and significance in their countries of origin recedes to the background, becoming a historical backdrop to the real substance of trading and ownership.

One reason that I selected the Benin bronzes as an ideal case of objects involved in restitution debates is the uncontested nature of their provenance. There may be a lack of clarity about which institutions or individuals bought, sold or traded the objects after they arrived in

[7] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, BG 2182. Minutes of the Meeting Between Bernie Grant MP & Edo State Centenary Committee Officers Group, London, 3 March 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

Europe following the invasion, but how and when they were initially removed from Benin in 1897 is undisputed. As such, the focus can remain on debates on the fate of looted objects and what this discourse reveals about political dynamics between states as opposed to whether these objects were indeed looted, a conversation that is more situated around the objects themselves and which has the potential to distract from conversations about ownership and return, and the political implications.

DISSERTATION OUTLINE

My dissertation is comprised of eight chapters, including four substantive chapters. In the next chapter I review three main bodies of literature that I use throughout my dissertation: postcolonial institutionalist and economic history; postcolonial cultural theory and sociology; and museology and material culture studies. The third chapter then outlines the project's research design, the archival, observation and interview data I collected, and the methodologies and analytic tools I utilized throughout the project.

The fourth chapter provides an overview of the postcolonial debates between Nigeria and its allies seeking the restitution of the Benin artifacts, on the one hand, and the British cultural establishment and other retentionists interested in maintaining possession of the artifacts in Western museums on the other. I demonstrate how the rhetoric used in these debates are grounded in a neoimperial framework that draws on beliefs, practices, and logics used to justify and defend the original 19th century colonial project and examine how these structures have evolved to continue to influence cultural relations between ex-colonies and imperial nations. I begin with an overview of key actors and museum practices then consider arguments rooted in the idea of museums as public benefits, histories of global transformation, legal entitlements, political and diplomatic concerns, and economic rationales. This chapter also considers how those seeking restitution understood and

challenged these systems of power and articulated claims to the artifacts based on an anticolonial vision of morality. In addition, I explore alternatives to the question of restitution, including loans, cultural assimilationist practices, decolonial curation, the production of replicas, royalties and remittances, and conditional returns.

The fifth chapter examines formal political institutions, actors, and processes to understand how states--in this case Nigeria, England and Scotland--mobilize the artifacts as cultural mechanisms through which to achieve their respective political objectives. While Nigeria uses the objects as tools with which to assert a postcolonial national identity through an intentional engagement with the forces of global capital, England and Scotland appropriate the artifacts in ways that serve mostly to reinscribe a colonial relation of power with Nigeria. I draw on two cases to illustrate these points. The first case explores transnational efforts to facilitate a strategy of nation building and development through cultural tourism in Benin City and examines the legacies of this work that persist into the present day. Since the 1990s there have been comprehensive attempts to utilize Nigeria's, and particularly Edo State's, rich cultural heritage resources as a tool through which the national and state-level government has pursued economic development goals via tourism and diasporic engagement. In 1997, a transnational committee formed to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Benin invasion, an event which I argue was, at its core, a project of nation-building. The commemoration was not only an effort to reconstruct a memory of a pre-colonial Benin Kingdom, redress decades of situational and ongoing colonial violences, and promote of educational awareness that would benefit future generations, but was also a way of commodifying these practices to ensure their sustainability. The work of the Centenary Committee revealed that not only are economic and cultural development not at odds with one another, but the latter may indeed be a tool through which the former is achieved.

The second case in this chapter examines Labour MP Bernie Grant and the Africa Reparations Movement (ARM-UK) work in the 1990s to repatriate Britain's Benin artifacts to Nigeria, a process through which articulations and contestations of entitlements to cultural heritage, constructions of national identity, and claims to historical memory were established. This case traces the efforts of Grant and his interlocutors engaged in ARM-UK's work and to reveal the shifting meanings of political power the Benin bronzes carried in the postcolonial context. Through heated debates of ownership of the objects, the parties appropriated the meaning of the Benin bronzes to signal commitments to their ideological, political, and moral viewpoints to ultimately achieve their respective political goals.

In the sixth chapter I consider the role of informal non-state cultural institutions, activists, artists, and other grassroots actors in establishing their own understandings of cultural authority by navigating alternatives to repatriation that are less reliant on the workings of the state and political actors I discuss in the previous chapter. These individuals and groups ask how the legacies of colonial power can be negotiated through engagement with the Benin artifacts that transcends the framework of repatriation and reliance on formal political solutions. This chapter also draws on two cases. The first case uses the debates surrounding the replication of a famous Benin mask to examine the ways in which ex-colonies and imperial nations use the practice of replication to meet political, cultural, spiritual, and economic objectives, and how these desires tend to be contentious in the transnational postcolonial context. I examine replication as a relational aesthetic that interrogates the frequently overlooked cultural and spiritual implications of mimesis. I demonstrate that replication is used by imperial states as a tool for political manipulation as they are able to continue to extract political and economic resources from the colonized state while simultaneously accruing material benefits and cultural capital from the original artifacts in exchange for a culturally insignificant and aesthetically inferior facsimile. Yet heritage replication may also be used by the ex-

colony as a tool of political subversion when employed as a strategy of resistance by rejecting the outcomes of the restitution decision and setting their own terms of cultural production.

The second case in this chapter explores how generations of diasporic artists have, since Nigeria's independence in 1960, engaged in various forms of recuperation of pre-colonial aesthetics through the adoption of postcolonial modernist visual tactics to negotiate a sense of self-determination and to recover an autonomous postcolonial national identity. Through the creation of subversive artwork which attempts to think beyond the framework of Western benevolence embedded in the project of restitution, some have made efforts to resist hegemonic influences within the global contemporary art world. The tactics of anti-imperial refusal that some Nigerian and diasporic artists have employed suggest a strategic redeployment of an aesthetic tradition that simultaneously advocates for the reclaiming of a black radical indigenous history and full realization of Nigerian cultural autonomous potentialities, while also envisioning a future situated within a global cosmopolitan framework--what I refer to as *cosmopolitan repair*. Such forms of cultural production constitute a critical component of the recent resurgence of decolonial activism that has swept the global art world which, at its core, poses a resistance to extractive capitalist practices in the Global South.

In the seventh chapter I examine the ultraviolent impact the looting of the Benin artifacts had on the Edo/Nigerian community, and how artists, activists, and the general public have organized to reject the narrative that the 1897 sacking was a totalizing event. I use my new insights about cultural materiality and coloniality to build a theory of cultural death and repair, which considers the restitution and repatriation of spoils of war an essential component of the modern decolonization process and the rebalancing of relations of power between Europe and Africa. I argue that the retentionist strategies I outlined in the previous two chapters represent a position which ensures cultural death for the objects and people of Benin, while the strategies of resistance

those engaged in, and beyond, the struggle for restitution serve as acts of decoloniality which make space for the refusal of death and the embrace of repair.

Here I use the Benin artifacts to examine notions of social and cultural alienation, seizure, disruption, expulsion, bondage and slavery, and draw on recent debates about heritage restitution to think through the possibilities of repair, reparations, reclamation and redemption. Employing Orlando Patterson's theory of social death, I argue that both the people *and* the objects that are alienated from one another during the imperial looting of cultural artifacts experience a process of cultural death. I extend this theory by demonstrating that restitution is a form of reparations that offers the opportunity for spiritual redemption from the state of cultural death. In doing so, I establish a conceptualization of cultural regeneration that, via restitution and reparations more broadly, provides a pathway out of symbolic death toward emancipation. I conclude with a review of major arguments and discuss the future of restitution efforts as well as my own vision and recommendations for the postcolonial museum.

CHAPTER II:

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

This project sits at the intersections of global and transnational historical sociology, postcolonial studies, and material culture and museum studies. I primarily draw on the work of postcolonial cultural theorists and sociologists to identify and address gaps in the institutionalist and economic historic literature on postcolonial 'development.' The fundamental theoretical intervention in the literature on empire that I make is to expand our conceptualization of the constitutive elements of the process of colonization and the endurance of colonial structures. To achieve this, there are broadly two camps of literature that I use throughout my project. The first is the literature I'm speaking *to*, and the second is the literature I'm speaking *with*.

The literature this project speaks *to* consists of scholarship on empire devoted to explaining the processes by which dominant imperial nations subordinate and colonize weaker states. Institutionalist historians and scholars of development and worlds systems have theorized the emergence of colonial styles, systems, and techniques as mechanisms through which to explain dynamics such as ethnic conflict and economic and political development in the Global South. My project builds upon this body of literature to argue that these conventional components of imperialism are necessary to provide an accurate account of the colonial process but are insufficient without considering the effects of the appropriation of material heritage.

To do this work I draw on two streams of literature that I am speaking *with*. While institutionalist scholars have tended to primarily examine the aspects of the colonization processes which take place in the colonies, postcolonial scholars of empire have often focused on the effects of the imperial process at home in the metropole. Recognizing that imperialism is a multiscalar, multispatial process that was impactful both in the colonies and in the metropole, postcolonial cultural theorists have examined the ways in which cultural and social patterns in Europe were influenced by developments in the colonies. In particular, these scholars have analyzed issues such as shifting racial categories, class affiliations, and gender norms at home in light of awareness of the

imperial project in conquered lands. My dissertation is also in conversation with numerous postcolonial sociologists whose work invites us to confront the ways in which empire and colonialism have structured modernity, and how the sociological imagination may be enhanced by the study of social change from a postcolonial perspective.

The second body of literature with which I am speaking is work of art historical social scientists, whose work challenges us to think about the transformation of museums as cultural spaces, rather than physical places, as these institutions collectively have begun to shift their attention toward repressed histories, voices, images, memories, bodies, expression and cultures.

ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONALIST, WORLD SYSTEMS AND DEVELOPMENT LITERATURE

In a 1912 essay on the state of education in Africa, Robert Park noted, "Africa must expect to serve a long and hard apprenticeship to Europe, an apprenticeship not unlike that which Negroes in America underwent in slavery," a reference to the colonial intervention of European empires in the so-called development of Africa (quoted in Magubane 2013: 86). For more than a century, sociologists have examined the impact of Europe's colonization of the continent. More recently, in the wake of decolonization and independence movements across newly formed African states, sociologists and other social scientists have turned their attention to the enduring legacies of colonialism in the aftermath of its formal conclusion. Social scientists have traditionally looked at economic, social and political factors to understand the effects of colonialism in the contemporary period. One of the most famous studies on the topic was published in the 2001 paper by Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson in which the authors explore the effects of European settlement on current income per capita (Acemoglu et al 2001). Others have examined technical and ecological effects of imperialism on current levels of socioeconomic development (Lenski and Nolan 1984; Ziltener and Mueller (2007). Two articles in AJS and ASR, published in the 1970s at the height of post-

independence foreign intervention and reflection, examined the effects of foreign direct investment and economic dependence on socioeconomic outcomes (Bornschier et al 1978; Chase-Dunn 1975). Others still have looked at the effects of imperialism on broader economic, political and social outcomes, such as democratization and GNP (Grier 1999; Mahoney 2003).

In 2017 researchers in sociology departments across three European universities published a new dataset and paper that aimed to capture the contemporary effects of colonialism in Africa and Asia (Ziltener et al 2017). The variables considered included economic (e.g. trade policy), political (e.g. violence) and social (e.g. immigration) factors, yet no were cultural variables considered. In the paper the authors explained, "For more general effects of colonial domination, such as alienation (Fanon 1963; Césaire 2000) we could not find appropriate indicators measuring different levels of impact" (ibid). Absent from these scientific, and largely quantitative, studies were an examination of the cultural factors that reproduce inequality in the aftermath of colonialism. While the studies have been effective at extending our understanding of the enduring legacies of colonialism, in sociology and the social sciences more generally, there has been a noticeable lack of analysis of factors that point to other forms of domination, as Ziltener et al note above.

"Culture has always been a weapon of the powerful," argued Immanuel Wallerstein, the founder of world-systems theory (Wallerstein 1997). Through his application of a critical, Marxist approach to conventional dependency theory, Wallerstein developed the world-systems approach to understanding North-South inequality as a function of economic and political domination. While culture was central in Wallerstein's theorization of the world-system (see "Culture in the World System," (Kumar and Welz 2001), "Culture as the Ideological Battleground of the Modern World-System" (Wallerstein 1990) and "The National and the Universal: Can There be Such a Thing as World Culture?" (Wallerstein 1997), the concept of culture has been notably absent from the corpus of world-systems literature produced over the last half-century. Instead, this approach has most

often centered on economic and political explanations for persistent global inequality. Robertson and Khondker (1998) have argued that world systems analysis indeed promotes a "distinctly economic conception of globalization."

Sociologists writing in this tradition are primarily those advancing theories within the dependency, world-systems and Marxist literature and are more generally focused on economic structures that produce inequality under global capitalism (Cardoso & Faletto 1979, Evans 1979, Frank 1970). Several scholars in this camp have analyzed ways in which subjugation on the basis of race, class and labor throughout slavery and colonialism have been used to perpetuate global inequality (Cox 1948, Tomich 1990, Rodney 1981). Others have examined the role of political and military regimes in the maintenance of an unequal global order (Amin 2006, Arrighi and Silver 2001, Letukas and Barnshaw 2008). Still others have assessed the rise of global capitalism and the global political economy more generally in the aftermath of colonialism in the expansion of global inequality (Arrighi 2000, Frank 1967, Chase-Dunn 1999). This scholarship, similar to the sociological literature on the lasting effects of colonialism discussed above, primarily focuses on economic, social and political impact, while largely sidelining the issue of culture.

In their Annual Review of Sociology article on the evolution of development studies and praxis, Viterna and Robertson (2015) credited the discipline of sociology with the expansion of development studies beyond analysis of economic growth to encompass factors such as class and gender, citing several development sociologists in this movement (Portes 1978, 1983; Roberts 1979, Blumberg 1984, Elson & Pearson 1981). The article also notes that the recent literature on globalization that followed traditional world systems literature has adopted a cultural perspective, particularly those studying the globalization of politics. These more recent studies consider a new world polity in terms of the growth of its interconnected organizations and distribution of rights discourse and policy scripts, which has produced a new set of norms and a burgeoning global

culture. The emerging literature on the influence of institutions within the world system has also grappled with the issue of culture.

Some have argued that often when culture is considered as a factor within world-systems analysis, it is often taken to be merely a derivative of economic or political processes, and therefore not analytically distinct (Beyer 1998). For those who have incorporated the question of cultural flow into their analysis of the world system, including Wallerstein himself, many of their examinations tend to focus on the process through which the dominant culture of one society is imposed on that of a subordinate one through forces such as globalization, cultural diffusion and assimilation. The emphasis is largely on a unidirectional flow of cultural content from the powerful to the weak state resulting in the adoption of a set of values or practices by the latter within a homogenizing capitalist world economy. Building on this foundation, the goal of this project is to expand this understanding of the ways culture can be theorized as a mediating factor within world systems framework to analyze inequality between nation states in the postcolonial period. Beyond the imposition of dominant culture, the increasingly unequal distribution of power and resources across global economic and political systems has also been facilitated by an extraction and displacement of material culture. In addition to the displacement of physical objects, the looting of cultural artifacts also represents the erasure of memories, histories, and peoples.

Though he does not name cultural erasure as a function of the unequal distribution of power, Wallerstein does examine the notion of cultural resistance as a challenge to the threat of cultural hegemony. He suggests that, in response to practices of cultural resistance, a shift occurs:

> "The powerful of the world seek to commodify and thereby denature the practices of cultural resistance. They create high market demand for the forms of avant-garde (and/or exotic) artistic production. They create high-tech market networks for the distribution of previously artisanal or illicit production of the means of everyday life; that is, they transform a private domain into a semipublic one. They assign public space, delimited public space, to the non-standard linguistic, religious, even juridical forms" (Wallerstein 1997).

As such, this project attends to the ways in which those with power and resources challenge forms of cultural resistance—in the form of former colonies' attempts to retain or reclaim their cultural heritage and memory—specifically through the treatment of artifacts as 'art.' Given that, as Wallerstein has noted, "the holders of cultural power can and do treat them [resistors] either with the disdain that requires no notice or by severe repression," it is necessary to examine the ways in which culture elicits such strong responses.

Yet for his significant theorization on the role of culture within the world system, Wallerstein did not believe in culture as a unique entity. "I refuse the idea that culture is a separate domain from the economy and from the political processes," he argued in a 2001 interview (Kumar and Welz 2001: 222). While economic and political factors have been the primary tools through which scholars have applied world-systems analysis, often at the expense of cultural dynamics, it is true that they are all deeply interconnected, and must all be attended to when conceptualizing the world-system. In this dissertation I center the role that culture has played in constructing and perpetuating inequity between nation states, while acknowledging the intersecting economic and political factors that are influenced by the appropriation of culture.

POSTCOLONIAL SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL THEORY

The endurance of empire

West Indian novelist George Lamming (1960) asks, how can a Britain without its Empire still maintain cultural authority in post-colonial societies? This question lies at the very heart of this dissertation as I seek to understand how the shadow of empire continues to structurally influence economic, political, and sociocultural relations between nations. Postcolonial thought is a useful framework for what some have referred to as the "postcolonial present," which is to say a modernity that remains influenced by colonial power through everyday interactions long after the dismantling

of formal imperial structures. I draw on the work of postcolonial theorists—from sociologists to historians to literary critics—to examine what Edward Said (1994) has referred to as a "culture of dominance" that is pervasive in Orientalist thinking and practice, which I argue characterizes much of the discourse I analyze throughout this dissertation.

The legacies of colonialism have long been the subject of study for those seeking to understand the persistence of disparities in power and resources between geopolitically disparate nations. Two decades ago Peruvian social theorist Aníbal Quijano (2000) offered the theory of 'coloniality of power' as a framework for understanding how forms of power and hegemony based on group difference initially rooted in imperial systems of control have become embedded in modern systems of governance and whose effects persist throughout contemporary societies. Quijano's study of Latin American colonial domination examines the structural, material and epistemological underpinnings of the long durée of power to make sense of the endurance of imperial hierarchies in the aftermath of formal domination. Others, such as Walter Mignolo (2007) have elaborated upon this thesis, arguing that narratives about modernity linked to Eurocentric notions of progress and development perpetuate the existence of colonial relations.

These new colonial, or neocolonial, relations of power are more subtle, yet potentially more potent, argues Julian Go (2013: 5), who insists that the West is able to maintain its cultural power by "beckoning the ex-colonized to be like it," thereby reproducing global inequality in power between the North and South. The formal period of decolonization failed to usher in a radical or sustained decolonization of the racial and cultural consciousness of both the colonizer and the colonized. Scholars have described the forms of social interaction inscribed by colonialism into the contemporary fabric of everyday life as 'pathological ' or as a 'colonial wound' which persists long into the postcolonial present, which represents a form of epistemic violence that becomes an inherent feature of the postcolonial world. European paternalism and colonialism was never

intended to end--it is necessary for the protection and survival of Africa's heritage, with museum retentionism becoming a mechanism through which the horizon is delimited and empire endures today. This dissertation is specifically concerned with the ways in which culture, and in particular material cultural heritage, is strategically deployed as a tool of imperial control in the modern day, drawing on theories of the relationship between culture and imperialism.

This dissertation is an attempt to, using the lens of cultural materiality, understand the ways in which colonial regimes continue to reproduce themselves in ways that maintain systems of global inequality. Discussions of cultural materiality and domination necessarily encompass issues of economic, political and social domination, particularly in cases in which the cultural objects that carry symbolic significance and value are contested. Yet a limited focus on the economic, political and social factors that contribute to the endurance of imperial values without an examination of cultural developments risks minimizing or overlooking the subtle yet pathological ways in which the colonial shows up in everyday interactions between states, museums and the public. As sociologist Olivier Kozlarek (2013: 191) has noted, "it is not the easily understandable perpetuation of power relations that marks the colonial or, better, postcolonial reality, but the perpetuation of culturally reproduced forms of everyday social interaction that have survived political independence."

Situating the "global"

Throughout this dissertation I explore themes related to the national, global and transnational, and conclude by theorizing a conceptualization of cosmopolitanism which helps us make sense of the tensions between these levels of analysis in the postcolonial period. Social theorists have long examined the impact of globalization on the ways in which we analyze power between geographic territories which have, in turn, shifted our theorizations of global change. Recent scholars of globalization, citing the problems with conventional theories of modernization

and development, have advocated for more cosmopolitan approaches to examining shifting global power relations that transcend the nation-state centric analyses of political and social change. Beck (cited in Bhambra 2013: 306), for example, problematizes what he refers to as the "first age of modernity," instead conceptualizing a "world society" analysis that acknowledges the multicultural modernities of various societies in light of a newly emergent global age. Bhambra (2013), while supporting a shift away from methodological nationalism toward analysis of a global world order, is critical of what she has argued are ahistorical approaches to global change which center the West and leads to what she believes is a form of methodological Eurocentrism. Instead, she argues that cosmopolitanism was indeed a feature of the past and non-European societies, and that any theorization of this newly globalizing age must provincialize European understandings of the past and present in order to construct a "new universalism" (ibid: 308).

Theorizing the global is important to this project as the discourse of restitution in the postcolonial period becomes increasingly situated within universal concepts such as "world culture" and "world society." The unit of analysis and interaction shifts from the imperial—between the empire and the colony—in the colonial period to a transcendent global framework in the postcolonial period. Whereas colonial claims to power during the height of empire were grounded in claims of the nation-state (Britain) and empire (British Empire), the neo-imperial orientation is that of the global for the former imperial nation and cosmopolitan for the ex-colony.

Decoteau has similarly highlighted the tensions between these spatial scales, arguing that there is a "dilemma that all postcolonial states face of attempting to sustain a national identity in the face of deterritorializing forces of globalization" (Decoteau 2013: 273). The shift to a new global order fundamentally threatens the sense of nationhood a state, particularly in the postcolonial context, has as newly independent nations begin grappling with ways to affirm their national identity in the face of global change. Decoteau has also theorized the tension between global capital and

national redistribution as a paradox that "entails a simultaneous need to respect the demands of neoliberal capital in order to compete successfully on the world market *and* a responsibility to redress entrenched inequality, secure legitimacy from the poor, and forge a national imaginary" (ibid). Throughout the dissertation I explore this contradiction in the postcolonial colony's resistance to neoimperial appropriation and cooptation, while simultaneously working to assert a cosmopolitanism that is nationally grounded and culturally specific, yet engaged in neoliberal structures of "global" culture and capital.

Universalism, reason and modernity

The construction of reason and rationalism as qualities embodied exclusively by the West is central in understanding debates about restitution. Theories about Western reason were integral to sociology's founding, as early thinkers such as Weber believed that systemic, rational science was a practice that could be traced back to Hellenic Greece and was indeed unique to the West. "Only the Occident knows *rational law*, made by jurists and rationally interpreted and planned, and only in the Occident is found the concept of *citizen* (*civis romanus, citoyen, bourgeois*) because only in the Occident does the *city* exist in the specific sense of the word," Weber (1961: 232) argued. Boatca has argued that there has been a Western monopolization of the terms modernity and rationality, which Quijano (2000) referred to as "the European patent on modernity." In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim (2014) similarly proposed a typological approach to understanding social change in which he defined a path of evolution from a "segmented" or "collective" social type to an organized or modern social type. All societies, past and present, were placed along the continuum between collective and modern, with some societies stagnating, declining, or becoming incorporated into that of another. European beliefs in the universalism of their own societies, and conversely the provinciality of colonies, is rooted in this understanding of the supremacy of Western

epistemologies. Part of the radical shift in museology and museum practice has been the attempt to grapple with the ways in which museums reinforced such associations. The relegation of African 'artifacts' in ethnographic, culture, and natural history museums while 'art' from Western societies--and increasingly societies settler communities have deemed more proximate to the West due to their embrace of modernity, such as those in East Asia--is naturalized in art museums is one example of the way such dynamics materializes in the art world. Where objects are house significantly impacts how they are understood, valued and maintained, a determination largely predicated on the sacred/rational dichotomy.

As intellectual theories of modernization proliferated in the 1960s following the dismantling of formal colonial institutions, so too did museums take up a modernizing agenda. Museums began to use the language of modernity and development to justify their collections and decisions to retain looted artifacts. Claims that Western museums were uniquely and exclusively capable of preserving and displaying ancient objects while source countries were unable to properly do so due to a lack of knowledge and skill proliferated, thereby positioning Western museums museum and West in general as purveyors of modernity. According to James Cuno (2006: 17), it is the responsibility of the museum to protect objects from the intellectual deficiencies of source communities: "The principle that underlay the formation of the British Museum," he argues, is "that its collections are a force for understanding, tolerance, and the dissipation of ignorance, superstition, and prejudice." Said (1978) refers to this perspective as the "imperial standpoint of knowledge" and argues that it is both essentializing and homogenizing. The world culture approach to collection, display and interpretation, as opposed to a nation-state based approach, also reflects a belief in rationale modernity. Holding the power to set the terms of debates--deciding where objects are housed, which technologies are most effective, whose narratives should be represented, which staff is most representative, and how to portray the nation--is a product of this logic which maintains resource

and power inequity between nations and reinscribes comparable power relations between the states that existed during the imperial era.

Arguments for the retention of cultural heritage are often premised on the idea that objects should remain in Western museums as they are sites best poised to articulate the narrative of a collective human history via the artifacts in their collections, which suggests a belief in a form of European historical universalism. The universal museum, in its claims to be able to represent and speak for the Other, has advanced a belief in the uniqueness of a European metropolitan standpoint. The universal, as defined by Boatca (2013: 56), is an "unwarranted generalization from a particular standpoint." In an editorial as chair of the International Council of Museums Ethics Committee, Geoffrey Lewis argued, "the concept of universality is embodied at the origin of museums. As we know them today, museums originated in the eighteenth century encyclopaedic movement of the so-called European Enlightenment" (Cuno 2006: 16).

In contrast, advocates for restitution have challenged this fundamental premise of the universal museum, arguing that the danger of universalizing is its potential to undermine the specificity of culture thereby subsuming it under a dominant universal culture. Said (quoted in Boatca 2013: 57) has argued that "Western academic knowledge has only been constructed as universal, generally valid, and unsituated by simultaneously demoting non-Western knowledges to the status of the local, particular, and therefore ungeneralizable." Yet I demonstrate that, in the context of museums, Western rational knowledge is universalized through a process of local erasure that indeed relies on a process of generalizability and the erosion of local particularity through the construction of a generic, non-Western, primitive Other.

The provincialization of non-Western communities is one way that such forms of universalism are constructed. In addition to framing the West as possessing a universally dominant culture while relegating the South to specificity and contingency, European scientific rationalism is

reified as a universal epistemological framework against which all other forms of knowledge are evaluated and, ultimately, discredited. James Cuno (2013) has, for example, argued that archaeological artifacts are 'scientific fact,' whereas cultural property is an identity-based 'political construct' created by nations and ethnic and religious groups. Bortoluci and Jansen (2013: 205) explain that provincializing "non-Western social realities makes them out to be idiosyncratic deviations from an ideal (European) historical standard." The universal museum, from inception, has been a provincializing mechanism through which to establish a hierarchy of Western art and primitive artifact. Indeed, ethnographic objects themselves were used as evidentiary proof of non-Western civilizations' transition from savagery to modernity.

In response to the provincialization of colonies, several scholars have argued that Europe, too, should undergo provincializing. In *Provincializing Europe,* Chakrabarty (2000) rejects the idea of the universal human condition by bringing from the margins histories and experiences which demonstrate the heterogeneity and legitimacy of global modern experiences. "The provincialization of Europe thus contributes to a denaturalization of Eurocentric modernization narratives and points instead to the need to understand the historical specificities *and* interconnectedness of contemporary societies," argue Bortoluci and Jansen (2013: 205). Calls for restitution, I argue, have provincializing capability in that they seek to question Europe's entitlement not just to the objects in their collections, but to the histories Western museums and nations articulate via these artifacts. The deployment of cosmopolitan tactics by Nigeria's cultural entrepreneurs which brings their work into, and in conversation with, Western artwork and spaces likewise provincializes European understandings of the universality of their craft by highlighting the interconnectedness between the two forms and their shared modern relevance.

Agency and the subaltern voice

In the postcolonial period Western museums have been hammered with the critique that their practices, from collection to curation to interpretation, have silenced the voices they seek to depict. The world culture approach to curation has meant that the specificity of indigenous cultural expression has been subsumed under the Western articulation of a generic indigenous Other which leaves little room for the autonomous peripheral voice. Gayatri Spivak has most famously questioned whether subaltern people, and women in particular, have the authority to be heard and represent themselves with their own voices. "She 'spoke,' but women did not, do not, 'hear' her," Spivak (2010: 4) wrote. Said (quoted in Go 2013: 14) has also addressed this erasure of indigenous voices, accusing Orientalists of "eliding completely the voices and actions of non-Europeans for an examination of how they were represented--as if 'colonial discourse' was not in fact a discourse but a one-way discussion." While Western museums have systematically obscured the perspectives of the source communities from which objects in their collections originate by whitewashing their histories, recent attempts have been made to correct for such practices through, for example, engagement with African artists and curators and increased efforts to create more conversational environments through educational and community programming. Boursiquot has argued that bringing indigenous into conversations taking place in museums is the only viable path forward: "In our postcolonial world, it is not possible to speak on behalf of non-Western societies, nor to represent them or their objects without being preoccupied by what they would say about it," they note (Boursiquot 2014: 63). Yet how this vision should be realized remains up for debate, with some arguing that the inclusion of indigenous voices through curation and community consultation and access is sufficient, while others have argued that, for communities seeking the return of their objects, only repatriation will honor the true spirit of giving voice to that community.

These assimilationist approaches have the potential to allow Western museums to continue to speak of and represent Africa in non-agentic ways. There is an assumption that Africa is not in

the room, that it could never be in the room. The question of restitution remains elusive for many museums, particularly those in England, which means that calls for object return often fall on deaf ears, thereby perpetuating mechanisms of silencing. Yet Jonathan Harris (2001: 3) warns us that the recovery of such voices cannot be achieved by simply tacking their perspectives onto existing structures: "What is at stake here is not a pacific integration of the missing chapters of the forgotten, excluded and subaltern voices into inherited accounts, but rather a deconstruction and rewriting of those very histories through the irrepressible presence of these other narrations," he argues.

Julian Go (2013:10) has suggested that the very origin of postcolonialism, both in theory and practice, is rooted in "an attempt to grapple with the potential for postcolonial peoples to take control of their destiny in the face of perpetual Western power." Sarkar has also argued that the ability to speak and act for oneself is ultimately a deeply transformative process. Revolutions, he suggested, were not matters of happenstance, but were products of "the capacity of actors to seize and rework existing social and geopolitical forms thereby bringing about 'new international arrangement" (Goswami 2013: 160). The struggle for restitution is indeed an internationalist movement seeking to bring about new structures of power that stand to both directly challenge neocolonial systems of control while simultaneously building power between postcolonial states. Yet others have made the counterargument that, for some colonial internationalists, cultural and spiritual autonomy is only the first step toward decolonial liberation, and that the pursuit of equality was the ultimate political and epistemological struggle.

Relationalism

Reparations, and the pursuit of repair for harm, is rooted in an acknowledgment of the connectedness between the component parts of empire. Restitution, in particular, is an acknowledgment that the theft of a cultural landscape by imperial forces has wrought damage upon

a community and that there is a need to redress such harm. It is a proclamation of the ways in which countries were once, and continue to be, intertwined. The temporal dimension of restitution is critical—it recognizes that nations were formally connected through an imperial structure and continue to be so through patterns of heritage ownership and retention today. Advocates of retention have argued that the return of objects is nationalistic, isolationist and anti-global--that returning objects to the places from which they originated reifies divisions between nations and affirms borders in an otherwise aspirationally global world. Inverting this premise, I demonstrate that calls for restitution are an acknowledgment of the connected nature of imperial debris and the ways in which those relations continue to manifest in the world today. The redistribution of objects is a symbolic representation of historic violences which characterized colonial relations as well as the contemporary connectedness of those very nations in the postcolonial period.

Boursiquot, reflecting on the work of Benoît de L'Estoile have argued that objects themselves should be curated in such a way that is consistent with a relational ethic:

> These objects should be presented on the basis of the complex relations that were established around them. Ethnographic objects are not only non-Western objects in our museums; they are enmeshed in relations between 'Us' and the 'Others'--relations that are in constant redefinition. The postcolonial museum, as de L'Estoile suggests, is a museum that reflects on these relations and places history and reflexivity at its core. The postcolonial museum questions the very possibility of exhibiting cultural diversity as if it were a reality. It encourages the public to reflect on the fact that other cultures do not exist outside of the relation that determines difference (Boursiquot 2014: 69).

Relationalism as a theory first emerged with the growth of postcolonial theory and has since risen to prominence across the social sciences and humanities as fields from sociology to history of science to literature have found utility in the framework. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said examines the ways in which Western epistemologies constructed the Orient as regressive, static and singular while the West was held as progressive, modern and universal, and that overcoming such binary distinctions through relational thinking was critical to undermining hegemonic paradigms (Said 1979). Édouard

Glissant famously described the poetics of relations as "relational comparison as the complexities and entanglements among cultures and communities (Glissant 1997)." And Lisa Lowe and Kris Manjapra have theorized an "analytic of relation that seeks to reckon with the coloniality of knowledge that divides and regiments the world into areas, objects, properties, and scales of meaning, by observing instead asymmetrical conflicts, entanglements, survivals, and transformations" (Lowe and Manjapra 2019). Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to 'provincialize Europe' is a relational declaration that seeks to destabilize Europe's position at the center of analysis and global relations in an effort to undermine its universality while turning attention to the importance of considering 'the periphery' and its relation to Europe and beyond (Chakrabarty 2000).

Julian Go (2013: 15) has argued that a central component of postcolonial theory is its emphasis on relationality, which involves "recognizing the entanglements and relations between colonizer and colonized, metropole and colony, center and periphery and by disclosing how identities, institutions, spaces, or places that might be deemed separate were in fact connected, intertwined, and mutually constituted." Relationalism, he argues, is a framework for critiquing and resisting the processes of methodological nationalism and analytic bifurcation, which he defines as "the analytic abstraction or separation of social objects from their wider constitutive relations" (ibid). Others have described relationalism as a set of "contacts, superimpositions, amalgams, mixtures, [and] compositions" which produces an internationalism rooted in reciprocity as opposed to competition or domination (Goswami 2013: 158). Goswami (2013: 162) has framed the relational analytic as one that has the potential to serve as a "center of political-economic gravity" through its emphasis on mutuality and exchange. Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar has theorized the notion of parallelism, a concept related to rationalism which he defined as, "relations of equivalence and the coincidences in social life," which he argued were products of the expansion of capitalism. Zine Magubane (2004)

has also described the way in which middle-class English reformers understood the colonies to be merely extension of the domestic social body, a relationship characterized as one of symbiosis.

Transcending this opposition between Europe and the 'Rest' is at the heart of the postcolonial project. Such a view recognizes that colonialism was just as pervasive and influential in the colonies as it was in the metropole. As Seidman (2013: 40) has argued, "Despite efforts to maintain a rigid division between French nationals and colonial natives, people, ideas and goods circulated between the metropole and colony. Colonial culture was brought into France." He has argued that the work of Orientalism has been the maintenance of such distinctions between the cultural East and West:

> Orientalism fashions polluted projections of the East and purifying constructions of the West. The West is imagined as the dramatic center of history, as the driving force of change, and as the agent of human freedom. Accordingly, representations of the West are purged of everything that might blur the boundaries between East and West. Orientalism projects the realities of Anglo-European localism, traditionalism, and authoritarian- ism either to its distant past or onto the Oriental. Orientalism is then as much a misrepresentation of the West as it is of the East. And, one of its key misrepresentations is that it disavows or resists a discourse that links empire and modernity (ibid: 49).

Methodological nationalism is a related concept which refers to the construction of the colonized and colonizer as discrete and independent of one another, thereby failing to attend to the ways in which transnational dynamics collapse the space between them. Those in favor of retention have accused those seeking restitution of a form of nationalism consistent with such a practice given the desire to see objects returned to their homelands. Retentionists have mounted anti-nationalist critiques of restitution advocates, instead arguing that their approach to collecting that is oriented around the framework of world cultural display is more interconnected and transnational given the diverse geographies that engage the collections of universal museums. Yet those favoring restitution have contested the nationalist framing of their efforts by insisting that their aim is not to silo the objects in source communities, but rather shift the power dynamics which come with ownership and

possession while continuing to share them with the world. As such, work on methodological nationalism helps us engage these debates and examine the ways in which the nation state and transnational spaces are contested based on the perspective of those making claims.

Other concepts such as metrocentrism and the metropolitan gaze refer to this bias in Eurocentric perspectives which isolates the metropole from its colonies. Richard Price has described the metropolitan gaze as "insufficient to properly scan the links of Britain's history to its empire. To approach empire from the metropolitan perch is to miss a great deal of the process of constructing empire. One big thing that is missed is the agency of the subjects of empire in the making of British history" (ibid 626). Sociologist Julian Go has further suggested that analytic bifurcation occurs when relations that might not, in reality, be separate are analytically held apart and he calls, instead, for a relational approach that "emphasizes the interactional constitution of social units, processes, and practices across space (Go 2013: 28)." One example of this is Go's claim that in *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault only attends to violence in France and the *ancien regime*, while ignoring the simultaneous and connected violence in France's colonies, such as Saigon, Senegal and Algeria. As such, Foucault perpetuates the myth that colonial history was not, in fact, Europe's history.

Over the last several decades, postcolonial social theorists have explored this 'relational turn' in their historical analyses of global power. Edward Said early on suggested that we attend to "overlapping territories" and "intertwined histories" and construct narratives that are "common to men and women, whites and non-whites, dwellers in the metropolis and the peripheries, past as well as present and future (1979: 46)." This means acknowledging that the experiences of the colonizer and colonized were not easily disentangled. Price suggests that relationalism is a way of returning to the period of colonization and thinking about the way that empire manifested as more than just an event that took place at home, and which affected people at home, but a process of encounter, contact, association and interaction that stretched across geographies and, now, temporalities (Price

2006). He develops the concept of "imperial circuits" as a way of interrogating these mutual connections between the colonial nation and its empire which is often construed as distant, distinct and foreign. On the British empire, Price advances the idea that there is no such thing as an autonomous British state, both during the height of the colonial period and as the nation exists today:

> "The British state was neither a fixed nor an essential category. It assumed different shapes and forms from different historical moments or geographical vantage points. [...] Indeed, the state provides perhaps the best example of the mutually constitutive relationship of empire and British history. Historically speaking, the idea of the British state was inseparable from the idea of empire" (ibid: 614).

Much of postcolonial theory is an attempt to overcome what Antoinette Burton refers to as "the persistent conviction that home and empire were separate spheres (1997: 231)." She argues that distinctions between concepts such as "home" and "away" defined the imagined geography of empire during periods of European colonization and have persisted through the present day. Such distinctions, citing the work of Mrinalini Sinha on the British empire, risks "remaking Britain (itself a falsely homogenous whole) as the centripetal origin of empire, rather than insisting on the interdependence, the 'uneven development', of national/imperial formations in any given historical moment (ibid)."

Instead, a relational approach to the analysis of empire would recognize not just the interconnectedness of the spaces—because interconnectedness would imply that they are two distinct things that are connected—but an actual sameness that binds the two together. Burton argues that the nation is not an independent entity, but "an imperialized space--a political territory which could not, and still cannot, escape the imprint of empire (ibid: 240)." Empire, thus, does not need to be brought into the nation—it *is* the nation. The nation, as Burton describes it, "often stands as the mirror to which imperial identities are reflected back (ibid: 232)." She discusses a form of relational thinking that conceives of the 'nation' as, in fact, "a set of relations that are constantly

being made and remade, contested and refigured, that nonetheless produce among their contemporaneous witnesses the conviction of historical difference (ibid: 235)." The distinction between home and the colonies was an intentional discursive project in order to provide evidence for modernity and civilization in the former. As such, undoing such categorizations and recognizing the fluidity between the two is a decolonial move toward undermining colonialist discourses of progress and development that persist today.

Museology and Studies of Material Culture

Museums are an inherently colonial project. The first ethnographic museums in the Western world were altars to the spoils of imperial conquest and violence that were subsequently used to justify further territorial expansion and colonization. Traditionally literature on this subject has been the domain of anthropologists seeking to understand colonial logics of classification and rationality (MacKenzie 2009), strategies museums use to invoke collective memory (Aldrich 2005), and how indigenous and Southern communities are reclaiming problematic museums sites, collections and narratives (Simpson 1996).

Early museums in the West originated as spaces in which colonial powers could showcase the objects acquired from their colonies as a way of conveying the power and ownership they had over such lands, societies and peoples. "Museums were part of the colonial ideology of conquest, domination, and attempts to hijack or re-write the narratives of so-called subject peoples to serve political, economic, and intellectual agendas," argues Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, a Nigerian-born curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City (ArtNews 2019). Museums have historically taken a vast range of approaches to displaying their collections. Today, museums largely separate natural history and ethnographic content (and many, though not all, now separate these from each other) from 'art' and other creative content. The current British Museum ethnographic

collection, for instance, was housed under the Museum of Mankind until 1997, at which point it was moved to the Natural History Museum to allow the British Museum to focus exclusively on the display of 'art.' The categorization of peoples and depiction of their development through modernity has necessarily created concern in many museum and academic spaces over the last few decades and, in response, museums have begun to 'decolonize' their collections in an effort to disrupt and rehistoricize indigenous and colonized peoples in a way that resists troubling narratives of modernity/barbarity, challenges imperial hegemony, and offers a progressive, inclusive form of representation. Thus, the museum as we understand it today—with its galleries of people and culture and art—was born in the West as a colonial project, but nevertheless is an institution that retention advocates suggest must remain as it is due to this origin story that must be preserved and told.

In recent years sociologists have begun turning to the museum to explain features of the social world. In *Artifacts and Allegiances*, Peggy Levitt uses the museum as an analytic tool through which to understand how nations situate and articulate understandings of themselves within a global order. She suggests that it is, indeed, possible to "understand world power dynamics through the prism of collecting," (2015: 21) given the way in which the social histories of nations have been linked to earlier modes of global exploration and conquest as well as contemporary forms of power. Museums and their artifacts, therefore, offer the opportunity to read the nation in the larger context of transnational power configurations while also serving as an analytic frame through which to understand the pursuit of particular social goals of the nation. Similarly, others have argued that museums can be useful tools to examine specific forms of nationalism (Gordon-Walker 2016), political ideology of the state (Gray 2015), and the construction of national identity and belonging (Fladmark 1999). Bourdieu et al (1991) have famously written on taste and privilege through the lens of the European museum. Such studies demonstrate the importance of museums and their contents

in articulating contemporary social and political problems, allowing us to wrestle with them in a way that exposes everyday forms of inequality and violence implicit in the holding of artifacts.

This project also draws on the abundant literature in the humanities and postcolonial studies (subaltern, feminist and ethnic/indigenous studies) which focuses on museums and material culture specifically, and cultural production more generally. Scholars have examined the museum as cultural space in the era of globalization and multiculturalism (Chambers et al 2014, Harris 1986) while others have explored how museums and material culture shape the national identity of the formerly colonial and colonized in Europe and Africa (Coombes 1997, Mawere et al 2015). More widely I draw on classic and contemporary scholars who have reflected on the development, maintenance and implications of empire far and wide (Fanon 1952, Hall and Rose 2006) and consider how such thinking intersects with the study of material culture.

There is a robust and growing body of literature which explores the role of objects in shaping social processes, productions and events. Museums, as state institutions vested with the mandate of protection, guardianship and preservation of heritage objects in particular are thus the apparatus through which this power is wielded. But what exactly are museums? Universal, or encyclopedic museums, of the West are institutions that originated in the eighteenth century during the period of Enlightenment as a venue in which imperial nations could display the 'curiosities' of their conquered territories which allowed them to justify their hierarchical classifications and ideologies of race and indigeneity used to defend imperial expansion and subjugation. Museums were established to house artifacts collected from colonial expeditions and the representations of the native and colonial life depicted through these collections shaped the culture of the metropole. Universal museums seek to display the cultures and histories of societies beyond its own but, in doing so, frames its own national and cultural identity. They conjure questions about the power to represent, the power to name, and the nature of power itself.

As scholarship on, and practices of, museology have moved away from conceptualizations of the museum as purely a space for collection and preservation to acknowledge the political role museums play in shaping and reflecting national and cultural identities, they have also begun to interrogate their responsibility to discuss and challenge the complicated histories of their institutions and collections. Over the last couple of decades, museums have evolved into sites of interrogative reflexivity, as communities that traditionally were the object of study in museums have increasingly called for the "decolonization" of the museum. Piotr Bienkowski (2014: 48) has claimed that today's 'postcolonial' museum should be "a locus for open, respectful, egalitarian dialogue and participation around issues of interpretation of the past, personal and group identity, and rights to ownership of culture," emphasizing the need for equity and fair distribution of claims to knowledge and authority. Clifford (1997: 199) has argued that museums may be thought of as "contact zones," a concept proposed "as a move beyond their previous role as places representing imperialist appropriation to places in which that relationship could be rethought." According to Rubie Watson (2001: 4), Director of Harvard's Peabody Museum, the mandate of the museum in its earliest years was primarily to acquire, house, preserve, and interpret. Yet more recently, she argues, "museums are expected to combine education and entertainment, commemorate heroic deeds, document 'real history,' give voice to the strivings of minorities, and provide a forum in which new (and sometimes unpopular) ideas can be discussed." In this shift from a "collection model" to a "translation model," museums have become spaces in which experience, narrative and memory about the other and the self are constructed. According to Boursiquot, in the postcolonial world, "ethnographic museums tend to become museums of the relationship between 'us' and the 'Others' more than museums of the 'Others'" (Boursiquot 2013: 67). With an emphasis on interactional dynamics as opposed to objective display. The recent shift of the motto of Paris' Quai Branly museum to *la ou dialoguent les cultures* ("where cultures converse") is exemplary of such a transition in the postcolonial period.

Some have elaborated on the ways in which states appropriate the social and symbolic value of cultural heritage into national heritage with utilitarian function in order to confer greater authority onto the state, often at the expense of the source community's possession of the object. For many, the museum continues to be a space in which authenticity and the desire to represent a global whole are in competition with justice for colonized groups which has perpetuated their marginalization. As Bailey (2021: 893) has argued, the museum is "an institution that has long served as a compendium of technology and racialized gendered violence."

CHAPTER III:

DATA AND METHODS

This dissertation excavates the historical record of restitution debates between Nigeria and the UK in the late colonial and early postcolonial period, from the 1940s to the 1990s, through an analysis of archival records supplemented by interviews, media content analysis, and museum field observation.

Transnational archival research

From 2019-2021 I consulted and collected roughly 2,400 pages of primary source archival material from the following six institutions:

British Museum, London (1943-1992): I collected material from the British Museum's Anthropology Library and Research Centre, which included files from the museum's Ethnography Library. These files largely consist of the following types of documents:

- Correspondence: These documents include letters and memos between museum professionals and leadership (curators, preservationists, directors, etc.), British government officials within the culture sector and foreign offices, British collectors, and cultural entrepreneurs. There is also correspondence between the museum and Nigerian government officials and those working within the Nigerian cultural establishment.
- Meeting ephemera: Museum Board of Trustees meeting minutes, notes from other internal museum meetings, minutes and participant lists from community meetings.
- Newspaper articles: Articles from the British and Nigerian press about the history of the Benin invasion and active restitution claims.
- Museum accession and logistical records: Files documenting the purchase and sale history of specific Benin artifacts in the museum, shipping records documenting the transfer of artifacts to and from the museum.

Bishopsgate Institute, London (1991-1997): This archive includes the personal papers of late MP Bernie Grant housed in London's Bishopsgate Institute, most notably Grant's work with the Africa Reparations Movement on the restitution of the Benin Bronzes. The "Benin Bronzes Campaign Files," the most relevant subset of material in this collection, contains approximately 260-pages of documents created between the mid- to late-1990s. This assemblage of documents provides key insights into the mechanisms by which Grant acquired knowledge about the Benin artifacts, mobilized transnational support for their elevation in British society, and organized an international movement for their restitution. They include the following types of files:

- Correspondence: Letters between Grant and his Parliamentary colleagues, museum staff and leadership, members of the Glasgow City Council and Scottish House of Commons, his constituents, and historical researchers and interlocutors close to Grant. The file also includes letters between the Benin royal family and Grant, British political leaders, and other actors in the culture sector.
- Personal memos: Grant's notes reflecting on readings, meeting and general sentiments about how to position the movement.
- Minutes: Minutes from ARM meetings, planning meetings with committees both in the UK and Nigeria, and between Grant and members of the Benin royal family.
- Speeches: Transcripts of speeches from the Benin royal family delivered in the UK and Nigeria.
- Reports: Reports from Grant and the ARM to the Glasgow City Council.
- Museum and protest ephemera: museum catalogs and brochures, protest flyers and participant lists, press releases, and newspaper clippings.
- Photographs: Images largely taken at the British Museum demonstrations organized by Grant and ARM.

- Artifact documentation: Lists of objects held in the British Museum and Kelvingrove Museum.

British National Archives at Kew (1976-7): Similar to the documents collected from the British Museum anthropological archive, this collection contains correspondence primarily between professional and curatorial staff within the British Museum as well as communication between staff and various actors within the British government. There are a handful of newspaper clippings and secondary source material included in these files.

National Museum of Nigeria, Lagos (1897-1959)

- Correspondence: Letters and memos between the museum professionals and the government of Nigeria
- Journals: Military expedition field journals and correspondence with the Crown government
- Exhibition ephemera: Exhibition catalogues and brochures
- Reports: Antiquities service reports by the museum professionals; artifact sale, purchase and trade records; preservation and museum development reports
- Secondary literature: Publications about the museum's collections, histories of looting, cultural heritage law books and legal guidelines on restitution, newspaper and magazine articles about the museum's history

Mitchell Library, Glasgow (1994-7)

- Correspondence between the Glasgow City Councillors and Bernie Grant. Much of this material is supplemental to, or a duplicate of, that held in Bernie Grant's papers at the Bishopsgate Institute.

Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London (1939-1962): I collected correspondence, newspaper clippings and essays from this site but none related to the Benin artifacts. I was denied access to their documents on restitution debates surrounding the V&A's collection of artifacts looted from Maqdala (Ethiopia) in 1868. These files were originally open to the public, but the head archivist sealed them upon my request citing that they had recently become active, not historical, documents due to Ethiopia's recent restitution request, making them no longer eligible for archival consultation.

Archival methodology

I began each archival visit with a conversation with the archivist(s) on site, explaining the nature of my project and following their recommendations for primary source material to examine. At times the archivists were deeply involved in helping me locate materials, such as the archivists at the British Museum anthropology library and the Mitchell Library who had curated files waiting for me when I arrived based on our prior conversations. Others were less directly involved and mostly suggested search terms that I might use in the digital catalogs to help with my search. The curated files often yielded the most useful material that was specifically about the Benin artifacts and discussions about their restitution.

Digital catalog searches produced mixed results. I searched for geographically and culturally specific terms such as "Benin," "Edo," "Nigeria," "bronzes," "oba," "Niger Coast Protectorate," and "Royal Niger Company; topical terms such as "art," "artifact," "restitution," "repatriation," "return"; and event- and institution-based terms such as "FESTAC '77," "Sotheby's auction," "Centenary Commemoration," "Kelvingrove Museum." Few records that I located through these searches sat at the intersections of these terms, and I largely relied on the recommendations and curated materials from archivists.

There was no digital catalog or finding aid for the archive at the National Museum of Nigeria, but the head librarian and the museum's archivist were present daily to talk through the collections and pull useful material. This archive provided deeper insights into perspectives from the general public in Nigeria given the availability of newspaper sources and clippings not accessible outside of Nigeria. There was also more secondary literature in this collection and syntheses of decades of restitution debates from museum staff which was helpful in grounding my study.

As I mentioned above in the section about the V&A museum, I did encounter some gatekeepers who made accessing some information difficult in addition to the infrastructural obstacles some archives had which made locating material challenging. The material which I collected is, therefore, biased given that it has been curated based on what the museums and archives are interested in allowing the public to see. This does not necessarily imply that all the material portrays the museums in a positive light—indeed much of the content is critical or skeptical of the museums—but this information has mostly been filtered through the gaze of those who hold power within these debates. As such, a large part of my analysis was reading against the institutional grain in order to address such biases in the primary source literature.

To document and analyze the primary material I used a combination of Excel and NVivo to summarize and code my data. I engaged in a close reading of each document, summarized the key points for quick reference, and inductively assigned codes by page. In total I came up with 126 codes which I then consolidated or discarded to build the empirical and theoretical structure of each chapter.

Interviews and conversations

To supplement and contextualize my archival material, from 2019-2021 I conducted interviews with several dozen key informants across five cities:

London: I conducted semi-structured interviews with five key informants who were, or had previously been, affiliated with British museums and galleries. These individuals were curators, collectors, archivists and preservationists and provided insights both into the histories of the debates the dissertation examines and recent developments in the British cultural production landscape.

Lagos, Nigeria: I conducted eight semi-structured interviews with the director of the National Museum of Nigeria, an official with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, preservation and curatorial staff, an archivist, a librarian, a tour guide, and local artists and gallery owners who discussed the significance of the missing heritage and the historic debates to their work.

Benin City, Nigeria: I conducted nine semi-structured interviews with the director of the Benin City National Museum, a preservationist, facilities maintenance staff, a studio/gallery owner, a collector, and several artists. I also had a group interview with a collective of six metalworks who were in the process of making bronze sculptures in their workshop, as well as a handful of local shop owners who sold recently manufactured bronze sculptures in their shops on Benin's famous Igun Street, the site from which all bronze metalwork has originated since the tradition began in the 11th century. In addition, I had informal conversations with Uber drivers, hotel staff, and friends I made along the way about their views on restitution, the lost heritage, and the new museum being built.

Ibadan, Nigeria: I had one three-part interview with a legal historian who has written extensively on the restitution of the Benin and other Nigerian and African artifacts. In addition to an interview about his work as part of the Benin Dialogue Group and historian of legal debates, he provided me with a wealth of secondary material on restitution cases across the continent.

Glasgow: I conducted six semi-structured interviews with a museum curator and director, an archivist, collections and records manager, a city councillor, and the director of the city's museums who provided insight into the collections of the Kelvingrove Museum and the city's recent efforts around restitution.

As this project is mostly an analysis of historic debates on restitution between Nigeria and the UK and relies primarily on my archival data, not all of these interviews are explicitly referenced in the dissertation, but they were all helpful in my framing of the contemporary legacies of these debates. Though the interviews were largely semi-structured, I did largely ask questions about the museum's priorities (if and to what extent restitution is among them), how decisions around restitution are made, who are the major stakeholders in such decisions, what are the future plans for their museums, and what has changed since restitution has become a global conversation.

Content analysis

Given the recent rise to prominence of restitution debates in the public domain, there is a near infinite amount of media and news content to examine. In early 2019 I set a Google alert for any news article with "restitution" or "repatriation" in the headline, and have read and analyzed each article hit with an eye toward framing the contemporary landscape of restitution through this content. Western news outlets like ArtNet, ArtNews, the Guardian, the New York Times, and Hyperallergic are overrepresented, but there are a fair number of publications from Nigerian and Ghanaian outlets on which I have been able to draw. There have been a number of high-profile indigenous and First Nations' human remains and artifact repatriations in recent years, and though

my dissertation does not deal with these cases, media coverage of them has provided useful frameworks for me to think through issues related to the Benin artifacts.

During the pandemic there were dozens, if not hundreds, of online events, including panels, community discussions, workshops, symposia, listening sessions, and artistic performances hosted by museums, galleries, academic institutions, cultural institution governing bodies, and artists collectives to examine the current state of restitution. During the pandemic several high-profile repatriation events took place, new books and exhibitions were released and staged, and new restitution protocols were established by governments, and these spaces provided outlets through which to reflect on and process these events. Many of these programs were responses to the global racial justice movement of 2020 which was ignited as a result of the police murder of George Floyd, so there was a sense of urgency around interrogating the implicit racist and colonial legacies embedded within the art and public culture world.

Lastly, I examined art—and art ephemera, such as catalogues and reviews—not for its artistic, aesthetic, cultural, or spiritual content, but for what it reflected about the artists' location within restitution discourse. I was particularly interested in how contemporary artists were articulating and staking their own claims to a particular argument for the future of Benin's cultural heritage through their own work, so their artwork became an important site of analysis. My goal was to understand how the artists of postcolonial Benin made sense of their own futurity and made space for contemporary artistic practice in a context that is deeply determined by its colonial past. The questions I entered the field with concerned the extent to which the production of contemporary cultural heritage was dictated by centuries-old, as well as more recent, imperial forces that continue to impact the local art market as well as the sense of memory, heritage and pride one must have in order to reproduce one's heritage in the face of cultural amnesia.

Museum field observation

I conducted content analyses of the following four museums in Nigeria and the UK which hold Benin artifacts and have been at the center of various restitution debates since the 1940s: the British Museum, Nigerian National Museum in Lagos, Benin City National Museum, and the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow. In each museum, in addition to interviewing staff which I discuss above, I examined wall labels that accompany the artifacts, listened to audio guides, observed the infrastructure and building/space layout, and gathered available interpretation and educational material. My goal was to gain an understanding of how these museums are grappling with calls to decolonize their collections. I took photos and notes of in-person guides, curation labels, audio guide content, pamphlets, and eavesdropped on visitor conversations. Though not all of the content focused specifically on restitution, there were more general references to the legacies of colonialism with which the institutions are grappling.

I also visited several galleries belonging to private artists and (ex-)curators and the homes of private collectors of both ancient and contemporary work to study how the artifacts were arranged, displayed, curated and discussed, and how these representations were framed in the context of ownership, possession and restitution.

CASE SELECTION

Restitution debates between the UK and Nigeria most consistently showed up in my archival exploration and yielded the greatest amount of historical data. In addition, the formation of the Benin Dialogue Group and announcement of the new royal museum being constructed in Benin City makes this the most widely discussed and attended to repatriation issue globally today. It is because of the abundance of these resources and their representativeness as a classic case of colonial looting in Africa that I have chosen this as my analytic case. In addition, the provenance history of

the Benin bronzes is well documented and undisputed, therefore any claims that deal with the uncertainty of the objects' history and other logistical or administrative points may be set aside, allowing the focus to remain on the issue of power revealed in these conversations. Often in cases of artifact theft it may be unclear where the objects originated from, who removed them from their original location, and whose hands they've passed through over the centuries. And often these uncertainties about provenance hinder debates about restitution, but because the provenance history of the bronzes is well known, debates about their restitution have been able to develop in substantial ways.

The UK is believed to hold the most African artifacts looted during the colonial period, followed by Germany, France and the US. The British Museum alone has 73,000 objects in their Africa collection. Of the 10,000 Bronzes that have been dispersed worldwide, 900 are in the British museum, which is the single largest subset of bronzes in the world. The Benin artifacts represent one of the single largest collections of objects that were plundered during the Scramble for Africa. While many individual artifacts were pillaged under colonial rule, few were part of such a comprehensive and cohesive collection as the Benin artifacts. This cohesiveness is an important factor in the narrative about the cultural significance of those objects and features heavily in Nigeria's arguments for restitution.

The British Museum and other institutions in the UK were founding members of the Benin Dialogue Group, an organization devoted to resolving disputes about the Benin bronzes and artifacts removed from or destroyed in the region during the era of imperial conquest. Unlike their other European counterparts, like Germany, Belgium and France, the UK has been most resistant to the idea of restitution, which presents a unique case for studying the history of these debates. Several UK museums are also signatories to the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums and have been participants in ongoing conversations on restitution for decades. The

primary source material in the British Museum, the National Archives, Bishopsgate Institute, and the Victoria and Albert Museum is among the most extensive collection on restitution in the world.

Since the release of the Sarr Savoy report in 2018, which called for the widespread the repatriation of African artifacts currently held in France, the African continent has been the primary focus of the restitution debates. The Benin bronzes are among the most high-profile artifacts to have been claimed in restitution debates, perhaps second only to the Parthenon marbles of Greece, and Nigeria has had one of the longest-running and most robust repatriation campaigns on the continent. They are among the most publicly debated objects in global restitution conversations, which means that there is an abundance of public discourse over the decades on which to draw. The debates in this region are not just happening at the institutional level, but at the national, regional and transnational governmental levels as well. The documents that European institutions have on their colonial and postcolonial dealings with nations in these regions are also amongst the most robust for these types of records. The Benin Royal Museum, a new museum being constructed in Benin City, will house returned Benin bronze collections on loan from various Western museums (the British Museum primarily, as well as other museums in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden) and is expected to open in 2023. The vast majority of the documents in the UK archives refer to repatriation debates with Nigeria, and many of the documents are from Nigerian news sources. The fact that the Benin Kingdom as an autonomous geopolitical space no longer exists, having been incorporated into Nigeria in upon colonization, also raises interesting questions about the role of temporality and place, and the impermanence of the nation in restitution claims.

Project limitations

It is also important to acknowledge the limits of this project in particular—and postcolonial sociology more generally—in accurately representing and providing voice to historically marginalized

populations. While it is an important endeavor to attempt to provide space for an integration of subaltern perspectives in such critiques, my standpoint as a Western researcher necessarily occludes full and transparent representation. In addition, working within a colonial archive, despite my best efforts to read contrapuntally, also provides significant limitations to the extent to which marginalized groups can be represented due to the power relations inherent in such texts. Where possible, I have integrated critical subaltern accounts that respond directly to colonially-authored archival records, primarily from media and other journalistic sources, but this method naturally falls short of creating a balanced account in terms of political representation. Instead of attempting the impossible task of authentically representing the marginalized experienced, I follow Homi Bhabha's charge to expose the limits of colonial discourse while simultaneously highlighting the ways in which colonized populations disrupted the very representations that were being developed about them in order to reclaim control of their narrative (Go 2013: 12).

CHAPTER IV:

DEBATES AND PERSPECTIVES ON BENIN HERITAGE RESTITUTION

Debates about restitution lay bare interactions between competing states and institutions that continue to structure colonial power relations between former imperially tethered nations, revealing enduring forms of imperial power and influence. This chapter is concerned with the political, scientific, historical and moral claims states and institutions have made regarding the ownership and possession of plundered heritage. On one hand, source communities from which the objects were looted demand their objects be returned on ethical grounds related to their spiritual and historic connections to the objects, arguing that the "victims of this plunder, sometimes for hundreds of years, have not only been despoiled of irreplaceable masterpieces but also robbed of a memory which would doubtless have helped them to greater self- knowledge and would certainly have enabled others to understand them better" (M'Bow 2009: 4). On the other hand, those representing museums who are in favor of the objects remaining in their collections argue that they have a responsibility to the objects of long-term stewardship and preservation, a responsibility to the public of education and enjoyment, and a responsibility to the scientific community to provide research and intellectual opportunities, among other claims (Merryman 2006).

Such debates are representative of the ways in which nations and communities conceptualize the spectrum of cultural representation. While source communities advocate for the importance of their objects in the development of their national consciousness, those in favor of the retention of the objects in museums suggest that such a view indicates a form of "retentionist cultural nationalism" that privileges the desires of a single community over the benefits accrued to all mankind, a move deemed to be "a political gesture against the promise of humanism" (Merryman 2006: 32-33). Instead, large state museums have pursued policies of "cultural property internationalism" which, as James Cuno argues, enables them to fulfil a more universalistic function:

> "Museums do not alienate objects. They keep, preserve, research, and share them with the public, holding them in public trust for future generations of all time. [...] Antiquities are not one nation's cultural property. They are among the greatest contributions to our common, human heritage, and we should all work together to preserve them for all of time, to be

> studied and enjoyed by everyone everywhere. Only internationalist cultural policies serve this purpose. Nationalist, retentionist policies work against it" (Cuno 2006: 29).

Those representing this perspective have suggested that non-Western art not be thought of as territorially or culturally bound to a specific group, but rather belonging to a shared global heritage: "There are good reasons to be very critical of the notion of nationality of an *objet d'art* and the attribution of a territorial home to works of art created or humankind and for a common cultural heritage," Kurt G. Siehr (2006: 128) suggests. Former directors and administrators of the British Museum have similarly made arguments that "all great works of art are surely the *common inheritance of humanity*," while also referring to non-Western artifacts as "the world's cultural heritage," "our common artistic heritage," and "the greatest contributions to our common, human heritage" (Cuno 2006: 19, 29, 34). Yet source communities remain steadfast in the belief that their cultural knowledge and spiritual needs rooted in possession of the artifacts supersedes the material culture desires of museums. The extent to which artifacts are considered treasures belonging to a culturally or geographically specific people, or to humanity more broadly, lies at the heart of restitution debates and, more generally, informs how imperial nations justify their appropriation of indigenous heritage. Former colonies have, for more than a century, had their legacies represented in museums dictated by a colonial narrative. The reclaiming of cultural heritage is one attempt to rewrite this narrative in a way that centers the histories of African peoples with an eye toward liberation and sovereignty. The Museum of Black Civilizations in Dakar has explicitly sought to achieve such a reclamation and rebalancing, with a curatorial mandate to be a "political, cultural, artistic and economic response of the 'Negritude' against the technological and cultural devaluation of black civilizations" (ArtNet News 2018). Arguments in favor of the restitution of cultural heritage by former colonies are primarily framed in terms of the preservation of one's own cultural or spiritual heritage, reclamation

of troubled narratives, and the recovery of a collective memory and story which departed with their material counterparts.

Retentionists often consider themselves to be the sole and proper stewards and guardians of the heritage pieces. "As custodians of these Ethiopian treasures, we have a responsibility to celebrate the beauty of their craftsmanship, shine a light on their cultural and religious significance and reflect on their living meaning, while being open about how they came to Britain," said Tristram Hunt, director of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London where many artefacts from Ethiopia, Ghana and Egypt are currently held, in a recent blog post (V&A blog, 2018). Such a view reflects the widely held view amongst Western museums that African museums and governments cannot be trusted to look after their own artifacts. Such a lack of confidence reflects a deeply paternalistic logic that was at the very root of systems of hegemony during the imperial era. Retentionist arguments are mostly pragmatic in their concern for the safety, security and preservation of the artefacts and are generally based on concern for the material and aesthetic value of the objects. In his book *The New Art History*, Jonathan Harris (2001: 275) draws an explicit parallel between past imperial violence and what seems to be a continuation of such logics of power through the retention of colonial loot:

> "The question of the meaning of the 'Benin bronzes' or 'Elgin Marbles' in London–1900 or 2000–is inseparable from the issue of British attitudes towards Africa and the Orient as sites, once for direct military and political colonisation, and now for their post-imperial economic exploitation and indirect manipulation. To return them would imply the belief, on the part of the British authorities, that the peoples of those parts of the world were now capable of competently looking after artefacts that were removed ostensibly on the grounds that the local inhabitants were unfit, because of the 'degeneration' of their societies, to act as their curators. Their return would also imply admission of their illegal possession by the British. Both implications remain largely unthinkable because post-imperial racism continues to be a highly significant aspect of British foreign policy."

There is a strong distinction made between the Western museum world, which has primarily sought to retain artefacts on the basis of their aesthetic and artistic principles, and the desires for former colonial source countries for retrieval, which are for the continuation of their spiritual and cultural

heritage. Supporters of repatriation argue that withholding particularly spiritually or ritually significant artefacts prevents communities from fulfilling their cultural obligations. One concern on the part of restitutionists in this regard is the desacralization of artefacts, or the idea that once objects are removed from their religious context and uses, they are no longer considered to be sacred. What, then, comes of these objects that can no longer serve their original spiritual purposes if they are returned?

The boundary between those in favor of repatriation and retention does not fall neatly along identity-based or political lines either. While it may be tempting to argue that the Edi Nigerians, Africans, Blacks, non-Westerners, and liberals support restitution, while Brits, Whites, Westerners, and conservatives advocate for the retention of the Benin artifacts in Western museums, this position is somewhat reductive. While these identity categories largely do shape the contours of restitution debates, there is plenty of evidence in the historical record to suggest that the blurring of such allegiances was not uncommon. This was, in part, due to the which a host of different reasons people took their positions on restitution which transcended cultural or aesthetic commitments to the artifacts that may not have aligned with their identity categories.

While today the majority of Brits favor the restitution of looted African patrimony, during the early postcolonial period it was far more uncommon to find such support. Two examples of Brits who supported restitution stand out: In 1974, D W R Lewis of the British Foreign and Commonwealth's West African Department urged the Deputy Director of the British Museum to return the Queen Idia mask to Nigeria for the FESTAC 77 festival, or at the very least give to the festival organizers on loan for the duration of the festival.[8] A second example was the renown British designer Beverley Pick, who had been commissioned to develop artistic installations at

[8] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2116. Letter from D W R Lewis to Miss M F Webb B.Sc., London, 23 July 1974. Consulted on 2 July 2019.

FESTAC 77, and in 1975 encouraged Prime Minister Harold Wilson to take seriously the request for the repatriation of the mask. He argued that such "simple and inexpensive gesture" would go a long way toward promoting positive relations between England and Africa: "I cannot envisage a greater opportunity for Britain to create African goodwill than for us to voluntarily offer the return of this relic as our contribution to the Nigerian cultural festival."[9] The political commitments of these two white British individuals—which stemmed from both diplomatic and professional engagement—led them to be supportive of restitution efforts. It was their political, geographical, and professional proximity to Benin which made them more sympathetic to such demands. These figures—who I refer to here as identitarian liminals--reveal the complexities and nuances of debates about the ownership and futures of objects which transcend allegiances to nationality, race and place, demonstrating that commitments to just solutions do not adhere to fixed categories.

This form of liminality works in both directions with regard to restitution. Similar to those whose identities would suggest that they may be inclined to side with their nation and its institutions on the question of return though who ultimately transgress this assumption, so too are those whose identity categories would suggest a loyalty to the cause of restitution who upset this belief. There are a number of examples of individuals from Benin, Nigeria and the diaspora who complicate and nuance the oversimplified binary of Blacks as pro-restitution and whites as pro-retention. Some may oppose restitution not as a matter of practice, but as one of focus, believing that the Nigerian government's priorities should be on the socioeconomic development of its people instead of costly economic endeavors such as the purchase of artwork. More recent examples of liminal figures who did not fully embrace, or actively resisted the idea of restitution, are individuals I met during my fieldwork visits who believed that there were valid reasons for the objects to remain in the West. In

[9] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2126. Letter from Beverley Pick to The Right Honourable Harold Wilson, O.B.E., M.P., London, 30 December 1974. Consulted on 3 July 2019.

January 2020 I spoke with one young artist in his studio in Benin City who told me that I was only in Benin City because I had heard about and seen the artifacts in their Western context. He used this logic to argue that diasporic objects drive people to Benin as tourists due to their curiosity about the people and culture, a move which ultimately benefits Benin economically. In November 2021 while I was in Scotland I spoke with a Nigerian-Scottish man who told me about an Edo priestess in Glasgow who was opposed to restitution based on her belief that the removal of spoils of war is a defensible aspect of conflict and that Benin did not have a sound argument for advocating for restitution. Such liminal figures are important because they complicate the narrative of identity-based restitution claims, but are also analytically important because they represent a spectrum of ways of thinking about justice and restitution instead of merely presenting the dichotomous options of return and stay.

Formerly colonized communities have understandably been skeptical of the intentions and attitudes of their former imperial rulers in the postcolonial period. One argument in favor of restitution has been that such a gesture would signify to the former that the latter is sincere about putting their dark past behind them and moving toward an egalitarian future between the countries and regions. As a Ghanaian journalist recently commented, "It [restitution] will convince the rest of the world that despite her colonial and imperialist past, Britain is ready to start relations with African peoples on a new basis and is willing to correct past mistakes."

Government leaders and the general public across Africa seem to be the most invested in the question of restitution, whereas those working in the culture sector, such as museums, curators and artists, seem to be more focused on the future of contemporary African art and its ability to compete in the global art market as opposed to repatriation, which they believe to be a primarily historical, backward-looking pursuit. Some museum professionals from source countries, while

being generally supportive of the idea of repatriation, have cautioned against an exclusive focus on it as the sole means by which to recognize and celebrate Africa's cultural heritage. Many have argued that the focus on restitution centers European domination too heavily and, consequently, takes the focus away from the art that Africa has retained and its contemporary, future-looking art scene, thereby anachronizing the continent. Recently Hamady Bocoum, the director of the Museum of World Civilizations in Dakar, registered his concern about the potentially Eurocentric nature of such goals and debates, suggesting that framing the issue of cultural heritage in terms of reparations centers the role of Europe's role in granting and denying Africa's cultural heritage too strongly. Instead, he argues, while restitution should certainly be pursued, it must be framed only as a small part of the continent's cultural legacy, and the majority of focus should be placed on doing justice to the artifacts and artworks which remain on the continent and building up Africa's contemporary arts landscape in a way that centers the spaces that African artists have created for themselves, not just what they are lacking as a result of European exploitation (Aug. 2019 interview with F. Bodenstein). Furthermore, international bodies like UNESCO maintain a focus on preservation of the objects and appear to be less concerned with restitution. While I recognize the risk of creating a Eurocentric paradigm in the focus on restitution and also understand the centrality of preservation as central to the retention of heritage, this project focuses primarily on debates about repatriation and restitution as these conversations do provide insight into the maintenance of power between states in the postcolonial period.

In the remainder of this chapter I present a vignette which illustrates the contested nature of the Benin artifacts then use the case to outline the key arguments and themes that have prevailed in such debates since the mid-twentieth century. These points I then use in my analysis of the larger question of restitution throughout the remainder of the dissertation. How Western powers choose to respond to calls for restitution and repatriation are important given what such responses clarify

about how nations seek to negotiate the ownership and holding of cultural artifacts. Those in favor of maintaining colonial looted collections in the West have proposed a number of ways to resolve the debates that favor their position of retention, the most popular of which I outline below alongside the counternarratives from source communities.

The thrust of this project is not simply to trace the evolution of restitution and repatriation debates, but to examine what they reveal about how Western powers maintain control of the cultural heritage of formerly colonized peoples. As such, defenses of the retention of artifacts and responses to calls for restitution and repatriation are much more instructive in serving this purpose than the calls for restitution and repatriation themselves. Yet some of the ways former colonies have engaged in the debates can be used to help think through a futurity of cultural heritage that rebalances geographies of power. In this chapter I juxtapose some of these perspectives alongside the retentionist claims. Because restitution advocates often do not have the legal or political recourse to support their restitution claims due to existing institutional barriers, they mostly rely on moral arguments to make their case for return. Many advocates of repatriation believe that beyond the legal or political justifications is an underlying moral imperative for return. The belief that restitution is simply the right thing to do on the basis of cultural, spiritual, and historical reasons has largely been the basis from which demands have been made in the postcolonial period.

THE RAWSON COLLECTION

In May and June of 1947, H.J. Braunholtz, the Keeper of the Department of Ethnography of the British Museum, exchanged a series of letters with Captain H. Rawson (Rawson, Jr.) regarding a collection of 40 Benin artifacts Rawson, Jr. had in his possession. Rawson, Jr. was the son of the late Admiral Sir Harry Rawson (Rawson, Sr.), the commander of the 1897 Benin invasion, and had inherited the collection of objects when Rawson, Sr. passed away in 1910. In 1947 Braunholtz

learned of the family's collection and became interested in acquiring some of the contents for the British Museum. Over the course of several months the men exchanged nearly a dozen letters containing information about the objects in their respective collections, with Rawson, Jr. providing aesthetic descriptions of the 40 objects in his possession, and Braunholtz attempting to reconcile these descriptions with information the Museum had acquired about the objects soon after they were looted from Benin and ownership was transferred to Rawson, Sr. The descriptions of the objects are compelling and reveal a great deal about ancient Benin aesthetic commitments, the men's and Western interest in the objects, and the conditions under which they were looted. The following is just a handful of the objects Rawson, Jr. describes in his collection: an "original" Executioners Sword bearing a small gold handle, which was understood to be the only gold found in Benin; two tusks, one of which was damaged in the fire when the royal palace and Benin City were torched during the 1897 invasion; a blood-stained spear and a bronze stand used for holding severed heads; and plaques depicting execution scenes. Rawson, Jr. also notes that the collection included a copy of the Executioners Sword made of nickel, which was meant to be a gift or trade to the Oba likely from a European trader, but Rawson, Jr. noted the trader was killed before the sword was delivered.

Braunholtz wrote that the Museum was interested in purchasing the entire collection, but was particularly keen on a brass plaque which depicts a "sacrificial scene" because the Museum, at the time, did not have "one of this type."[10] The Museum—in its desire to showcase objects that they believed were representative of the entirety of a culture—was committed to securing an object of every type, and they believed some of the family's pieces would help bring them closer to this objective. "There is of course a good series of Benin bronzes in the British Museum, but it is possible that yours may contain specimens of types that are not represented in the national

[10] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2373. Letter from H.J. Braunholtz to Capt. H. Rawson, R.N., London, 12 June 1947. Consulted on 1 July 2019.

collection," Braunholtz wrote in his initial letter to Rawson, Jr. Braunholtz emphasized that the Museum was prepared to purchase the objects at "fair valuation," though conceded that it was unclear what that meant at that current moment given the high fluctuation in value. Rawson, Jr. explained that the Berlin Museum offered his father £2,000 for his entire collection and French and American collectors were also willing to pay a premium, and while he would rather the collection stay in England, he was prepared to sell it to the institution willing to pay the highest price.

Rawson, Jr. noted that the artifacts had been on display in their family's billiard room that was built specifically to showcase them, but explained that they objects had been in storage since 1919 when the family moved. The cost of insuring and storing the objects for nearly three decades has been more than he could afford, and he was now interested in selling some of his collection in order to provide additional income for his family. He believed that the addition of his family's objects to the British Museum would not only enhance the Museum's Benin collection aesthetically and scientifically, adding that "it would make your collection far more interesting to the public," but would also provide a valuable lesson in history to Museum visitors. He informed Braunholtz that he would be willing to lend him a biography of his father's life, which Rawson, Jr. suggested should accompany the objects once they were on display so that visitors would understand that the objects were more than "simply a collection of bought native curios."[11]

Braunholtz also mentioned that the Nigerian government was another party interested in acquiring the Benin artifacts. A few years prior, Nigeria had appointed Kenneth Murray, a British archaeologist and curator, as the country's first Surveyor of Antiquities, and in 1942 Murray founded the Nigerian Antiquities Service. One of the first and most significant projects under the Service was the opening the Nigerian National Museum in Lagos, the country's first national museum, and

[11] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2367. Letter from Capt. H. Rawson, R.N. to H.J. Braunholtz, London, 29 May 1947. Consulted on 1 July 2019

Murray had hoped to recover some of the looted Benin artifacts to include in the museum's permanent collection. When Braunholtz decided which objects he was interested in for the museum, he suggested that those which remained should be sold to Murray, noting that some pieces, such as a noteworthy plaque in good condition, "would probably be most desirable for them."[12]

Rawson, Jr. and the British Museum seemed poised to strike a deal for the transfer of the collection, but soon after the correspondence in 1947 there was a lapse in communication on Rawson Jr.'s part, leaving Braunholtz to wonder if he was still interested in parting with the antiquities. In April 1948 Braunholtz received a letter from Rawson, Jr.'s wife notifying him that he had passed away, and that she was assuming responsibility for his estate, including the Benin collection. Mrs. Rawson invited Braunholtz to view the collection to determine which pieces he was interested in purchasing for the museum, which resulted in him offering her £280 for eight of the 40 objects in the collection. Braunholtz explained his rationale for selecting these eight pieces was, again, rooted in the notion of collection 'completeness' he articulated to Rawson, Jr.: "The pieces I have mentioned are of interest to us chiefly because they would fill gaps in the national collection, which ought to be as representative as possible," he wrote.[13]

After receiving Braunholtz's request for the eight pieces, Mrs. Rawson made the decision to sell the entire collection to Murray in Nigeria, citing the fact that the British Museum was unwilling to purchase the entire collection and a desire to keep the collection intact. Braunholtz pleaded with Mrs. Rawson that she reconsider the transfer and attempted to renegotiate down to a sale of just one to two pieces, as the Museum had "nothing like it at all."[14] Yet he conceded that if her decision to sell the entire collection to Nigeria was final, he would like for her to, at the very least, send it to the

[12] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2385. Letter from H.J. Braunholtz to Mrs. D. Rawson, London, 8 May 1948. Consulted on 1 July 2019.
[13] ibid
[14] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2388. Letter from H.J. Braunholtz to Mrs. D. Rawson #2, London, 3 July 1948. Consulted on 1 July 2019.

British Museum to study and gather notes, photographs and molds of each of the pieces. Despite Braunholtz offering Mrs. Rawson nearly double the price for the pieces in a somewhat desperate final plea, she declined the offer to sell any of the original pieces to the British Museum and turned the collection in its entirety over to Murray and the new museum in Lagos, though she did agree to allow the collection to be sent to the British Museum for inspection and study beforehand. In the end, Mrs. Rawson sold the British Museum one drum—which, according to Braunholtz, was not part of the Benin collection and had "no very special artistic interest"—to the great disappointment of Braunholtz and the museum. Two years after Mrs. Rawson sold the collection to Murray at the Nigerian Museum, Braunholtz contacted Murray to inquire into his willingness to purchase the museum's 'duplicate' plaques, revenue from which the museum had decided they would invest in the purchase of another set of objects for their African collection.

Mrs. Rawson's decision to sell the entire collection to the Nigerian government—thereby defying the wishes of her late husband, who had hoped that the collection would stay in England and yet also wanted to it to go to the highest bidder, of which neither condition was satisfied in the sale to Nigeria—was perhaps rooted in a desire to honor the request of the Edo that their artifacts be returned so that they may be unified. While the 40 objects in the collection represents less than 1% of the estimated Benin artifacts looted in 1897, it is a significant step toward setting precedent for return, particularly in the case of private restitution beyond the context of museums.

While the British Museum was interested in the objects from this collection for their aesthetic value and their contribution toward 'completing' their Benin collection, Rawson's motivation for selling the objects was based purely on financial considerations. These two sources of interest—the aesthetic/educational and the financial—are largely associated with Western approaches to the collection of indigenous art, yet are distinguishable from the cultural and spiritual investments in the objects that are largely held by the source community. It is important to note,

though, that there is fluidity between these categories, as some source communities may increasingly have opportunities to reap the benefits of commoditizing their cultural heritage for Western as well as local consumption. In addition, source communities of course originally produced these objects with aesthetic interest in mind, but it is the idea of aestheticism void of cultural or spiritual value that is uniquely Western. Braunholtz's critique of the artistic quality of the drum provides a further example of how Western ascriptions of aestheticism influence desirability politics on the art market in ways that have significant implications in both the withholding and source communities around who is entitled, and has access, to cultural heritage.

What stood out about the descriptions of the objects in the letters between Rawson Jr. and Braunholtz was the nature of brutality that characterized what was believed and portrayed to be embedded in their original use in Benin society. It is important to consider when these letters were being exchanged and the political context in which they were situated which may have influenced how these objects were represented. In 1947--though Nigeria had been a British colony for 50 years already and imperial rule persisted for over a decade longer--there was still a necessity to construct the African as savage in order to defend and justify a number of imperial aims. To imperial nations, colonization was a necessary intervention to save native communities—who were inherently violent, disorderly, and unable to care for themselves—and lead them to salvation and enlightenment. These articulations of the redeemability of the native through intervention permeated the consciousness of white metropolitan Britons, for whom it was necessary to buy into this ideology en masse in order for the imperial project to function. As such, the descriptions of the objects in Braunholtz's and Rawson, Jr.'s letters--in which they constructed an image of Benin society comprised of murderers who had special implements to carry out their executions and beheadings and engaged in arbitrary assassinations of goodwill traders—was consistent with the colonial discourse of savagery needed to justify imperial rule. More specifically in the context of the art market, these narratives were also

necessary in justifying the looting, trade and collection of artifacts that were acquired against the will of the source community. A common argument for the removal and retention of artifacts looted from Africa was that the societies were riddled with violence and warfare, which made them unfit to care for their material heritage. As such, their transfer to the West was an act of preservation. These 1947 letters exemplify such a belief that despite the dubious origins of the removal of the objects, their trade was justified on the basis that they were being rescued from blood-thirsty savages and placed in the safety of the Western museum.

Being able to claim representativeness—or being able to tell the story of the world's culture through single objects curated from a Western perspective--of one's collections is an integral component in this process, and explains why the acquisition of these particular objects was important for Braunholtz and the British Museum. Regarding Rawson, Jr.'s desire to have his father's story told alongside the objects displayed in the British Museum, he would have undoubtedly wanted the depiction of his father's efforts to be portrayed heroically, as he offered no critical perspective on the Admiral's role in the 1897 massacre in his letters. The postcolonial critique of empire and the ways in which museums acquired much of their collections has just emerged in recent years, and indeed has only been limited to a handful of relatively progressive museums. The desire to publish his father's biography alongside the objects in the museum is demonstrative of how certain versions of history have been normalized and narrated through the benign display of material heritage. To make the British Museum's acquisition of Rawson's collection conditional upon displaying the "winner's" version of history alongside the objects was a subtle, yet powerful, means by which to institutionally valorize a past that has since been problematized. In museums today we are increasingly seeing 'decolonial' labels that speak to the complicated histories and debates surrounding the acquisition and retention of the contested objects. Yet the work that these labels are doing is indeed unravelling the historical narratives which

celebrate the triumph of imperial violence over indigenous communities, represented here in Rawson Jr.'s desire to have his father's heroism associated with the presence of the artifacts in the museum and his desire for his family's artifacts to tell a certain pro-British historiography.

It is important to note that Braunholtz—not a member of the Edo community or even Murray who had more familiarity with the cultural and social origins of the artifacts—was responsible for making the determination about the cultural significance of certain pieces and using that logic to decide which pieces would be retained in London and which would go to Nigeria. While Braunholtz stated that the plaque was more desirable for the Edo community for cultural reasons, this argument obscures the fact that the cultural wishes of the Edo would be for *all* looted objects to be returned, as their countless restitution claims have indicated. Thus, the claim that the decision about the fate of the objects was made in the best cultural interest of the Edo provides little ground on which to stand. Throughout the history of restitution debates about the bronzes there have been several attempts by Westerners to impose views of cultural significance on the objects which have been incompatible with the desires of the Edo community. Several Edo leaders, including the last few sitting Obas, have articulated the idea that each object from the looted collection is sacred both in its own right as well as a member of a collective body whose value is defined by its wholeness. This motivation explains why there have been significant efforts to reunify the bronzes—either virtually, through projects such as Digital Benin, or physically, through the construction of the new Edo State museum which will house returned artifacts.

Yet some Western museum officials have made the argument that some objects are more valuable, sacred, unique, or important than others and have, in turn, used such designations to determine who should own the objects. Such ascriptions of value are not rooted in Edo cultural or spiritual beliefs, but instead are rooted in a logic of Western commoditization of culture that assigns arbitrary notions of value not observed by those who produced the very objects. Instead, these

decisions are guided by financial interest, convenience, or availability of the objects at hand, such as in the case of Rawson who decided which objects would be culturally desirable for the Edo only after he had removed from the collection those which he deemed would be most suitable for the British Museum collection. Another example includes the sale of several dozen bronze plaques from the British Museum to the Nigerian government between the 1950s and 1970s not in response to decades of lobbing on the part of the government of Edo community, but because the museum deemed the pieces to be 'redundant' to their collection and, therefore, wished to make money from their sale.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF PRIMITIVISM

Among the most common arguments against the full restitution and repatriation of artefacts is the potential damage that the objects might experience due to transport risk, poor management techniques, lack of museums to properly house the artefacts, or instability in the counties that could lead to violence or looting that would result in the artefacts entering the art black market. Such arguments are rooted in paternalistic values which suggest that former colonies are unable—due to a lack of responsibility, maturity or resources—to preserve their own heritage and, therefore, must rely on the benevolence and protection of more resourced and experienced countries, often times, but not always, their former colonizers. Such were the logics of the development and justification of colonization. The dehumanization of the indigenous community from which the objects originate is a necessary condition for their removal and refusal to return them. Such arguments are rooted in the very stereotypes of primitivism advanced by former colonial powers, often used to justify colonization, that formerly colonized people have spent decades attempting to resist and renegotiate. The production of sophisticated artwork and artefacts were often used as proof that colonized peoples were not as primitive as Europeans had imagined. Therefore, the retention of such artifacts

contributes to the ongoing defense of such arguments. As Kwame Opoku (2019) has recently asked, "Do Europeans need the Benin artefacts to show that they have also achieved a high level of sophistication in the past? Why are contemporary Europeans withholding what Africans could use to counter the negative impressions created by racist and colonial ideas of the past?"

Constructing indigenous communities as primitive creates the conditions and makes space for the denial of their demands for humanity and rights. The discourse of Orientalism provided a rationale for empires to engage in colonial endeavors in the name of social progress and human advancement. It is easier to argue that a more resourced society is entitled to the cultural patrimony of another—thereby stripping the source community of access to their own heritage—if the legitimacy of the source community, and their ability to care for their heritage as a result of their primitive status, is called into question. 'Progress' as a product of modernity, as understood by the West, functions here as a mechanism through which entitlements are claimed based purely on a belief in the underdevelopment of the Other.

While the construction of primitivism under imperial rule was a more explicit and unapologetic process facilitated in large part by the colonial anthropological gaze, the discourse shifted in the postcolonial period as relations of power and dependency evolved. Salvation was no longer a framework through which imperial states could engage with their former colonies, so new narratives of subordination to distinguish between the those who held power and those who lacked it became necessary. One of the ways primitivism was constructed in the postcolonial Nigeria was through the curation of an appearance of the Nigerian in her 'native,' pre-colonial (read, premodern) state which was established by a litany of visual cues. One example was the 1993 exhibition brochure of the Museum of Mankind (the British Museum's art collection from their Department of Ethnography before it merged with the British Museum), the cover of which depicted a minimally

clothed man from Papua New Guinea wearing tribal face paint and a feathered headdress.[15] The exhibition showcased a collection of objects from every corner of the globe the museum had in its storehouse, from the indigenous Americas and Mexico to Zaire and Benin. The common thread uniting these disparate geographies and their cultural patrimony was that they were non-Western, with the image of the tribesman at a New Guinean Wahgi Pig Festival on the cover of the exhibition brochure serving as a mechanism through which to reiterate this point. The use of an image of the body of the archetypal 'primitive man,' to allow the body to speak for and represent the material object, places a finer point on this message. Further, the use of this image of a tribesman from Papua New Guinea to advertise the museum's collection of Benin objects, represents the ways in which primitiveness is a flattening category, a frame not through which to draw out the specificity of culture, but to register the sameness of non-Western peoples.

The binary between the sacred, spiritual, and cultural elements of indigenous artifact, versus the cosmopolitan, worldly, and sophisticated aspects of these objects as art is one that is anchored in the imperial belief in the distinction between the superstitious native and rational Westerner which emerged during the period of Enlightenment as a way of justifying colonial expansion. As Chakrabarty (2000) reminds us, secularity, reason and progressivism are associated with Western thinking, while the 'sacred' is confined to the primitive and archaic. Natives, the logic went, must be saved from their primitive states through development projects of the West. Likewise, indigenous artifact must be salvaged from the ruin that is native ignorance by being understood, then commodified, as art and place on an international open market which assigns value, of both material and symbolic variety.

[15] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2. Museum of Mankind exhibition brochure, London, 1993-4. Consulted on 12 June 2019

Seidman (2013: 50) has explored the ways in which Europeans constructed the global South as antithetical to modernity:

> If European modernity was individualistic, legal-rational, secular, and dynamic, the non-Europeans encountered in their colonial projects were conceived of as collectivist, ritualistic, guided by customary law, and socially stagnant. In short, non-European cultures were understood as "traditional"– the very opposite of what the Europeans were becoming, "modern." The modern/tradition binary functioned in European colonial culture as a trope of difference and hierarchy. It marked off two distinct, unitary global social types. The modern was understood as superior to the traditional. It was dynamic, evolved, and world transformative. A discourse of modernity, from the philosophes to Weber's Vorbemerkung to his studies of religion and society, allowed Europeans to view themselves as world historical agents of human progress.

I argue that it is this very sacred/rational divide which animates, and is ultimately the decisive factor, in restitution debates. Possessing a spiritual connection to an object is viewed by those in the West as necessarily precluding a rational scientific ability to care for the object in a way that would be consistent with the standards of Western museums. In the West, one must have an objective approach to an object to be able to care and contextualize it properly in one's collection, whereas an approach rooted in sacredness suggests a primitive orientation from which an object must be saved. Advocates of restitution rarely have a legal basis for their claims given that the legal infrastructure which prevailed during the period of seizure was developed, and therefore, favored the colonial administration. As such, restitution claims must largely rely on moral justifications which largely evoke the cultural and spiritual importance of the objects to their source community. Yet this very act of claiming a sacred commitment to the object suggests to the Western holder of the object that the community is unfit to properly attend to their objects on the basis of their lack of rational commitment and scientific practice. Spirituality and cosmopolitanism are antithetical to one another. The Glasgow City Council would not agree to the return of the Benin artifacts until Nigeria embraced democratic rule or, more explicitly, until the country adopted a Western rational political standpoint, and until they were able to do so, Scottish retention was the only solution. The mere

request for repatriation thus becomes grounds for refusal under a paternalistic logic of museum stewardship.

The challenge in addressing the ontological distinction between the sacred and the rationale is that it contains an element of truth. Former colonies do indeed often have a spiritual connection to their objects, whereas these same objects are largely appreciated by the West in terms of their scientific or aesthetic qualities, a fact which the Edo community has taken pride in and used in their defense for restitution. Yet what is important is that spiritual commitment should not preclude the community from accessing their heritage, nor does it imply that they lack those same rational commitments of the West. As Goswami has argued, Orientalists "compare the superstitions of the Orient with the rationalism of the Occident, while they ignore the rationalism of the Orient and suppress the superstitions of the Occident" (Goswami 2013: 162). The overestimation of Oriental superstitions and underestimation of Oriental rationalism indeed informs the prevailing logic of retentionist claims.

The presentation of the primitive African trope for the European imagination also materializes in Edo society and debates around the bronzes in other displays of native appearance. Interestingly, a tension between the uses of indigenous and European clothing and attire has been frequently deployed to draw a further distinction between the primitive and the modern. In the catalogue for the Benin Kings and Rituals exhibition which traveled to Vienna, Paris, Berlin and Chicago from 2007-2008, Oba Erediauwa, the sitting oba at the time, wrote in an introductory letter that the organizers of the exhibition "sought permission for courtiers of the Benin Royal Court to come over and model some of their ceremonial outfit: (Plankensteiner 2007: 200). The court obliged, in part, with the hopes that their agreeability would create the conditions in which the museums may consider repatriating their looted Benin artifacts. The idea of Western museums requesting members

of the Edo community to come stand in their gallery halls draped in traditional regalia to visually entertain patrons who are viewing artifacts from which the community has been forcibly estranged seems nearly farcical. This image evokes memories of 19th century colonial exhibitions in which indigenous communities were transformed into public spectacle through presentations of their "native" selves, where individuals were on placed on display in recreations of their indigenous villages in which they performed their culture, always in their indigenous dress for visual appeal.

Annie Coombes (1994: 63) has argued that "those exhibitions which featured any representation of the colonies were a powerful means of ensuring the longevity of a residual scientific racism long after this had been discredited in academic scientific circles." Zine Magubane (2004: 42) additionally offers an evocative description of an ethnographic exhibition which displayed "extraordinary Bushpeople brought from South Africa" that evoked a "spectatorial lust" through which "empire and unreality [came to] constitute each other in ways rooted in the deepest layers of modern consciousness." The sight of a former colonial subject in their native attire is as entertaining as it is comforting, as it disarms any potential intellectual power the primitive subject could have, thereby reducing the level of threat of the individual and community. It seems inconceivable that anyone dressed in such primitive attire could be as adept at preserving, researching and curating valuable antiquities as those whose cultural institutions were founded on such practices and have boundless resources to sustain them. The juxtaposition of members of the Edo community in their ceremonial garb in the hallowed halls of Vienna's and Paris' esteemed museums filled with wealthy white museum patrons and benefactors is meant to both shock and entertain, while also maintaining the distinction between the primitive producing object and the modern consuming subject—a boundary which allows the latter to justify the continued imperial project of retention of the looted artifacts and rejection of restitution claims.

Yet the Edo community has also used their traditional attire as a site from which to resist such stigmatizing identity formations. In a 1996 speech by Benin Prince Edun Akenzua in Lisbon as part of the pre-Centenary festivities, he noted that one bronze piece that was not looted during the 1897 invasion and remained in Benin bore the image of Oba Esigie, who ruled the Kingdom during the 16th century. In the cast, which Akenzua described as "an historic 'photograph," the oba was depicted wearing "European apparel" as he had just returned from a visit to Portugal.[16] In another speech, this one delivered by Oba Erediauwa in 1997 at the Centenary commencement festival, he commented that the Edo chiefs who had participated in a parade that morning were all wearing their traditional regalia, affirmation that, indeed, native attire and other Benin traditions "are still very much with us," a testament to the endurance of what many believed was a decimated culture following the 1897 invasion.[17] A third example of the importance of attire to the establishment of ancient cultural identity was a reference from the same speech by the Oba which discussed a play that was staged in England and South Africa which told the story of the history of the Benin Kingdom. The Oba was incensed by what he believed to be an historically inaccurate depiction of the Kingdom, specifically noting the "poor acting and costuming" as being one of the ways in which the company perpetuated narrative fallacies.

While the museum deployed images of brown-skinned men in native dress to fuel the aesthetic desires of their patrons, the community has refused these stereotypes and strategically used their attire to transgress European understandings of the boundary between modernity and primitivism while simultaneously reclaiming and affirming pride in their cultural heritage. The bronze sculpture of the oba donning European attire represents the duality of the modern and the

[16] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2201. An Address Delivered by His Royal Highness Prince Edun Akenzua Enogie of Obazuwa Benin Nigeria, Lisbon, 1996. Consulted on 12 June 2019.
[17] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2269. An Address Delivered by The Omo N'Oba N'Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo, Erediauwa, CFR, Oba of Benin, Benin City, 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

traditional—the piece is cast in the classic Benin bronzemaking tradition and its subject is a 16th century leader of the Kingdom, yet the oba is wearing clothes which signify cosmopolitanism. The importance of Prince Akenzua's reference to this particular piece from the collection in his Lisbon speech was to signify Benin's ties to Europe given the audience's Portuguese background while also drawing attention to the ancient practices of the Kingdom which endured into the present. The two additional references to clothing were used as rhetorical devices for Edo leaders to affirm their cultural pride to both the Edo community and international audiences. Oba Erediauwa's 1997 speech to those gathered for the Centenary celebration in Benin was meant to affirm to members of his community the endurance of cultural traditions from the pre-colonial period, epitomized by the regalia of the Kingdom's chiefs. In a moment of heightened awareness of cultural theft and imperial violence—exactly 100 years since the invasion and plunder of most of the Kingdom's patrimony and amidst heated debates in England about the future of those objects—a reminder of the sustained legacy of Benin's rich royal traditions was critical to reifying its national identity. Lastly, Oba Erediauwa's frustration about the poor costuming in the diasporic plays which contributed to the mishistoricization of the Kingdom's history was likewise rooted in a desire to affirm the pride he held in the cultural traditions such as attire, and a disavowal of any practice that, instead, brought shame to the community.

Zine Magubane has provided a powerful account of the ways in which clothing may be used to both confirm and reject notions of cultural agency. She writes of an 1875 newspaper article in which the columnist described the appearance of black miners in fine clothing appearing as uncomfortable apes in suits:

> The writer's deliberate characterization of these Africans as apes in fashionable attire suggests that it is not so much that blacks' attempts to impersonate whites were futile, but that their attempts to impersonate human beings were futile. We are meant to see not simply as apish person in a fashionable suit, but an actual ape in a human suit. The entire discourse is premised on the idea that it is impossible not only for blacks [to] access whiteness, but also for them to access the status of humans (Magubane 2004: 169).

Magubane demonstrates the power of clothing in both affirming a sense of cultural pride, in the case of the black miners, while simultaneously serving as a denigration of that very black cultural power by white onlookers who believed them to simply be dressed-up apes. There is no way of to know how the 16th century Europeans received Oba Esigie in his European attire, but the significance of that ensemble for the people of Benin, in the act of casting it in bronze, is evident. Conversely, traditional Benin regalia donned by chiefs as well as ahistorical Edo costumes worn by stage actors have the power to establish a narrative of cultural agency located within an indigenous history which rejects the idea of Western clothing as being a site of modernity, while traditional clothing is believed to be primitive, and inverts this configuration to demonstrate pride in one's heritage. Such moments in Benin's history have been an important turn in reclaiming a self-narrated history, one not overly determined by a Eurocentric depiction of the past, that has worked alongside attempts to reclaim the bronzes toward a similar end.

Artifact Care and Safety

Museums have often framed their concern about the ability of non-Western peoples to care for their own heritage in terms of worries about the safety of objects related to questions of political instability in the source country—what I refer to as their "care mandate." Many of the world's universal museums believe that their responsibility is the exclusive stewardship and safekeeping of precious objects at risk, that they are "the guardians of beautiful things in an unsafe world," as one journalist put it (Alibhai-Brown 2019). Yet as some members of the Edo community have noted, their heritage had been safe and secure for centuries prior to the 1897 invasion, and it was only when the British troops looted the objects that many of the objects were lost and remain unaccounted for.

This is not to suggest, though, that objects are not appropriated or mishandled in their source countries. There have been examples of Benin bronzes being returned, through sale or gift, to Nigeria that have later been trafficked back out of the country on the black market, sold to non-state or royal actors, stolen from museums, or simply, at times, lacked proper care and attention. A 2001 British Museum internal memo expressed concern over the "illicit trade" of antiquities in Nigeria and claimed they had documents and video footage of museum officials attempting to sell their collections.[18] This evidence was cited as a rationale for the museum's prior decisions to decline restitution requests. The irony, and indeed double standard, of the British Museum not returning looted objects for fear of them being looted or stolen is, of course, not lost on Nigerians.

Yet, there are also examples in which artifacts that have remained in countries of origin or returned as part of a repatriation agreement have found their way back onto the European art market, raising legitimate concerns for preservationists in both Africa and Europe. Over the last few years, several countries across sub-Saharan Africa have announced plans to build or renovate state and regional museums, often citing these preservation retentionist arguments as counterproductive narratives the countries are attempting to dispel. Proof of infrastructure and administrative and cultural competence for the maintenance of one's antiquities is the greatest defense against retentionists who have historically questioned such capabilities. "[W]e can no longer say that Africans are not ready to receive new works. We now have all the cards in hand if works from Senegal, commented Abdoulaye Camara, a researcher at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar (The Art Newspaper 2019). Cultural establishments across the continent have also been committed to developing the capacity of their cultural preservation institutions and human resources by investing in curatorial and historical, provenance research training for local professionals (Aug. 2019 interview

[18] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2309. Memorandum In Confidence from Henrie Lidchi to Robert Anderson et al, London, 12 July 2001. Consulted on 1 July 2019.

with UNESCO Dakar). The hope is that such long-term investments will create an environment in which source countries may independently be able to preserve their antiquities without Western intervention and the Western countries holding foreign collections will gain institutional confidence in the countries' ability to maintain their own collections that they comply with restitution efforts.

The important point here is that it is not just those in the Western museum and art worlds who are concerned about these issues and, therefore, the only ones who are able to protect the objects from this fate. Source communities are, of course, themselves concerned with the safety of their own obscures, a fact which is largely obscured in conversations about these concerns from Western museums which present the issue as one that is only being discussed in their spaces. Under colonialism and since independence there have been a number of anti-trafficking laws established in Nigeria to protect the heritage that remains in the country, such as Order-in-Council No. 2 which took effect in 1939 to regulate the export of Nigeria's antiquities. More recently, Bernie Grant's ARM-UK organization was deeply concerned with the protection of the objects they sought for restitution and held this issue as central to their internal negotiations, advancing plans to train curators and develop exhibition spaces to properly care for and display the objects. "We need to do some home work to ensure if released, we are able to keep the objects safe and fine," committee minutes from a 1997 meeting noted.

It should be noted that the Brussels Declaration of 1874, of which England was a signatory prior to the invasion of Benin in 1897, outlawed the destruction and transfer of enemy property, including cultural heritage. "According to this principle are especially 'forbidden ': […] Any destruction or seizure of the enemy's property that is not imperatively demanded by the necessity of war," the Declaration read (Brussels Declaration 1874). Yet despite the existence of this protocol, the British army decimated the Benin Kingdom, the royal palace, and its contents. There have been

varying levels of adherence to anti-trafficking and property destruction laws which has, in large part, depended upon the national context and period in which the instrument was implemented.

Furthermore, there is an argument that regardless of Nigeria's level of preparedness or ability to protect their objects, they should be responsible for determining the destiny of their diasporic artifacts. In a January 2020 interview, Nigerian artist Victor E. identified the hypocrisy in such logic—"you can't tell me to take care of something that doesn't belong to you," he noted. "It would be like if I came to your house, stole your car, and refused to give it back to you because I didn't think your garage was nice enough to protect it. It's absurd," Victor continued.[19] Museums also have sought to guarantee that objects, once returned to a source community, are kept there and not sold again. A Glasgow City Councillor, during a 1996 debate about the fate of Glasgow museums' bronzes, asserted that he would only support their return on the condition that there was a way of guaranteeing they would never be sold for profit. Beliefs that the Edo community, and former colonial subjects more generally, are unable to care for their own heritage are rooted in the same paternalistic logics that undergirded and justified colonial expansion which argued that natives were unable to care for themselves and needed whites to save them.

An interesting twist to the discourse of artifact preservation which should be noted is that while Western collectors and museum professionals frequently argued that the Benin artifacts would be safer in Western collections, in reality, the vast majority of damage the objects have experienced can be traced back to the 1897 invasion. Rawson Jr.'s description of an elephant tusk that was damaged when the British army torched the Benin palace is just one example of the harm of imperial violence wrought upon these objects, many of which were hundreds of years old and had been safeguarded by generations of caretakers until their dislocation. It is not just the Benin case where this is true—the Parthenon marbles, which are housed in the British Museum and have been

[19] January 17 interview with Victor E., Lagos.

at the center of large-scale restitution debates for over a century, were also badly damaged when they were forcibly removed from Athens. The argument that looted objects would be better cared for and protected in Western museums risks being undermined by the evidence of their destruction at the hands of Western forces.

PANDORA'S BOX

One of the most ubiquitous arguments that many universal museums, including the British Museum, have made in defense of repatriating requested objects is the fear that returns may set a precedent for other nations to make their own demands, thereby opening repatriation floodgates which would ultimately lead to the emptying of museums. Such moves would fundamentally impair their ability to fulfil their care mandate discussed in the previous section. Several letters between the British Museum and government warn against "the dangers of setting a precedent" with the restitution of the Queen Idia mask citing the example of comparable restitution claims. One example reads:

> It is not possible to look at the Benin Ivory in isolation, and an amendment would set a precedent which could be put forward in support of demands for the repatriation of almost every object of foreign origin held by museums and educational institutions in this country. This view was confirmed recently in the House of Lords by Lord Goronwy-Roberts when a similar suggestion was made in relation to the Ashanti Regalia.[20]

In the 1970s, in the midst of the controversy around the FESTAC restitution request, the British Museum and government expressed some anxiety that they would be overwhelmed with requests for the return of the mask. In a letter from M J C Glaze, an administrator in the West African Department of the UK government's Foreign & Commonwealth Office, to Bryan Cranstone, curator in the Department of Ethnography, Glaze noted the prospect of this reality: "It is very likely

[20] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2127. Letter from D W R Lewis to Beverley Pick Esq, OBE, London, 13 January 1975. Consulted on 3 July 2019.

that as preparations for the World Black and African Festival of Art and Culture get under way considerable pressure for its return will be brought to bear on us, particularly as the Ivory has been adopted as the emblem of the Festival."[21]

The museum and government recognized the significance of the mask not just to Nigeria, but to the continent, and began considering the implications for more widespread requests. It is important to note that FESTAC '77, as a pan-African festival with representation from 56 African nations, transcended the idea of tribe and nation, conceptualizing the continent as one entity worthy of celebration and veneration. In the wake of anti-colonial resistance and post-colonial identity formation, the struggle for artifact restitution was a process through which pan-African unity that transcended tribal and national borders could be consolidated. Yet it also represented an existential threat to the Western museum, whose collections and mandates had, for decades, relied on the retention of these artifacts. As such, the British Museum, in light of the FESTAC requests in the early 1970s, began implementing pre-emptive measures to block, or at the very least avoid and minimize, requests for repatriation. In addition, fearing that activists may attempt to steal the mask, which was on display in the museum's Africa gallery, the museum went through great efforts to ensure the piece was protected with additional security. Evidently a notorious gold artifact from the Asante of Ghana had been vandalized years prior, and the museum believed that the Idia mask may be destined for a similar fate.

The premise of the Pandora's Box argument rests on several assumptions that have largely been contested by restitution advocates. First, the argument assumes that there have been restitution demands for all non-Western object in museums, which is a fallacy for both cultural and pragmatic reasons. Culturally, source nations are largely only interested in recovering objects that hold spiritual

[21] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2112. Letter from M J C Glaze to B A L Cranstone Esq., London, 29 April 1974. Consulted on 3 July 2019.

and cultural meaning and objects that continue to bear some significance to the community. Journalist Willy Bozimo, in a 1976 article about the FESTAC 77 request, recalled an interview he had with Professor Sabori Biobaku who affirmed the specificity of sacred objects: "In legal terms, any cultural artefact made before 1918 or if some of them have been used in a ritual we call them all antiquities. It is not everything we keep especially those that we have in plenty we don't keep them like the IBEJI twin figures used in rituals are all over the place because the Yoruba's venerated the twin. If one died, they keep an effigy of the other," he argued (Bozimo 1976).

In practical terms, though there is not a figure which can accurately estimate the amount of objects which have been pursued for restitution, it is likely an insignificant figure, largely due to the fac that the majority of source communities are not aware of where their heritage lies and the contents of Western museums. Most museums' collections exceed their gallery space and it is not uncommon for the majority of a museums' collections to be held in storage. An estimated 97 percent of the British Museum's objects are in their storehouses.[22] In addition, while most museums have some object biography content on their websites, most do not have full inventories of these objects simply because the process for staging such an effort would be too timely and costly. Because the onus of initiating restitution claims has historically fallen on the source community, and because of transparency challenges source communities encounter attempting to locate their patrimony, only a small proportion of objects have been claimed for restitution. The process for claiming restitution has historically been an onerous and expensive endeavor, which has also limited the number of demands that have been made in the postcolonial period as the claimants tend to be ex-colonies which lack the resources to devote to such projects. [23]

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[22] Glasgow Museums is an example of an institution dedicated to the transparency and visibility of their collections. In 2009 the city opened the Glasgow Museums Resource Center, which is a display storage facility where all the museums' collections not on display in galleries are kept and are accessible to the public for viewing and research.

[23] In recent years Western countries have begun to adopt more proactive approaches to restitution by approaching source countries about artifacts which they may hold in their museums and establishing guidelines through which those

In addition, there is a great deal of bureaucratic inertia as well as political resistance that serve as barriers to restitution. In France, for example, a nation considered to be a leader on the issue of proactive restitution, while the Sarr Savoy report commissioned by Macron found that 86% Quai Branly's objects had been looted and urged their return, yet only 26 pieces have in fact been restituted due to bureaucratic challenges, such as legal frameworks that must first be amended. The British Museum Act of 1963, to provide another example, is one such piece of legislation that prohibits the museum from deaccessioning any of its collections, and doing so would require an act of Parliament which has, to date, only been amended for Nazi era looted objects. For all these reasons, the fear of a single case of restitution opening Pandora's Box is unlikely unless significant structural changes manifest across the state-level restitution landscape.

Yet advocates for restitution in and beyond Benin approached the issue of a Pandora's Box effect from a markedly different perspective. In a 1996 letter from Oba Erediauwa to Queen Elizabeth, he spoke of the idea of England potentiality setting a positive precedent for the world—if UK museums returned the Benin bronzes, other Western museums which hold bronzes, as well as other looted artifacts from African nations, may also be inspired to consider returning their objects.[24] A positive floodgates movement, in other words, might take place if England returns some of their requested objects, potentially inspiring similar actions across Europe and North America. Citing England as a potential leader in the restitution movement seemed like a promising strategy, but more than 25 years on the nation and its restitution policies are trailing those of its neighbors.

The fear of former colonies requesting, or stealing, back their artifacts represents an anxiety that could perhaps be described by the idiom of "chickens coming home to roost." After centuries

countries would be able to seek restitution. President Macron's 2017 speech in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, which he pledged to return the nation's looted patrimony, is largely credited as a significant turning point in such proactive measures.

[24] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2203. Letter from Oba Erediauwa to Queen Elizabeth, Benin City, November 1996. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

of colonial plunder, the British Museum and government, in the postcolonial period, now fearing a reversal of tactic—that the same strategies which the government enacted in the colonies were now going to plague them at home through acts of imperial retribution by the formerly colonized. The claim that museums would be emptied if source communities requested the return of every looted piece of cultural patrimony rests on an assumption that all objects in the museum are stolen, a logic which should inspire greater provenance research efforts instead of a refusal to engage in such conversations.

The Museum as a Public Benefit

Western museums, especially larger state museums, draw considerably larger number of museum goers than museums in Africa, which tend to be regional institutions with a fraction of the budget. Retentionists have commonly argued that the museums which have the largest visitor numbers should be the ones to keep the objects in order to fulfill the true educational mission of museums. Art is meant to be accessible, and accessibility, in this sense, means numbers. The UK Secretary of Culture Jeremy Wright, in response to a question about restitution, recently remarked, "Never mind the argument about who owns this thing, let's argue about how it gets to be seen" and suggested that if all repatriation requests were successful, there would be no place in the world where one might see objects from multiple regions (Modern Ghana 2019 [b]). While the British Museum chose not to sign on to the 2002 Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums discussed above for political reasons, Neil MacGregor, the director of the museum at the time, issued the following statement in response: "This declaration is an unprecedented statement of common value and purpose issued by the directors of some of the world's leading museums and galleries. The diminishing of collections such as these would be a great loss to the world's cultural heritage" (Cuno 2006: 15).

Arguments that universal museums provide access and educational opportunities to the largest breadth of the general public fail to take into account the inequality inherent in the demographic composition of who is visiting those museums. The vast majority of citizens of the former colonies are unable to visit the museums due to socioeconomic and political factors. Most universal museum goers have historically been from other Western countries—and increasingly from East Asian nations in recent decades—and have the resources to make such a pilgrimage in part due to the historical factors that gave rise to the holding of the looted objects of the museum. In addition, as migration securitization and control between the global North and South tighten, it becomes increasingly more difficult for even those who might have resources to travel to the West to do so (Modern Ghana 2019 [a]).

Relatedly, advocates of retention have argued that another possible response to the question of restitution might be to enhance and expand the global circulation of artifacts through traveling exhibitions which thereby allows more people in the general public to witness the objects, more so than would be possible if they were held in an African museum. In reality, traveling exhibitions primarily only circulate through cultural institutions located in other Western centers that are equally beyond the reach of formerly colonized peoples (Bozimo 1976). Most Western museums have agreements almost exclusively with other Western museums that allow for such exchanges and loans for temporary exhibitions, which was the case in 2007 when the *Benin Kings and Rituals* exhibition travelled to Vienna, Paris, Berlin and Chicago but not to Benin or elsewhere on the continent, despite the exhibition containing objects borrowed from the National Museum of Nigeria. When I was conducting archival research in the Nigerian museum in 2020 I met the African curator of the Yale University Art Gallery who was conducting research on pieces in the Nigerian museum's collection that Yale was preparing to borrow for a show on Benin art in New Haven. Yet he informed me that the exhibition would not be staged in Nigeria nor would any objects from the Yale

collection be circulated in Nigeria. Curated collections from the Global South rarely stay within the Global South due to fears of mismanagement or ill treatment, as was evidenced in the case of the FESTAC '77 mask.

The British Museum is fully aware of the importance of the bronzes to the reputation and value of their collections. As a universal museum which seems to teach the world about the world, their ability to fulfill their public educational and research mandates as well as their financial success is reliant upon the retention of objects in their museum, regardless of their contested status and calls for return. The museums' public arguments for not returning the Benin artifacts are myriad, spanning political, cultural, educational, environmental and aesthetic reasons. Yet ultimately, the museum is also concerned with its own survival as the seat of world culture. As the deputy keeper of the museum noted in a letter to the museum director during debates about the FESTAC 77 mask, "Considerations which might inhibit its long-term loan to Nigeria are: (a) It is our finest piece of African ivory sculpture."[25] The idea of the museum relinquishing its most impressive piece of African ivory is unthinkable as it is objects like these which give the museums its status as one of the most preeminent universal museums in the world, a designation which the leadership would be loathe to sacrifice in the name of restitution. Yet often the objects that are most aesthetically and materially valuable to the museum happen, perhaps not coincidentally, to be the same objects that are most culturally important to the source community, creating tension over the privileging of secular interests over sacred ones.

A further interpretation of this hierarchical binary is the privileging of the non-human over the human. Retentionist practices of museums place the interest of the Western material world over the subjugated *humanity* of those in the source country whose identities are rooted in their spiritual

[25] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2115. Letter from B A L Cranstone Esq to Sir John Pope-Hennessy, London, date unknown. Consulted on 3 July 2019.

and cultural practices and objects. Protesters during the demonstrations Bernie Grant led on the steps of the British Museum wielded signs which read "Museum of Mankind: Be Kind of Mankind," an invitation for the museum to consider the humanity of the people behind the objects over its commitments to what they regarded as personless objects.

'World Culture' and Universalism

The belief in the possibility of being able to accurately represent a culture or society in its entirety through a collection of artifacts forms the bedrock of the identity of the Western universal museum. Many critics of the universal museum, particularly those with an ethnographic focus, have argued that this notion of representativeness is a myth given that it is not possible to represent the nuances of a society from a Western perspective alienated from its original context and relocated to a foreign context. The Sarr Savoy (2018) report speaks to the notion of translation of artifacts, noting they become 'semiophores', or objects which carry new meanings, when they are moved from one place to another. This desire to fully represent the Other, at its core, represents a Eurocentric belief in the universality of Western narratives of histories of the non-West rooted in principles of the Enlightenment. Universal museums have argued that artifacts are most legible and best understood as part of global collections and have defended the retention of looted objects on this basis. Boursiquot has argued that the project of reconstituting a society from its component objects was central to the ethnographic museum, but says that this was a function of the museums being established in contexts of European domination of foreign nations and questions the degree to which this logic can endure in a postcolonial setting. "What meaning do these museums have now that the colonial era is officially over?," they ask (Boursiquot 2013: 63).

Universal museums are, by definition, meant to allow the visitor to encounter cultures from every corner of the world. Those opposed to repatriation argue that if objects from a particular

geographic region were to be removed from their collections, it would limit the museums' ability to fulfill their roles as cultural ambassadors and educators, doing a disservice to museum goers and the general public (see the museum as a public benefit section above). Arguments that museums represent an 'international culture' or are themselves a 'world country' are central to the idea of the universal museum (The Guardian 2018). Such a perspective claims that collections must be preserved as a whole for the benefit of the general public having access to a full narrative, not sold off or deaccessioned in ways that are understood to disrupt a collection. As David Wilson, former director of the British Museum, has stated, "the Trustees would regard it as a betrayal of their trust to a precedent for the piecemeal dismemberment of the collections which recognise no arbitrary boundaries of time or place in their enduring witness of the achievement of the human race" (Modern Ghana 2019).

Often retentionists espouse a desire to educate the global citizenry and pursue a form of cultural globalism that resists nationalism or nationalistic isolationism. Some have argued that encyclopedic museums combat nationalism and culturally isolationist ideology by bringing together collections from across the globe that, together, tell a unique historical story (The Atlantic 2019). Thus, in a moment when populism and political extremism rooted in nationalism is on the rise globally, retentionists argue that encyclopedic museums are the perfect antidote to such trends because they break down national barriers by supporting transnational collection. Conversely, the repatriation of artefacts to their countries of origin would reinforce nationalistic and isolationist values by demanding that objects remain only in the borders of their origin countries. These arguments are historicist in nature in that they ignore the power relations that guided the holding and circulation of objects in the past and attempt to merely superimpose a contemporary vision of collecting that meets and maintains the needs of those in power while continuing to disenfranchise those who have historically been marginalized from such decisions and discussions.

One of the most common arguments that universal museums have made to support their retention practices is that museums are the best, if not only, institutions able to place objects in context. Context for museums implies the ability to tell the full story of global history through the display of objects from every corner of the globe that provide the comparative history necessary to fully understand the significance of the object. This interpretation of context means being able to read across different geographies and temporalities to understand their relationships and an emphasis on highlighting their similarities and dissimilarities. Such a perspective is rooted in Enlightenment principals which recognize not only the legibility of the Other through rational study, but the understanding that it is only Europeans, or Westerners, who have the ability to make such connections. The idea that the world is knowable from the Western gaze implies a sense of universalism which holds that societies can be reduced to their component parts and compared to disparate forms, a practice which naturally excludes an examination of the self and the West.

Source communities have, likewise, argued that the context in which their objects are held, curated and displayed are central to their positions on restitution, though their framing of what context means differs significantly from that of museums. Those in favor of repatriation have argued that the richness of African cultural heritage lies, in part, in being able to situate objects in their places of origin. As the Harvard Crimson (2011) editor in a feature on restitution noted, "The purpose of a historical artifact is the rare insight it affords the world of the present into the world of the past, and the value of that insight depends upon a conversation between an object's current home and the site of its creation."

Many throughout the Benin community, on the other hand, have argued that their objects can be best understood, appreciated, and maintain cultural and spiritual significance if the full collection of objects are intact and in their place of origin, not dispersed globally in museums and galleries thousands of miles from their home. Thus, understanding by virtue of context means, for

many in the Benin community, relation through similar object association, whereas context for the British Museum meant relation through dissimilar object association. In a 1997 letter to the director of the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow, the chairman of the West African Museums Project used this argument for context to make his restitution plea: "Each object on the ancestral altar has a meaning and performs a function that is paramount and necessary in the life of the Edo. In a different context, environment and situation, the same object becomes sterile, empty and just a work of art."[26]

The 2007-08 exhibition of Benin bronzes which toured Vienna, Chicago, Paris and Berlin acknowledged the rupture caused by the 1897, but argued that the exhibition allowed them to be reunited in a unique context: "This show makes it possible to bring together ensembles that had been torn apart, to compare series of similar types of objects, and to place certain works in context with related pieces or to re-unite pieces which ended up in different museum collection like two-parted bronze reliefs" (Plankensteiner 2007: 21). Yet this reunion and new context in which the objects were presented was only temporary—when the exhibition closed in 2008 the objects returned to their respective museums, only to be torn apart once more, a reinscription of the original violence which led to their initial placement in the museums. Given that the exhibition did not tour in Nigeria—or anywhere in the non-Western world—despite the fact that Nigeria loaned some of its own bronzes to the show, the importance of the reunification of the objects for context was of aesthetic and curatorial importance for the Western museums, but held little cultural or spiritual value for the people of Benin. Some in favor of retention have argued that while the source community is not able to see their objects in their original contexts, the diaspora of these communities who live in the West and have access to the holding museums are able to see them, yet

[26] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2223. Letter from Emmanuel N. Arlnze to Julian Spalding, Dakar, 22 January 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

this community represents a small fraction of the members of the source community and, therefore, many believe this rationale should not justify continued retentionist policies.

The idea that Western museums are the most capable of contextualizing and interpreting the significance of indigenous art is rooted in the belief that indigenous communities produce and interpret cultural artifacts, but it is the museum which confers the status of 'art' unto it. As Barbara Plankensteiner argues in the introduction of the Benin Kings and Rituals catalog, "The full complexity of the works can be appreciated only through the awareness and consideration of two complementary cultural perceptions of the art of Benin. The Western appreciation of them primarily as works of art, and their understanding in Benin as historical documents and as mnemonic devices to reconstruct history, or as ritual objects."[27]

The belief that the Western museum is the most appropriate site for interpretation upholds the positivist idea that there is a single African, or even global history, that can be fully comprehended and told, but only from a Western study and standpoint. This myth of the single narrative holds that there is a natural global alignment of cultures based on a universal Otherness that can be properly (re-) constructed by the West with the disparate objects of far-flung places placed in conversation with one another, thereby providing context for each piece that otherwise would have had no meaning in their own isolated cultural and societal contexts. Meaning, in other words, is made through the global. The world—but only the third world—as a single entity is laid bare. The first world is necessarily absent from this narrative, which museums represent by placing objects from the third world in one museum—together, objects from disparate geographies are placed in conversation with one another—that are called ethnographic, natural history, or cultural museums. This is how it is possible for the Museum of Mankind to produce a brochure in 1993 of an exhibition featuring a seemingly schizophrenic array of objects from New Guinea, Mexico, Zaire,

[27] Plankensteiner 2007: 21-22

Benin. What do these places have in common beyond their Otherness in the imagination of the imperial subject? Primitivism is what the museum visitor anticipates, so this frame animates the brochure and advertisements for the exhibition. The differences between these places are collapsed even further when the exhibition brochure describes the display of "Textiles," which no longer distinguishes the objects based on their geographic region, but instead on their material quality. The museum moves from the nation to materiality with the same ease with which it moves from Mexico to Zaire. Grouping objects as "Textiles" is a strategy museums use to navigate challenges about the classification of people, nations and cultures, but in so doing, they create an panacea which reifies the lack of commonality between the nations reinforcing a decontextualized myth about connection between primitive people, which fundamentally undermines the claims Western museums make about their ability to provide a space in which one can experience objects in their full context. Meanwhile, Western objects are in art museums and galleries, each piece able to speak unto itself on its own merit without the necessity of comparison to other culture and societies to be understood. The value of Western art is indeed self-evident. The placement of African art, and indeed indigenous art more generally, together--and the subsequent failure to place indigenous art in conversation with Western art—risks reproducing the binary between the Global North and South and maintaining an analytic bifurcation of the two 'zones.'

The neocolonial logic of museum stewardship creates new iterations of imperial forms of domination which continue to deprive source countries of their heritage while enriching the cultural and financial coffers of Western institutions, thereby perpetuating colonial structures of domination. Such systems are testaments to the fact that imperial subjugation does not end when formal colonial occupation ends, but just transforms in ways that are consistent with the prevailing interactional modes of the day. Contemporary museums engage in a form of neoimperial cosmopolitanism that, on one hand, advocates for transparency and an acknowledgment of historic injustice, yet are

unwilling to concede to demands for reparations out of a concern for what such sacrifices may mean for their collections and broad public support.

The director of the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow defended his position on retention on the basis that Nigeria's collection of bronzes in their national museum was so impressive, he did not believe that the collection in his museum would improve theirs. "The museums in Nigeria, including the one in Benin itself, do now have one of the world's finest representations of this great culture and our collections would not add significantly to this," he wrote.[28] If one believes that a culture can be depicted accurately in a museum through a collection of representative objects, which is the museum's perspective, then this logic holds. Yet if you, like many of the people of Benin, believe that an object's value is derived from its placement in the context of other objects from its original collection and returned to its place of origin, then the demand will not be satisfied until all objects are returned. A piecemeal, "some but not all" approach to collecting will always be insufficient for a community whose conception of the importance of their heritage lies in its wholeness and place. To the museums there is a sense of transferability in the importance of the object, but to the Benin community their spiritual value is located in the collection's wholeness and recognition that the archive of objects is incomplete when scattered. As Bernie Grant noted in a report to the Glasgow City Council, "Over and above each piece's individual significance, these objects have a collective, organic significance. […] All the Benin artefacts are unique."[29] The emphasis on their uniqueness here is meant to disrupt the view that objects believed to be "duplicates," for example, are somehow less valuable than others, or that single objects could represent the whole. Such arguments are fundamentally materialist in nature and place emphasis on the object's value and aesthetic qualities,

[28] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2221. Letter from Julian Spalding to Bernie Grant, Glasgow, 10 January 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.
[29] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2237. The Restitution of the Benin Bronzes and Ivories to Benin: A Report from Bernie Grant, MP to Majority Group, Glasgow City Council, London, date unknown. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

attending less to their cultural or spiritual significance which cannot be transferred or shared across pieces. Members of the Benin community and allies have maintained that it is impossible for foreigners to assess the significance of their collection to the point that it determines where it should be distributed, and it is they who should be responsible for making decisions about the objects' future.

The Edo community and British Museum have vastly different approaches to thinking about the importance and meaning of context for the bronzes. While Edo leaders have argued that the objects lose much of their meaning when split apart and transferred to foreign locations, the British Museum has suggested that their objects are their most informative and powerful when they are removed from their original contexts and placed in dialogue with objects from other regions to tell a more global story of human history. These antithetical approaches are of course not value-neutral theories on collecting, but serve the specific interests of each party—largely the financial and aesthetic/educational investments of the museum, and the spiritual and cultural desires of the Edo community. Each group uses the argument of the importance of context in their claims to the objects, yet what constitutes context—whether it is a relationship to other objects from the same community of origin, or objects from disparate corners of the globe—leads to a fundamental incompatibility in understandings of which group is the appropriate steward of the objects.

GEOPOLITICAL AMNESIA

Many Western museum professionals have argued that repatriation is untenable due to the ways in which geographic borders and spaces have shifted in the wake of colonization and decolonization. Nations and kingdoms that existed or were formed in the colonial era have disappeared and new ones have been constituted through acts of conquest and movements for independence. Therefore, the argument that artifacts should be repatriated to their countries of

origin, according to this camp, does not hold because these countries no longer exist (Modern Ghana 2019 [a]). The case of the Benin bronzes is the most notorious example of this argument. The bronzes were looted from the royal palace of the former Benin Kingdom, which no longer exists though was geographically situated in modern-day Nigeria. Professionals in Western museums have argued that the bronzes in their possession cannot be returned to the Benin Kingdom and, therefore, must be retained in their current museums. This contested position, though, directly contradicts the requests of the contemporary royal family of the Benin Kingdom who reside in Benin City in Edo State as well as federal, state and local political leaders in Nigeria who have all made numerous restitution requests. Though the ancient political kingdom itself does not exist, they argue, the descendant people and the culture are strong, and they deserve to have access to their cultural heritage. "Countries are beginning to clamor for these objects, but they never left any country—they left cultures," argues Ndubuisi C. Ezeluomba, the curator of African art for the New Orleans Museum of Art (ARTnews 2019). The Rhode Island School of Design museum has, according to inside sources, been attempting to repatriate a bronze sculpture of the last *oba* (king) of the Benin Kingdom but has also encountered difficulty as a result of this claim (Hyperallergic 2019).

The ways in which Western museums discuss and approach the notion of cultural evolution directly contribute to this historical erasure. Museums have taken significant efforts to emphasize the role of modernity and cosmopolitanism in source communities at the expense of sidelining consideration of the nation's past. The argument of cultural evolution as a defense for retention works on two levels: (1) the idea that cultures change, empires fall, and societies transform; in short, change is inevitable and, therefore, we must move on and cut our losses (of cultural objects); and (2) the idea that a society may evolve so significantly that cultural traditions of one society may not be shared by those in subsequent generations and, therefore, the modern society is unable to make claims to objects which their predecessors produced or to which they had formed cultural

attachments. If there is no cultural continuity in a society, then indigenous communities are unable to lay claims to their own artifacts because, in short, that culture no longer exists.

Museums and governments have, at times, requested that source communities prove that their cultural practices are either directly descended from those of their ancestors, or that their cultural practices are suffering as a result of violence their ancestors encountered. In a 1996 letter to Bernie Grant, the UK Foreign Secretary explained, "if it could be shown that people were still suffering the ill-effects of slavery and colonisation," then he would give his support to the campaign for restitution.[30] In addition to proving that one's culture has not been disrupted since the objects were produced and there is a through line between ancient and contemporary cultural practices, there is also an expectation that a society provides that their suffering endures as well.

Benin historian Peter Murphy, in a 1996 letter to Bernie Grant, challenged this perspective arguing that Benin should be entitled to their heritage on the grounds that theirs was, indeed, a living culture: "this is not a matter of digging up old historical grudges but a living matter of importance to people today," he wrote.[31] "The Benin treasures can only be seen as artefacts of aesthetic or anthropological interest in a museum here; in Benin they are part of a living culture with meanings and relevance which are denied in exile," Murphy continued. From the perspective of restitution advocates, the past and its violences cannot be relegated to a historical moment, but remain alive in the galleries and storehouses of museums, a reality which must be confronted in order to fully direct one's gaze ahead.

Relatedly, some Western museums have argued that much of the provenance research on the objects in question is insufficient to execute an exchange. Because many of their histories are

[30] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2212. Minutes of Meeting with ARM-UK and Prince Akenzua, Duke of Benin, London, 11 November 1996. Consulted on 12 June 2019.
[31] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2216. Letter from Peter Murphy to Bernie Grant, London, 10 December 1996. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

generally unknown and it is unclear from where the objects originated, retentionists have argued that it is impossible to return them. Those in favor of repatriation often respond that the answer is not to lament poor provenance research, but to invest in capacity building and research development to improve our understanding of provenance that would allow for future repatriation efforts. In early 2019 the German government allocated €1.9 million for provenance research on colonial artefacts in the national museum's ethnographic collection. The national museum will also distribute some of these funds to smaller German museums in other regions to help support their own provenance research (The Guardian 2019).

Artifacts whose provenance is not clear are often described as being "acquired under questionable circumstances." One reason that the Benin artifacts are a poignant and illustrative case for this study is due to their undisputed history. The Benin expedition was one of the most well-documented conquests, and the looting of the artifacts, their transfer to the British government and the global art market, and their subsequent whereabouts were, and continue to be, very well documented as well. As such, objection to restitution on the basis of provenance concerns is not an issue for the Benin artifacts, leaving more room to examine the cultural, social and political merits of the arguments about their ownership and keeping. Ultimately these arguments contribute to the erasure of historical continuities—the idea that cultures cannot and do not persist in the face of colonial violence or postcolonial recovery, or that the enactment of violence does not have long-term effects that continue to follow all parties long after the commission, and that these traumas must be healed in order to allow societies to move forward. The fact that colonial entities redrew new borders to make societies legible to them does not erase centuries of history, nor does it suggest that those more recent, violent histories must be forgotten.

These perspectives also assume that restitution means the emptying out of museums, versus the reality that most restitution claims consist of a targeted campaign to retrieve selected objects of

great historical, cultural and spiritual significance. Retention advocates, though, often rely on the floodgates theory of repatriation discussed above, which suggests that once a decision is made in favor of repatriation and the precedent is set, a floodgate of requests will open and there will be no way to control which, and how many, objects will return, eventually leading to the emptying of Western museums. Furthermore, such perspectives are historicist in nature because, for centuries, borders and land conquest have been central to the European project of colonization. Yet the question who constitutes a geographically and temporally bounded cultural community have, more recently, been construed as both arbitrary constructions of the past and ones that are now dictated by presentist desires that enable colonial nations to hold onto their powers now that Western collections are threatened.

Historicizing the 1897 Benin invasion and its enduring effects is a complicated task, and attempts to do so often reveal political commitments that are important for understanding the contours of restitution debates. Those in favor of retention, while acknowledging the horrors associated with the violence, ultimately believe that the end result of the global dispersal of non-Western objects was one that was beneficial for humanity. As the museum directors of the 2007-08 *Benin Kings and Rituals* exhibition noted in the catalogue, "History, whether tragic or glorious, lies forever behind us. We stand on its shoulders and direct our gaze to what lies ahead" (Plankensteiner 2007: 11). The implication here is that the past is behind us, and that now that the objects are in Western museums, we should take advantage of what they have to offer. In a 2018 blog post, the director of the Victoria and Albert Museum Tristram Hunt conveyed a similar sentiment regarding objects looted from Ethiopia: "We have a responsibility to celebrate the beauty of their craftsmanship, shine a light on their cultural and religious significance and reflect on their living meaning, while being open about how they came to Britain" (V&A Blog 2018). Such declarations of imperial amnesia inform the ways in which museums, particularly the British Museum, grapple with

the historical events that resulted in the accumulation of their collections. Of course, it is only the victor who is able to engage in this form of remembrance, and only the victor who benefits from this type of amnesia. Those in favor of restitution of the Benin artifacts would argue that the past is not, in fact, behind us, and that the continued presence of the objects in Western museums means that historical violences have not been resolved and are actively being perpetuated. Restitution, and reparations more generally, are solemn acknowledgments that past harm remains structurally embedded within our institutions and memory and represent demands to dismantle such systems.

LEGAL CONTESTATIONS

Many opposed to restitution argue that the museums acquired the objects legally and resist the colonial violence and looting argument. This perspective implicitly rejects the idea that colonial legality was defined purely by the imperial state, which naturally had a vested interest in acquiring and maintaining collected objects. Thus, to suggest that the state and its cultural institutions should be allowed to maintain their current collections on the basis that they were lawfully acquired under colonial influence implies a legitimation of the colonial regime itself. There is the question of what happens when a legal doctrine governing one region changes over time and/or as a region changes. For instance, if objects from a colonized nation had been legally exported under the laws set forth by the colonial power, but those laws later changed following independence, which laws should be recognized? Likewise, as discussed above, if there is a geopolitical reconfiguration—such as when a nation is constituted or erased due to colonial or decolonial transition—do the laws governing a region that no longer exist still apply?

Currently most European countries have laws that prevent the transfer of objects that are owned by the state. Therefore, in order for repatriation to be considered, laws would have to be amended, which is a very difficult and controversial process to undertake. In the case of objects and

collections held by private institutions, such as the British Museum, there is typically an internal constitution that limits such transfers that a Board of Trustees oversees and would have to amend in order to allow the deaccessioning of objects from their collections. The British Museum Act of 1963, which is a Parliamentary instrument, explicitly prohibits the transfer or deaccessioning of objects held by the museum. This was a renewal of legislation passed by Parliament in 1753 that prohibited the removal of any objects from the British Museum collections. Historically, particularly in the case of the British Museum, there has been little movement on these issues and the UK Secretary of Culture recently told reporters that the UK had no intention of modifying its laws to enable restitution (Modern Ghana 2019 [b]).

The British Museum Act is the most commonly referenced legal instrument in defense of retention. A 1974 letter from the British Museum's Deputy Director to an administrator in the government's West African Department who had requested the restitution of the mask invoked the law in order to dismiss the claim: "I am afraid that it would not be possible for the Trustees to consider the return of the ivory to Nigeria. Such a solution to the problem you raise is outside their powers, since it is precluded by Section 5 of the British Museum Act of 1963," he wrote.[32] The Act was passed just three years after Nigeria won its independence during a time when the newly-established state, as well as other former British colonies, were beginning to demand the return of their patrimony. The original British Museum Act of 1753, which established the museum, allowed for the deaccessioning of objects, but in the wake of anti-imperial organizing and calls for the repatriation of artifacts from ex-colonies, the Act was repealed and replaced by the now standing 1963 Act, one of the biggest changes of which was the prohibition on deaccessions.

[32] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2118. Letter from M Webb to D W R Lewis, London, 2 August 1974. Consulted on 3 July 2019.

There are other legal mechanisms that are seemingly neutral on the surface but may have some unintended effects that serve the objectives of retentionists. In 1970 UNESCO passed the global Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transport of Ownership of Cultural Property, which effectively banned the transfer of stolen cultural heritage, including artefacts and artwork (UNESCO 1970). The convention, though, does not apply retroactively, therefore objects looted during the colonial period are not covered under the mandate. Furthermore, the emphasis on trafficking out of source countries, as opposed to foreign looting, shifts the responsibility and blame of lost objects to the source countries themselves and away from those who have unlawfully removed antiquities. The Convention effectively deprioritizes the issue of colonial-era restitution and has, therefore, been widely adopted by states that have thus far been unwilling to engage in such discussions.

Recently there have been several moves to create new legislation that works in the opposite direction—that would restructure or create a legal framework that would allow for the return of colonial artifacts. In March of 2019, German cultural authorities established a new set of guidelines that inform how the state and its cultural institutions deal with colonial loot. German museums are now required to create inventories of their ethnographic collections that will be available to certain groups (Deutscher Museums Bund 2019). The guidelines also establish a clear process through which former colonies may make restitution claims, though the culture minister recently said that Germany had not considered the full repatriation of its holdings in the national ethnographic museum. In addition, the guidelines are not legally binding, but merely suggestions for how local and regional museums might proceed with their colonial holdings.

Between 1950 and 1972, 37 bronzes were deaccessioned from the British Museum—25 were sold back to the Nigerian government, one was exchanged for an object in the National Museum of Nigeria, and the remaining were exchanged or sold to private dealers and collectors. These objects

were referred to as 'duplicates' because they appeared to have iconography identical to other pieces in the collection. Yet we now know that, due the lost wax style of production through which the bronzes are cast, no piece is a duplicate or copy of another—they are all originals. The museum may have, at the time, misinterpreted a two-part relief which bore complementary features as duplicates, but in fact these objects were all unique. Because the museum is interested in collecting objects that are representative of cultures, they believed that having only one 'duplicate' was sufficient for their collections and were, therefore, willing to sell the others. The museum's board of trustees sought approval to deaccession these pieces via the British Museum Act of 1963, which only allowed the deaccessioning of objects from the collection if they were considered to be duplicates or were otherwise "useless" to the museum. The museum has long argued that restitution of the Benin bronzes and other contested objects, such as the Parthenon marbles and the Hoa Hakananai'a statue from Easter Island, is not possible due to internal and external regulations. Yet advocates have argued that if the British Museum and Parliament are willing to amend its law to make exceptions for Nazi-era looted relics and Benin duplicates, then so too can adjustments be made for the remainder of the Benin artifacts in their possession.

Just as the British Museum Act was modified in 1963 in the wake of decolonization and restitution efforts to prevent the repatriation of artifacts to ex-colonies, so too have other legal instruments been fungible. In Scotland, the Public Libraries Consolidation Act of 1887 was amended (specifically Section 21) to allow state museums and galleries to deaccession only duplicates of objects.[33] Several restitution advocates, including Bernie Grant, used this piece of legislation to further advocate for restitution of the bronzes given case of the duplicates repatriation, which has the possibility of setting of a precedent for large-scale return based on this exemption. These moves

[33] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2205. Letter from Edward Wood to Bernie Grant, London, 19 November 1996. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

indicate that such laws are, indeed, institutions that serve the interest of those who hold power and who benefit from its allowances, but also provides a framework through which those seeking justice are able to claim power.

ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

While many objects hold symbolic, cultural, spiritual, and historic value for the source community, many of the most prized pieces in museums only became materially valuable between the late 19th to mid 20th centuries as African cultural heritage began its rise to prominence in the West. Recognizing the considerable economic drain the loss of these objects created for source communities, efforts to secure their return are often framed as a form of wealth redistribution, while efforts to retain the objects in Western museums are called out for reinforcing existing exploitative economic structures. One goal of postcolonial development was to achieve parity between states that had formerly been structurally unequal due to imperial racial capitalism. Julian Go (2013: 5) has argued that early thinkers on postcolonial inequality believed that economic 'development' initiatives would usher in neoliberal markets that would enable "the postcolonial world to 'catch up' with the status of their former metropolitan masters," reinforcing a linear model of progress rooted in a Eurocentric notion of development. Conversely, decolonial approaches to economic repair, which I argue includes restitution and reparations more generally, resist assimilationist or charitable approaches, instead advocating for the dismantling of the systems which continue to reproduce colonial relations of power.

Some African museum professionals interested in repatriation have suggested that it is politically untenable to request the return of objects or compensation from countries that provide them aid, fearing a potential retributive disruption in aid. Such aid dependency means that formerly colonized nations are hindered in their ability to make claims to the imperial states and seek a

rebalancing of historic inequalities in cultural ownership, thereby maintaining the cycle of dependency characteristic of colonial relations.

Debates about the restitution of high-profile objects like the Benin artifacts—and particularly those which have been at the center of international attention via public auctions, such as the Queen Mother ivory mask now valued at tens of millions of pounds—increase the value of such objects by giving them publicity and, therefore, raising public interest and awareness of the objects. Though many such objects do have intrinsic material value given the fact that they are made from gold, ivory and other precious materials, their monetary value increases exponentially once they are given public attention. The irony in such cases is that the sources countries, by and large, want the objects returned on the basis of their cultural and spiritual value, not primarily on account of their material value; but once these requests are made and publicized and their material value increases, Western institutions have a larger stake in retaining the collections, thus making them even more difficult for source countries to retrieve.

There is an inherent catch-22 in the ways in which the value of the Benin artifacts is understood. On one hand, the objects were sacred ritualistic and decorative pieces made for specific purposes such as ceremonies, or spaces such as the royal palace. The ancient objects were never produced with the intent to be sold and, as a result, were not ascribed monetary value. It was only when they were transferred to the West and placed on the international art market that they were commoditized and monetized. The appreciation of such objects, especially those which are contested, is one way in which museums continue to benefit financially from episodes of colonial violence and material appropriation. A 1993 flyer distributed at ARM-UK's demonstration led by Bernie Grant on the steps of the British Museum called out these profits as one of the reasons they were picketing for restitution: "These Museums also retained selling rights of duplicates to the

originals, which of course means that enormous profits have been made," the flyer read.[34] To address these concerns, some advocates have suggested that Western museums pay source countries royalties for the objects in their possession, drawn from the profits the institutions make from the collections, while others have advocated for the creation of public art trusts in African nations to build cultural endowments and capacity to protect and conserve ancient artefacts in lieu of, or in addition to, restitution.

NON-RETURN SOLUTIONS

When repatriation is not a viable option—usually due to an unwillingness or inability to consider return on the part of the holding museum, or complications on the part of the source community—a number of alternative options to return exist which museums and communities have pursued in recent decades. Restitution, as a term with many dimensions that refers to a number of different strategies of repair, goes beyond object repatriation, though this is one of the primary usages. According to the Sarr-Savoy report, restitution entails the restoration of ownership of objects to their countries of origin, or financial compensation to the country of origin in exchange for retaining their artifacts, but not necessarily a physical transfer, whereas repatriation refers to the physical transfer but not necessarily a shift in ownership. Beyond the return of artifacts, institutions have engaged in creative means of power sharing, which has included solutions such as short- and long-term loans, rotating exhibitions, and the sharing of curators and curatorial knowledge and capacity building.

Loans

[34] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2146. 'Why is A.R.M. Picketing' Flyer, London, November 1996. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

The question of ownership versus possession is central to debates about restitution. Though restitution and repatriation are often used interchangeably, in the context of the return of colonial loot they are, in practice, quite different arrangements that bear great significance on the question of ownership. The transfer of ownership is important to give African countries a stake in the international art market, whereas physical possession is important to restore cultural patrimony and educational opportunities to source countries.

Beyond return, one of the most common forms of restitution is the temporary, short- or long-term loan of an object to the source community, a practice that would allow the holding museum to retain ownership (and thereby royalties) and the ability to make key decisions about the object, but would grant the source community an opportunity to consult and display it in its place of origin. Under this arrangement, the museum is allowed to retain property rights and ownership of the objects, but they would be available for circulation to the requesting countries. This solution maintains the balance of power and ownership in favor of Western nations and does little to redress the inherent inequality within these relations. When it was clear that the British Museum would be unwilling to permanently return the Queen Idia mask to Nigeria for the FESTAC '77 festival, other supporters advocated for the return of the mask on a temporary basis for the duration of the festival, though that option too was rejected by the museum. The request to loan the mask was denied on the basis that museums officials were concerned that the Nigerian festival organizers and government could not be trusted to return the object once it was in their possession as well as a fear that the mask may be damaged during transport.

One alternative that the British Museum and other institutions in the UK have pursued is forfeiture of ownership followed by a long-term loan (Modern Ghana 2019 [b]). While the museums are not willing to consider repatriation of objects, which could be in contravention of the museums' codes and federal laws, they have been willing to consider loans on the condition that the source

country legally turns over or affirms British ownership. Such a stipulation would require that source countries not make future requests for repatriation and guarantees that the objects would always remain in the collections of the British museums, regardless of their physical location. Such agreements formalize and seek to legitimize imperial notions of ownership that continue to economically benefit Western institutions and nations while leaving previously colonized nations in financial precarity and cultural uncertainty.

While the idea of a loan is attractive to a museum, who sacrifices little in the exchange given that they are able to replace an object that may be on display with others from their collection, source communities have been less enthusiastic about the arrangement. In a January 2020 interview with a Nigerian artist he explained, "The idea of a temporary loan is insulting because to be able to loan something implies that you own it."[35] The idea of ownership, not simply possession, of an object is central to many restitution demands—the ability to determine the fate and use of an object for one's community without a fear of it being removed, yet again, against the will of the source community. As such, loans of objects may be considered dual acts of violence—the first the original looting and the second the promise of the imperial authority, whether realized or not, reclaiming the object once the terms of the loan have been fulfilled. Yet some communities have been more open to considering alternatives to restitution, such as the Edo state government which is a member of the Benin Dialogue Group, an organization which has helped to facilitate long-term and permanent loans of Benin artifacts when holding museums and countries have been unwilling to relinquish ownership.

Assimilation and decolonial framing

[35] January 2020 interview with Victor E. in Lagos

Through the deployment of a world culture framework, Western museums have staked claims to a form of global cosmopolitanism that acknowledges, but does not cede power or property to, the non-West. During the imperial years the resources within colonies were the property of the colonial government, yet in the period following colonial rule, new, more subtle strategies for the appropriation of resource extraction and claiming became necessary. Western museums have begun bringing diasporic voices into restitution debates as a way of engaging the source community and seeking a more nuanced perspective on the issue. While, for decades, museums have invited artists from former colonial countries to display their art in their galleries, more recently museums have begun to have African artists engage directly with the question of restitution within their collections. Two Nigerian artists I met during my visit to Lagos and Benin in 2020 had previously worked with the British Museum as collaborators on curatorial projects and events which reflected on the presence of the Benin artifacts in the museum. Collaborations with artists from ex-colonies have, in some cases, become substitutes for repatriation—a way of claiming engagement and reflection on the complexities of holding looted work, a reflexivity that had been sorely lacking until the last one to two decades, yet still retaining ownership of the pieces. In some cases this approach has become such an effective way of addressing stolen cultural heritage that the governments and cultural establishment of source countries are appeased by this treatment and do not pursue restitution.

As non-Western perspectives become more sought after in the Western museum, African artists are displayed more readily, African curators are invited to install exhibitions, and diasporic groups are able to "co-curate" educational information about their heritage on display. These efforts to honor the voice of African cultural producers may, on the surface, seem progressive, but there has been some resistance to these practices as they are largely done instead of, as opposed to in addition to, artifact repatriation. As Bodenstein and Pagani have argued, the museum is only willing to offer "a form of partial reparation, as it demonstrates its respect or at the very least its awareness

of other claims to the interpretation of the object's place, its cultural, social and political importance, although it cannot offer, at least in the near future, any promise of actual restitution" (Bodenstein and Pagani 2014: 41). This approach is commonly referred to as the "retain and explain" model, whereby museums remain committed to the retention of their collections—at times, in spite of repatriation requests—instead offering solutions that seek to acknowledge and contextualize the dark histories which surround the objects and subsequent grievances around ownership and restitution.

Posting curatorial descriptions and wall copy that represent conflicting and critical views around the objects and increases the visibility of self-scrutiny has become one way the museums have reckoned with their difficult past. Restitution advocates have argued that while this is a necessary step in the decolonization of museums, their ultimate goal is to bring the objects home—these actions are not only non-mutually exclusive, but are both necessary in the restoration of justice. As I discuss below, providing context for the exhibitions in their lands of origin is an approach that those who favor restitution have supported, but the counter argument advanced by retention supporters is that objects do not have to be relocated in order for that context to be understood. As such, revealing the debates that surround the artefacts is one way of building contextual understanding of their origins and ways they came to be in the Western art world.

One recent example of this practice was the 2018 exhibition of several dozen Maqdala artifacts in London's Victoria and Albert Museum. These objects were looted from Ethiopia in 1868 during a British invasion and had been kept in the museum, largely in a storeroom not on display, since their transfer to England following the invasion. The museum mounted the exhibition to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the plunder despite calls from the Ethiopian government for their return. Some critics argued the installation of an exhibition on the anniversary of such an atrocious event was a further display of British superiority, symbolically akin to what John

Merryman (2006: 4) has referred to as the ancient practice "political triumphalism," or the act of prominently displaying loot on return to one's home country from battle in order to stimulate public admiration for the war machine and public approval for the imperial enterprise.

Instead of repatriation, the museum chose to "retain and explain" the collection, keeping the items in their museum acknowledging the violent means through which the objects were acquired and the ongoing debates about their restitution. The exhibition included quotes from interviews conducted with the Ethiopian diasporic community in England in which members reflected on their feelings about the objects being in the V&A collection. The sentiments were overwhelmingly critical of the museum for retaining the collection and indicated desires to see them returned home. Yet for the museum, the representation of these voices, regardless of how dissenting they were, was sufficient for community engagement under their "retain and explain" position, and was therefore a way to justify their retention. The Ethiopian government has consistently refused to engage in negotiations with the V&A Museum in 2018 when offered the objects back on loan. The Ethiopian government indicated that they were only willing to enter into discussions that would lead to permanent repatriation and rejected anything short of that.

During fieldwork in Nigeria, while I did meet a handful of artists who had made artistic contributions to Western museums who held looted Benin artifacts, others refused to do so out of concern that such engagement would make them complicit in the retention efforts of the museums. The diversity of responses to such museum policies is indicative of the heterogeneity of attitudes toward decolonial and assimilationist approaches to museum engagement within the Benin context and beyond. It remains to be seen the extent to which such divergent strategies either undermine or complement one another in the pursuit of reparative justice for the nation.

Replication

Instead of returning objects, Western museums have suggested creating replicas --either through photography or the actual replication of the object using cast molds--that would be displayed in the requesting countries. Museums have at their disposal a host of technological innovations to aid in the study of their collections, and the ability to reproduce objects is one such method. When Braunholtz learned that Mrs. Rawson would be selling their entire Benin collection to the Nigerian government, his response, after pleading with her to reverse her decision, was to have the objects sent to the museum in order to reproduce them. While these reproductions would not necessarily be suitable for display, the idea is that in the absence of the original objects, the museum would still be able to conduct research and analysis on the objects. Many source community cultural institutions, such as the Benin City Museum have, for decades, used photographs of their heritage objects to fill their museums in the absence of the originals that had been looted. This solution addresses the aesthetic/material issues of the requests and debates, which are primarily the concern of the Western museums, but does little to address the cultural and spiritual elements considerations that are embedded in the objects themselves. A reversal in this practice, where the photographs and replicas are instead retained in the Western museum, and the original objects are returned to the source community, is a potential strategy many restitutionists favor. Such efforts would contribute to the "rebalancing of the geography of African heritage" (Sarr and Savoy 2018) by shifting the ownership back to the requesting countries.

Historically, source countries have often used replication techniques when their attempts at restitution have failed. Such was the case for the organizers of Nigeria's FESTAC 77 festival, who unsuccessfully requested the repatriation of the Queen Mother ivory mask from the British Museum and, instead, commissioned a Beninese artist to produce a replica mask. "It is even better than the old mask, which has been haunting our sleep and disturbing our waking hours," said Chukwujindu Nnite, a Nigerian festival organizer, about the replica. Other non-African nations seeking restitution,

such as the Haida Nation, a First People's tribe in Alaska, have used photos and other images in museum displays to represent their looted heritage.

Conditional return

Restitution can be approached from a conditional or unconditional standpoint. It is possible that a holding museum agrees to return an object without conditions, which is increasingly becoming the case as museums, from a moral position, begin to relinquish their rights to determine the fate of objects. Yet historically repatriation has been negotiated with conditions which take many forms. Some conditions are oriented around the source community coming up with legitimate (to the holding museum) reasons for requesting the return of their objects. The British Museum has, at times, expressed a desire that Benin exhibit the "right" reasons for their requests which, to the museum, amounts to be able to demonstrate a cultural or spiritual need for the object. In a memo sent during the negotiations for the Queen Idia mask in the lead up to FESTAC '77 that ultimately recommended not returning the mask, one museum administrator accused the museum of not having the proper intentions for requesting its repatriation: "The agitation for its return is artificial, to the extent that it results from its selection as the emblem of the forthcoming Festival. Had it not been so selected (or had the mask in New York been selected in its place), no serious pressure for its return would have arisen."[36] The implication here is that the Benin community did not require this object for spiritual purposes, but only because it was going to serve an artistic purpose for the festival. This logic undermines why the object was chosen as them emblem of the festival in the first place—its recognition as "a most important part of the country's national heritage"—as well as a

[36] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2122. British Museum Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, London, 14 September 1974. Consulted on 3 July 2019.

symbol of transnational, pan-African solidarity around which the FESTAC '77 delegates and community rallied in the period immediately following independence, as I argued above.[37]

Another common condition for return is the ability to ensure the safety and security of an object within the home country upon return due to either environmental or political reasons. Arguments about the quality of caretaking—or lack thereof—which are often related to the professional skills of curatorial staff, are often used to make judgments about repatriation. These qualities are necessarily related to conversations about resources, given that curation is a costly skill that requires a significant amount of highly trained professionals, which many under resourced nations lack, as discussed above. A lack of museums, museum professionals and poor environmental conditions, such as climate, humidity controls and lighting, contribute to the sense of peril for the objects. Many scholars, mostly from the continent, have challenged this view that Africa lacks adequate museums to care for their objects, citing numerous longstanding state, regional and local museums across the continent as well as new museums that are being constructed, including the one on palace grounds in Benin City. While these museums will likely not have the resources of state museums in the West, advocates have argued that this fact should not be a barrier to communities accessing their heritage. Questions from restitutionists, instead, have focused on why these disparities and inequities in museum resources exist and what actions may be taken to address them.

Another condition established by the British Museum is that a return would create future opportunities for the British to receive those objects back on loan from Nigeria. Their willingness to return the objects was dependent on them being able to request them back from Nigeria in the future. A 1949 report by Braunholtz for the British Museum recommended "offering two or three as a gift to the Nigerian Government, in consideration of recent (and probable future) loans made by

[37] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2125. Letter from Beverley Pick to The Right Honourable Harold Wilson, O.B.E., M.P., London, 30 December 1974. Consulted on 3 July 2019.

that Government to the British Museum."[38] Such a conditional measure risks perpetuating a cycle of dependence—in which Nigeria is unable to claim its heritage on its own terms and is in a state of perpetual debt to the British Museum—thereby locking the museum and Nigeria in a relationship of an unequal distribution of power and resources. The logic of the conditional return implies that the museum is the sole arbiter of legitimate possession, the agent that is allowed to determine the acceptable conditions for return and on their own terms, which lies at the heart of what the Benin community is contesting.

Restitution is not simply about returning objects to their 'proper' places, but also about restoring a sense of belonging and understanding of one's own heritage. According to Bénedicté Savoy, the question of restitution should also consider how to restore our own memory. "What are we made of, we, Europeans, when we know that our culture is based on these institutions?," she asks. Debates about restitution force us to go beyond thinking simply about the transfer of the objects in question to reflecting on the ways in which former colonially-tethered nations have, and continue to, co-construct the national identities of one another.

[38] British Museum Archives. Anthropology Library, BM 2304. British Museum Report on the Disposal of Duplicate Bronzes from Benin. London, 5 October 1949. Consulted on 3 July 2019.

CHAPTER V:

RESTITUTION, POLITICAL ACTORS, AND THE STATE

This chapter examines political institutions, actors, and processes to understand how states--in this case Nigeria, England and Scotland--mobilize the artifacts as cultural mechanisms through which to achieve their respective political objectives. While Nigeria uses the objects as tools with which to assert a postcolonial national identity through an intentional engagement with the forces of global capital, England and Scotland appropriate the artifacts in ways that mostly serve to reinscribe a colonial relation of power with Nigeria. The chapter draws on two cases to demonstrate these negotiations. The first explores transnational efforts to facilitate a strategy of nation building and development through cultural tourism in Benin City and examines the legacies of this work that persist into the present day. While many scholars of heritage tourism have argued that the involvement of local actors is critical to a successful implementation of a tourism program, I demonstrate that the role of diasporas is generally overlooked as being critical to the success of such initiatives. Since the 1990s there have been comprehensive attempts to utilize Nigeria's, and particularly Edo State's, rich cultural heritage resources as a tool through which the national and state-level government has pursued economic development goals via tourism and diasporic engagement. In 1997, a transnational committee formed to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Benin invasion, an event which I argue was, at its core, a project of nation-building. The work of the committee revealed that not only are economic and cultural development not at odds with one another, but the latter may indeed be a tool through which the former is achieved.

The second case examines the political restitution efforts of Labour MP Bernie Grant and the Africa Reparations Movement (ARM-UK) in England and Scotland. In the 1990s, the ARM-UK mobilized a campaign to repatriate Britain's Benin artifacts to Nigeria, a process through which articulations and contestations of entitlements to cultural heritage, constructions of national identity, and claims to historical memory were established. This case traces the efforts of Grant and his interlocutors engaged in ARM-UK's work and to reveal the shifting meanings of political power the

Benin bronzes carried in the postcolonial context. Through heated debates of ownership of the objects, the parties appropriated the meaning of the Benin bronzes to signal commitments to their ideological, political, and moral viewpoints to ultimately achieve their respective political goals.

CULTURAL HERITAGE TOURISM, NATION BUILDING, AND DEVELOPMENT IN BENIN

In January 2020 I walked into the Benin City Airport to catch a return flight back to Lagos and was greeted by a banner that read, "The Edo State Ministry of Arts, Culture, Tourism and Diaspora Affairs Welcomes You." As I sat in the lobby waiting for the plane to arrive, I wondered about the commonality and linkages of these concepts--art, culture, tourism and diaspora--what conditions and circumstances led to their union under one bureaucratic umbrella, and why this ministry would be the one to greet me in the airport as opposed to, say, the Ministry of Immigration or Ministry of Aviation. The existence and prominence of Edo State's Ministry of Arts, Culture, Tourism and Diaspora Affairs reveals the significant and formative role of arts and culture in the development of Edo State's tourism industry, and vice versa, and the ways in which the global Nigerian diaspora--from London and Leeds to Houston and Huntsville--helps shape these forces.

Heritage tourism is a viable source of development globally, with estimates of up to 80 percent of all domestic and international travel in the world involving the exploration of cultural heritage.[39] In Benin, the rich artistic and cultural landscape has long been a driver of economic development through its tourism industry, and the engagement of diasporic populations as a means by which to pursue this project is not a newly-minted strategy. In 1997 a transnational group of government officials and those working in the culture sector in the UK and Nigeria formed a

[39] See discussions in Timothy, D. J. 2011. *Cultural Heritage and Tourism: An Introduction*. Bristol, UK: Channel View Publications; Scheyvens, R. 2002. *Tourism for Development: Empowering Communities*. Harlow, UK: Prentice Hall; Timothy, D. J. 2014. Contemporary Cultural Heritage and Tourism: Development Issues and Emerging Trends. Public Archaeology: Archaeology and Economic Development, 13(1-3), 30-47.

transnational committee to plan events and projects that would commemorate the 100th anniversary of the 1897 British invasion of Benin. The Edo State Centenary Committee, as the group came to be known, had a two primary goals: to secure the return of artifacts looted from the ancient pre-colonial Kingdom of Benin during the 1897 massacre, and to spur economic development in Edo State through the enhancement of the region's tourism infrastructure in collaboration with the Nigerian diaspora in the UK. While many scholars of heritage tourism have argued that the involvement of local actors is critical to a successful implementation of a tourism program[40], I argue that the role of the diaspora is generally overlooked as also being critical to the success of such initiatives. Thus this chapter explores the Centenary Committee's efforts to facilitate a strategy of nation building and development through their work at the intersection of culture and tourism and examine the legacies of this work that persist into the present day.

Economic or Cultural Development?

In the early 1970s, in the wake of the global oil boom and Nigeria's ascendancy as a leading producer and exporter of crude oil, socioeconomic conditions within the country began to deteriorate due to issues related to internal governance and corruption, international capitalist exploitation, and civil conflict (Okowa 1997). Despite the producing $320 billion in oil revenue between 1970 and 1999, millions of Nigerians were plunged into poverty and economic despair for the first time since the end of colonial rule (Relief Web 2002). At this same time, given that Nigeria had only recently fought for and gained its independence in 1960, nation building and the development of a national cultural and political consciousness was a priority for government and civil society actors. Officials engaged in high-profile efforts to construct a national platform for

[40] See discussions in Singh, S., Timothy, D. & Dowling, R. eds. 2003. Tourism in Destination Communities. Cambridge (USA): CABI publishing.

cultural development rooted in the country's rich material heritage in an effort to unify the country, specifically focusing on securing the return of looted antiquities from abroad, but these plans were met with significant resistance due to the belief they were at odds with efforts aimed at alleviating the nation's urgent economic crisis.

In a 1976 article in Nigeria's *West African Pilot*, journalist Willy Bozimo (1976) notes the oppositional nature of these perspectives: "On the controversial aspect of spending millions of petro-naira on buying back antiquities, most Nigerians who cannot claim three square meals a day cannot understand the rationale behind the feverish campaigns to bring back forgotten antiquities." Conversely, those working in the culture sector argued that the reclaiming of material heritage from abroad and restoration to their places of origin represent a necessary step in the construction and articulation of an historically-informed postcolonial national identity. Chairman of the National Antiquities Commission and former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lagos Professor Sabori Biobaku was quoted in Bozimo's article stating, "Man does not live by bread alone, and to feed the mind spiritually, we need our people to stand erect and be proud of our glorious past. While the average Nigerian must not be denied the blessings of modernity, he must live and die only in the assumption of his own contribution to the present from his past. In other words, we must allow some element of spiritual quality to temper the materialistic world." Thus, for many years following Nigeria's independence, economic and cultural development seemed to be in tension with one another as the country grappled with the project of nation-building. I argue that the efforts of the Edo State Centenary Committee were one small step toward bridging the gap between these disparate conceptualizations of progress.

The conventional literature on heritage tourism and development have argued that the more precarious the country's economic base, the less likely it is to appreciate cultural heritage for its 'intrinsic' value--such as its aesthetic, educational and scientific merits--and more likely to prioritize

its economic potential.[41] I would argue, though, that this perspective is rooted in a colonialist mentality that undermines the intrinsic value of heritage that their creators possessed that created the conditions for the production of such objects--aesthetic virtue, spiritual embodiment, and textual wisdom--while it simultaneously overemphasizes the condition of economic desperation the global North has constructed of the South. I offer the case of Edo heritage as a challenge to this binary logic and testament to the possibility of holding both cultural and economic development in one frame.

The Great Benin Centenary Committee

The primary objectives of the Great Benin Centenary Committee in the period preceding the 1997 commemoration of the Benin Massacre were to elevate the history of the ancient precolonial kingdom of Benin while simultaneously making efforts to secure a stable and prosperous foundation for the future of Edo State. The Committee, which had two branches--one in London which engaged the Nigerian diaspora of the UK and was led by Bernie Grant, London's first black Member of Parliament, and the second based in Benin City--was convened and presided over by the king of Benin Oba Erediauwa. A memo outlining the goals of the Committee highlighted the importance of commemorating this dark moment of Benin's history with the recognition that, "Yesterday gave birth to today and today is the mother of tomorrow. Without remembering the past (good or bad), no one can plan for the future."[42] Thus the activities and goals of the centennial celebration were both forward- and backward-looking as they sought to promote prosperity across Benin through the recognition of past suffering.

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[41] See discussions in Timothy, D. J. & Nyaupane, G. P. (2009). *Cultural Heritage and Tourism in the Developing World: A Regional Perspective*. London: Routledge.

[42] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, BG 2182. Minutes of the Meeting Between Bernie Grant MP & Edo State Centenary Committee Officers Group, London, 3 March 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

The nation building and development goals of the Committee were clear. According to notes from a London branch meeting, the projects initiated were created with the intent to "foster the unity and encourage the development of all sons and daughters of Edoland, and enable us to step into the next century with confidence and hope."[43] These projects included the following: (1) a week-long celebratory festival in Benin City; (2) demanding the repatriation of looted Benin artifacts currently held by Western institutions and individuals, citing that "these works of art represent our wealth and archives; (3) fundraising for socioeconomic development projects.

Development Objectives of the Centenary Committee

As part of the centennial commemoration, four socioeconomic and sociocultural development projects were planned to advance the nation building objectives of the Committee. The first project was the establishment of the Edo Foundation, a body which would be charged with promoting education, economy, national and international politics, commerce and industry within Benin. Their work would include providing scholarships and grants for students in Edo State and sponsoring fellowships and endowments for researchers and professors as well as ten blocks of public housing. One block was to be financed entirely by the UK's Nigerian diaspora through their fundraising efforts. The Committee suggested that the Edo Foundation would be, "The umbrella that will provide shelter against literacy, hunger and disease for the future generations. It shall be a defence mechanism for the people of tomorrow, just as the moat initiated by Oba Oguola was for the people of yesterday."[44] The historical references to a 13th century infrastructural project and the simultaneous promise of a brighter future creates a virtual throughline from the past to the present

[43] ibid
[44] ibid

and continuing into the future and suggests a steady progression of nation-building unencumbered by colonial violence and economic strife.

The second project proposed by the Committee was the construction of a sculptural garden and exhibition center to honor all those involved in the Benin Massacre. They noted that both Benin and British individuals would be included in the memorial, in addition to other "heroes of the land." The third proposed project is the restoration of the great wall and moat that had previously surrounded and provided protection against invaders to Benin City. The wall and moat were built in 1285 AD and was long considered to be the second-longest wall in the world only after China's Great Wall. The wall and moat were destroyed in the Benin Massacre and, therefore, are a symbol of the colonial destruction associated with the invasion.

The final development project proposed by the Committee was to convert a village by the name of Ugbine to a historic tourist attraction. Ugbine was the site at which the initial attack on British soldiers in response to their invasion of Benin occurred. Two Edo chiefs traveled to Ugbine in 1896 to dissuade the British troops to retreat, but their demands went unheard and when the Britons continued to advance, the Benin party attacked them, killing all in the party. Several weeks later, in January 1897 the Benin Massacre occurred which was initiated as both a revenge slaughter as well as a strategic military occupation to capture the remainder of the region during the Scramble for Africa. Thus the village of Ugbine is considered to be a significant site in not just the sacking of the Benin Kingdom, but of the colonization of the entire region. The total costs associated with the four development projects was 311 million naira (approximately USD 786,000 at the time).

The London branch of the Edo Foundation was deeply invested in the financial viability of this slate of development projects and committed to raising £250,000 in support of the overall goal. In order to meet this objective, the Committee requested that each Edo person living in the UK, as well as

any friends or supporters of the community, contribute a minimum of £10 to the project. On a visit to Portugal in 1996, Prince Edun Akenzua, the Duke of Benin and the oba's brother, requested financial support for the projects from the Portuguese government, noting that the total budget of the centennial activities would amount to USD 50 million. In addition to financial support, the London branch of the Committee also committed to hosting a series of local activities in May of 1997 that would run parallel to the centennial celebration events taking place in Benin City, which included demonstrations led by MP Bernie Grant on the steps of the British Museum demanding the repatriation of looted Benin Bronzes; a public lecture for the London community on the 1897 Benin Massacre; a community exhibition and workshop exploring Benin arts and culture; and a dance and theater performance that would serve as a fundraiser for the Committee's development projects.

During this period Grant also founded the Africa Reparations Movement (ARM), a political organization dedicated to repairing the enduring harm and legacies of British imperialism and slavery. One of the major projects initiated by ARM in 1996 was the development of the Gallery for Returning Treasures. Minutes of a meeting between Grant, Prince Akenzua, and other members of ARM note that the Gallery would be designed through a competitive process engaging the wider African diaspora and serve as a European 'staging post' for objects being repatriated to the countries of origin."[45] In addition to a repository of antiquities, the gallery would serve as a training institute for future African curators as well as a library and archive of African cultural heritage. The focus on creating the conditions in which artifact restitution is possible combined with developing the capacity of African diasporic scholars and curators may be read as an anti-colonial strategy to obviate the need for preservation, conservation, education to be located within a Western colonial

[45] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, BG 2182. Minutes of the Meeting Between Bernie Grant MP & Edo State Centenary Committee Officers Group, London, 3 March 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

framework. Reclaiming these pursuits within an African diasporic framework represents efforts toward a vision of Edo nation building that is both grounded in Benin's history while also being transnational in scope.

In a meeting between Bernie Grant and the City Councilors of Glasgow, Scotland, one of the Councillors inquired if there was oil in Benin, and when he learned that there was, he suggested that one of the oil companies sponsor the return of Glasgow's collection of Benin Bronzes, noting that "they would benefit from the good publicity."[46] The return of the objects would not only serve to benefit the educational, cultural, spiritual and historical development of the nation, but also generate tourism for those interested in experiencing the objects in their sites of origin. The speculative leveraging of Nigeria's primary resource commodity in service of the return of the Benin's most famed looted historical relic speaks directly to the intersection of cultural and economic development. In this case, though, the economic stimulus is presented in the form of potential philanthropic support from the business community, unlike previous forms of development that depended on the Edo diaspora, the tourism sector, and foreign governments. The notion of an internal, domestic loop of resource capital from the oil industry being redirected back into the culture sector exemplifies the ways in which economic growth has historically been used to spur cultural development within Edo.

One development activity that led to divisions within the Centenary Committee, with the London branch on one side and the Edo branch on the other. As noted above, the London branch produced a cultural performance in London entitled "The Trial of Oba Ovonramwen," which dramatized the 1897 British trial of Benin's sitting oba who was subsequently exiled by the colonial British government. The oba presiding over the Centenary Committee was extremely displeased

[46] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, BG 2182. Minutes of the Meeting Between Bernie Grant MP & Edo State Centenary Committee Officers Group, London, 15 June 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

with the portrayal of his royal predecessor, arguing that "the treatment the British meted out to the Oba was to [his community] exposing the Oba to ridicule and our people did not like that" and describing the depictions as "awful" and "atrocious."[47] Many disgruntled citizens of Edo called for the outright banning of the play, primarily due to the perceived historical inaccuracies and the fact that many of the actors and actresses were West Indian and South African. The play was later staged in South Africa where it has an even more successful run to the sitting oba's dismay. While the oba was understandably and genuinely appalled by the inaccurate historical portrayals, especially in the context of a movement to redress flawed British narratives of history, his ire was also motivated by an economic force. Of the play he notes that, "What is even more sad, and which is to be deprecated, is the manner the authors of these scripts used the stage performance to make money and enrich their pockets without contributing as much as one per cent of their in-take to the fund of the Centenary Committee.[48] The oba, and the Committee more generally, entrusted the London branch to develop culturally appropriate, respectful, and representative historical programming, but they also expected their activities to generate revenue for the overall development goals of the project. He goes on to add that, "They have used the misfortune of our people [one] hundred years ago to enrich themselves, and it is not healthy."[49] The fact that those involved in the production of the play did not uphold the fundraising component of the bargain was deeply offensive and betraying to the oba and transgressed the notion that the cultural festivities might simultaneously be both educational and economically lucrative for the Kingdom.

While each of these activities have as their objective to expand the awareness of, and access to, Benin's cultural heritage for the Edo diaspora as well as the general public living in London, it is

[47] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/4. "An Address Delivered by the Omo N'Oba N'Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo, Erediauwa, CFR, Oba of Benin, At the Commencement of the Great Benin Centenary Activities" Benin City, 17 February 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.
[48] ibid
[49] ibid

clear from the monetization of such approaches that the economic motive is particularly strong. With regard to the cultural development projects that would take place in Edo, particularly the three which explicitly endeavor to enhance the cultural tourism economy of Edo, the link between the role of cultural and economic development via a touristic economy is even more explicit and profound. Beyond the Benin Bronzes, the wall and moat, the monuments and the dances being touchstones for Edo's cultural identity, members of the Committee recognized the financial viability of these entities as potential drivers of revenue for a petrol naira-based economy that had failed the daughters and sons of Edoland. Thus the project of nation-building in Nigeria in 1997 was not only an effort to reconstruct a memory of a pre-colonial Benin Kingdom, redress decades of situational and ongoing colonial violences, and promote educational awareness that would benefit future generations--in a sense, the development of a national cultural self-consciousness-- but was also a way of commodifying these practices to ensure their sustainability. In short, nation-building involved a two-pronged approach of both cultural and economic development. The work of the Centenary Committee revealed that not only are economic and cultural development not at odds with one another, but the latter may indeed be a tool through which the former is achieved.

Benin's contemporary culture-tourism nexus

Thus far I have examined the ways in which Benin's cultural heritage was leveraged in the late 1990s to promote economic development and encourage nation building both within Edo and throughout the diaspora, particularly in London. I would argue that the legacies of utilizing Benin's cultural heritage in such a productive way have persisted into the contemporary moment and remain just as present as they were more than two decades ago. As I noted in the introduction, Edo State has a ministry that governs arts, culture, tourism and the diaspora, which represents the ways in

which the region continues to think about their heritage tourism strategy both domestically and transnationally.

In 1997 one of the arguments advanced by a handful of the Glasgow City Councillors who MP Bernie Grant engaged on the question of restitution for the Glasgow Museum's Benin collection is the extent to which removal of objects from source countries has "benefitted poor countries economically, wetting the appetite for tourism and cultural exchange."[50] This is a retentionist claimed often put forth by those seeking to hold on to the looted antiquities that they have inherited, but it is also a common argument amongst some in Nigeria, in particular Benin, today who likewise believe that the presence of the Bronzes in Western nations has sparked a curiosity within Westerners to experience the objects in their sites of origin. Thus this strategy advocates for the objects to remain in their Western locations to serve as a mechanism that would drive tourism to stimulate Edo's local economy.

On a recent visit to the Benin City National Museum, as I was perusing a collection of 16th century antiquities on the ground floor I was approached by a man who introduced himself as a custodian of the museum's storage facility, where many thousands of objects that are not currently on public display are held. He saw me scribbling down notes and asked me several questions about my work and background, and the conversation eventually led to the topic of restitution. Given his role in the museum as a conservator of Benin's material heritage, I assumed that he would be an ardent supporter of repatriation. Instead, he told me, "The fact that you're here is reason enough to keep those artifacts there [in the British Museum]."[51] Like the Glasgow Councillors, he believed that it was more important to have the artifacts remain in the West where they would be seen by individuals who would, in turn, be inspired to visit Benin in order to see the objects in their

[50] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/4. "Some Points Likely to Made In Support of Motion" Benin City, 17 February 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.
[51] Interview with Respondent 26, Benin City, Nigeria, January 19, 2020

homeplace. Support for such a tourism strategy was echoed by several individuals with whom I spoke on the visit, from those working in the culture sector, such as artists and museum curators, to those represented in the general public, such as Uber drivers and shop owners.

The Benin Dialogue Group is a collective comprised of museum directors, curators, attorneys and intellectuals hailing from Nigerian and Western institutions that hold or have deep connections to Benin Bronzes that was formed in 2007 in response to ongoing conversations about the restitution of the Bronzes. After more than a decade of negotiation over the fate of the antiquities, weighing the divergent perspectives of those favoring restitution versus retention, the group announced in 2019 that an agreement was reached that the artifacts held by the Western museums represented within the Group would be returned to Benin with two caveats. The first is that the objects would be returned on long-term loan, which means that the Western museum would still maintain possession of the objects, but that they would be on view in Benin. The idea of long-term or permanent loans is one that has become increasingly popular in recent years as a way of allowing source countries access to their cultural heritage while allowing looting countries to maintain the wealth and status accumulated from the possession of the object.

The second stipulation concerns the placement of the returned objects. The Bronzes were originally looted from the Kingdom of Benin's royal palace, many of them from sacred altars or spaces that only the royal family and court were privy to witnessing and therefore not on public display. When the artifacts were looted from these locations and sold to museums which subsequently displayed them to millions of visitors, many Edo people and those familiar with the cultural practices of the Edo, including several obas, objected to the showcasing of these sacred objects and demanded that they be returned to their rightful place within the palace. In his 2007 letter Omo N'Oba Erediauwa noted that "they were not originally meant to be mere museum pieces simply to be displayed for art lovers to admire" (Plankensteiner 2007: ix). Yet for educational and

touristic purposes, many institutions have deemed it necessary to showcase the objects publicly. The Benin Dialogue Group, in discussing this issue of placement, arrived at a relative compromise--the objects returned on loan would be placed in a newly-built museum housed within the royal palace. This agreement was made with the belief that the objects on display would allow Edo people to see the Benin Bronzes in their homeland for the first time in more than 120 years, thus enabling the revival of a history of pre-colonial Benin told from the perspective of the Edo. Yet the construction of the new palace museum and return of the loaned Bronzes also had the twin aim of promoting touristic activity within Benin. The Group hopes that the new museum and its contents, the construction of which is set to be completed in 2022, will attract the interest of tourists and travelers who have been following the years of debates over the entitlements of the Benin Bronzes and want to finally experience them in their original contexts. Thus, we again see the utilization of cultural heritage as a mechanism through which a national historical consciousness is developed as well as it being a simultaneous driver for tourism and economic development within Edo.

In 1994, two years before planning for the centenary celebration began, Bernie Grant and his Africa Reparations Movement party held demonstrations on the steps of the British Museum to protest the museum's refusal to consider the question of the restitution of the Benin Bronzes. In photos of the picket line formed across the main entrance to the museum, protestors are seen holding signs which read, "Our Culture, Our History, Our Inheritance." Culture and history are considered to be the cornerstones of national building, particularly for postcolonial states that continue to be ravaged by the legacies of imperial rule. Thus, the project of nation building is one that relies heavily upon redressing historical inaccuracies perpetuated by the former imperial nation, the reconstruction of that history, and the development of a national cultural identity that centers indigenous authorship. What, then, is the role of inheritance? Inheritance may refer to the ownership of cultural and historical legacies, but it may also refer to the material endowments which a people

or society are owed. Those protesting the British Museum and, by extension the UK government's looting of their inheritance, might therefore in this case be speaking both to the lost Bronzes inheritances and more broadly to the material and economic losses Edo has incurred in the century since the massacre, from which it has hardly recovered--the inheritance of cultural and historical but also economic dispossession. Recent efforts toward reparations, particularly in the area of cultural heritage, have addressed the twin imperative of thinking about long-term sustainable development as part of a stable reparative process.

The strategy of using the nation's rich cultural heritage resources as a tool through which to pursue economic development goals via tourism and diasporic engagement is one that dates back to the 1990s. Far from a novel framework for development, current efforts to bring tourism to Edo through the establishment of a new royal palace museum and gallery that will hold repatriated objects on loan is simply the latest in a decades-long strategy to leverage Edo's material heritage for the purposes of nation building. What does feel new about this particular moment is the extent to which this process extends beyond the reach of the "sons and daughters" of Edo into the Western diaspora and the engagement Western cultural and philanthropic institutions that will enable the project to come to fruition.

Following the Centenary celebration, as the Committee was in the process of being dissolved, there were discussions about whether to transition the Committee into a longer standing institution that would continue to facilitate the development needs of the nation through a cultural heritage mandate. According to notes from a meeting between Bernie Grant and a Scottish City Councillor, Grant noted that, "We are working to establish a permanent organisation to work on this issue. This body will be better placed to assist in such things as raising funds."[52] Bernie Grant,

[52] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, BG 2182. Minutes of the Meeting Between Bernie Grant MP & Edo State Centenary Committee Officers Group, London, 15 June 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

who died in 2000, three years after the centenary celebration and related activities, was forward looking, if not prophetic, about the enduring role that Edo's culture would have in its development. Only time will tell to what extent the plan's focus on sustainability will have a lasting effect on the great nation.

BERNIE GRANT, THE AFRICA REPARATIONS MOVEMENT, AND RESTITUTION

On a warm day in July of 1994, British Labour MP Bernie Grant marched back and forth across the steps of the British Museum for several hours waving a sign reading "400 Years of Robbery, Fraud & Lies."[53] Clad in his signature dashiki, Grant, one of Britain's first black MPs in over 65 years, was picketing against the Museum's exhibition of artifacts from the ancient Kingdom of Benin as part of a demonstration he and the Africa Reparations Movement (ARM) had organized. Grant founded the UK Committee of ARM (ARM-UK), of which he was chair, in 1993 with the mission of seeking repair for the nation's moral and material debt accrued through centuries of slavery and colonization in Africa and the Caribbean. Among the most significant objectives of the committee was securing the restitution of the Benin bronzes back to the royal palace in Benin City. Over the next seven years until his death, Grant and his colleagues in London, alongside transnational political activists across the diaspora, advocated for the repatriation of the bronzes and, in doing so, generated a renewed discourse on the state of neocolonial relations between the UK and Nigeria. The collections of bronzes within British museums thus became a prism through which articulations of entitlements to cultural heritage, constructions of national identity, and claims to historical memory were understood. While Grant's political life regarding his work on anti-Black racism in the UK is well documented, less has been written about his efforts regarding reparations,

[53] The Times Picture Gallery, vol. 65004, London, Times Newspapers Limited, p. 10, 12 July 1994. Additional photos of the demonstration taken by Peter Murphy are in Bernie Grant's personal papers (BG/ARM/4/4).

particularly the campaign for the restitution of the Benin bronzes. In this critical moment of heightened calls for the 'decolonization' of museums and a groundswell of support for the repatriation of artifacts from museums back to source countries, it is important to examine the efforts of political actors who contributed to the pre-history of today's movement.

This case traces the efforts of Grant and his interlocutors engaged in ARM-UK's work--from English and Scottish Members of Parliament and City Councillors, and Benin and British monarchists, to museum professionals, journalists, and activists--to reveal the shifting meanings of cultural and political power the Benin bronzes carried in the postcolonial context. Through a series of conferences, proclamations, protests, Parliamentary and Council debates, public campaigns, and internal memoranda, those involved in conversations over the fate of the Benin bronzes engaged in debates in which claims and counterclaims to their rightful possession and stewardship took center stage. Stakeholders supportive of restitution emphasized the sense of cultural alienation and violence experienced through the plunder of their heritage and advanced articulations of the artifacts as symbols of the enduring hegemonic effects of cultural imperialism. To this community, the promise of restitution represented the possibility of an alternative future liberated from the Eurocentric imperial narratives of their history frequently told in 'world culture' museums, and an opportunity to embrace indigenous counternarratives from their own perspectives. Conversely, those on the retention side of the debate who wished for the artifacts to remain in museums invoked notions of preservation, cultural universalism, and commitment to science in their arguments for keeping the antiquities in their collections. Through heated contestations of ownership of the objects, the parties appropriated the meaning of the Benin bronzes to signal commitments to their ideological, political, and moral viewpoints to ultimately achieve their respective political goals. Through their activism and campaigning, Bernie Grant and ARM-UK negotiated, re-interpreted, and re-formulated the meaning of the Benin bronzes in British society to articulate their understanding of the obligations

Britain has to the descendants of their institutions of slavery and colonialism. The British government and museum establishment, on the other hand, imbued the Benin bronzes with a sense of purpose that allowed them to stake claims in a forward-looking postcolonial national identity, as a nation advocating for a just world seeking to protect the core values of the Enlightenment.

This case is specifically concerned with how material culture is strategically deployed as a tool of imperial control in the modern day and the ways in which political actors resist, challenge and negotiate the boundaries of control through calls for restitution. I argue that the possession and retention of cultural artifacts by the West represents a form of neoimperial control, with the objects themselves serving as a mechanism of state and institutional power through which the nation affects its political desires. States appropriate the social and symbolic value of cultural heritage into national heritage with utilitarian function in order to confer greater authority onto the state, often at the expense of the source community's access to the object. Museums, as state institutions vested with the mandate of protection, guardianship and preservation of heritage objects are often the apparatus through which this object power is wielded. Over the last several decades, museums have evolved into sites of interrogative reflexivity, as communities that traditionally were the object of study in museums have increasingly called for their "decolonization." As such, this case examines the ways in which restitution advocates have pushed cultural institutions, and our framing of them, from being conceptualized as spaces purely for collection and preservation to zones which must acknowledge the political role museums play in shaping and reflecting national and cultural identities, and owning their responsibility to discuss and challenge their complicated histories.[54]

Bernie Grant and the Africa Reparations Movement (ARM-UK)

[54] See Kaplan, F (ed), Museums and the Making of Ourselves: The Roles of Objects in National Identity, London and New York, Leicester University Press, 1994. P. Levitt, Artifacts and allegiances: How museums put the nation and the world on display, Oakland, University of California Press, 2015

Bernie Grant founded ARM-UK in 1993 to, in part, support Nigeria's efforts to retrieve Britain's bronzes, yet his work to bring justice to Black people in the UK and throughout the diaspora had long been a prominent feature of his political life. Grant, who was born in 1944 in British Guiana while it was still under colonial rule, became a leading activist within the labor rights movement through the late 1960s and 1970s as an International Telephonist in the Union of Post Office Workers (Bishopsgate Institute website). In a move to address the racism he found to be endemic within the trade union movement, Grant founded the Black Trade Unionists Solidarity Movement and, turning his ambitions toward the political realm, was elected as a Councillor within the Tottenham Labour Party. In 1987 Grant was elected to Parliament continuing to represent Tottenham, one of three Black MPs elected that year after more than a half-century of an all-White Parliament. As an MP Grant was a fierce advocate for racial equity and justice, often speaking out against police misconduct, racial discrimination and harassment, disparities in health care, housing and education, and unjust immigration control. Yet, one of Grant's most enduring contributions to the UK's racial justice landscape were his efforts to secure reparative justice for Africans and people of African descent in Britain through his work with ARM-UK.

In 1993, Grant attended the Pan-African Conference on Reparations in Abuja sponsored by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which was a follow-up meeting to the first international conference on reparations held in Lagos in 1990 and was a venue in which leaders set a transnational reparations agenda for the global Black diaspora (McLymont 2002). Following the conference, Grant and the newly formed ARM-UK hosted the first UK Conference on Reparations for Africa in November 1993 and Grant embarked on a national speaking tour on reparations. These efforts were built on decades of organizing for restitution of African cultural property that took place between the late 1960s-1980s, spearheaded in large part by Dr. Ekpo Eyo, Director of Nigeria's Federal Department of Antiquities from 1968-1979 and Director-General of Nigeria's National Commission

for Museums and Monuments from 1979-1986, who, among other efforts, tabled a resolution at the 1968 International Council of Museums (ICOM) General Assembly for the restitution of one to two objects from each holding member institution, which was later rejected (Opoku 2011). In an effort to secure a collection of bronzes for the new Benin City museum whose opening was being planned in the early 1970s, Dr. Eyo also unsuccessfully launched restitution appeals to several museums and private collectors in the West which were known to have held Benin artifacts. Yet Bénédicte Savoy (2021) has argued that there is a sense of amnesia that has eroded memory of these earlier organizing efforts which sparked international conversations about restitution and created the framework through which many African nations made their initial formal requests for repatriation.

From the early 1990s Grant brought his reparations campaign into the political realm. In 1993, he initiated a Parliamentary motion to ratify the Abuja Proclamation, thus introducing the topic of reparations into Parliament for the very first time (UK Parliament Early Day Motions 1993).[55] Other members of the ARM-UK also advocated the case for reparations at the national political level, such as Lord Anthony Gifford who, in 1996, brought the issue before the House of Lords—another first.[56] ARM-UK embedded itself within the broader global reparative justice struggle by situating its work alongside reparations movements in contexts beyond African slavery and colonization, such as Scotland's retrieval of its Stone of Destiny from England in 1996 and reparations paid by the German state to Israel for crimes committed during the Holocaust. A March 1997 press release by ARM-UK announced plans to hold a picket "to demand the return of the Benin Bronzes and the 130,000 other items looted and held by them," an indication that the

[55] On 19 December 1995, Grant delivered an address to the House of Commons urging the government to provide material support to allow Black Britons to repatriate to Africa and the Caribbean. The copy of this speech can be found on ARM's former website here: http://web.archive.org/web/20061004105148/http://www.arm.arc.co.uk/speech.html
[56] A copy of Lord Gifford's speech is available on ARM's former website here: http://web.archive.org/web/20061004105557/http://www.arm.arc.co.uk/legalBasis.html

organization had its sights set on repatriation more broadly than just the Benin context.[57] In addition, the organization sought to enhance Pan-African linkages across the diaspora which transcended nation-state and continental boundaries and advocated for the restoration of dignity for black people the world over. Grant made several trips to Africa and the Caribbean, for example visiting Zimbabwe and Malawi in 1993 to speak with leaders and opposition parties about the problem of Global North dependency and ways to create self-sufficiency through reparations. As ARM-UK forcefully noted in a July 1994 press release, "The demand for the return of such artefacts is one expression of the growing movement for reparations for Africa."[58]

As chair of the ARM-UK throughout the 1990s, Grant frequently toured the UK giving speeches to ignite energy around his plan for repairing relations between Britain and Africa. Grant was concerned about what he believed was the deteriorating condition of nations in Africa and the Caribbean, which he attributed to slavery, colonization and, more contemporaneously, neocolonial economic development policies of the West which created structures of geopolitical dependence. His demands included an apology from the British government about its involvement in slavery and colonization, an acknowledgment of the positive contributions of Africans and their descendants to the founding and development of Britain, increased investments in infrastructure in ex-colonies, monetary compensation, and cancellation of Third World debt.

ARM-UK attempted to establish a global reparations network with a committee in every nation that would represent all African people, yet there is only evidence of successful committees being established in Nigeria and the UK.[59] Membership was open to anyone of African origin and its supporters included British and Nigerian politicians from City Councillors to MPs, members of the

[57] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/3. ARM press release, London, March 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.
[58] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/6. ARM press release, London, July 1994. Consulted on 12 June 2019.
[59] See ARM's former website, 'About the Africa Reparations Movement':
http://web.archive.org/web/20061121013101/http://www.arm.arc.co.uk/about.html

Benin royal family, museum administrators and curators, archivists, researchers, academics, journalists, artists, civil servants, activists, and concerned citizens who shared a common concern about the enduring legacies of slavery and colonialism. The organization had sections for students, trade unionists, women, athletes, entertainers and architects, and their work included research on institutional linkages to the slave trade, public demonstrations supporting artifact restitution, and the establishment of memorials to enslaved persons. Research was a particularly important aspect of ARM-UK's work: for example, the student section engaged in historical research to uncover transactional records of enslaved persons and Grant utilized his MP status to gain access to archival records in the House of Commons, House of Lords and the West India Committee to build his case for reparations. The organization produced publications on the history of Africa and the Caribbean used in curriculum for educational institutions, as well as for use in cultural events and spaces, such the establishment of a museum of black history and cultural center in the UK, a dream which was finally realized in 2007 with the opening of London's Bernie Grant Arts Centre, designed by renowned architect Sir David Adjaye.

While Grant and many others within the transnational movement were invested in developing reparative solutions for issues related to social and economic development, it was his commitment to restoring Africa's cultural heritage to its people that was a particularly critical aspect of his call for reparations. At a rally in Birmingham on April 11, 1993, Grant laid out his case for cultural reparations:

> I am saying that we need Reparations but I am not going to start from enslavement, I am going to start from before that. I am going to say to you that Black people have a rich history and culture and tradition. Our history has been distorted, so as to deny our achievements. […] Our history has been wiped out, and re-written to suit the white world. […] I think that one of the things we have to insist on is that sacred, religious, historic artefacts are returned to their countries of origin (Grant 1993).

There were two distinct moments during the time ARM-UK was active between 1993-2000 that the organization centered their focus on demanding the return of the bronzes. The first was in 1994:

catalyzed by a recent return from the Abuja Conference and signing of the Abuja Proclamation in 1993 and embittered by the 1993-4 exhibition of the bronzes at the British Museum, ARM-UK members staged the first of two series of pickets on the steps of the museum. In 1996 ARM-UK launched its second bronzes restitution campaign, this time spurred by two events fundamentally different than those which led to the 1993-4 campaign. The first event was the 1996 return of the Stone of Destiny to Scotland by England, discussed in detail below, which ARM-UK argued set a precedent for the repatriation of looted artifacts in Britain. The second event was the approaching 100th anniversary of the 1897 Benin invasion, an affair that was to be commemorated in Benin City by the current generation of monarchists whose objective in memorializing the event was, among others, to seek the return of the objects plundered during the massacre.[60] ARM-UK, as an active participant in the commemoration events, embarked on a second restitution campaign and engaged in another series of pickets at the British Museum in 1997 on the anniversary of the invasion. As part of the Centenary celebration, Grant launched a two-year letter writing campaign with City Councillors in Glasgow, where several dozen bronzes were held in the city's Kelvingrove Museum, and also met with museum administrators. During this time Grant also moved an Act of Parliament which would have allowed the amendment of the British Museum Act 1753 which prevents British state museums from deaccessioning their collections, though this amendment never passed (Oqunleye 1997). Five months before his death in 2000, Grant, in his final appearance in the House of Commons, gave an impassioned speech before Prime Minister Tony Blair requesting an acknowledgment of the contributions Africans made to the wealth of the North Atlantic and asking that he "set the record straight" by apologizing to people of African origin, living and dead, for Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Grant made similar pleas to Queen Elizabeth

[60] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/4. « An Address Delivered by the Omo N'Oba N'Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo, Erediauwa, CFR, Oba of Benin, At the Commencement of the Great Benin Centenary Activities » Benin City, 17 February 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

directly, which largely went unacknowledged, and had plans to advocate to international bodies, such as the United Nations and the International Court of Justice.

ARM-UK struggled to secure funding throughout its life course and Grant's speaking tours to generate interest in the movement often served a dual purpose of fundraising amongst its membership base, which was the organization's primary source of financial support. Grant, at times, expressed frustration that African governments on whose behalf he was seeking artifact restitution, failed to provide more support to the movement and believed that greater commitment by these actors might have ensured more successful repatriation outcomes. While ARM-UK ceased its operations following Grant's death in 2000, Grant's efforts "stoked the fire of reparationist breakthroughs in the coming decades" and continue to have enduring effects across the reparations advocacy landscape of Britain and beyond (Manjapra 2020). The Pan-Afrikan Reparations Coalition in Europe, National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America, the Global Afrikan Congress, and the Afrikan Emancipation Day Reparations March Committee all emerged in the last decades, both explicitly and implicitly building upon the efforts of Grant and ARM-UK.

The restitution of the Benin bronzes in context

When asked his thoughts on the British Museum's 1993-4 exhibition of Benin artifacts, Bernie Grant emphasized, "I am of the view that the exhibits ought to be back in Nigeria where they belong, and not kept in British museums and institutions."[61] Flyers distributed across the city of London in the weeks surrounding the protests contained statements such as, "We refuse to be denied of our art, our heritage," "African art belongs in Africa" and other demands which

[61] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/4. Letter from Bernie Grant to Simon Fuller, Senior Education Officer, Channel 4 Schools, London, 30 March 1994. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

communicated frustration over the museum's retention of the artifacts and a belief that Nigeria was entitled to their possession.[62]

While the focus of ARM-UK's activities was on seeking repair for theft from African peoples, Grant and the organization often studied, referenced, and organized around cases of heritage restitution beyond the African context to situate the Benin case within a larger world-historical framework and to use such precedent to build their own case. In Grant's papers held at the Bishopsgate Institute is a copy of the collected writing of John Maynard Keynes entitled *Volume XXV: Activities 1940-1944. Shaping the Post-War World.* Highlighted are 15 pages of the section on "Reparations the Dismemberment" which examine the war reparations Germany paid to Allied nations following the Second World War. Germany was required to return artifacts, property and money looted from Jewish families during the Holocaust to survivors and the victims' descendants. In 1998, the Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art were released, which provided a framework for addressing matters of restitution of artwork confiscated from Jewish families under the Nazi regime (U.S. Department of State. 1998) and in 2009 the British Parliament passed the Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act, which enables all cultural institutions to return objects acquired illegally during the Nazi era to their rightful owners or descendants.

The return of Jewish heritage was used by members of ARM-UK and Benin officials as a model through which to make similar demands for the bronzes. In 1996 Prince Edun Akenzua, brother of the Oba, wrote to Grenville Tanner, a member of the House of Commons who authored a Parliamentary mandate obliging the Swiss government to disclose holdings of gold that Nazis looted from Austrian Jews which remained in their banks, as well as transferring 8,000 works of art seized from Jewish families held in Vienna. In his letter, Akenzua praised Tanner, noting that, "this

[62] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/4. Flyers for British Museum demonstration produced by ARM, London, 18 July 1994. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

is a victory you share with all those who stand up for justice and raise their voice against racial discrimination, injustice, suppression of the weak by the strong and against enslavement and colonization."[63] To those in the UK and Benin engaged in the struggle over the bronzes, the objects were not simply objects that belonged to a single community or nation, but were part of a lineage of globally-dispersed property that had been misappropriated through war and acts of violence across international contexts.

ARM-UK also drew on the case of Scotland's Stone of Destiny, which was returned to Scotland from England in November of 1996. The stone, which had been mounted in King Edward's throne in Westminster Abbey for 700 years, was believed to have been the oldest surviving relic of the Scottish monarchy. The return of the stone to Scotland was hailed as a victory amongst restitution advocates due to the precedent it might establish for future antiquities returns. In a June 1996 press release from Grant's office, the MP remarked, "I am delighted that the Scots have had their Stone returned, but what goes for one must go for all. We have a history, too, and much of our culture is locked away in British museums."[64] To Grant and his colleagues, the Scots were not unique in their entitlement to the ownership of their cultural heritage, and he believed that explicitly naming the double standard in restitution would ultimately strengthen their case. In addition, such instances of successful repatriation were evidence that the British government was willing to make exceptions to the British Museum Acts of 1963 that prevented the deaccessioning of objects in the museum, which made ARM-UK hopeful that the same logic would apply to the bronzes.

Yet, it was this very response by restitution advocates that led many individuals and institutions to adopt a position of skepticism around support for the return of the bronzes. Many who were in favor of preserving the artifacts in British museums in the 1990s feared that the

[63] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/6. Letter from Prince Edun Akenzua to Hon Grenville Tanner, MP, London, 5 November 1996. Consulted on 12 June 2019.
[64] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/8. ARM press release, London, 12 June 1996. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

repatriation of the Stone would open a Pandora's box of source countries flooding museums with their restitution claims and, therefore, any subsequent returns might only validate such claims. In a news story about the return of the Stone, UK-based *The Art Newspaper* (1997) noted, "Museum directors in the UK are bracing themselves for the flood of demands for repatriation that this move may have released."

The Pandora's box argument featured heavily amongst debates in the Glasgow City Council regarding the artifacts in the Kelvingrove Museum and Gallery, Glasgow's public cultural museum. Following the demonstrations at the British Museum, Grant decided to focus his restitution efforts on the Kelvingrove due to the fact that the museum held the next largest collection of Benin bronzes in the UK and Grant saw an opportunity to elicit support from the Scots because that had suffered a similar experience of displacement of crucial cultural artifacts with the Stone of Destiny. In December 1996, Grant wrote letters to each of the 83 Glasgow City Councillors and several House of Commons MPs requesting their support for the restitution of 22 bronzes held at the museum. In a January 1997 letter, MP Donald Dewar raised concerns about the unwanted potential for such a return to spawn other claims: "I suspect that Art Gallery and Museums are concerned about the dangers of setting precedents and encouraging other countries to demand objects of real artistic importance that have been similarly acquired over the years."[65] Widespread was the belief in the emptying and subsequent downfall of Western museums if one collection were to be returned, a popular sentiment echoed in contemporary debates on restitution.[66]

An important goal of ARM-UK's restitution campaign was the education of the British public about the history of Benin from the perspective of Edo society. The organization was

[65] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/8. Letter from Donald Dewer, MP to Bernie Grant, London, 13 January 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.
[66] See K. Brown, « The Idea is Not to Empty Museums », Artnet, 24 January 2019, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/restitution-report-critics-1446934.

displeased with the Western historiographical record of the 'punitive invasion,' looting, and subsequent transfer of the artifacts to the British government as articulated by the museum and which had, by then, become part of Britain's national memory. Historical accounts of these events are an important component of restitution debates as these narrations are used to make claims of justification or wrongdoing that would influence legal and moral understandings of entitlements to ownership and possession of the artifacts. A memo in Grant's papers authored by Peter Murphy, a research historian and an interlocutor of Grant, contains a four-page account of the British and Nigerian perspectives on the 1897 invasion, which influenced Grant's understanding of the British Museum's rendering of the history to be subjective and Eurocentric. Murphy is a British videographer and cultural documentarian who had traveled to Edo State in the 1980s and met with the sitting Oba once he learned of the plundered Benin treasures. Upon his return to the UK, Murphy wrote a series of memos for Grant about Benin's history and the artifacts, which informed Grant's thinking and activism on the matter.[67] The memo argued that the "official [British] version" of the 1897 events was that a brave and humanitarian mission was massacred as a result of "African treachery and barbarity," and uses remarks from Captain Boisragon, who fought in the invasion, and British historians to emphasize the terror and fetishization associated with the Kingdom and their provocation of violence against the British as a way of justifying the humanitarian invasion of the British army and their looting of the palace as a way of financing the campaign. The document then pivots to the "Benin perspective," which includes Nigerian historian Philip Igbafe's account of the invasion based on statements from witnesses at the Oba's 1897 trial, which "suggest a very different situation to the official version," including the Oba's attempt to avoid confrontation with the British. During the 1994 pickets, ARM-UK distributed flyers to the public highlighting such Benin

[67] Interview with Peter Murphy, online via Zoom, 10 May 2021.

counternarratives: "The Benins saw the 1897 event as an evil intrusion to their sovereignty and annexation of the region by a foreign power," one flyer read.[68]

ARM-UK also aimed to clarify to the public the distinction between art and artifact, and aesthetic materiality and spiritual culture, to illuminate how the value of the sacred objects existed beyond the framework of European visual culture. As the organization understood it, museums' interest in the objects was primarily aesthetic and historic, as opposed to the more sacred meaning of the bronzes to the people of Benin. In a December 1996 letter Peter Murphy argued, "The Benin treasures can only be seen as artefacts of aesthetic or anthropological interest in a museum here; in Benin they are part of a living culture with meaning and relevance which are denied in exile."[69] Grant used this idea of the differing approaches of British and Benin cultural and moral valuation of the objects as an argument for Benin's rightful ownership and possession. In a 1997 report to the Glasgow City Council Majority Group Committee, Grant made his case using a similar logic:

> The Benin Bronzes and Ivories have a religious and cultural significance for the people of Benin which far outweighs their importance to the people of Scotland as works of art or objects of beauty and historical interest. They were brutally and unjustifiably stolen from the people of Benin to whom they rightfully belong and who have the strongest moral claim upon them.[70]

A 1994 ARM-UK press release stated that the artifacts "symbolise historical and social significance which is greater than any aesthetic and monetary value they hold in exile"[71] and in a 1997 speech in Portugal commemorating the Centenary of the invasion and plunder, the prince of Benin further advocated for the prioritization of culture over art:

> These objects are currently referred to merely as 'works of art' or 'artefacts.' But they are much more than that! Many of them represented the focal points of the people's religion. In

[68] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/6. ARM demonstration flyer, London, 1994.
[69] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/4. Letter from Peter Murphy to Bernie Grant, London, 6 December 1996. Consulted on 12 June 2019.
[70] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/6. « The Restitution of the Benin Bronzes and Ivories to Benin », a report authored by Bernie Grant issued to the Glasgow City Council Majority Group Committee, London, undated.
[71] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/6. ARM press release, 1994, op. cit.

> fact, many of them were removed from various altars in the King's palace. Removing them, therefore tampered with the people's religion, which the Oba held in trust for the whole nation.[72]

ARM-UK directly challenged the notion that the museums could truly fulfill their stated duties given the context in which the objects were acquired and held in their collections. The 1994 protest flyer stated, "The claim that the collections should be preserved in the interest of scholarship cannot be met because the bronzes are all scattered."[73] Many in favor of restitution argued that the bronzes were an archive that only collectively could tell Benin's history and that a single object or sub-collection lacks the ability to communicate the wholeness of the Benin's history. As such, museums are only able to fulfil their stated educational missions by reuniting them, ideally in their place of origin. In addition, on several occasions, ARM-UK referenced the fact that many Benin artifacts in museums are kept in storage to cast doubt on their faith in the museums to fulfill their mission of public education. "All the artifacts never seen the light up till date. They are keep [sic] inside," argued Marie Ologbosele, the great, great granddaughter of the Oba, in a March 1997 meeting in London of the Edo State Centenary Committee Officers Group (ESCCOG), an organization of Nigerian diasporic leaders based in the UK.[74] In a letter from Grant's Personal Assistant Machel Bogues to a supporter, he noted that "while we have been able to open dialogue with several museums, the British Museum (where the majority of the pieces are held in storage [emphasis his]) has steadfastly refused to enter into discussions on this matter."[75]

In debates about restitution, some have argued that artifacts cannot be returned because the communities from which they were taken no longer exist, and the erasure of those communities is

[72] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/6. « An Address Delivered by His Royal Highness Prince Edun Akenzua » Lisbon, 1996.
[73] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/6. ARM demonstration flyer, op. cit.
[74] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/6. Minutes of the meeting between Bernie Grant MP & Edo State Centenary Committee Officers Group, London, 03 March 1997.
[75] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/4. Letter from Machel Bogues to Mr. Ronke Sotimirin, London, 4 March 1997.

used to justify the retention of objects in museums.[76] Communities are asked to demonstrate a certain degree of historical continuity and descent from an ancestral population, and if they fail to do may be deemed inauthentic, culturally extinct, and not fully entitled to descendant claims.[77] Such questions were raised in 1996 conversations about the Kelvingrove Museum's bronzes: Malcolm Rifkind, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, promised Bernie Grant that "if it could be shown that people were still suffering the ill-effects of slavery and colonisation, then he would give his support to the campaign for reparations."[78] In response, Peter Murphy, in a personal letter to Grant, was attentive to this enduring connection between contemporary Edo people and their ancient culture: "This is not a matter of digging up old historical grudges but a living matter of importance to people today," he stated.[79]

Some ARM-UK members expressed frustration over the British Museum's handling of the Benin artifacts and believed that the museum's inability to properly care for the objects in a respectful manner also raised serious doubts about its ability to fulfil its educational mission. The re-creation of a sacred ancestral altar, upon which the bronze statues of previous Benin kings were held, in the 1993 Museum of Mankind exhibition was considered objectionable by some within the Edo community because such altars were not intended to be viewed outside of the royal court, let alone in public view to foreigners outside Benin. As Ologbosele noted at the time, "Most of the objects from Africa have never been treated with respect. Those who stole them from us often use a number of primitive names to describe the objects." Interestingly, such practices continue today—in 2019 the Fowler Museum at UCLA held an exhibition entitled "On Display in the Walled City: The

[76] See W. L. Boyd, « Museums as centers of cultural understanding », in J. H. Merryman (ed), Imperialism, Art and Restitution, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.
[77] See T. Ingold, "Ancestry, generation, substances, memory, land," in T. Ingold (ed.) The Perception of the Environment, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 132-151.
[78] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/6. Minutes from Bernie Grant's meeting with Prince Akenzua, London, 11 November 1996.
[79] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/4. Letter from Peter Murphy to Bernie Grant, op. cit.

Nigeria Pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition" which featured a replica of an altar commissioned by Oba Ovowamren's son, Eweka II, in 1921 that contained objects purchased by Sir Henry Wellcome from the Nigeria Pavilion at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition in London (Hicks 2021). There is an inherent paradox in showing respect for objects and making them visible to the public. On one hand, if museums display cultural objects that are not made for public consumption, their actions are deemed disrespectful. On the other hand, if those objects are kept from public view and placed in storage, the museums' educational mandate is not fulfilled. Grant and the ARM-UK argued that returning the artifacts to the royal palace where officials there could determine if and how they would be displayed was a culturally and morally appropriate way to address this tension.

Forces of democracy

The struggle over the fate of the Benin bronzes was a stage upon which control of Nigeria's cultural heritage and, by extension, the nation's statehood and autonomy as an independent postcolonial political entity was dramatized. As Eleana Yalouri (2001) has argued, "Asking for the return of [objects] is a political act, an act of independence." After years of anticolonial struggle, Nigeria gained its independence from Britain in 1960 yet, in many ways, the former empire continued to have a significant amount of leverage over the political landscape of the newly formed state through the retention of their cultural heritage in their museums. The negotiation of ownership and possession of the bronzes in this context brings to light colonial disputes over the formation of political boundaries and imperial development of the nation state. In 1966, following a half-decade of postcolonial independence, Nigeria's military staged a coup and took control of the civilian government, and for the next three decades, except for a handful of years in between successive regimes, the military ruled the country, including Edo State and Benin.

Many of the politicians Bernie Grant approached from 1996-1997 for support on restitution, particularly with respect to artifacts held in Glasgow's Kelvingrove Museum, objected to their return on account of what they considered to be Nigeria's political instability for fear that repatriation would appear as an endorsement of the military regime. Several Glasgow Councillors supported the return of the objects on the condition that Nigeria depose its military junta and embrace democracy. Councillor Patricia Godman, in a February 1997 letter to Grant, informed him that she "would only support this particular move when Nigeria is a democracy" and, similarly, Councillor John H. Young noted that he believed that "the collection should be returned subject to conditions regarding its security, and regarding a return to democracy in Nigeria."[80]

ARM-UK challenged this political view, arguing that Benin was a political entity distinct from the Nigerian state, with traditional leaders operating independent of the government, and emphasized the fact that the artifacts were looted before the Nigerian state was formed. Moreover, they argued that the identity of Edo people was rooted in Benin culture more so than Nigerian culture and their loyalties were to the Oba and not Nigeria's elected officials. As such, supporters argued that because the bronzes would be returned to the Kingdom's royal palace, decisions regarding the community's cultural future should not depend on Nigeria's political situation, and would only exacerbate colonial injustices:

> The creation of the state of Nigeria, and the Looting of the Benin Treasures, were part and parcel of the same process, i.e. colonisation, and they both took place against a background of total disregard for the traditional power structures in this part of Africa as elsewhere. To make the return of cultural and religious objects to this victimised people conditional on the righting all the wrongs of the past, would seem to be compounding an historic injustice.[81]

Indeed, there was a significant degree of tension between the traditional Benin royalty and the

[80] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/8. Letter from Councillor Patricia Godman to Bernie Grant, London, 10 February 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.
[81] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/8. Report the Labour Group Executive Glasgow City Council submitted by Bernie Grant, London, 25 February 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

Nigerian government.[82] According to a memo Grant penned to Julian Spalding, the director of the Kelvingrove Museum, the Oba viewed the military regime with great disdain but had little influence over their dealings. Likewise, according to Grant's sources, the military regime was not only disinterested in the Benin artifacts and cultural life in Benin and Nigeria more generally, and thus would not be persuaded to embrace democracy by restitution, but sought to actively undermine the royalty. There was also tension between the royal court and government about the proper method by which to seek restitution, with some attendees of the Centenary advocating for the case to be taken to the International Court of Justice by the federal government, while the Oba, in his opening remarks at the celebration, cautioned that such an approach would be imprudent, adding that his use of "quiet diplomacy" would be more effective at securing the return of the objects (Nevadomsky 1997). In a dramatic culmination of crown-state struggles surrounding the Centenary in 1997, the military bombed the telephone lines in Benin City in February in an intentional effort to disrupt the festivities. Despite such tensions, Grant and his supporters believed that the return of the artifacts to the Oba might, in fact, imbue him with increased power and leverage in discussions about a democratic transition.

Ultimately, while the Glasgow District Party (Labour) supported a motion to return the artifacts, the Glasgow City Party voted against the motion in March 1997 and Spalding and the museum directors rejected the plea, thus allowing the objects to remain the property of the Kelvingrove Museum, where they continue to be held today.[83] [84] In Spalding's final letter to Grant,

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[82] In the postcolonial period three independent, though interrelated, institutions formed Benin's governance structure—the royal court, led by the Oba; the Edo state government led by the governor; and the federal government which had influence over local and state-level matters. Since independence, relations between these entities have shifted as power and spheres of influence have been renegotiated over several decades.

[83] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/8. Letter from Bernie Grant to Tam Dalyell MP, London, 25 February 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

[84] In August 2021 the Glasgow City Council reconvened the Working Group for Repatriation and Spoliation, after more than a decade-long hiatus, to begin reconsidering restitution requests, including those for their collection of Benin bronzes. See D. Sandelands, "Glasgow's looted Benin bronzes could finally be returned to Nigeria," Glasgow Live, 18 August 2021, https://www.glasgowlive.co.uk/news/glasgow-news/glasgows-looted-benin-bronzes-could-21341658.

he explained that their decision was rooted in a belief that their Benin collection represented one the finest examples of African art and culture, and its removal "would limit, in our opinion, our visitors' understanding of the world." The letter concluded with an emphasis of the importance of the bronzes for Britain's understanding of itself: "We believe […] that these artefacts have an important role to play in the public sector by informing over 3 million visitors here about the culture of Benin and, it has to be said, the history of British Imperialism."[85]

In their essay "Three takes and a mask," Malaquais and Vincent examine the trajectory of the FESTAC '77 mask discussed above and the multiple claims and counterclaims made regarding its possession and ownership, highlighting decolonial moves made by the Nigerian government who sought its repatriation from the British Museum. However, the authors also argue that the mask "was deployed by the Nigerian government to tell (…) the story of a nation destined to act as a beacon for all black people and as the economic powerhouse of a global south shorn of its colonial shackles," adding that "she emerged as a powerful tool of hegemony in the hands of the Obasanjo regime" (Malaquais and Vincent 2019). Relatedly, Grant and ARM-UK used the Benin bronzes as an instrument through which to make their political claims known—namely, the rejection of what they believed to be neoimperial hegemonic practices of the artifact retention which alienated the Edo from their heritage, and the advancement of counternarratives of Benin's history to challenge existing Eurocentric discourse. In so doing, the artifacts became embedded within the larger struggle comprised of global actors of the past, present and future seeking reparations. ARM-UK confronted head-on the British government and museum establishment, to whom the bronzes became symbolic matter through which a public reckoning and atoning of the nation's own imperial history was achieved. By serving as a platform upon which British, diasporic, and Edo narratives of

[85] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/8. Letter from Julian Spalding, Director of the Kelvingrove Museum, to Bernie Grant, London, 10 January 1997. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

epistemological, historiographical and intellectual value were projected, the bronzes represented both a refusal of the enduring legacies of cultural imperialism and a demand for the rebalancing of North-South geopolitical relations and obligations.

Bernie Grant died in 2000, never witnessing the return of any objects from the museums he lobbied, and shortly thereafter ARM-UK was dismantled due to a lack of funding and leadership. Yet, the fight for the restitution of colonially-looted objects and efforts to acknowledge and repair the ongoing violence committed by European colonial institutions has only grown stronger, and significant progress has indeed been made. In 2018 the French government commissioned and published the Sarr-Savoy report, which recommended the return of imperial plunder housed in France's state ethnological museums, and in early 2020, Arts Council England announced that it would embark on a similar study and plans to release new guidelines on the ethical stewardship and restitution of collections in the UK's museums and galleries. In 2020, the UK-based African Foundation for Development (AFFORD UK) published their own guidelines on the return of African cultural property and human remains in British museums to support these institutions in adopting their own restitution frameworks (AFFORD UK 2020). Such moves are promising steps toward seeking accountability for the imperial crimes from which Britain's museums have benefited, though legal obstacles to restitution--such as the British Museum Act 1963, against which Bernie Grant lobbied--still remain. In 2018 Oba Ewuare II visited the British Museum and met with the director though, according to the museum's website, "no formal request has been received for the return of the Museum's Benin collections in their entirety" (ARTnews 2021).

Yet, much progress has been made at the sub-state level, within smaller regional and local museums and private institutions which have more discretion over their collections and are not beholden to the obligations of Parliamentary law. In 2021 the University of Aberdeen and University of Cambridge both repatriated looted bronzes which had been in their possession for over a century.

Unlike the tensions which characterized the relationship between the royal court and state government in the 1990s, the ceremonies held to honor both university repatriation agreements were attended by members of both parties as a symbol of the collaborative spirit that guides their contemporary approach to restitution.[86] Other institutions, such as the Horniman Museum in London, have made similar commitments to begin the process of restitution, and other smaller museums and private institutions are expected to follow suit. Dan Hicks (2020) notes that it was Bernie Grant's influence which shifted the focus of restitution in the UK from larger state museums to regional, non-national museums, the effect of which remains visible today. UK government and British Museum representatives, as well as representatives from both the royal court and state government, have also been participants in the Benin Dialogue Group, a transnational organization comprised of Nigerian and Western government and museum officials which has been meeting for over a decade to discuss the stewardship, safekeeping, long-term loans, and potentially the full return of the artifacts. The group has also spearheaded other efforts to restore Benin's cultural heritage beyond the scope of restitution, including, by 2025, the construction of a new museum complex on the grounds of the royal palace where repatriated artifacts will be housed, which will also include an archaeological excavation of ancient Benin City.[87] In addition to its international partners, the museum is also a collaboration between the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), the Benin Royal Court, and the Edo State government, a further testament to the progress the three entities governing Benin—royal, state and federal parties—have made toward partnership since the end of military rule and the ushering in of democracy in 1999.[88]

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[86] See The Art Newspaper, « Cambridge University college becomes first UK institution to return looted Benin bronze to Nigeria » 28 October 2021, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/10/28/cambridge-university-college-becomes-first-uk-institution-to-return-looted-benin-bronze-to-nigeria.

[87] See Office of Governor Godwin Nogheghase Obaseki, « Obaseki, German govt parley on return of Benin stolen artifacts, completion of Edo Museum » 18 March 2021, http://www.godwinobaseki.com/obaseki-german-govt-parley-on-return-of-benin-stolen-artifacts-completion-of-edo-museum/.

[88] See Fad, « The Legacy Restoration Trust, Nigeria, the British Museum, and Adjaye Associates announce details of major archaeology project on the site of a new museum in Benin City » 13 November 2020,

Today, museums dedicated to African cultural heritage are opening across the continent, some like the Musée des Civilisations Noires in Dakar boasting empty shelves and galleries in anticipation of the return of their antiquities. These communities, through negotiations with European partners, have a shared goal of experiencing their heritage in the context in which it was originally produced, often for the very first time. ARM-UK and Grant's efforts to secure justice for the bronzes and people of Benin in the 1990s was a pioneering movement which paved the way for the actualization of this vision which will allow nations to narrate their histories on their own terms. As Bernie Grant told the Edo State Centenary Committee Officers Group in their March 1997 meeting, three years before his death, the reunification of a people with their objects has profound implications for an understanding of one's community: "We shall be telling our own stories instead of someone else telling us."[89]

https://fadmagazine.com/2020/11/13/the-legacy-restoration-trust-nigeria-the-british-museum-and-adjaye-associates-announce-details-of-major-archaeology-project-on-the-site-of-a-new-museum-in-benin-city/.

[89] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/6. Minutes of the Meeting Between Bernie Grant MP & Edo State Centenary Committee Officers Group, op. cit.

CHAPTER VI:

CULTURAL ACTORS AND THE STRUGGLE

BEYOND RESTITUTION

In this chapter I consider the role of non-state cultural institutions, activists, artists, and other grassroots actors in establishing their own understandings of cultural authority by navigating alternatives to repatriation that are less reliant on the workings of the state and political actors I discuss in the previous chapter. I draw on two case studies to demonstrate how these individuals and groups determine how the legacies of colonial power can be negotiated through engagement with the Benin artifacts that transcends the framework of repatriation. The first case uses the debates surrounding the replication of a famous Benin mask to examine the ways in which ex-colonies and imperial nations use the practice of replication to meet political, cultural, spiritual, and economic objectives, and how these desires tend to be contentious in the transnational postcolonial context. I examine replication as a relational aesthetic that interrogates the frequently overlooked cultural and spiritual implications of mimesis. I demonstrate that replication is used by imperial states as a tool for political manipulation as they are able to continue to extract political and economic resources from the colonized state while simultaneously accruing material benefits and cultural capital from the original artifacts in exchange for a culturally insignificant and aesthetically inferior facsimile offered to the colonized state in lieu of full restitution. Yet heritage replication may also be used by the ex-colony as a tool of political subversion when employed as a strategy of resistance by rejecting the outcomes of the restitution decision and setting their own terms of cultural production.

The second case explores how generations of diasporic artists, since Nigeria's independence in 1960, have engaged in various forms of recuperation of pre-colonial aesthetics through the adoption of postcolonial modernist visual tactics to negotiate a sense of self-determination and to recover an autonomous postcolonial national identity. Contemporary artists in Nigeria, particularly in Benin, have employed a range of aesthetic political practices to disrupt the legacies of colonialism still pervasive within their industries and communities. Through the creation of subversive artwork which attempts to think beyond the framework of Western benevolence embedded in the project of

restitution, some have made efforts to resist hegemonic influences within the global contemporary art world. The tactics of anti-imperial refusal that some Nigerian and diasporic artists have employed suggest a strategic redeployment of an aesthetic tradition that simultaneously advocates for the reclaiming of a black radical indigenous history and full realization of Nigerian cultural autonomous potentialities, while also envisioning a future situated within a global cosmopolitan framework--what I refer to as *cosmopolitan repair*. Such forms of cultural production constitute a critical component of the recent resurgence of decolonial activism that has swept the global art world which, at its core, poses a resistance to extractive capitalist practices in the Global South.

REPLICATING EMPIRE

In July 1977 an editorial entitled "FESTAC Symbol: Replica is Welcome" appeared in the Nigerian Observer in which the author claimed that "the British blackmail against Nigeria has now been called off."[90] 80 years prior, British forces looted and retained an ivory mask during a colonial massacre of the Benin Kingdom (present day Nigeria) and, after decades of failed restitution and repatriation attempts, Nigerian actors decided to make a replica of the mask. This move, according to the Nigerian resistors, thereby liberating them from what they believed to be the influence their former colonial oppressors continued to wield over them through the withholding of their property. In response, the British Museum, where the original mask was and continues to be held, also created a replica of the mask which was meant to be sent to Nigeria in order to appease the government and maintain positive diplomatic relations between the states.

For centuries, the replication of antiquities has been leveraged as a tool for political bargaining between states with imperial ties, and their production in the postcolonial context raises a number of questions and issues regarding ownership, power, and the enduring legacies of empire.

[90] UK National Archives, Kew: FCO 65/1927; JWN 294/1.

This case uses the debates surrounding the replication of the Benin Kingdom's Queen Idia mask as a case study to examine the ways in which nations use the practice of replication to meet their political, cultural, spiritual, and economic needs, and how these desires may be at odds with one another in a transnational postcolonial context. Examinations of the practice of replication are often concerned with the aesthetic, material and economic implications of the mimetic process--often asking questions such as whether a replica is authentic or as valuable as the original--yet in this case I focus on a different set of questions which interrogate the often overlooked cultural and spiritual implications of replication. Instead of asking if a replica can be authentic or valuable, I ask if a replica can be just and meaningful.

This case provides a way of thinking through replica as a relational aesthetic, which Trimble (2011: 4) defines as "a way to continue to treat these statues seriously as *visual* images, with effects and meanings as such, but which operated in and through their relationships to the physical, social, spatial, and conceptual world." I argue that replication is used by imperial states as a tool for political manipulation as they are able to continue to extract political and economic resources from the colonized state while simultaneously accruing material benefits and cultural capital from the original cultural artifacts in exchange for a culturally insignificant and aesthetically inferior facsimile offered to the colonized state in lieu of full restitution. Yet heritage replication may also be used by the colonized state as a tool of political subversion when employed as a strategy of resistance by rejecting the outcomes of the restitution decision and setting their own terms of cultural production. This issue is about more than a disagreement about a valuable antiquity, but, as one British government official noted in 1977 about the Queen Idia relic, it shines a light on "the importance of the Mask to Anglo/Nigerian relations."[91] As such, the mask replicas become their own archive through which we may gain greater insight into the fraught relationship between the UK and Nigeria

[91] *ibid*

in the postcolonial years. Ultimately the practice of replication is a stage on which the drama of neoimperialism and anti-colonialism is performed in full view of those who wish to bear witness to the violence and triumphs of the colonial past and present.

Authenticity, postmodern manifestations, and struggle

Western debates about the replication of heritage objects often centers questions surrounding the authenticity of the copy and the way in which it is received and experienced by the viewer. When art replication became a norm in the thirteenth century, copies were considered as important and valuable as original objects as long as the latter conformed to the prevailing aesthetic and technical norms of the day, thereby giving the viewer an 'authentic' experience (Latour and Lowe 2011, Le Gac 2001). Yet beginning with the Renaissance, art became synonymous with antiquity because of its ability to "manifest the length of the link uniting the current and original states: a link that defines the value of authenticity," thus replicas were less able to convey such presence (Heinich 2009: 174). In the last several decades there has been a postmodern shift in a previously held agreement within the field of art history that originality confers authenticity, and which seeks to blur the lines between 'real' versus 'fake' (Groebner 2018, Meskell 2012, Smith 2006). Rejecting this positivist and essentialist view of authenticity, scholars have more recently argued that certain forms of replication and duplication of art can bring the viewer as close to an experience intended by the artist as the original. While efforts to produce picture-perfect replications that simulate the emotional experience evoked by original works is still one objective in the heritage world (Duval 2019), there has been a re-embrace of a disruption in the belief that authenticity lies only in the ancient and a celebration of the potential of reproduction in its ability to induce within the viewer feelings associated with a present context as opposed to a past reality (Morin 1999). It has

also been increasingly read as a means by which class-aspirational collectors may signify status (Briefel 2006).

As contemporary forms of production and remaking have expanded, so too has the literature on the proliferation of the "culture of the copy" (Schwartz 1996) as a practice grown. The last few decades of scholarship on art history and replication have witnessed a rise in progressive criticism, such as William Roseberry's Marxist analysis of replication which holds that "cultural production is not limited to those who control the means of cultural production" (Roseberry 1989: 49). Authenticity thus becomes a quality that is not simply disputed by the presence of an original but may be actively interrogated and contested through the actions of those wishing to lay claims to their own interpretations of classic art (Brulotte 2012). Replication, in this context, becomes a democratizing means of production and a practice of subversion and resistance against the hegemony of dominant classical or 'legitimate' forms of art. As Brulotte (ibid: 6) notes, replica artisans in her study of the Oaxacan wood-carving trade are not simply making copies of heritage objects, but "are engaged in their own creative acts of interpreting the pre-Hispanic past." Replica, in this context, take on their own political meaning and significance by calling into question the nature of authenticity, and complicating and disrupting our notions of historical time periods and geographic space as replicas exist in multiple planes of each simultaneously (Di Giovine 2009). Brulotte (2012: 8) discusses the Oaxacan heritage industry as follows: "Archaeological replicas and those who make them signal a type of refusal of this system...It is their destabilization of and semiotic play with taken-for-granted categories of Oaxacan "culture" [...] that give replicas their inherent capacity for social critique." Furthermore, Trimble (2012: 4) challenges us to think beyond the material nature of the aesthetic and invites us "to consider the aesthetic in terms of its relationships to historical situations, ideas, space, agency, and reception in a way that continues to illuminate the complex and powerful relationships between people and their visual cultures." Thus,

replicas are not merely copies or facsimiles of objects, but become editorial, didactic and epistemological interventions into the world of visual culture and politics (Codell 2020; Aldrich et al 2012).

Walter Benjamin (2010: 19) notably argued that "technical reproduction...enables the original to meet the beholder halfway," later adding that "in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced." Such liberal views of authenticity--that a copy of an object can retain its original intended meaning and convey it, at least in part, to the audience--is one that resonates throughout the postmodern art world. Yet I argue that such perspectives fail to take into account the reproduction of objects of cultural, spiritual and historical significance that have been forcibly alienated from their countries of origin. Western discussions of replication primarily focus on the aesthetic value of the practice and the emotionality of the largely Western audience responding to the piece, yet there is little space to think through alternative cultural configurations that may impact the way in which a heritage replica is received. In Western cultural spaces, much of art is produced and consumed as *l'art pour l'art*, yet in indigenous communities of the Global South, art has historically and continues to hold spiritually and culturally symbolic meaning. As such, a reproduction in the Western art world may be able to meet a Western viewer halfway because the meaning is in the aesthetic form of the object, whereas a replica of a cultural object may not be as meaningful for a person or community from which that object originated and who has been estranged from that object due to forces of violence and coercion. This case aims to think through the implications of colonization, cultural dislocation and spiritual alienation for the ways in which replication becomes a meaningful response to the problem of postcolonial and neocolonial struggle.

The Benin Bronzes and Queen Idia Mask

In 1977 Nigeria hosted the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), a prominent pan-African occasion that played a pivotal role in the formation of the continent's anti-imperial identity in the wake of decades of decolonial struggles. Festival organizers adopted the infamous 16th century ivory mask of Queen Idia, a revered matriarchal figure of precolonial Benin, as the event's official emblem. The mask was conventionally worn by the *oba* of Benin during traditional ceremonies in the palace court and had never been a public display piece. During the 1897 British invasion, four nearly identical copies of the mask were looted from the kingdom and subsequently transferred to the British government, one of which was later retained by the British Museum where it currently still resides in the African galleries.

For decades after Nigeria's independence in 1960 citing cultural and spiritual necessity, various government and cultural actors in Nigeria lobbied for the return of the British Museum mask. These efforts intensified in the months leading up to FESTAC in 1977 when the Nigerian government successfully persuaded the British Museum to return the mask on short-term loan for the duration of the festival, but the request was later denied due to an unwillingness of the festival organizers to pay a 2 million Naira insurance premium for the protection of the mask. The official British position on the question of a short-term loan or permanent restitution was their belief that the mask was too fragile to be transferred and might potentially be mishandled, damaged or stolen while on loan to Nigeria. In the absence of a loan or permanent return, organizers commissioned the descendants of the sculptor of the original mask from Edo State (former Benin Kingdom) to produce a replica that would become the new FESTAC emblem. Once the museum decided against the return of the original mask, executives commissioned technicians within the museum to produce their own replica of the mask which they would present to the Nigerian government in an effort to moderate their frustration around their decision to not return the original. According to British

government correspondence, "The offer was made in a helpful spirit and was intended to reduce the Nigerians' disappointment at not having the original Mask."[92]

The British Replica

There was a great deal of fanfare about the British Museum's version of the replica. As noted in an official Foreign and Commonwealth Office correspondence about the status of the mask, "Following their refusal to surrender the original Benin Ivory Mask the British Museum have made a replica at considerable cost in time and money and would like the Secretary of State to hand it over to the new Nigerian High Commissioner at a suitable ceremony."[93] Much emphasis was placed on the cost of the replica, which was valued at roughly £6,000 on the open market, as well as the amount of time spent on its creation, which was approximately six months. The official ceremonial presentation of the replica was also a matter of great significance, with some correspondence suggesting that the museum craftsman should be prominently featured and celebrated at the event. Such a focus on the replica's aesthetic, productive and economic content suggests a sense of benevolence on the part of the British Museum and implies anticipation of a spirit of gratitude from the Nigerian delegation. The emphasis throughout the archival record on the costliness of the museum's copy, particularly that which was derived from valuation on the open market, suggests that the material value of the object took precedence over the cultural and spiritual value to the Nigerian delegation, who believe that the mask is a priceless heritage piece. Combined with the museum's belief in the power of their replica to diminish the frustration the Nigerians' might experience when they receive the news that they will not return the original, such expectations

[92] UK National Archives, Kew. Foreign and Commonwealth Office: West African Department: Registered Files (JW Series). NIGERIA. Antiquities of Nigeria, including Benin Ivory Mask. FCO 65/1927; JWN 294/1.
[93] UK National Archives, Kew. Foreign and Commonwealth Office: West African Department: Registered Files (JW Series). NIGERIA. Antiquities of Nigeria, including Benin Ivory Mask. FCO 65/1927; JWN 294/1.

fundamentally undermine the Nigerians' entitlement to their anger about the process as well as the merits of their continued pursuit of the restitution of the original mask.

For the British Museum the production of their replica was an ideal solution--the copy would be understood as an expression of political goodwill and generosity toward Nigeria as the country would finally be able to witness the artistry of their ancestors in their homeland, thereby fulfilling the nation's restitution demands in their mind. Yet this process would also enable the museum to maintain its mandates of preservation, conducting scientific research, and educating the public on the histories of the world's cultures through their holding and display of the artifacts. As such, this form of 'digital repatriation' was a verifiable win-win for the British Museum and England more generally as they were able to maintain positive diplomatic ties while retaining the heritage they believed was rightfully theirs.

The Nigerian delegation was categorically disinterested in the British Museum's replica of Queen Idia. One museum official notes that, "The Nigerians, who have pressed us to return the original, have twice failed to respond to offers of the replica and may take offence if further attempts are made to press it on them."[94] Persuaded neither by the costliness nor the craftsmanship of the museum's copy, the Nigerian delegation refused to accept and even acknowledge its existence to the dismay of the museum executives who were, in turn, frustrated by the lack of enthusiasm and wasted craftsmanship efforts. After the museum discovered that the festival organizers had produced their own replica of the mask which had been well-received by the public, the British government was concerned that Nigeria might be offended by the museum's offering of their copy as it may have implied that theirs was superior to Nigeria's copy. This perspective centers the aesthetic content of the object while skirting the primary source of offense to the Nigerian

[94] UK National Archives, Kew. Foreign and Commonwealth Office: West African Department: Registered Files (JW Series). NIGERIA. Antiquities of Nigeria, including Benin Ivory Mask. FCO 65/1927; JWN 294/1.

delegation which was the refusal to return the original. The replica thus becomes symbolic of the ways in which Western aestheticism is leveraged over cultural ownership and propriety, whereby there is an assumption that the aesthetic content is the axis along which value is determined at the risk of failing to attend to the forms of cultural appropriation inherent in the practice of retention and replication.

The British Museum and government were also concerned that presenting the copy of the museum's mask might also rekindle decades of friction between the two countries surrounding the original mask's restitution which had seemingly been settled after the most recent refusal. According to one government officer, "The presentation of the replica might also re-arouse the Nigerian disquiet at their inability to get the original mask."[95] There was also concern that, if presented with the museum's replica, the Nigerian delegation would demand that the museum keep the replica for itself and return the original to Nigeria. While originals and copies are given equal symbolic value in this context, the retention of the original by the museum is important due to the exponentially greater material benefit and cultural capital accrual associated with its status. As Aldrich (2012: 81) explains of replicas, "They envisaged its practice as a contravention of the unique and original status of the collection in their care."[96] As such, a replica can never fully replace an original for an institution that prides itself on the distinctiveness of its collection.

Lastly the British Museum anticipated that if they presented their copy to Nigeria and it went on display at FESTAC or in the national museum, it might be installed in an unfavorable light toward the British. As one British administrator suggested, "If they accepted the replica they might well choose to display it prominently in Lagos with a contentious inscription which could have the

[95] UK National Archives, Kew. Foreign and Commonwealth Office: West African Department: Registered Files (JW Series). NIGERIA. Antiquities of Nigeria, including Benin Ivory Mask. FCO 65/1927; JWN 294/1.
[96] UK National Archives, Kew. Foreign and Commonwealth Office: West African Department: Registered Files (JW Series). NIGERIA. Antiquities of Nigeria, including Benin Ivory Mask. FCO 65/1927; JWN 294/1.

effect of turning the replica into a permanent irritant in UK/Nigerian relations."[97] As such, the replica was not regarded as a benevolent gesture of charity and skill but becomes a potential source of agitation for Nigeria and a reminder of the bitter feud that has existed over the withholding of Nigeria's antiquities and anxiety for the British Museum and government. In subsequent conversations between the museum and British government, they elaborate on their anxieties about what sentiments the unwelcome presence of a mask may arise in Nigeria: "Do we really want the British Museum's replica on display here as a permanent irritant to Nigerian susceptibilities and a reminder of an unpleasant tiff in UK-Nigerian relations? We must remember that in Nigerian eyes the Benin mask is theirs and we have stolen it from them." Historic conversations and narratives about the question of who the 'rightful' owner of the original mask is thus become central to a proper evaluation of the effects of the British copy. The replica therefore assumes greater meaning than its cultural and spiritual significance to Nigeria or its aesthetic and commercial significance to the UK, but a reminder and potentially even instigation of the fraught political relationship between the two countries which has taken on new meaning in the postcolonial period since Nigeria's independence.

The museum firmly believed in the transformative power of their gesture of replication. Through several exchanges with the British government, it is evident that the British position was that, regardless of the outcome on the restitution decision, the act of producing and offering a replica of the original alone should be an indication of the spirit of generosity and openness with which Britain wishes to engage with Nigeria. According to one British administrator, "The fact that the Museum went to the trouble and expense of preparing a replica could we think be presented to the Nigerians as proof of their desire to be as forthcoming as possible" and noted that the replica

[97] UK National Archives, Kew. Foreign and Commonwealth Office: West African Department: Registered Files (JW Series). NIGERIA. Antiquities of Nigeria, including Benin Ivory Mask. FCO 65/1927; JWN 294/1.

would sufficiently "demonstrate our good faith." A subsequent correspondence suggested that the Nigerians "might be grateful" for the replica as they were in the process of building a FESTAC museum in Lagos which could potentially hold the museum replica given that the Nigerian replica was going on display in the national museum. Others, on the other hand, were more skeptical of the museum replica's ability to placate Nigerians who had called for the restitution of the original mask. As one British government official noted, "While no doubt the Nigerians will continue to use the incident when they wish to drag up illustrations of British ill-will towards Nigeria the FMG [foreign office] refrained from making an issue of it at the time of FESTAC and have now tacitly accepted that they are not going to get it back." In this context there exists some belief that the relations between the nations are so fraught that even what the speaker perceives to be a goodwill conciliatory gesture of a replica may be unwelcome and insufficient to address the tensions. [citations]

In the end, the museum copy of the mask was never given to the festival organizers or government officials due to fears of reigniting calls for restitution of the original mask and hostile relations between the nations. Instead, the British Museum contributed £20,000 to supporting black Britons who wanted to participate in FESTAC. While this was a welcome gesture and enabled increased engagement of British citizens in the festival activities, ultimately this move contributed little toward fully pacifying relations between the two states, which only full restitution of the mask could have done.

The Nigerian Replica

Once it was clear that the British Museum was unwilling to return the original mask, FESTAC organizers commissioned the production of their own copy, which was presented at the festival "with much publicity." The Edo replica was widely celebrated in Nigeria and throughout the pan-African diaspora and was notably hailed in local press as being better in form than the original

mask. This copy went on to be placed on permanent display in the National Museum of Lagos. An important question is why Nigeria decided to produce their own replica, as opposed to accepting the museum's copy for paying the 2 million Naira insurance premium for the loan of the original for the duration of the festival. Given the eagerness of the British Museum to extend this act of generosity to the Nigerians and the fact that, as a petro-naira oil rich nation in the 1990s 2 million Naira was a relatively insignificant sum of money for the nation, they could have easily pursued both options yet failed to due to what I argue was a loyalty to the symbolic value of their own uncorrupted production.

The Nigerian replica is an intervention. It is a declaration of political autonomy. It says, "I do not need your copy, I have my own" in a language that can only be spoken and heard by the descendants of Edo. Their copy is a refusal--a refusal to be left beholden to the benevolence of their former colonial oppressors to experience their own cultural heritage and a refusal to adhere to the terms on which that experience is had. The Nigerian copy is a disruption of the political and economic blackmail which had structured relations between the UK and Nigeria uninterrupted since the imperial period. The Nigerian replica is the unshackling of an ancestor.

The production of the Nigerian replica also becomes an expression of national, if not pan-African, identity. The belief that their replica is better than the museum's is a statement on their understanding of the superiority of their craftsmanship. Yet beyond this aesthetic interpretation, the claim that their replica is better than the original itself is also a cultural and political commentary into the corrosive power of theft, appropriation and, more generally, imperial domination. The looting of the original mask, removal from its original cultural and spiritual context, and exile into the land of its conqueror eroded its symbolic relevance and significance to the people of Edo State, leaving it devoid of cultural value and only meaningful in Western imperial aesthetic spaces. As such, the statement that the Nigerian replica is better than the original, beyond a commentary on its aesthetic

merits, is an acknowledgement of the endurance of Edo culture in the face of hegemonic cultural appropriation and domination.

Victorian artists often produced replicas of their own paintings and would often charge more for the replicas than the originals as they might have considered the originals a first draft, whereas the replicas were value-added due to the greater skill and knowledge the artist acquired over time that was invested in the replica (Codell 2020). As such, it is possible that the Nigerian delegation truly did believe that their replica was superior to the original aesthetically due to creative innovations made in ivory carving over the four centuries since the original mask was cast that would have made the replica more aesthetically charming. According to Codell (ibid: 3), "replication was a way to explore their [the artists'] own ideas" in the same way that Oaxacan carvers are able to render their own interpretations of pre-Hispanic history through their replicas. Thus, the craftsmen who created the Nigerian replica may have been engaged in the production of a piece that held four hundred more years of history than the original, an interpretation which invariably appeared in the reading of the replica by the Nigerian public.

The Nigerian replica also offers space for a racial critique of postcolonial relations between Nigeria and the UK. One of the reasons the British Museum cited in their rationale for not returning or lending the mask was the fragility and belief that if the mask were to cross continents and be in the hands of Nigerians for several weeks the safety of the mask would be compromised. The Nigerian delegation interpreted this lack of trust in their caretaking and stewardship abilities--despite years of production and caretaking of similar and, in fact, this very object--to be a commentary on their abilities as racialized subjects. As one Nigerian journalist argued, "To Britain, the blackman is still probably not capable of reasoning. The talk of the Ivory mask being too fragile for movement is in keeping with this disposition towards the blackman."[98] As such, the production of the Nigerian

[98] UK National Archives, Kew: FCO 65/1927; JWN 294/1.

replica becomes a way in which the Nigerian delegation obviates this neocolonial narrative of racial paternalism and mistrust by no longer seeking the object through which such forms of oppression are enabled and perpetuated.

Lastly, the Nigerian replica becomes more than just a symbol of, but an actual tool for the post-imperial liberation of Nigeria. While Nigeria gained its formal independence in 1960, subsequent decades ushered in a framework of neocolonial relations in which the UK continued to exploit Nigeria's material resources, albeit in a manner in which Nigeria retained a larger share of returns, though such a structure led to other forms of fraught internal relations which extended from the initial imperial paradigm. As such, the very notion of a post-colonial Nigeria is only accurate as a temporal descriptor as opposed to one that reflects contemporary power relations between the states. Yet the power of the mask was in its disruptive potential for this neoimperial configuration. One Nigerian journalist argued for the liberatory power of the nation's replica:

> The federal military government should henceforth embark on a drastic review of our diplomatic, trade and cultural ties with Britain with a view to paying her back in her own coin. Another reason why the production of the replica of the FESTAC symbol is a welcome news to us is that it has shown what a patriotic people can do for their nation in her hour of need. With the current fight to win economic independence from the so called industrial powers, it is difficult to see how we can expect them to show genuine interest in the development and well-being of our country. More than ever before, Nigeria should now turn her mind to the effective harnessing and utilization of her internal resources.[99]

The author demands full divestment from any form of dependence on the UK given their inability to comply with the restitution demands of the Nigerian delegation, and it is the symbolic and aesthetic character of the replica which gives him the confidence to believe that such an undertaking would be possible. Thus, Nigeria's Queen Idia mask replica is not a symbol of freedom of a cultural nature, but freedom itself of a political nature in the postcolony. The ability to produce a replica that is not only better than the UK's replica, but arguably better than the original that Britain is

[99] ibid

withholding, and thus all the power therewithin, represents a triumph over the political and economic blackmail the UK had been waging against Nigeria since independence. Repaying its debts to Britain, as ironic yet necessary as it was, would be the ultimate move through which Nigeria could unshackle itself from decades of colonial and neocolonial subjugation and realize its own destiny as an economic, sociopolitical, and cultural vanguard of the continent.

The Future of Heritage Re-Presentation

At the heart of this debate about the two replicas of the mask is the question of what the function of replication is. First, it matters who is producing the replica and their social and political location relative to the culture that produced the original. Holding all other factors such as quality and value equal, a replica produced by members of the community which produced the original will hold more significance and be more favorably received than a replica produced by an external community, especially one with historically fraught political relations. Second, the cost of a replica on the open market is not equivalent to its value in a cultural context. The £6,000 price tag of the British Museum replica and its expert craftsmanship were not compelling enough to the Nigerian delegation to display at FESTAC. Instead, they opted to showcase a replica that was culturally more valuable to them because it was made by descendants of the sculptor of the original, thereby preserving the cultural lineage of ancient Benin ivory carving.

Replication is a deeply political practice that both reflects, but also creates, relations of power within and between nations. Of the Oaxacan wood carving industry, Brulotte (2012: 25) argues, "Replicas both reveal and at the same time partially reproduce hegemonic discourses of cultural patrimony espoused by state institutions." In the case of the mask of Queen Idia, replication becomes a tool through which reparations for colonial violence is eschewed, yet also becomes a symbol of, and tool for, postcolonial liberation and the rejection of models of hegemonic models of

colonial charity which perpetuate neocolonial relational ethics. In recent years as digital repatriation in the form of photography and online dissemination has become a venue through which justice is sought for the Benin artifacts, replication will continue to be a critical consideration for their future.[100]

The Italian word for replica, *replicare*, literally translates to "a response," and in the case of the Benin replicas, the production of both masks is well suited to this meaning. On the surface, the British Museum replica is a response to decades of unfulfilled demands for restitution of the original mask, yet on a more symbolic level their replica is a response to what the museum and British government sees as attempts to undermine the UK's enduring colonial authority. Likewise, the Nigerian replica is a response to the failed restitution attempts, yet also represents a response to calls for undoing the enduring harms of imperial domination in the form of neocolonial expansion that continues to permeate the postcolony. Replica thus serves as a response to political relations and dynamics between states while also representing the consolidation of power that extends from such interactions. As Codell (2020: 14) has noted, "Replicas can reveal the underlying politics, intention, aesthetic effects, multiple meanings, and social contexts of art production." It is through the mimetic process that wounds of the past that extend into the present are revealed and the repair of postcolonial violence becomes a possibility.

COSMOPOLITAN REPAIR

A 1993 exhibition brochure for the Museum of Mankind bears a photo of a modestly clothed black man wearing a feathered headpiece, geometric face paint, and a shell beaded necklace, striking a drum in the midst of similarly clad men seemingly engaged in ceremonial practice. The cultural affiliation of the man is obscured, but inside the brochure we learn the exhibitions on

[100] See *Digital Benin: Reconnecting Royal Art Treasures* website, visited November 17, 2020, https://digital-benin.org/

display represent collections from New Guinea, Mexico, Zaire (now DRC), and the Benin Empire. Of the Benin collection, the museum boasts "a fine collection" of ivory, brass and coral artefacts, a replica of an ancestral altar on which the heads of former Benin kings are displayed, and work commissioned by "European visitors" which, together, we are told provide insight into "the relationship between Edo [of Benin] and Europeans."[101] The photograph accompanying the Benin collection is of a famed ivory mask depicting Queen Idia, a looming ancestral figure in Benin's royal history. The mask--along with an estimated 4,000-10,000 other sacred objects collectively known as the Benin Bronzes--was looted from the Benin royal palace in 1897 during a speculative colonial invasion by British forces and transferred to the British Museum, where it has remained for over a century.

In 2019, in a sprawling contemporary studio gallery in Benin City, Nigeria, Nigerian artist Victor Chiejine Mowete exhibited a piece entitled *Ọmwan nọr dia uyi ẹdo yi* ('Preserver of Edo culture and glory').[102] The work is a bronze sculpture that, at first glance, appears to be a replica of the Queen Idia mask, but upon closer inspection depicts a mustached man wearing a pith helmet. The man is Northcote Thomas, a British government anthropologist who documented Edo culture in the early twentieth century, a decade following the British massacre of 1897. The sculpture fuses the image of Thomas' facial features with depictions of the heads of infamous shrine figures that he collected, while abstractly resembling an effigy of the Queen Mother.

For decades, Nigerian government officials, artists, museum professionals, and the public have called for the return of their looted sacred artifacts that are now scattered across the globe in Western museums, art houses, and private collections. The reluctance of cultural institutions to honor such requests, justifications evoked to defend their decisions, and the neoliberal tactics

[101] Bishopsgate Institute Archive, Bernie Grant Collection, African Reparations Movement Records (1963-2000), Museum of Mankind Exhibitions leaflet.
[102] See [Re:]Entanglements, Benin City: Colonial archives, creative collaborations.

employed to appease restitution demands collectively represent a neo-imperial form of power former colonial states exercise over their ex-colonies. In recent years, contemporary artists--from painters to bronze sculptors to poets to thespians--in Nigeria and throughout the diaspora have employed a range of aesthetic political practices to disrupt the legacies of colonialism still pervasive within their industries and communities. Through the creation of subversive artwork which attempts to think beyond the framework of Western benevolence embedded in the project of restitution, some have made efforts to resist postcolonial hegemonic influences within the global contemporary art world. By rejecting a historiography that continues to perpetuate the myth of primitivism and sameness across subaltern peoples from Benin to New Guinea, many Nigerian and diasporic creators are constructing an alternative schema through which to grapple with vestiges of both colonial violence and black grandeur.

This case considers what cultural repair and justice look like for Nigeria. It imagines not just the repatriation of artifacts, but full forms of systemic restitution. Together with subversive approaches to contemporary art, I read these acts as forms of anti-imperial resistance to more recent forms of colonial influence. This section focuses on the ways in which contemporary Nigerian artists and cultural producers have responded to the colonial theft of their material heritage through their work. What has been largely sidelined in these transnational conversations has been the response of Nigerian artists who, through my research, I have found have developed creative ways of representing this heritage in the physical/material absence of the objects. These artists have resisted the colonial appropriation of their heritage in Western museums and reclaimed cultural power by (re)creating their own historical narrative through their art. They have achieved this through, for example, visual/aesthetic reconfigurations and distortions and reproduction of the famed works in the museums, among other methods. The British cultural establishment has, over the last several decades, produced a single narrative of what African art is meant to represent premised on its

physical location, curatorial decisions, educational interpretation, etc. Contemporary artists in Nigeria are, in response, challenging this neocolonial logic of heritage ownership and production through subversive aesthetic practices in what I argue is a form of anticolonial resistance. We see the central question as bearing on the redeployment of anti-colonial aesthetics in contemporary cultural productions that address *new iterations of colonial forms of domination*.

The tactics of decolonial resistance that some Nigerian and diasporic artists have employed suggest a strategic redeployment of an aesthetic tradition that simultaneously advocates for the reclaiming of a black radical indigenous history and full realization of Nigerian cultural autonomous potentialities, while also envisioning a future situated within a global cosmopolitan framework--what I refer to as *cosmopolitan repair*.[103] The contemporary artists with whom I engage in this case share a commitment to both a critical refusal and creative negotiation of the neoliberal postcolonial globalization of modern art and the discursive positioning of their culture therein. Such forms of cultural production constitute a critical component of the recent resurgence of decolonial activism that has swept the global art world which, at its core, poses a resistance to extractive capitalism in the Global South.

Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism, Modernism and Anti-Imperialism

Mid-century anti-imperial independence movements across the African continent produced a new wave of African scholars and artists grappling with the ways in which art can produce critiques of colonialism, constructions of nationalist narratives, and pan-African cultural solidarity. In 1960 artist Uche Okeke theorized the concept of *natural synthesis* to describe a fusing of

[103] I use the terms 'decolonial' and 'anticolonial' not interchangeably, but to distinguish between decolonization as embodying a set of tactical strategies and anticolonialism as a conceptual movement. As Andrew Davies reminds us, anticolonial geographies are "a somewhat broader concept than decoloniality, which is often (and necessarily) rooted/routed through the specific circumstances of colonialism in particular places/spaces—something like a broad stance rather than a toolkit for precise circumstances" (2020, 12).

indigenous and non-indigenous modalities to produce a hybrid postcolonial aesthetic that emerged with Nigeria's independence (Uche Okeke 1960). Extending this framework, Chika Okeke-Agulu examined the concept of *postcolonial modernism* as a political consciousness which entails "a set of formal and critical attitudes adopted by African and black artists at the dawn of political independence as a countermeasure against the threat of loss of self in the maelstrom unleashed by Western cultural imperialism and its enduring aftermath" (2010: 522). He argues that the idea and aesthetic of natural synthesis was born out of this modernist turn which Uche Okeke and his peers of the independence generation founded. Their vision was simultaneously postcolonial and modernist in their belief in the necessity of a new national art form, loyalty to traditional aesthetics, and the creation of new hybrid styles. Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi (2015) has more recently explored contemporary forms of hybridity via critiques that contemporary artists are expected to have feet firmly planted both in the Western art historical tradition as well as their own particularized geospatiality to achieve and maintain visibility in a rapidly globalizing art world.

Today some Nigerian and diasporic artists working within a postcolonial framework embrace a form of dualism that makes them visible to a globalizing art world which is simultaneously Western-dominated yet Other-curious while maintaining a steadfast commitment to anti-imperial critique that precludes their cooptation. By speaking to what Enwezor refers to as a postcolonial matrix of dichotomies—global/local, center/periphery, transnational/diasporic, avant-garde/outmoded, ancient/contemporary, art/artifact, colonizer/colonized—these contemporary artists collapse the boundaries of what has conventionally defined or denied their incorporation into the Western field. Their work flattens such distinctions in an effort to recover untold stories, undo the alienation of a people from their heritage, and give voice to new identities recovered from decades of plunder. Scholar Ariella Azoulay makes the case for recovering the past as present to repair the enduring harms which erode and deny the possibility of a distinction between then and

now. Potential history, she argues, is "the restitution of the right to participate differently" in the construction of one's own story (Azoulay 2019, 45). One theme that emerges prominently throughout the work of the artists surveyed in this case is the necessity of constructing a narrative on one's own terms by returning to the point of original dispossession in 1897 in order to confront head-on the colonial narratives which have held Benin's cultural narrative hostage to the Western gaze and grip.

The ways in which the globalization and internationalization of the art world over the last several decades both advances and masks neoliberal capitalist exploitation and hegemony is an issue explored extensively by scholars such as Nzewi (2015), Enwezor (2003) and Sunanda Sanyal (2015). Despite the appearance of equity and fairness of this new postnational space--which Nzewi refers to as the "global contemporary" or "global modern" and Enwezor has called the "postcolonial constellation"--it is the West which continues to confer legitimation and affirmation while precluding the possibility of radical change on issues related to inequality. Yet many non-Western artists contend with desires to have their work be recognized by a consumption-driven global audience at the risk of cooptation and neutralization. I argue that some contemporary Nigerian and diasporic artists today navigate the space between absorption and recognition through drawing on the spirit of cosmopolitan repair by making use of the contemporary globalized art economy to assert a decolonial visual agenda.

Such modes of cultural production which center on emancipation and transnational solidarity constitute a form of anti-imperial cultural cosmopolitanism that is integral to a growing body of contemporary art of Nigeria and the diaspora. Over the last two decades black intellectuals have used the framework of African cosmopolitanisms to reflect on ways in which the diaspora has constructed anti-imperial philosophies that resist conventional colonial cosmopolitanism rooted in notions of modernity and development which inherently excluded and subjugated colonized

peoples. Kiddoe Nwankwo (2005) argues that cosmopolitanism may be one answer to the problem of a national identity and representation of the self made inaccessible by imperial violence, while Kobena Mercer and his contributors (2005) examine the ways in which critiques of primitivism and modernism have constructed a 20th century cosmopolitan agenda rooted in postcolonial critiques of, and resistance to, Eurocentrism. Kwame Appiah (2006) offers cosmopolitanism as a moral strategy to mitigate the violent divisions between communities, suggesting that art may provide a space of commonality and care in which societies are less concerned with absolutist forms of development and modernity, instead advocating for de-centering the self and seeking common humanity.

Babacar M'Baye's discussion of the radical nationalist and anti-imperial cosmopolitanism utilized by black politicians and intellectuals in the wake of continental decolonization movements is particularly instructive for the interventions contemporary artists of the diaspora are making. He defines black cosmopolitanism as "a resistive tool that enables various blacks, whose lives are intertwined with the West, to embrace their hybrid and diverse selves and mitigate the anguish of their fragmented and marginalized identities while preserving a sense of a shared history of struggle" (2017: 4). In *Black Cosmopolitanism and Anticolonialism* M'Baye argues that this form of diasporic cosmopolitanism stands in direct contrast to the liberal forms of republicanism and pursuits of civilization and modernization that Western empires, particularly France, practiced throughout imperial reign. Black intellectuals writing in the early postcolonial era wrested the revolutionary spirit from French cosmopolitanism and replaced its colonialist and racist discourse with an anti-imperial Pan-African modality.

A key feature of contemporary artistic production that I examine in this case is this explicit appropriation and subversion of colonialist practice and discourse in service of transnational antiracist and anti-imperial resistance which advocates for liberatory solidarity. The development of a transnational consciousness is central to M'Baye's conceptualization of black cosmopolitanism,

and like Okeke's theories of natural synthesis, unites disparate local and global histories to produce a hybrid identity that inherently resists Western hegemony. The artists and cultural producers who contribute to this landscape of reparative cosmopolitanisms that I examine acknowledge the endurance of colonial systems and, therefore, employ modern tools to resist such neoimperialist practice. Through their radical aesthetic work, artists demonstrate the ways in which Western hegemonic forms of power, ownership, possession, historiography, depiction, representation, narration, access, epistemology, and market continue to bear the legacies of colonialism and may, in turn, be channeled into forms of resistance and provide ways to navigate beyond the colonial matrix.

This case argues that the retention of sacred artifacts against the will of source countries, particularly ex-colonies, represents a form of social and cultural control that facilitates and exacerbates political and economic inequities between nations. Western states and institutions benefit not only financially from the possession and ownership of the objects--through museum visitor revenues, philanthropy, and sales and auctions--but also wield substantial political power over former colonies through these objects.[104] Since independence, generations of Nigerian artists have engaged in various forms of recuperation of pre-colonial aesthetics through the adoption of postcolonial modernist visual tactics to negotiate a sense of self-determination and to recover an autonomous postcolonial national identity. This article explores the efforts a handful of contemporary artists who, noting the shortcomings of decades of restitution negotiations, yet firmly committed to resisting the retention of their sacred artifacts, have leveled critiques at the neo-imperial appropriation of their heritage through their own bodies of work. Such forms of contemporary art continue to build upon a decades-long Nigerian postcolonial modernist tradition

[104] See The New York Times, "Disputed African Artifacts Sell at Auction," published June 29, 2020; accessed June 30, 2020.

of calling into question forces of imperial violence while making space for honoring the continuity and resilience of the nation's living history.

Cosmopolitan resistance

The democratization of art is one channel through which contemporary artists in Nigeria express their resistance to the legacies of colonialism. Whereas the Benin Bronzes were, in their original function, considered to be court art meant for use primarily in royal ceremonies, they are now thought to be pieces of 'high art,' occupying prominent positions within distinguished Western museums fetching hundreds of thousands of dollars per piece. Nzewi argues that the commodification of African art in Europe is deeply tied to colonial frameworks of knowledge production in which intellectual and cultural resources were extracted from Africa, and produced and interpreted as artistic knowledge only once they were imported to the West (2013). Peju Layiwola explains the destabilizing effects of the Western market locally:

> *The system of valuation used in today's art market is such that a premium is placed on two categories--'the looted' and 'contemporaneous with the looted'--almost as if Edo art ended with the rape of 1897 and whatever comes after that date of rape is ersatz or kitsch. This valuation, for me, imposes anonymity on the producers of art in the Edo idiom today, and it also strengthens the anonymity that the ancient artists lived under* (2010: 43-4).

While these antiquities continue to hold a great deal of spiritual and historical significance and there is broad support for their return to Nigeria, some contemporary artists simultaneously seek to destabilize the material value of these objects as a way of challenging the West's retention of them in a multitude of ways. The practices these artists employ to seek reparative justice beyond restitution—efforts which de-center the importance of Western ownership and possession, call attention to the heritage in Benin that was retained and continues to be produced contemporarily and reclaim their own narrative of past events—represent a new iteration of a modern postcolonial reparative cosmopolitanism that has long been a hallmark of Nigeria's cultural landscape. Frustrated

by decades of unsuccessful restitution campaigns, artists and creative professionals pursue strategies to divest from a sole focus on reclaiming art from the West through undermining the traditional art market which has enabled the exploitation of their work and pursuing alternative channels of expression.

The significance of the Benin Bronzes is contextually dependent and constructed. As Arjun Appadurai (1997) has argued, movement and changes in context shape what 'things' are, their function and their meaning and, as such, it is necessary to trace their social lives to understand how embodied material networks influence their meaning. The Bronzes were looted from the Edo people of the ancient Benin Kingdom, but their contemporary significance resonates across several discrete spatial scales beyond the living culture of Benin.

The four artists and collectives whose work I engage each represent a cultural space in which the Bronzes have shifted in their significance since their forcible removal. Peju Layiwola is not just a daughter of Edo but was indeed born in the royal palace and is the granddaughter of Oba Akenzua II, who reigned over the Kingdom from 1933-1978. While her work speaks to her ancestral ties and represents the significance of the Bronzes to Edo people, Layiwola has also been deeply engaged in many of Europe's cultural centers such as Paris, Zurich and Vienna through exhibition, curation, and teaching, which reflects the cosmopolitan nature of her artistic and intellectual engagement. Osaze Amadasun was born and resides in Lagos and while he does not identify as ethnically or culturally Edo, he has devoted his craft almost exclusively to depicting revisionist history of ancient Benin due to an investment in the construction of a pan-Nigerian nationalist identity of which Benin's history is a significant component, a cultural state-building project which the Nigerian and Edo state government have also been pursuing since independence. Amadasun has been represented by Lagos-based contemporary galleries which have a global audience and are embedded in a transnational network of arts spaces. [Re:]Entanglements is a UK-based and funded project led by

SOAS professor Paul Basu and Enotie Ogbebor holds numerous international museum affiliations, including a recent rescidency at the British Museum, which speaks to the ways in which the Bronzes have assumed a form of global citizenship, particularly in the UK. Lastly, the [Re:]Entanglements project partnered with the South London Gallery Art Assassins, a collective of young London-based poets led by poet Inua Ellams, and took to Zoom during the pandemic to critically reflect on how the legacies of imperialism continue to bear on the lived experiences of contemporary British youth. As such, each artist and project embody the spatial scales which the multiple reformulations of the Bronzes traverse and through which they have, over time, accrued new layers of meaning and significance.

Benin1897.com

"*Benin1897.com* projects an anti-imperialist trajectory in the discourse on the Benin Massacre," remarks Freida High in her essay about the 2009 show by bronze sculptor and Benin native Peju Layiwola which sheds light on the spiritual and cultural resilience of Edo culture while attending to the enduring political, social, economic and demographic impacts and legacies of the 1897 invasion (Layiwola 2010: 15). Contributors to the exhibition catalog refer to the invasion and its legacies as "an effacement of history," "cultural rape," "cultural imperialism," "aggressive art imperialism," and "ritual desacralization" in recognition of the violent impact of the theft on the nation. Yet Sola Olorunyomi argues that the displaced artifacts in fact challenge the power of their captor despite their captivity:

> *Even in their seemingly inert and mute states, the appropriated Benin statuettes and figurines already expressed a coded oppositional transcript in the foreign lands to which they were transported. By the 'artefactual' Other in their new abode, they called attention to self and remained an unsettled and an unsettling question (ibid: xix).*

1897.com is thus a cultural intervention that seeks to reactivate this perceived inertia of the objects by disrupting the notion that Benin as a kingdom and bronzecasting as a mythical practice ended with colonization, imagining, and documenting the enduring legacies of a society uninterrupted by the violence of Western hegemony.

Benin1897.com stands in direct opposition to the 1897 and contemporary pillaging through Layiwola's mimetic recreation and spiritual relocation of the infamous antiquities that are now scattered about the world by attempting to salvage the very materiality of the objects. If a society can be destroyed through the desecration and theft of its cultural heritage, then it might also be restored through the recreation of these monuments, she believes. In *Commemorative Heads*, Layiwola creates 1,000 busts of Benin royalty in the likeness of those that were looted. "The hundred-fold mimetic ancestral portraits, plaques, and related ritual forms shout of the rejection of an irrevocable loss [and] delineate identity and a sense of commemorative permanence," High notes (ibid: 30). Her work serves as a rejection of the loss and trauma associated with colonial violence, recuperation of the Kingdom's material history to its proper symbolic and physical location, and a challenge to neo-imperial retentionism.

In the piece *Theatres of War*, Layiwola takes the words recovered from journals of the British Army during the 1897 invasion and inscribes them on traditional terracotta bricks: "PROCEED TO BENIN," "PROCEED AT ONCE," "SEND FORCES," "SEND GUNBOAT," "WITH KNOWLEDGE OF NATIVE WARFARE." High interrogates the power of imitating the language of the aggressor and notes: "Thomas Hobbes says, 'To imitate is to Honour; for it is vehemently to approve.' Yet he adds, 'To imitate one's Enemy is to Dishonour'" (ibid: 32). Thus, Layiwola's presentation of the British "enemy's" language of war is a reappropriation and decontextualization tactic that, when utilized by the oppressed, removes its power and ability to perpetuate colonial violence.

Layiwola directly addresses the realities of war and violence in the exhibition. *Uhunmwun elao* ('portraits of ancestors') and *Oba ghato okpere* ('Long Live the King') in particular collectively "evoke images of history and commemoration, both honorific and horrific, memorializing and simultaneously launching criticism of the British Expedition to which sacred objects and lives were lost," according to High (ibid: 27). She argues that the pieces demonstrate a type of agency which precludes passive engagement by the viewer, forcing them to engage in the critical work of bearing witness to a more just telling of history and spectating against the grain. The audience is brought into the active process of contesting the duality of looting through their critical gaze and process of re-memory. The spectator is provoked to "reflect on both visible form and the extra-referentials (memory and history) that are enacted in the process of engagement" (ibid), thus being transformed into an agent of decoloniality by engaging in contentious work of their own, on their own terms, through sitting with and moving through the violence of the past.

Benin1897.com advocates for the return of the Bronzes, yet it acknowledges that the process of restitution is not simply limited to the material exchange of objects, but a deeper process of mutual healing and reconciliation as well as the undoing of the neocolonial structures that persist into the present. Reparations is the product of these two forms of return—material and symbolic—a process intended to repair relations between violently entangled communities and restore justice to the aggrieved. The process of restoring an archive to its original context through which a community may reconstruct its past is an attempt to bring history into the present, a practice which Azoulay argues is necessary to confront the enduring legacies of empire. As she argued in a March 2, 2020 essay in Hyperallergic, "Reparations is the straightforward answer to structural violence."

Osaze Amadasun

Lagos-based artist Osaze Amadasun uses his work to resist stereotypical representations of Edo people and culture established during the colonial period which have persisted to the present day. He has spent much of his career studying and researching pre-colonial Benin art and creating reinterpretations of the classic folk-art motifs which simultaneously serve to educate the Benin public of their own history while also posing resistance to colonial understandings of the society outside of Benin. Amadasun uses a variety of media types--including graffiti, textiles and playing cards--to export Benin's creative energy, rooted in knowledge of its precolonial past from their ancestors, to disseminate information about Benin's regal past to new audiences. "I am playing with nostalgia," he says.[105] His hope is that by democratizing art in forms that the everyday person will be able to consume, their awareness of Benin's pre-colonial history will receive its proper treatment.

One of Amadasun's successful creative ventures has been the creation of the Bini Cards, a set of playing cards which depict culturally significant figures and motifs from Benin's pre-colonial past. The production of these images on playing cards and their dissemination to the public at the price point of roughly 7 USD represents a democratization of the high art in Western museums and art houses. If these institutions profit from the exclusivity and rarity of these objects, thereby reinforcing a neocolonial, neoliberal claim to them rooted in retentionist politics, then resistance to such a position is a decolonial strategy that inverts the Western gaze and prioritizes not just viewership, but utility and pleasure for indigenous groups. The racial capitalist project of artifact retention is thus undermined by the provincialization of the artifacts through their third-world circulation.

One piece that has received significant attention is Amadasun's acrylic and charcoal painting of Oba Ovonramwen, the last king who reigned over the Benin Kingdom prior to the colonial period and who was exiled in the 1897 invasion. In the painting, the *oba* stands atop a crumpled

[105] Interview with Amadasun, Lagos, Nigeria, conducted January 2, 2020.

Union Jack dressed in traditional royal Edo regalia, holding Edo cultural symbols that convey strength and power, with a yellow orb behind his head suggesting a deity-like character. Surrounding the oba are three guardian angels directing their energies toward the oba, with a self-portrait of the artist himself in the image of one angel.

The painting, and Amadasun's corpus of work more generally, represent the struggle for self-determination that was the hallmark of the mid-century independence movements across the continent. Amadasun explained that while he supported their return, he believed that Nigerians cannot afford to rely on British benevolence to know their history--they must actively work in the present to reclaim and recast their own histories. "I want to push the conversation forward, beyond just appreciating traditional court arts and 'fetish arts' by destigmatizing them and making them accessible to everybody," Amadasun says. He argues that despite the British looting, they did not steal his nation's cultural and artistic knowledge, therefore the "creative blood" of the ancestors continues to still flow through Edo people today must be used to rearticulate a new narrative. Post-colonial self-determination is multi-scalar--it can be understood as the body politic (re)claiming its own collective narrative; but it may also refer to the freedom to express the sovereign desires of the self, as evidenced by the artist including his own celestial self-portrait in the painting as an individual agent of decolonization. Amadasun's work is an attempt to wrest from the hands of those who looted his nation the power to continue to dictate their narrative. He is exercising what Azoulay has described "the right to deny perpetrators and their inheritors their imperial right to continue to own and profit off of what was robbed (Azoulay 2020)." While debates about the fate of the Benin Bronzes continue to unfold, some contemporary artists such as Amadasun are proving that there are multiples ways to negotiate the appropriation of Benin's looted heritage beyond the framework of restitution in a manner which substantively rejects imperial hegemony.

[Re:]Entanglements

[Re:]Entanglements is a UK-based project which brings contemporary African artists into critical conversation with Northcote Thomas' 1907 archival records of his study of Benin and Sierra Leone through the production of work of their own, such as the Queen Idia/Northcote Thomas piece described above. The project's goal is to help young Nigerian artists develop a "better understanding of the historical context in which these materials were gathered" in order to "re-think their significance in the present" ([Re:]Entanglements 2020, About).

Enotie Ogbebor, the founder and director of the studio gallery in Benin City which hosted the project, produced an acrylic painting as part of the project entitled *Chronicles of an Era* in response to his encounter with the archive. His piece articulates the 'modernization' of Benin following the 1897 British invasion. On the left side of the canvas, he depicts decorative wooden posts that adorned pre-colonial Benin homes and the ancestors who occupied them as a way of representing the pre-colonial past. In the middle is Northcote Thomas, marking the transition to colonial 'modernity,' along with a horn blower who is sounding the passage of time. "He's [the horn blower] here being joyous, and bringing music alive to show, even though they had just recovered from the British invasion--they are trying to move on with their lives." ([Re:]Entanglements, Benin). Ogbebor's representation of Thomas is hollow, literally and metaphorically--a white stenciled silhouette, his body rendered a blank void which sits in stark contrast to the evocative, colorful depictions of Benin's vibrant past and future.

The notion of cultural continuity across time here is important. A common retentionist argument is that communities are unable to retrieve looted objects because the society has since evolved and is no longer that same as that from which the objects were taken.[106] Thus, Ogbebor's presentation of Benin's past and transition to the future is a critical disruption of this belief in a lack

[106] See Merryman, J. (2006).

of cultural continuity. The way in which Ogbebor represents Thomas is also key. The white silhouette denotes an absence or negation, a critique of the erasure of indigenous personhood and culture as well as the self-erasure synonymous with the gaze and violence of colonial anthropology. On the right side of the painting are signs of 'modernity' ushered in by the British, yet depicted are also the failures of modernity, such as mass migration and human displacement.

On the power of these archival sources to convey important lessons of Benin's history through his work, Ogbebor notes:

> Colonialism tended to bring an effect where people felt we didn't have a civilization. We did not have a history. We were just civilized and brought into Western influence. The archives showed how the people have already formed societies, how they had their own architectural styles, how they had their own motifs, how they had a functioning society, even post the British invasion, gives you a snippet of the kind of civilization that existed before the British invasion. If you know where you're coming from, it's easier to examine where you want to go ([Re:] Entanglements, Benin).

Depicting royal society in a way that is honorific and sophisticated thus challenges the imperialist assumptions that colonized peoples were both culture-less before the colonial encounter and were ineffectual due to a perceived primordial nature.

South London Gallery Art Assassins

The summer of 2020 witnessed a transnational eruption of racial justice and anti-police brutality uprisings in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd, a black American man. Protests swiftly pivoted to the destruction of dozens of monuments long considered to be symbols of white supremacy, including a statue of Edward Colston, a 17th century slave trader in Bristol, which was subsequently thrown into a river. Weeks later, a group of young black/brown poets in London gathered on Zoom to reflect on these unfolding events and explore the connections between the contemporary moment and Britain's colonial and enslaved past. "We are living in a Britain that is now having to come to terms and speak about its colonial histories, and the racial and economic

implications of that. We are literally digging up colonial legacies that we have today and the physical embodiments of it, and in some places throwing them into rivers," the host Akhera Williams noted (South London Gallery 2020). The eight poets, like the young artists in Benin City discussed in the previous section, had also spent time studying Northcote Thomas' archive as part of the [Re:]Entanglements project, and came together to reflect on his anthropological gaze on the region and the lasting effects of war and theft.

The poets collaborated on a 40-minute spoken word performance in which they explored diaspora, hair, photography, dance clubs, diamonds, Kipling and tattoos as a way of engaging with the legacies of empire and slavery in modern-day Britain and in the mundanity of their own lives. "Is it different to be British now?," one poet asks, wondering whether the pillaging of 19th century Britain is in any way different from how Britain holds itself in the world today (ibid). Of Northcote Thomas's exploration of Benin, one poet interrogates the legibility of the Other and abstractness of representation in his collections:

> The ideal anthropologist looks only at society's surface [...]
> Surely their own story in their own words buried under yours needs to be told [...]
> They can't speak to each other
> Wells and medicine are good for the body
> But the way to gain a soul is to hold it in the way that it knows to be held
> Unfortunately, the world documents communities the only way they know how
> Not for who they are, but for who they are to them.

The Benin Bronzes, which were removed just one decade before Thomas' exploration of the region, were pages torn out of Benin's history book in order to allow a new story of global culture to be told in the halls of the world's universal museums. Yet the history told of Benin in these spaces is not one that would be recognizable by Edo people, but one that is framed in relation to and in service of those who might only understand Edo people 'for who they are to them.' Azoulay, in the Hyperallergic essay, suggests that the issue with reclaiming withheld heritage "is about the right to name and to define, the right to repair and care for relationships outside of the terms set by imperial

institutions, the right to deny perpetrators and their inheritors their imperial right to continue to own and profit off of what was robbed, the right to hold dear ones as family rather than documents."

The poem goes on to consider the encounter between the bodily aesthetic of Edo people, its representation in Edo art, and the anthropologist. One poet offers:

> *I want a tattoo*
> *I want my skin to bear witness to the truth*
> *Rebellion resistance whatever the cause of my persistence*
> *I need my face, my hands, my limbs to tell the stories of*
> *To sing the hymns of*
> *Of people whose words were mistranslated by those who hated their single skin.*

The poet is referring to a desire to appropriate the pre-colonial ritual of facial scarification which signified status and group affiliation that many Edo people continue to engage in today. The practice of scarification dates centuries, and while it continues today, its usage diminished drastically in the wake of colonial scrutiny and documentation used as evidence of the savagery which was used as a justification for the continuation of colonization. Thus, the practice and desire to have a marked body can be read as a physical embodiment of anti-colonial resistance. Yet, as the poet reminds us, a marked body is irrelevant when confronting subjugation: "Here in the West, lest we forget that even the sight of clear black skin is treason. [...] But still I want a tattoo because I'm black if I do and I'm black if I don't." The legacies of colonial violence upon the body made possible through benign documentation remain, yet the dispossessed engage in the continual work of reclaiming the narrative of their people through telling revisionist stories on their very backs.

The Present and Future of Repair

In late 2020 the government of Nigeria and the royal family of Benin announced plans to construct a new museum at the palace in Benin City that will, among other features, serve as a repository for repatriated Benin Bronzes in anticipation of successful negotiations with European

partners. Months later in 2021, Germany announced its famed ethnological museum would return more than 500 objects looted from Benin during the 1897 invasion, and other nations and regional bodies are expected to follow suit in due course. Restitution has long held broad support within Nigeria and the diaspora, and such victories are reminders that the pursuit of justice may be decades long and decolonization is a process that temporally extends well beyond the dissolution of formal imperial structures. Yet in recent years, some contemporary Nigerian and diasporic artists have engaged in the work of restoring plundered heritage by extending their focus beyond restitution in pursuit of liberatory framework of artistic production rooted in traditional anti-imperial values of nationhood and self-determination. Beyond efforts to materially recover the past, such forms of repair invoke a spirit of creation and the transcendence of new visual forms. Like Ogbebor's painting which bears a hollowed-out silhouette of Northcote Thomas, absence, or the negation of presence, leaves space for the creation of novel futures. Perhaps repair, in this context, offers the possibility of creating work that circumvents the colonial framework, complicating and subverting the colonizer's own self-narrative, undermining the market structures through which their power is maintained, and rejecting the very structures which have established the limits of one's cultural claims. This version of repair elides revisionist approaches, instead advocating for the disposal of a system that trades in colonial-era racialized hierarchies of center/periphery art to advance the capitalist agendas of the neoliberal cultural establishment.

The project of cosmopolitan repair ultimately aims to reappropriate the conventional aesthetic strategies and cultural institutions and structures traditionally used by imperial forces to subjugate colonized peoples in order to reclaim the power to narrate one's own story with the resources embedded in the memory of a nation that can never be looted. Azoulay explains that the lesson of potential history is that "you don't have to imagine a different future, you have to look backward and reclaim what was there that contains other potentialities for the entire body politic"

(Vincente 2020: 436). Through radicalized histories, the provincialization and disruption of European institutions, aesthetic critique of cultural symbology, and the democratization of art, contemporary Nigerian and diasporic artists are tackling the contemporary colonial by backwardly reclaiming and constructing a hybrid cultural awareness which exists beyond the Western grip. Through fashioning sites of liberation, their very existence as artists within a radical indigenous aesthetic tradition stands as a form of resistance. As Freida High reminds us, "contemporary Nigerian artists not only make monuments, but are monuments themselves" (Layiwola 2010: 34). It is through their cultural production of the past in aesthetic form that the colonial is excavated from its inert state to be reckoned and repaired in its afterlife with a view toward imagining alternative emancipated futures.

CHAPTER VII:

THE AFTERLIFE OF CULTURAL DEATH

In this final chapter I examine the ultraviolent impact the looting of the Benin artifacts had on the Edo/Nigerian community, and how artists, activists, and the general public have organized to reject the narrative that the 1897 sacking was a totalizing event. Using my new insights about political officials' and local cultural actors' use of cultural materiality to assert neo- and anti-imperial claims developed in previous chapters, I build a theory of cultural death and repair which considers the restitution and repatriation of spoils of war an essential component of the modern decolonization process and the rebalancing of relations of power between Europe and Africa. I argue that the retentionist strategies I outlined in the previous two chapters represent a position which ensures cultural death for the objects and people of Benin, whereas the strategies of resistance those engaged in, and beyond, the struggle for restitution are acts of decoloniality which make space for the refusal of death and the embrace of repair.

I use the case of the Benin artifacts to examine notions of social and cultural alienation, seizure, disruption, expulsion, bondage and slavery, and use recent debates about heritage restitution to think through the possibilities of repair, reparations, reclamation and redemption. Employing Patterson's theory of social death, I argue that both the people *and* the objects that are alienated from one another during the imperial looting of cultural artifacts experience a process of cultural death. I extend this theory by demonstrating that restitution is a form of reparations that offers the opportunity for spiritual redemption from the state of cultural death. In doing so, I establish a conceptualization of cultural regeneration that, via restitution and reparations more broadly, provides a pathway out of symbolic death toward emancipation.

In 2007, the Musee du Quai Branly, France's state ethnological museum, held an exhibition of royal art from the Edo Kingdom of Benin. The vast majority of the objects contained in the exhibition were plundered from the Benin Kingdom during a British invasion in 1897 which resulted in the capture and colonization of the region which is now modern-day Nigeria. Sylvester Ogbechie,

a professor at the University of California, who descends from an ancient Benin clan and who identifies as ethnically Edo, attended the 2007 exhibition at the Quai Branly. He had never seen firsthand the cultural antiquities from his ancestral homeland. In an interview, Ogbechie recounted the moment he first laid eyes on a sword of Oba Ovonramwen, who ruled Benin from 1888 to 1914 through the British invasion and exile, an object with great cultural significance to the Edo people and which he had heard about his entire life through stories and folk tales told to him by successive generations of his ancestors. Ogbechie recalls upon encountering the sword in the Quai Branly, he performed a traditional salute to the Benin king, which entailed dropping down on one knee, his hands crossed in front of his chest with palms flat out. The museum goers were understandably startled to see someone performing such a ritual in a Parisian museum, yet for Obgechie, this performance was a necessary act of restoring a sense of kinship between he his Benin clan and honoring the spirit of his ancestors embedded in the sword itself.

Since the artifacts were looted in 1897, very few Edo people have seen them in person--save for a handful of privileged individuals who have the financial, geopolitical and cultural capital to travel to the West to see them in museums. What this means is that the majority of people from Benin, which remains a living and vibrant culture, have long been alienated from their material heritage. These objects are significant to the Edo people for many reasons--first, many of the objects, which were created in the 13th century before Benin had a written history, bear a pictorial representation of Benin's major historical events and royal proceedings, so these objects serve as the only remaining archive of Benin's ancient history. As Freida High has noted of the objects, "For in the iconography of their solid materiality, they have preserved the images and histories of prominent individuals, lineages, major events and royal symbols for centuries. *In situ*, on shrines or altars, they vitally sustain the history, social memory, and cultural traditions through display and ritual" (Layiwola 2010: 28). Paula Ben-Amos Girshick has argued that the looted brass portraits of the

Benin kings were important because they were "a locus for constructing memory (cited in Layiwola 2010: 30)." Second, these are not just historical documents, but are believed by many to be the living embodiment of the Kingdom's ancestors themselves and are considered by many to be religious and spiritual icons. As Benin scholar Freida High has noted, "The dialogic relationship is not only physical but also spiritual; the artworks, apart from serving as records of events and the world view of the people, also served as objects of communication with the ancestors." These objects embody the souls of Benin's lineage and their forcible removal and relocation to Western museums has decontextualized their inherent and intended meaning, thus rendering them, in their current form, culturally and spiritually bankrupt.

I use the case of the Benin artifacts to examine notions of social and cultural alienation, seizure, disruption, expulsion, bondage and slavery, and use recent debates about heritage restitution to think through the possibilities of repair, reparations, reclamation and redemption. I employ sociologist Orlando Patterson's theory of social death to argue that both the people *and* the objects that are alienated from one another during the imperial looting of cultural artifacts experience a process of social and cultural death. I then build on and extend this theory by arguing that restitution, or the return of plundered objects to their source communities, is a form of reparations that offers the opportunity for spiritual redemption from the state of cultural death. My goal is to establish a conceptualization of cultural regeneration that, via restitution and reparations more broadly, provides a pathway out of symbolic death toward emancipation.

Social death

In 1982, sociologist Orlando Patterson penned *Slavery and Social Death*, a landmark text which examines the origins and relations within the institution of slavery through a survey of ancient and

contemporary global societies which spans several millenia, from ancient Greeks and Romans to the Karen ethnic minorities of Myanmar to the black Atlantic slave trade. Fundamental to Patterson's thesis is the concept of social death--the slave, he argued, was a socially dead individual alienated from all rights and claims of birth, and who ceased to belong to a legitimate social order. The slave, in Patterson's words, was a "genealogical isolate," one who was natally alienated through separation from her parents, blood relation, remote ancestors, and even his descendants--in effect, having lost all familial connection at birth with respect to both ascending and descending generations. As a social non-person, their ancestors were not a constitutive element of their social lives and realities and they were fully detached from any sense of communal memory. According to Patterson, the slave experienced pure, forced alienation from his history: "Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he was also culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. He had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage," he writes.

Social death and the process of social negation, to Patterson, was the first phase of the process of enslavement given that it entailed violently uprooting the individual from their community and subsequently desocializing and depersonalizing them. Embedded in this process was the institutionalization of marginality, which was the ultimate cultural outcome of the loss of natality, honor and power. According to Peter Suzuki, speaking on the Nias of Indonesia, "slaves are not mentioned in any ancestral myth, have no place in the world-tree, thus lack religion and consequently, a place in the cosmos. They have no past nor future, living as they do, on the whims and mercy of their masters. They live on the fringes of the cosmos and are viewed as being almost on par with animals" (cited in Patterson 1982: 39).

Social death was largely characterized as a state of liminality as Patterson conceived of it. The slave was an institutionalized outsider, one remaining in their new society yet held apart from it, and having lost enough of their identity to be hardly recognizable or relatable to their home society. The

ancient Egyptian word for captive literally translated to 'living dead' (Patterson 1982: 42). They were a 'quasi person'--neither dead nor incorporated. Unlike the artifacts that were destroyed during the 1897 raid or those left behind in Benin, the objects that were looted have been suspended in a purgatory betwixt and between a society that has attempted to erase their heritage and imbue them with a universal message digestible for the world, and a society that is home. "They're hangin, just sittin in limbo," raps the lyricist Monday Midnite in his song "1897" (Layiwola 2010: 11). The liminal state of Benin's heritage, and the community's inability to seek resolution through restitution, has been a factor which has contributed to the slow erosion of their cultural identity since the colonial invasion.

Patterson devotes a significant portion of his study to the notion of symbolic instruments used to control and manipulate the slave. In addition to the material instruments--such as manacles and shackles employed to subdue the slave--so too did masters utilize symbolic devices as a form of discipline. "The symbolic instruments may be seen as the cultural counterpart to the physical instruments used to control the slave's body. And much the same way that the literal whips were fashioned from different materials, the symbolic whips of slavery were woven from many areas of culture," Patterson asserts. The power of utilizing symbolic devices to control a population is at the root of cultural heritage theft and appropriation. Nelson and Olin have argued that "the effective way to destroy a community is to destroy a monument that symbolically represents it" (cited in Layiwola 2010: 30). Symbolic and physical destruction are complementary components--while the destruction of the physical environment disrupts a person or community's worldly existence, it is possible to rebuild such spaces. The dismantling of a society's symbolic infrastructure, including its cultural and spiritual resources, on the other hand, have long-lasting generational effects that take a psychological toll on communities. The plunder of Benin's heritage was an assault on the Kingdom's most sacred symbolic treasures that the colonial intruders knew would not only enrich their coffers,

but would be a source of cultural domination for generations to come that would enable the ongoing colonial expansion of Britain's empire throughout the region. Such a form of cultural disaster was the ultimate form of symbolic death for the people of Benin which persists with the retention of the artifacts in Western museums.

The Cultural Death of the Benin Bronzes

> Ariella Azoulay argues that there is a danger of depriving people of their material worlds:
>
> "Deprivation should be understood simultaneously as the production of entire communities, whose material and spiritual worlds were spoiled, plundered, and dissected, now made almost worldless; and the self-fashioning of cosmopolitan modern citizens through these looted objects now recognized as art while disavowing their complicity in imperial genocidal enterprises on a global scale (2019: 126-7)."

The Edo people of Benin and the Benin artifacts, in their forcible removal from the ancient Benin Kingdom and their relocation to Western museums, have experienced a form of cultural deprivation and alienation leading to what I refer to as a state of *cultural death*. Like social death, cultural death is the result of a violent rupture of a people not only from their material heritage, but also from stories, narratives and histories embedded in such objects. Many have referred to the 1897 invasion and looting as a "cultural rape." The sitting oba of Benin has described the Benin artifacts which currently sit in Western museums as "the pages torn off from the book of a people's life history" and has argued that "the removal of these works, described as 'records of our souls', have led to a fragmented experience. [...] There appears to be some form of collective amnesia as a result of the gap created by the loss of these works." The forcible looting of the objects and their retention in Western museums, alienated from their source community, stands as a reminder of a civilization whose full potentiality was disrupted by the forces of imperial intrusion. Jas Elner's conceptualization of 'ritual desacralization' here is useful, which he defines as a process in which sacred objects are desecrated in multiple ways--through physical defacement, dislocation from

spiritual spaces, and the disruption of memory that keeps them temporally and spatially sacred (cited on Layiwola 2010: 21). Cultural death is thus the transition from the sacred to the desecrated, an autobiographical void left unfilled by decades and centuries of colonial extraction and violence and a nostalgic delinking of the Edo people from their past.

While some scholars have argued that the capture of enemy spoils of war was a commonly acceptable act throughout this period, and therefore that the retention of these objects is defensible, the laws governing African nations during this time did not permit such activity in peace or in war. As Chuka Nnabuife has argued, "These cultural objects are so intimately connected with deepest religious beliefs and practices of a particular people and could not simply be transferred to another people. This would have violated taboos and prohibitions in the cultures of those looting and those in the deprived society" (2011). There was a level of respect that shaped the ways in which African societies attended to the culture and religion of others, even during times of conflict. Often communities that were conquered were allowed to maintain their own religious and cultural practices, including material heritage. Yet the colonial laws during this period naturally superseded local ones during invasion and occupation, yet it is important to acknowledge that these systems were mostly not recognized by the indigenous communities and their legal infrastructure.

Many of the cultural objects had been used in ceremonies during the pre-colonial period, traditions which continue today despite the absence of material reference. The proceedings of royal ceremonies, for example, were not recorded in written language, but instead inscribed in a series of brass plaques which were looted during the 1897 invasion. When Oba Erediauwa, who ruled over Benin until 2016, was crowned in 1979, his father, Oba Akenzua II, had been in power for 45 years, from 1933 to 1978. During those decades, many of the coronation ceremonial attire and procedures had been forgotten, so it was necessary to consult the plaques in order to accurately perform the coronation. The ruling party had access to the necessary plaques in order to carry out the ceremony

in a traditional manner, but there have been many other ceremonies, according to Oba Erediauwa, whose plaques were missing and were, therefore, unable to be performed in the culturally appropriate manner.[107]

As noted earlier, these antiquities are not just historical or symbolic objects, but are embodiments of Benin's royal ancestors and a means through which their spirit and guardianship is kept alive for the people of Benin today. The language some Edo scholars and artists have used to describe the looting and retention of the artifacts in Western museums draws directly on references to slavery and suggests that the objects themselves, in their new environments, are enslaved persons. Peju Layiwola, an Edo bronzecaster, has argued that "Western museums hold African art objects literally in bondage." In her discussion of the ancestral legacies of the objects, Layiwola notes: "They who once enjoyed the splendour of the palace are now trapped behind glass walls in foreign lands. [...] These diasporic ancestors seemed to keep yelling: unbind us!," she explains. Responding to Layiwola, another Benin artist noted, "That statement in itself invokes memory, reflection, pain, and irony, referencing the destructive effect of the looting and desacralization of ancestor forms, and allusion to the impact of cultural loss on the memory of Benin legacies" (Layiwola 2010). The artifacts, scattered across the Western world, in museums, art galleries and auction houses in communities far flung from Benin, have thus become members of the Benin diaspora in their isolation and alienation from their homeland. The slave, according to Patterson, was *pro nolo*, or one who did not recognize a father nor a homeland. This form of cultural imperialism represents a sense of cultural death that leaves a community ill-equipped to write its own history, tell its own story, and confer such narratives to future generations, thereby ensuring future iterations of cultural death.

[107] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2203. Letter from Oba Erediauwa to Queen Elizabeth, Benin City, November 1996. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

Nigerian cultural theorist Mabel Evwierhoma describes how the idea of the lost ancestors is more than just a metaphor, but a literal way in which the community relates to the 'stolen ones':

> "The Benin kingdom will therefore connote the mother who needs a return of her children (the art works) in means physical, psychological, economic and social, among other forms of return for more value to be added to the lost heritage at home and in the Diaspora. In beholding her children, certain requirements or processes are needed, ditto in the beholding of the mother by her children flung apart throughout the world. This regard for Mother Benin and the children of Benin is one outcome of 1897 that has other ramifications in spheres that are mental, fiscal, collective, cultural and political. These consequences are still with us at home in Benin." (Layiwola 2010: 71)

Given their cultural and historic significance, as objects with both spiritual and archival value, the bronzes and other looted objects were never meant to be on public display, rendered solely for the Western gaze. Their decommissioning as sacred artifacts, objects of their spirituality, and reconstruction as art objects for consumption in the museum was itself a further act of looting. Some of the looted pieces, for example, were pieces of ritualistic regalia which had been passed down from generation to generation and were meant to be worn during ceremonies, yet once they were placed in showcases for viewing pleasure they lost their full meaning for the Edo community. Ariella Azoulay has argued for the reading of imperial violence as constitutive of the idea of art itself:

> In the process of being appropriated, these objects were detached from the environments, communities, and modes of activity to which they had belonged. They were re-anchored in the imperial culture defined by the museum and the market. In this new context, the idea of art for art's sake flourished and art became transcendental, a newly universal category that detached objects from the people who made and used them, from whose worlds they had been stolen (2019: 90).

The act of placing the bronzes in museums and imposing the framework of 'art', and thus desacralizing them from their originary context, was one means of ensuring that the community would remain in a state of cultural death as long as their artifacts were held in this way. Patterson argued that the slave was powerless, in part, because they had no independent social existence and

no public worth. "He had no name of his own to defend," he writes, and is therefore neither an individual nor a member of a body alienated as he was. Likewise, the looting of artifacts and concomitant erasure of indigenous history, and subsequent indoctrination within the context of the Western 'world culture' museum in which they acquire a new cosmopolitan identity is one means by which the independence of a nation may be supplanted by the desires of a more dominant one. "The slave's only life was through and for his master," Patterson argues. The artifacts have fully lost their spiritual and cultural significance to the people of Benin in their current context and now primarily have meaning legible to the international art world. The symbolic relations that bound the people of Benin to their heritage have been replaced by a fictive kin bond, which tells us that the Benin artifacts now belong in the universal museums because their story is one of global heritage and universalism. These severing of attachments to the former society is a necessary step in the marginal incorporation of the artifact in the museum in order to convince us that we are all members of a global communities with a shared heritage, while simultaneously depriving a society of the very heritage which gave them life, yet has now, in their current context, facilitated their death.

The plunder of the bronzes was also an act of historical revisionism. In the possession of not just foreigners, but the colonizers, the artifacts became pieces through which a new, sanitized version of history was told by the British. According to Professor Tunde Babawale, the effect of the theft of the bronzes was "to perpetually distort African history and appropriate African creativity, ingenuity, craftsmanship and industry as well as misrepresent the historic legacies of our forebears" (Layiwola 2010: ix). Instead of being violently looted during a military invasion, we were told that the objects were 'rescued' from a primitive society that was unable to properly care for them. And instead of being the booty of a colonial invasion meant to undermine the last standing autonomous kingdom in West Africa following the Benin Conference during which time Africa was being carved up by European empires, we were told that the objects were taken as a form of compensation for an

expensive mission meant to protect Africans from their own savagery. The act of destroying indigenous culture through pillaging and looting in order to advance a salvation narrative that would ultimately make space for the justification racial exploitation and the extension of racial capitalism was a common technique in the evolution of empire. As Dan Hicks has noted, "Brutal naval officers bombarded native villages in the name of ending barbarism. The destruction of sacred spaces and buildings was carried out in the name of civilisation as a universal value" (2020: 45). The looting of the bronzes was part of a project that would allow British forces to advance a version of history in which they were viewed as benevolent victors against a savage race, while simultaneously depriving the people of Benin access to their material heritage, thereby ensuring that their own understanding of their history and cultural heritage suffered immensely and was ripe for distortion. Professor Folarin Shyllon has argued that the appropriation of a nation's material culture has always been regarded as a trophy of war which adds glory to the victor and humiliation to the vanquished (Shyllon 2010). "What kind of history books will our children read in the future? Who is writing our history? What kind of history is being passed down to us?" asks Peju Layiwola (2010: 7). In order to redeem a broken culture, a community must be able to tell its own stories, amending those which had been previously narrated by their oppressors. As Mabel Evwierhoma has argued, "This revisitation of history is revalidation; an act to reclaim a stolen or muddle-up heritage. The reclamation is a strong voice for affirming a future and a present that fights cultural invasion" (Layiwola 2010: 70).

An additional form of narrative revision is embodied by what many advocates of return have claimed is the way in which artifacts serve as a testament to the sophistication of Africa's civilizations in the face of long-standing narratives of Africa's underdevelopment and primitive nature. Dan Hicks (2020) has discussed how assumptions about the origins of Benin's bronzemaking practice has fueled this myth of African productive inferiority. When the artifacts

were first discovered in the raid and placed on the international art market, art historians and critics denied the possibility of them being produced by Africans due to their technical sophistication, instead claiming that they must have been produced by Portuguese traders who had done business in the region for centuries prior. It was only decades later that the Edo origins of the pieces were confirmed, a victory heralded by the people of Benin and Africa more generally as evidence of their comparable capabilities relative to European artists. As long as these artifacts remain in the possession of Western institutions, the ability of African nations to claim this parity in artistic skill is undermined.

As MP Bernie Grant has argued, "They tell our story, and our history as black people is denied for as long as they remain hidden away."[108] As such, the retention of material heritage by Western museums is a means by which the historical narratives denying Africa's creative ingenuity are upheld and affirmed.

Far from an ancient culture of days bygone, Edo State in Nigeria remains the vibrant cultural hub for the Edo people who remain loyal to their royal heritage yet who also hold on to the painful memories of all that was lost in the British invasion. "Families from the old kingdom still speak of their losses, in human and material terms," argues Peju Layiwola, referring both to the human ancestors lost in the 1897 battle and the material ancestors scattered and now warehoused in museums across the globe. Despite the endurance of contemporary Edo culture, it is necessary to consider how the gap created by the removal of the works impacted indigenous scholarship and the origin of a cultural identity of the Edo people. As Peju Layiwola argues, "The Expedition did disrupt the structure of guilds and artistic processes, as it produced a critical vacuum in the sacred shrines of the palace and in the lives of residents with its unprecedented violence that traumatized the entire

[108] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2210. Letter from Oba Erediauwa to Queen Elizabeth, Benin City, November 1996. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

kingdom" (Layiwola 2010: 10). What additional creative and innovative potential was plundered alongside the theft of their material heritage? This is a question that of course looms large not just for the Edo people, but for the continent and its legacies of theft for generations of bodies, labor and culture more generally. The objects are required to restore a connection between the past and present, between Benin's ancient culture and the living culture of today. As Bernie Grant has argued, "They are as necessary today as they were in 1897 for communication between the living and the dead."[109]

Redemption from Cultural Death

The crux of Patterson's argument is that the state of social death is enduring, following a slave for their lifetime and for generations to come. Claude Meillassoux, who has elaborated upon Patterson's theory of social death, notes: "The captive always appears therefore as marked by an original, indelible defect which weighs endlessly upon his destiny. This is a kind of 'social death.' He can never be brought to life again as such since, in spite of some specious examples of fictive rebirth, the slave will remain forever an unborn being" (cited in Patterson 1982).

I would like to reconsider this assertion that social death in its cultural formulation is a perpetual condition by arguing that reparations--and in the case of the Benin artifacts, restitution in particular--may provide a pathway toward redemption from cultural death. A decade after Slavery and Social Death was published, Patterson wrote a two-volume text entitled *Freedom*, which assesses the origins of freedom as a universal value and the ways in which it is implicitly linked to the institution of slavery. Yet there remains a sense that within societies, ancient to contemporary, that

[109] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2290. Letter from Oba Erediauwa to Queen Elizabeth, Benin City, November 1996. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

there are groups who are free and those condemned to social death, but there is little discussion of a person or community who has experienced social death becoming redeemed, reborn, or free and what that process and its mechanisms entail.

I argue that reparations is one manifestation of the afterlife of social death, and restitution manifests as the afterlife of cultural death. If the plunder of the cultural artifacts plunged the Benin community into a state of cultural death, then it follows that the return of such objects might facilitate a turn toward cultural redemption. Since Nigeria gained its independence in 1960, the people of Benin and the government of Nigeria have sought the return of their heritage from museums, but have largely had little success. Museums generally argue that the objects are safer in their museums, that they have a commitment and mandate to educate global citizens, and that their institutions provide necessary context for understanding the intersections of and relations between the world's historic civilizations.

Restitution advocates argue that restitution is a necessary step toward starting to acknowledge and undo historical and continuing injustices perpetrated against indigenous source communities rooted in imperial hegemony and violence. In 1996 British Labour MP Bernie Grant waged a nation-wide campaign for reparations, an aspect of which focused on the restitution of the Benin Bronzes. During the campaign he and his colleagues argued that the return of the Benin artifacts would be "a gesture of a historic reconciliation and a positive response to the age-long yearnings and aspirations of an aggrieved People" and would allow the nation "to redress the balance, even a little, it opens up the possibility of a new and more appropriate relationship between people who have had a long history of contact."[110] The looting of Benin's heritage, and African heritage more generally, exacerbated a sense of mistrust rooted in paternalism that had long existed

[110] Bernie Grant Archives, BG/ARM/4/2, 2203. Letter from Oba Erediauwa to Queen Elizabeth, Benin City, November 1996. Consulted on 12 June 2019.

between the West and Africa, and, as such, a return of the heritage would go a long way toward the restoration of these relations. As Peju Layiwola (2010) has noted:

> "Repatriation of cultural artefacts is not simply the return of goods but the beginning of a healing process for both the victors and the defeated, for the aggressors and the victims. Until this healing process which may take various forms is taken seriously, the relations of the West and the rest of the world will continue to be problematic. The collective memories of various African peoples are still alive with recollections of the oppressive colonial and slave periods."

Repatriation is one form of restitution and is the most coveted form for most communities, but it is not the only option, particularly in cases in which the withholding institution is unwilling to consider repatriation due to alleged security concerns. Some parties, such as the Benin Dialogue Group, have agreed upon long-term loans of objects back to their communities, while other museums and institutions have settled on capacity building of their museum infrastructure, such as building new museums, as in the case of the new museum being constructed at the Benin royal palace, and development of museum personnel. Yet some have argued that such forms of aid do not truly lead to repair. As Peju Layiwola (2010: 10) has asked, "For how long must we continue to give up the legacy of our people for small packages such as development and training of museum personnel?" As such, it is important to clarify that any effort toward repair, for it to be considered truly redemptive from a state of cultural death, must center and lead with the desires of the source community. If a solution falls short in this regard, there is a risk of further exacerbating the experience of cultural alienation and death with each failed attempt at recuperation.

Many of the objects, particularly the brass plaques, were created not as individual pieces, but as objects within bodies of collective works composed of multiple pieces in conversation with one another. Some plaques, for instance, depicted important events in Benin's history over multiple frames, and when they were dispersed following the 1897 invasion, many of them were separated, thus making it difficult for art historians and curators to properly interpret the meaning of the

pieces. In the 1970s the British Museum famously sold a number of 'duplicate' brass plaques because they thought many of the pieces were redundant in their collections, only later to realize that the plaques were companion pieces and both were needed in order to fully make sense of their meaning and significance. Returning objects would facilitate the reunification of these dispersed collections and enable a more complete history of Benin to be read and told. Initiatives such as Digital Benin attempt to do just this digitally by soliciting information about the collections of each holding museum and archiving the information online so that the objects can, at the very least, be brought together in a virtual space. The organizers of Digital Benin hope that their project will ultimately provide the provenance history, information and knowledge necessary to make proper restitution claims, the absence of which today serves as a major source of restitution rejections.

The restitution of Africa's cultural heritage may ultimately aid in the restoration of relations that have long been fraught between former imperial powers and their ex-colonies, and the Global North and South more generally. As Benedict Savoy and Felwine Sarr (2018) have argued, restitution is "it's a way to open a pathway toward establishing new cultural relations based on a newly reflected upon ethical relation." Peju Layiwola has made similar claims, arguing, "The issue of repatriation of Africa's cultural patrimony is vital to establishing cordial intercultural relationships between the West and Africa." Recognizing that memories of colonial violence loom large in the imaginations of many Africans, with the enduring effects empire still grossly manifesting in the form of economic development projects that continue to underdevelop the continent, the return of artifacts may serve as a symbolic gesture that would begin to ease such tense relations and resurrect a centuries-long dying relation.

Methods of confronting past harm are widely contested. Ariella Azoulay has argued that we must reconstruct and reconstitute the violence which caused the disaster by returning to point zero, the initial moments prior to the disaster, in order to imagine alternative realities that we may begin to

dream again. She describes this process in her construction of an archive of the years of Palestine's transition to Israel: "The archive I created enabled me to make historical moments reappear at junctions where other options could have been chosen, not reiterated or altered later once their disastrous effects became clear. When nonviolent options for sharing life were constantly eliminated, the simple fact that they had existed earlier became inconceivable. The effort to make them visible was required with each and every single photo" (Azoulay 2013: 552). While some like Azoulay argue that the restitution of artifacts is one way of engaging, returning to, and staying with the past, others suggest that it may also be a way of leaving history in the before times. As Barbara Plankensteiner has argued, "Perhaps the repatriation of cultural artifacts may encourage communities like Benin to forge forward and leave their colonial past behind" (Plankensteiner 2007: 89).

Cultural reclamation

The return of Benin's artifacts have the potential to provide the nation with an opportunity to forge their own history and historical narratives that, for more than a century, have been told by colonizers and enslavers. It is only in places in which artifacts originated where their full significance can be harnessed and appreciated, contrary to the arguments museums make about the importance to the cultural context their galleries provide. Benin must be granted the opportunity to reconcile its colonial past, heal its historic wounds, and seek redemption from the cultural death it experienced in 1897. The history of a people whose history has been erased and appropriated in Western cultural institutions can only be restored through the return of their heritage. The contemporary generation must seek to repair such legacies so that future generations have access to resources that would allow them to narrate their own history. The past must be brought into the present in order to secure the promise of a culturally-grounded future.

While the looting of Benin's heritage was a significant event in the history of the nation and has had substantial implications for the living culture, the form of cultural death that I speak of was not totalizing, and the work of contemporary artists and the longevity and persistence of Benin's thriving artistic and cultural spaces is a testament to the endurance of the nation's cultural legacies. Bronzecasting remains a strong tradition on Igun Street, the main craftwork thoroughfare of Benin City and increasingly Benin's artists are being recognized on the international circuit, such as Victor's recent solo exhibition, Enotie's partnership with the British Museum, and the recent [Re:]Entanglements show at the University of Cambridge gallery which featured the work of young up and coming local artists. And indeed change in the form of restitution is on the horizon. In late 2020 the government of Nigeria and the royal family of Benin announced plans to construct a new museum at the palace in Benin City that will, among other features, serve as a repository for repatriated Benin Bronzes in anticipation of successful negotiations with European partners. And in early 2021 Germany announced its famed ethnological museum would return more than 500 objects looted from Benin, and other nations and regional bodies are expected to follow suit in due course.

In Edo language, the word for 'remember' is "sa-e-y-aya," which literally translates as "to cast a motif in bronze." For the people of Benin, their bronzes are not simply artifacts or art or cultural objects, but ways of remembering their ancestors and their history. To say that the looting of their artifacts in 1897 erased their understanding of their past and created a sense of amnesia about their own cultural heritage is not simply a metaphor, but the reality of the legacies of violent imperial intrusion. The warehousing of the bronzes in Western museums serves as a reminder of the colonial experience that lingers in the individual and collective memory of the people of Benin as long as they are held hostage. Peju Layiwola has commented upon the ways in which the artifacts are reminiscent of a scattered heritage: "As fossilised message, they [the artifacts] were a single instance

representative of dispersed temporal and spatial moments as infused myth, legend and/or history" (Layiwola 2010: xix).

Every day that a looted work remains in a museum against the will of the source community is a day of active cultural violence and death against that community, an ongoing plundering of indigenous cultural patrimony. Yet the recent decolonial turn in the art and museum world has provided a glimmer of hope that such forms of cultural disruption can be mended and the modes of cultural expression which have, for nearly 125 years, lied fallow in a state of death, can be revived through the possibility of restitution. In doing so, the power to remember worlds past has the possibility of being restored to the people of Benin for generations to come. Sa-e-y-aya.

CHAPTER VIII:

CONCLUSION

REFLECTING BACK

In this dissertation I have grappled with the legacies of colonialism and their contemporary manifestations by examining the ways in which colonial systems of domination continue to perpetuate inequality between former imperial nations and subjugated populations through cultural mechanisms. I have evaluated the everyday, quotidian ways in which decolonial processes are undermined, neocolonial logics are created, and empires are validated across disparate time and geographies. Beyond simply who gets to keep plundered artifacts, I ask what these interactions reveal to us about contemporary modes of decoloniality and call for a new reading of the cultural effects of inequality that allows us to expand our understanding of the neoimperial relations between previous colonially-entangled nations.

I have specifically analyzed the long shadow of British cultural hegemony since the mid-20th century as a form of neoimperial domination and examined, more generally, how imperial states exercise control over the cultural narratives of colonized groups through the withholding of their cultural patrimony, thereby resulting in the unequal distribution of resources that persists across generations. Yet I have also considered the forms of resistance ex-colonies exercise to challenge these forms of hegemony, framing such action as newly emergent forms of anti-imperial struggle and part of the larger, ongoing movement for Global South decolonization.

The decades-long struggle for the return of Benin's artifacts is one way in which politicians, activists, museum professionals and the general public have organized to rebalance postcolonial relations between Nigeria and Britain. Restitution as a form of decolonization has taken many forms, from calls for repatriation to performatively stealing art from the halls of national museums. In the last few years, private institutions as well as small local and regional museums have responded affirmatively to appeals for restitution and have begun the process of repatriating objects back to their homelands, but the UK's state museums, with their claims to represent the breadth of world

culture, have largely been silent. The current moment of global restitution activism is indeed seeking to dismantle modes of cultural hegemony which influence the ways in which Britain, and indeed Europe and North America more broadly, continue to deplete Africa's economic, political and cultural resources.

This dissertation has used evidence of this structural inequality to advocate for a revision of the ways in which sociologists conceptualize the constitutive elements of the colonial process, neoimperialism, and decoloniality. These debates invite us to reevaluate and revise how we have traditionally understood the longue durée of the colonial encounter. Through analyzing the silences, absences, and gaps of memory that result from this process of cultural alienation, I have interrogated the necessity of incorporating analysis of material culture in our sociological understanding of the economic, political and social factors which contribute to the persistence of domination and inequality. Furthermore, I have documented how the plunder of cultural patrimony has been a central element of colonization and racial capitalism that have long been overlooked by scholars of race and empire as well as how these debates compel us to reconsider how we conceptualize challenges to neoimperialism and racial domination in the postcolonial period.

I hope that this project also contributes to forms of praxis. Decades of organizing around museums to decolonize their collections and policies is finally paying off in the form of repatriation and restitution. My goal is to help illuminate to governments, practitioners, and activists that the return of material heritage is just as important a fight in the struggle for reparations as is the pursuit of financial compensation.

I began this dissertation began with an introduction to the history of the Benin artifacts and their removal during the 1897 British invasion, as well as a review of three important bodies of literature: economic institutionalist, world systems and development literature; postcolonial sociology and social theory; and museology and studies of material culture. I then outlined the

archival, interview and observational data I collected and the methodologies by which I analyzed these sources.

In chapter 4 I surveyed the colonial and postcolonial-era debates which have characterized the Nigeria-UK struggle over the Benin artifacts, including several high-profile cases of restitution claims, such as the FESTAC77 mask which remains in the British Museum and the Rawson private collection which was repatriated to Nigeria in 1948. In this chapter I also outlined many of the key arguments and tactics retentionists and restitutionists use to advance their claims, including the construction of non-Western peoples as primitive and unskilled, environmental and safety concerns about the objects, belief in the inherent supremacy of Western museums, and legal and economic concerns. This chapter also included a section on solutions which transcend the permanent repatriation model of artifact return that both Western museums and source communities pursue, including long-terms loans, source country assimilation into Western museums, decolonial museum representation, and replication.

Chapter 5 examined a selection of political institutions, actors, and processes to understand how states--in this case Nigeria, England and Scotland--mobilized Benin artifacts as cultural mechanisms to achieve their respective political objectives. While Nigeria used the objects as tools through which to assert a postcolonial national identity via an intentional engagement with forces of global capital, England and Scotland appropriated the artifacts in ways that mostly serve to reinscribe democratic political control over Nigeria. The chapter drew on two case studies—the first explored transnational efforts to facilitate a strategy of nation building and development through cultural tourism in Benin City and examined the legacies of this work that persist into the present day. I examined the example of a transnational committee formed in the 1990s which organized a commemoration of the 1897 invasion that I argued was a mechanism through which a national

historical consciousness was developed and simultaneously served as a driver for tourism and economic development within Edo State.

The second case in Chapter 5 traced the restitution efforts of Labour MP Bernie Grant and the ARM-UK in the 1990s which revealed the shifting meanings of cultural and political power the Benin bronzes carried in the postcolonial context. Bernie Grant and ARM-UK negotiated, re-interpreted, and re-formulated the meaning of the Benin bronzes in British society to articulate their understanding of the obligations Britain has to the descendants of slavery and colonialism. Grant and his colleagues in London, alongside transnational political activists across the diaspora, forcefully advocated for the repatriation of the bronzes and, in doing so, the artifacts became a prism through which articulations of entitlements to cultural heritage, constructions of national identity, and claims to historical memory were understood.

In Chapter 6 I considered the role of non-state cultural institutions, activists, artists, and other grassroots actors in establishing their own understandings of cultural authority by navigating alternatives to repatriation that are less reliant on state and political actors I discussed in the Chapter 4. I drew on two case studies to demonstrate how these individuals and groups determined how the legacies of colonial power can be negotiated through engagement with the Benin artifacts that transcends the framework of repatriation. The first case used the debates surrounding the replication of the Benin Kingdom's Queen Idia mask as a case study to examine how nations use the practice of replication to meet their political, cultural, spiritual, and economic needs, and how these desires may be at odds with one another in a transnational postcolonial context. I argued that replication was used by imperial states as a tool for political manipulation as they are able to continue to extract political and economic resources from the colonized state while simultaneously accruing material benefits and cultural capital from the original cultural artifacts. Yet heritage replication was also used

by the colonized state as a tool of political subversion when employed as a strategy of resistance by rejecting the outcomes of the restitution decision and setting their own terms of cultural production.

The second case in Chapter 6 examined the ways in which generations of Nigerian artists have in recent years engaged in various forms of recuperation of pre-colonial aesthetics through the adoption of postcolonial modernist visual tactics to negotiate a sense of self-determination and to recover an autonomous postcolonial national identity—what I refer to as *cosmopolitan repair*. Contemporary artists in Nigeria, particularly in Benin, and throughout the diaspora have employed a range of aesthetic political practices to disrupt the legacies of colonialism still pervasive within their industries and communities. Through the creation of subversive artwork which attempts to think beyond the framework of Western benevolence embedded in the project of restitution, some have made efforts to resist hegemonic influences within the global contemporary art world. The tactics of decolonial resistance that some Nigerian and diasporic artists have employed suggest a strategic redeployment of an aesthetic tradition that simultaneously advocates for the reclaiming of a black radical indigenous history and full realization of Nigerian cultural autonomous potentialities, while also envisioning a future situated within a global cosmopolitan framework.

Chapter 7 examined the ultraviolent impact the looting of the Benin artifacts had on the Edo/Nigerian community, and how artists, activists, and the general public have organized to reject the narrative that the 1897 sacking was a totalizing event. I used my insights about cultural materiality and coloniality to build a theory of cultural death and repair, which considers the restitution and repatriation of spoils of war an essential component of the modern decolonization process and the rebalancing of relations of power between Europe and Africa. I argued that the retentionist strategies I outlined in the previous two chapters represent a position which ensures cultural death for the objects and people of Benin, while the strategies of resistance those engaged

in, and beyond, the struggle for restitution serve as acts of decoloniality which make space for the refusal of death and the embrace of repair.

The case of the Benin artifacts allowed me to examine notions of social and cultural alienation, seizure, disruption, expulsion, bondage and slavery, and use recent debates about heritage restitution to think through the possibilities of repair, reparations, reclamation and redemption. Employing Patterson's theory of social death, I argued that both the people *and* the objects that were alienated from one another during the imperial looting of cultural artifacts experienced a process of cultural death. I extended this theory by demonstrating that restitution is a form of reparations that offers the opportunity for spiritual redemption from the state of cultural death. In doing so, I established a conceptualization of cultural regeneration that, via restitution and reparations more broadly, provides a pathway out of symbolic death toward emancipation.

The Future of the Museum

"Anthropology museums will only be able properly to fulfil their central, crucial function—to bring a sense of other ways of seeing, knowing, living and making into the Euro-American consciousness, including an awareness of the universal importance of material culture in human lives—when nothing in their collections is present against the will of others," argues Dan Hicks in the *Brutish Museums.* For many in Nigeria and across the diaspora, the physical restitution of the Benin artifacts is the only suitable form of justice for their heritage. It is an issue which has, for decades, been pursued by a host of interest groups, from British and Nigerian government officials and museum curators to Instagram influencers and local artists. The British government has been slow and quiet in their responses to the recent deluge of international calls for restitution in light of global movements against white supremacy and neoimperialism which many believe museums uphold. With repatriation would come not just the physical transfer of objects, but a rebalancing of

the geographies of power between Nigeria and the UK, and the Global North Global South more broadly. Such an act may demonstrate one first step in the West's process of relinquishing some cultural power and open the door to more horizontal sharing of cultural objects, ideas and practices in the future. As Benin bronze caster Peju Layiwola has noted, restitution is "the beginning of a healing process for both the victors and the defeated. Unless this healing process is taken seriously, the relations of the West and the rest of the world will always continue to be problematic" (Layiwola 2010: 10).

Recently, construction began on a new museum and gallery within the walls of the oba's palace in Benin City that will eventually house the returned objects from their current European museum repositories. The museums that have contributed to the Digital Benin project have all agreed to lend their Benin collections to the museum, some on a temporary or loan basis, while others have agreed to permanent repatriation. The future of the Benin Bronzes, and Benin culture more generally, remains indefinitely suspended as former imperial nations continue to weigh the impact of their colonial exploits against their perceived obligations to their own communities. Dozens of new museums are opening across the African continent, and many are being rebranded, refurbished or reinstalled across Europe, as those on both sides of the restitution debate see the value in building museums in former colonies that might, in the future, hold returned objects and collections. While those in favor of restitution acknowledge the relative shortcomings of the continent's museums in terms of volume, scale and content, they argue that the answer to such a challenge is not to reject the idea of repatriation, but to build the capacity and infrastructure across the continent so that these objects may eventually be restored to their homelands. It is after all, they argue, in part the systemic infrastructural violence of colonialism that is at the root of why such institutions do not exist in the first place.

To undo their displacement and overcome the resulting spiritual alienation, source communities must be empowered to make rightful demands for the return of their patrimony, which begins with eliminating the significant barriers to making restitution claims by making the process more transparent, easier to navigate, and less dependent on financial resources to engage. It is incumbent upon Western nations to provide resources, both financial and capacity-related, to support the former colonies in their provenance research agendas. In addition, Western museums have a responsibility to make their inventories more accessible—through initiatives which allow the public to engage with the entirety of a museums' collections, not just what is on display in their galleries, such as the Glasgow Museums Resource Center. Western nations must also shift the burden of responsibility and proof of provenance from the source communities to their own museums who, at the current moment, are more well-resourced in terms of staff and financial capability.

In the early postcolonial period museums largely saw restitution requests as a threat to the stability and future of their institutions and the process for making restitution requests was intentionally cumbersome and opaque. Today, more museums are looking at restitution simply beyond a demand for repatriation, but as an opportunity to engage with source communities about the complicated histories of their patrimony. States have become more proactive in developing frameworks for restitution that provide clear guidance to its public museums on approaches to restitution.[111] In addition, civil society organizations, such as AFFORD-UK, have provided support

[111] See Deutscher Museums Bund, "Guidelines for the Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts," https://www.museumsbund.de/publikationen/guidelines-on-dealing-with-collections-from-colonial-contexts-2/; The Art Newspaper, "Dutch museums take initiative to repatriate colonial-era artefacts," https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/03/14/dutch-museums-take-initiative-to-repatriate-colonial-era-artefacts

to nations engaged in this process by producing their own frameworks to enhance the development of equitable museum guidelines.[112]

In the future, the postcolonial Western museum may look like a diverse set of objects from countries all over the world that were procured legally and ethically, with curation informed by a contextual logic which the source country co-curated and authorized. It looks like Southerners exhibiting their contemporary art in these spaces and working as curatorial, educational and research professionals not as an alternative to restitution, but as a form of Southern-led cosmopolitan engagement *in addition to* restitution. The postcolonial Southern museum would, likewise, contain objects not just from the source country, but those which represent the heterogeneity of the global art world, told from a Southern perspective which provincializes instead of universalizes. To avoid the reproduction of universalist narratives, museums must be contextually situated and affirm the validity of museums across a range of diverse geographies as equal, what Bhambra (2007) refers to as "multiple modernities," or a recognition that modernity will manifest differently across geographies yet have shared legitimacy.

Yet we cannot make sense of these multiple modernities without thinking about how they have been constructed through the colonial turn. The current Benin City National Museum, and the museum under construction at the Benin royal palace, are just as much products of colonial intervention as the British Museum. These spaces were created in direct response to a need to warehouse repatriated looted objects as well as the globalizing effect of the culture of display exported from European and North American institutions. The modern British museum is, likewise, an inherently imperial institution, a direct product of the colonial project of naming, classifying and displaying, with more recent efforts around transparency to publicly grapple with the legacies of

[112] See AFFORD UK, "Return of the Icons," June 2020. https://www.afford-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/RoIPolicyBriefFinal.pdf

colonialism. As such, museums of multiple modernities are situated within multiple sites of colonial inheritance and reproduction.

Dreaming the postcolonial museum, whatever its location, requires a commitment to the communities represented in the collections having space to tell their own stories. Sarkar's vision of progress "sought to conceive the present in a manner that enabled the possibility of participating in history, one that opened up rather than foreclosed transformative practice" (Goswami 2013: 156). A political futurism of contemporary anti-imperial struggle has produced a situation in which a wave of restitution is sweeping the art world, with a deeper, sustained commitment necessary for the fulfillment of these promises.

We have seen the effects the Benin artifacts have had on the development of British cultural identity which has amounted to a redefinition and rearticulation of Britishness as a cosmopolitan identity rooted in world cultural ideals. Yet the question remains—what would the return of these objects mean for this postcolonial cultural identity? The return of at least some, if not all, Benin artifacts from the British Museum seems inevitable, a move which would have significant implications for the ways in which Britons' sense of self has evolved in the years in the 1897 invasion. As Jonathan Harris has asked, "What status do these relics of 'an older imperial identity' have in contemporary Britain? What does it mean to be 'British' now?" (Harris 2001).

African nations are building new museums which are allowing them to picture a substantively other future than what has been determined by the past by the West—one in which reclaimed ancient heritage is reunified and displayed on their own terms in a context determined by the community which produced it. There is a renewed emphasis by contemporary Nigerian artists and cultural entrepreneurs to focus on the space of possibility, dare we risk an over-historicism that sees the past as a constraint. Many individuals I spoke with in Nigeria believed that while history is important for understanding one's collective identity, the community must not be lured into the

belief that the absence of their artifacts undermines their sense of self. Instead, new forms of cultural production and historicism allow for the production of new social narratives that are not reliant on reckoning centuries-old violences. As Peter Murphy wrote in a memo to Bernie Grant, "It is possible to admit historical and continuing injustices and that through starting to redress the balance, even a little, it opens up the possibility of a new and more appropriate relationship between people who have had a long history of contact."

This dissertation has sought to clarify the postcolonial relationship between Nigeria and England—that these are not separate states, but rather national expressions of a single transnational linkage embedded in a relational framework. As J. A. Froude wrote in *Oceana* in 1886, "the people at home and the people in the colonies are one people" (cited in Magubane 2004: 110). Debates about restitution, as such, help to clarify this interaction. Restitution discourse illuminates logics of dependency when Nigeria maintains a reliance on the UK to sustain engagement with its own cultural heritage. The liminality of figures working on the restitution of Benin artifacts help us critique the simple binary of Nigeria-UK and disrupt the presumptive alliances these associations would suggest, such as British colonial officers supporting restitution claims and contemporary members of the Benin diaspora advocating for their retention in the UK. Instead of acting on behalf of "the nation," these figures advocate for a political commitment which transcends such geopolitical boundaries, exposing the fluidity and porousness of the nations and their embeddedness in one another.

While the Edo community advocated for their distinctiveness, autonomy, and sovereignty from England through calls for restitution, they simultaneously argued that their society to realize its full cultural and historic value was dependent upon Europe's withholding of their heritage, thereby blurring the boundary between England and her former colonies. Universal museums, likewise, argue that Europe and the Rest have been consolidated under a global cultural order of which they

were stewards due to their embodiment of a universal modernism. Yet Nigeria has rejected the premise of this universal frame, insisting upon a resurrection of a postcolonial framework of sovereignty through which nation state-based claims to heritage may be leveraged. As such, both camps have organized for the erosion of this dichotomy to advance their political arguments around possession and ownership of native heritage.

What is needed in the future is a relationism based not only on building anti-imperial and decolonial resistance, but on mutual recognition and harmony. Zine Magubane has highlighted the ways in which African American writers envisioned "an alternative way of constituting the national community that placed black bodies in symbiosis, rather than conflict, with the larger whole, thus pointing to an alternative cultural identity for the nation-state" (2004: 176). Restitution, and reparations more broadly, must happen in a way that reconfigures the belonging of African communities and their heritage as simultaneously part of the nation, but to truly be free, must also be situated in something much larger, more radical, and more connected.

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