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Legacies of Empire: Museums, Neocolonialism, and Repatriation

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Abstract

"Legacies of Empire: Museums, Neocolonialism, and Repatriation" examines four European museums and their presentation of African cultural heritage. Analysis of the British Museum, Louvre, Musée du Quai Branly, and the AfricaMuseum uses qualitative methods and is grounded in both critical museology and decolonial theory. In conducting this analysis, I argue that these museums are engaged in various forms of memory manipulation regarding their colonial empires and that the consequent refusal of these spaces to return African cultural heritage taken during the colonial empire perpetuates the supremacy and violence of their taking. Through analysis of the museums themselves, this thesis considers these spaces to be reflective of social and political values. Framing this within the refusal to return African cultural heritage to their countries of origin, I argue that these museums are serving as actors in a neocolonial world order that maintains the power dynamics of the former colonial systems. In arguing for the return of these objects, this work conceptualizes the repatriation as a facet of reparative justice. The engagement with reparative justice is guided by the Pan African principles of black humanity and dignity, which I argue is systematically removed through the keeping of cultural heritage within the aforementioned museum spaces.

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"Restitution,decolonization, social justice, and the question of racism go hand in hand"
-Benedicté Savoy

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

In 1971, Nii Kwate Owoo, a Ghanian film maker, released a film, "You Hide Me" which called for the return of African heritage. The short film was widely regarded as a critical expose on the African objects held in European museums. The film shows African art and cultural objects hidden in boxes and bags in the basement of the British Museum. While the film is making a call for the return of these objects, it also suggests that the debate over the return of these objects is not about the objects at all but instead about power and control as highlighted by the presence of these objects that aren't even on display. This research deals with European museums and their continued holdings of African cultural heritage amid increasing requests and pressures for their return. In this research I question the function of museums as social institutions and disseminators of knowledge in an attempt to critically analyze their role in perpetuating the initial violence associated with the taking of these objects and supporting a narrative that works in favor of a neo-colonial world order centered around western power and control. Within this research I engage with reparations and reparative justice as a way to challenge what I consider to be a neocolonial world order and move forward with peace and reconciliation. This thesis hopes to expand the current scope of reparations to include the repatriation or return of these looted objects.

Through analysis of certain museum spaces, this work aims to understand how these

social institutions which were and continue to operate as spaces of colonial domination through their presentations of African cultural heritage that have survived in the contemporary. Specifically this research seeks to analyze how these museums contextualize the objects taken during this time period and respond to increasing calls for object return. It is the hope that this research allows museums to reconsider the ways in which they present and discuss African cultural heritage and paves the way for the return of these objects to be considered as a form of reparative justice. In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron made a speech in Burkina Faso regarding France and its relationships with its former colonies. Specifically, Macron called for the return of objects held in French museum spaces, "African heritage cannot solely exist in private collections and European museums. African heritage must be showcased in Paris but also in Dakar, Lagos and Cotonou; this will be one of my priorities. Within five years I want the conditions to exist for temporary or permanent returns of African heritage to Africa".[1] With this statement, Macron relaunched the contemporary conversation over the return of objects back into mainstream conversation. While significant in that it marked a sharp departure from traditional statements and narratives offered by European officials in regards to the question of return, the lack of action that has followed further implicates museums as systems and institutions still in support of the colonial world order. A world order that allows the dominator to control the dominated in all ways, including the presentation of culture and history.

The continued holding of African cultural heritage constitutes a form of domination because it prevents African nations from having access to their own culture and assumes western superiority over the preservation and preservation of these objects. Culture, both in physical and nonphysical forms remains one of the most important ways in which communities and nations

[1] "Emmanuel Macron's Speech at the University of Ouagadougou," elysee.fr, November 28, 2017, https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/11/28/emmanuel-macrons-speech-at-the-university-of-ouagadougou.

create self identity and community. This idea has been recognized by multiple scholars and international leaders such as with the 2002 Durban Declarations, created by the World Conference Against Racism which utilized the word culture and the need to preserve and protect it, multiple times. Furthermore, the ability of Western museums to dictate the narratives and presentation of these objects aids in the disinformation and dominance that their presence creates. By claiming ownership of these objects Western museums are able to participate in a colonial amnesia that simple statements cannot fix. Many European countries have yet to fully acknowledge the damage and impact that colonialism had at the expense of African nations for the benefit of European ones and this is evident in the language and narratives that continue to be used when talking about the continent. Neo-colonial policies and language reiterate the idea of Africa as a failed continent or one with wasted potential in need of Western intervention to guide it into the future when in reality current interventions on the continent have created no real progress for the billions of people who call it home. Instead the interventions have served as another form of subversion of African independence and agency. Considering these things as being interrelated; subversion of African agency through neoliberal policies and the continued holding of African cultural heritage, the use of museums as a way to further the colonial legacy becomes much clearer. This is not to deny the benefit of museums as producers and dissemination of knowledge but rather to challenge the knowledge that is shared and to question the ways in which these holdings contribute to current narratives, policies and actions that continue to paint Africa as primitive, backwards, and in need of Western benevolence.

In considering the presence of African cultural heritage in Western museums, concepts of memory laundering, colonial amnesia and *lieux de memoire* come to mind. How are these institutions able to create and support various narratives through their collections? How does the

presentation of these objects and consequent refusal to return them dictate visitors' understanding of colonialism and its lasting impact? How can these museums transition to decolonial spaces if at all possible? These are the questions that guided me as I began my examination of various European imperial museums. The way in which language is used plays a major role in conceptualization of any topic, whether it relates to a mathematical equation, a recipe, or a museum label. Importantly, we must question the way in which museums use labels and other signage that continues to signal domination and control. In this way, the idea of memory laundering or colonial amnesia becomes clear. By glossing over or forgoing all together the impact of colonialism and the way in which it brought these objects into museum collections, museums are feigning ignorance to the violence that led to their collection and perpetuating said violence. Ignoring the taking means that visitors can assume what they want about how an object ended up in the collection. Labels like gifted, donated, bequeathed or collected damage the integrity of the history of the object and serve to aid in the museum being used as neo colonial institutions and furthers the idea of colonial amnesia.

Through analysis of four European museums; the British Museum, the Louvre, the Quai Branly and the Africa Museum, the following chapters will center these spaces and the countries in which they reside in under three themes, memory laundering, colonial amnesia and *lieux de memoire.* The examination of these spaces within the boundaries of these themes allows for analysis of ways in which museum holdings, presentation, and unwillingness to return lend themselves to the perpetuation of power and domination associated with colonialism. With this research and engagement with the principles of reparations and reparative justice, this thesis argues that the continued holdings of African cultural heritage within European museum spaces, perpetuates the legacy of violence and domination associated with colonialism. In analyzing

museums as spaces that support this legacy and memorialize control over Africa, this work suggests that the alleged neutrality of museums is deceptive and that these spaces instead are indicative of the social values and narratives that continue to dominate western interactions with Africa and her descendents. The specific consideration that this work pays to the labeling practices and statements of these museum spaces is crucial in that it creates a new avenue for conceptualizing how repatriation of these objects allows for museums to present a more nuanced and accurate way of presenting Africa that challenges the inherent values of the countries in which they operate.

Methods & Methodology

This thesis employs two forms of methodology to guide in the argument that the continued presence of African art and cultural artifacts within Western museums, perpetuates the supremacy and violence from which the objects were initially taken. If we understand Western museums to not be vestiges of knowledge and spaces of cultural appreciation, but rather as symbols of colonial power and European supremacy, it becomes clear that the continued entrapment of African property within these spaces, serves to contribute to the idea of Western supremacy and not to promote ideas of a shared global humanity; the idea that is regularly employed by those who seek to invalidate the claims for restitution.

The museums that are analyzed in the following pages of this thesis were chosen based on the concepts of collective memory. Generally speaking, collective memory refers to the shared memories, knowledge, and information of social groups. French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs considers collective memory to be selective, resulting in different memories for

different groups of people and consequently different behaviors.[2] This concept is employed to engage with museums as sites for memory holding and knowledge production. When analyzing the way in which these museums deal with the colonial violence under which the objects came to be in their collections, care was taken to understand the ways in which both formal statements and silences work together to indicate the collective memory of the museum itself and the broader country in which the museum is located. Utilizing this concept of collective memory led to the selection of four museums for analysis. Specifically, colonial era national museums were selected due to the large holdings of African cultural heritage within their collections. Museums in Britain, France and Belgium were selected due to the large and well documented role that these three countries played in the colonization and consequent destruction of Africa. Analysis of the British Museum, the Louvre, the Quai Branly and the AfricaMuseum (formerly the Royal Museum for Central Africa) will follow.

Analysis of the above museums utilizes both discourse and content analysis of official museum statements, publications and labels; as well as a review of other publications that relate to the historical nature of museums and the debate over the return of cultural heritage. Museum statements, publications and the corresponding object labels were chosen for three reasons. First, their purpose is to educate museum visitors about the objects that they are seeing. Second, because they are posted by the museum, they essentially act as official statements and positions on the objects housed in the museum. Third, these texts are accessible to all visitors of a museum, making this work both verifiable and repeatable. Content analysis was used to determine the occurrence of specific words and phrases used on object placards. Specifically, the labels of objects within the museum were analyzed for words like *donated, purchased, retrieved,*

[2] Nicolas Russell, "Collective Memory before and after Halbwachs," *The French Review* 79, no. 4 (March 2006): pp. 792-804.

bequeathed, looted, and collected. This was done by counting the total number of objects on display and then using a tally and chart method to track the use of words that described how the objects came to be in the collection. The tracking of these words allows us to see how museums deal with the collective memory of colonialism and manipulate it or erase it completely.

Discourse analysis is then used to note how the language is employed by museums as a continuation of colonial violence. Museums have been complicit in continuing the scientific racism and memory laundering of the legacy of colonialism. As institutions, the museums under analysis were created to uphold an image of superiority and to house the trophies of their dominations as indicators of power. Discourse analysis allows for close examination of how the refusal of contemporary museums to return their looted objects, perpetuates this ideology of violence and power under which the museums came to be.

Literature Review

This section will offer an overview of the literature and research on repatriation of African cultural heritage, museums as social institutions, and reparative justice. In understanding the history of the debate over African cultural heritage, this thesis utilizes the text *Africa's Struggle for Its Art, A History of Postcolonial Defeat* by Bénédicte Savoy. In this work, Savoy offers a comprehensive overview of the efforts of African leaders and intellectuals for the return of their art and heritage in European museums. The text engages with archival material that allows for a contextualization of the contemporary conversation on restitution. While doing this, Savoy highlights the deliberate ways in which European political leaders and museum officials worked to undermine and ruin these efforts. In framing the text, Savoy notes, "Restitution,

decolonization, social justice, and the question of racism go hand in hand".[3] This idea speaks to the purpose of this thesis as a way to critically engage the way in which museums, and the narratives that they perpetuate through the refusal to return these objects, subvert national identities and African culture. In juxtaposing the efforts of African peoples to have their history and culture returned to them with the systematic ways in which European countries refused, the text provides a framework for understanding how the continued presence of these objects in these museum spaces supports a neocolonial world order in which European countries are able to continue to exert power and control over the culture of their former colonies. In reference to the film 'Following in 007's Footsteps', it is noted that African objects in Western monuments are "monuments to the injustices of the past, menacing testimonies to Euroamerica's persistent exploitation and dispossession of Africa".[4] As presented by Savoy, the conversation around the return of African heritage within European museums is not new and his arguments for restitution of these objects, aligns with the underlying ideas of reparative justice.

In considering cultural property as a subject of restitution, Janna Thompson argues that the conception of cultural property must be grounded in the documented practices and traditions of a collectivity. With this argument, Thompson refutes the arguments made by defenders of universal museums, those against repatriation of artifacts. "If an artefact is central to a collectivity's identity then its right to restitution does not depend on whether returning the object is the best way of protecting human value".[5] The rebuke of the oft used argument on value to humanity, places agency back with the indigenous owners of the objects under consideration and challenges the idea that those who are in possession of these stolen objects have a plausible

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[3] Bénédicte Savoy, *Africa's Struggle for Its Art: History of a Postcolonial Defeat* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 3.
[4] Ibid.,101
[5] Janna Thompson, "Cultural Property, Restitution and Value," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20, no. 3 (2003): pp. 251-262, https://doi.org/10.1046/j.0264-3758.2003.00251.x, 259.

claim. “The fact remains that possesses often have no plausible basis for claiming rights based on adoption. There is no reason to think that the British or Italians have gained rights of cultural property over the artefacts taken from Ethiopia or any reason to think that the Ethiopians have lost their rights”.[6] This thesis is aligned with the ideas that Thompson uses to disagree with the concept of a universal museum.

In further consideration of museums and restitution, Andromache Gazi highlights the centrality of culture to identity formation and development, “...material culture is a manifestation and a mirror of each people’s creativity and talent. It constitutes one of the basic elements of their civilization…Thus, the cultural development of societies and the furthering of their creativity depends largely on the existence and accessibility of their artistic heritage”.[7] The framework engages with the idea that access to culture is necessary for the development of a given society. This idea provides the grounding for considering the role of museums as social institutions and aspects of nation building.

The consideration of the role of museums and their representations of African cultural heritage is engaged by Dan Hicks in *The Brutish Museums*. This text critically examines the way in which British museums and their African collections support ideas of European superiority and African inferiority. The use of the title ‘Brutish Museum’ , while an obvious play on words of the British Museum, is defined by Hicks as “...a prolongation of violence in the name of sovereignty. These colonial museums became the infrastructure for a new kind of white supremacy”.[8] The text challenges the idea that museums are neutral spaces and instead notes, “The point of departure for this book is the idea that, for as long as they continue to display

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[6] Ibid., 255

[7] Andromache Gazi, “Museums and National Cultural Property: I. the Question of Restitution,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 9, no. 2 (1990): pp. 121-135, https://doi.org/10.1080/09647779009515203, 122.

[8] Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto press, 2020), 233.

sacred and royal objects looted during colonial massacres, they will remain the very inverse of all this:hundreds of monuments to the violent propaganda of western superiority above African civilizations erected in the name of 'race science'...".[9] In his consideration of the museum as a 'weapon in its own right', Hicks frames the museum as an active participant in the creation and support of national narratives. This creates an opportunity to question what the continued presence of African heritage in these spaces represents as well as offers a useful guide for analysis of the history of colonialism and its relation to museum collections. As framed by Hicks, this thesis explores museums as sites that memorialize the violence and legacy of colonialism through their collections.

The primary guide for framing repatriation of African cultural heritage as a facet of reparation is *Britain's Black Debt* by Sir Hilary Beckles. In the discussion on the criminal systems of slavery and colonialism and their enrichment of the British state, Beckles conceptualizes reparations as, "The engagement of reparations begins as an act of justice. It embraces a process of redemption and renewal that celebrates humanity rather than inhumanity"[10]. Beckles advances a framework for reparations as being an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, an apology, acceptance of responsibility and a willingness to participate in the repairatory process. This framework guides this thesis in conceptualizing the way in which reparations and repatriation are interlinked by offering clarity in what constitutes a reparation.

Through specific consideration of the newly named AfricaMuseum, Vicky VanBockhave offers useful considerations for considering how museums present their colonial histories. The examination of the AfricaMuseum, a museum that claims to have transitioned from a colonial to a decolonial museum, provides key markers for analysis of colonial era museums in the

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[9] Ibid.,
[10] Hilary Beckles, *Britain's Black Debt: Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide* (Barbados: University of the West Indies Press, 2013), 171.

contemporary.In considering the museum post renovation, she argues that the failings of the renovation are a marker of inconsistency within the museum and an indecisiveness on how to deal with the countries colonial past, “The current review assesses the uneven outcome of the renovations as the result of both a lack of unity within the museum and the management’s indecisiveness to engage critically with colonial history”.[11] Importantly she notes that too much is left unsaid, which contributes to the lack of accountability that the Belgian government has for its actions in the Congo. The discussion of the renovation lends itself to the idea that the museum is glossing over its history which as Van Bockhaven argues, is tendentious and problematic. “The celebratory tone that the RMCA has cultivated to convince itself and its public of the important heritage it preserves—and to assuage its colonial discomfort—sits awkwardly with historical reality”.[12] With this analysis, it is emphasized that failures to connect objects accurately with history contributes to the decontextualized nature in which a majority of the objects appear, “... objects are presented as decontextualised masterpieces. It is stated, for example, that Belgian scientists played a historically significant role in acknowledging African objects as ‘art’ and in highlighting African artistry. To state this as a manifest truth is a form of Eurocentrism…”.[13] This thesis is guided by these ideas as it considers museums, their collections and refusals to return within the context of Eurocentrism and neocolonialism. Overall, the analysis shows the failures in typology, lack of narrative overviews and missing historical facts have a muting effect on a museum's ability to accurately portray its colonial history. The renovation, as understood from the analysis provided, seeks to distance the museum and Belgium from its colonial past rather than to move forward with the proper acknowledgement and reconciliation that is needed.

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[11] Vicky Van Bockhaven, “Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium's Second Museum Age,” *Antiquity* 93, no. 370 (August 2019): pp. 1082-1087, https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.83, 1082.
[12] Ibid.,1085
[13] Ibid.,1086

With numerous writings, the work of Dr. Kwame Opoku offers insights into the significance of African cultural heritage and the ways in which their presence in European museums perpetuates the violence of their initial seizure while robbing African people of their history. In discussing the importance of restitution as a way forward, he notes, "European colonialism has deprived concerned societies of part of their identities that is not replaceable. This reexamination of the colonial past is part of the responsibility of Germany and Europe for their colonial history and a precondition for reconciliation and understanding and for a better common future".[14] With this statement and others, the body of work from Opoku provides a useful repository for which to understand and consider the presence of African art within European museums.

Theory

This thesis utilizes two different theoretical frameworks as guides in this analysis. This thesis engages with both critical museological theory and decolonial theory to analyze European responses to calls for the restitution of African cultural heritage. Since critical museological theory is structured around the same guiding principles as decolonial theory, this is the primary theoretical framework that will be used. This decision is not meant to limit the applicability of decolonial framework but rather to indicate how they work in cohesion; with decolonial theory making up for the limitations of critical museological theory, and critical museological theory creating specificity in the broadness that can be decolonial theory. The motivation behind utilizing these two theories lies in the radical forms of thinking that the two theories are built

[14] Kwame Opoku, "Miracles, Reverses, and Hope in Restitution of Looted African Artefacts," Modern Ghana (Modern Ghana, December 31, 2018), https://www.modernghana.com/news/906639/miracles-reverses-and-hope-in-restitution-of.html.

upon. Both attempt to challenge existing systems, structures, and knowledge, while crucially recognizing that the aforementioned are not static and can continue to evolve.

The use of critical museology recognizes that the critical nature of any sort of theory calls for an alternative order based on structural changes to approach and understanding of an existing social system. In discussing critical museology in both approach and practice, Anthony Shelton's definition of the theory draws on the work of British sociologist Tony Bennet and Argentinian anthropologist Néstor García Clancini in arguing that, "As a field of study it interrogates the imaginaries, narratives, discourse, agencies, visual and optical regimes, and their articulations and integrations within diverse organizational structures that taken together constitute a field of cultural and artistic production, articulated through public and private museums; heritage sites; gardens; memorials; exhibition halls; cultural centers; and art galleries".[15] Specifically, critical museology draws on four epistemological positions that guide in this analysis. First, CMT recognizes that history is constructed by society. This is not to obfuscate fact from fiction but rather to note that history and what is presented as fact is presented as part of a master narrative in support of a specific way of understanding how an event took place. This concept can be explained in the shift away from describing razing of Benin City and looting of the Benin Bronzes which are held in Western museums all over the world as a mode of self defense for an attack on British soldiers to a more accurate description of the destruction as a consequence for Benin City's rejection of the expansion of British control and influence into the region.[16] Second, CMT recognizes the ways in which looting was legitimized under colonial regimes as a product of race science and utilized to support the purpose and values of the colonial system. Third, CMT

[15] Anthony Shelton , "Critical Museology : A Manifesto ," *Museum Worlds Advances in Research* 1, no. 1 (2013): pp. 7-23, 8.
[16] Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto press, 2020).

notes the objectivity that is arbitrarily prescribed to objects within museums, which gives museums the power to ascribe meaning to a particular object, irregardless of its truth. Finally, CMT rests on the position that the 'chronological order' in which museums exist and present their collections is non-existent due to the overlap of culture as a result of historical interaction. The critical nature of CMT questions the nature of institutions and social and power relations and recognizes the existence of museums as being linked to power relations. In further defining critical museological theory, Shelton notes, "These fields are clearly related to competing subfields of power relations and economic reginemes that are made partially visible through ideas and counter ideas of patrimony and social identity".[17] This idea helps to shape the conceptualization of museums as social power structures in this thesis.

This thesis also employs decolonial theory in support of the aforementioned critical museological theory. While often used interchangeably, decolonial theory was chosen over postcolonial theory due to the foundation of this work being centered on the idea that we do not exist in a post colonial world; rather colonial systems, structures, and ways of thinking continue to permeate our everyday life such as in the form of museums. Post-colonialism assumes that we are in a world free of the legacy of colonialism; that we have moved past it, hence the *post* in post-colonialism. Contrary to this assumption, this thesis employs decolonial theory as a way to argue that the colonial value systems and structures are very much alive and well and to recognize that the dismantling of colonialism is still in progress. Sara Marzagora conceptualizes decolonial theory as being based on the understanding that the world around us is based on colonial systems of power. "The concept of decoloniality is based on the recognition that 'ours is an asymmetrical world order that is sustained not only by colonial matrices of power but also by

[17] Anthony Shelton , "Critical Museology : A Manifesto ," *Museum Worlds Advances in Research* 1, no. 1 (2013): pp. 7-23, 7.

[specific] pedagogies and epistemologies', and therefore the point of departure from decolonial thinking are 'the existential realities of suffering, oppression, repression, domination and exclusion'".[18] In discussing what decolonizing as it pertains to museums specifically, Vanessa Whittington draws on the work of other decolonial thinkers and argues that to understand the decolonial process, it must first be recognized that colonialism has produced deep-rooted power structures that define nearly every aspect of contemporary life from the way in which knowledge is produce to how culture is defined.[19] The work of Quijano furthers this definition by considering decolonial theory as it relates to the objective nature in which Eurocentrism survives. This conceptualization recognizes how 'the object' and 'collecting' serve as extensions of domination and uses decolonial theory as a way to liberate the non-Western from being reduced to eurocentric systems and standards; "This liberation is, part of the process of social liberation from all power organized as inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and as domination".[20] Within this thesis, the application of critical museology and decolonial theory within the broader umbrella of a historical materialism approach creates a foundation for which to analyze and explain the relationship between European museums refusal to return African cultural heritage and the perpetuation of the values, power, and violence of the colonial system.

Contribution to Pan African Thought

This thesis is grounded in the Pan African ideals of self determination, humanity, and dignity for the people of global Africa. Pan Africanism emerges from an opposition to racial

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[18]Sara Marzagora, "The Humanism of Reconstruction: African Intellectuals, Decolonial Critical Theory and the Opposition to the 'Posts' (Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Postcolonialism)," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (April 2016): pp. 161-178, https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2016.1152462, 175.

[19] Vanessa Whittington, "Decolonising the Museum?," *Culture Unbound* 13, no. 2 (August 2022): pp. 245-269, https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.3296.

[20] Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): pp. 168-178, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353, 178.

discrimination and as Immanuel Geiss notes that, "Its opposition to the idea and practice of racial discrimination and hierarchical relationships among men, makes Pan Africanism *par excellence* the ideology of decolonization in Africa".[21] In considering the compounding effects that colonial interaction has had on the continent and for people of African descent, both in physical and intellectual forms, this thesis argues that the repatriation of African cultural heritage that remains housed in sites of colonial commemoration, serves as a symbolic remedy for the abuses of the colonial system. In doing so, this thesis draws on the ideas of Pan African scholars in arguing that the return of these objects will reassert humanity and dignity for global Africa. Pan African scholar Horace Campbell states that, "Pan Africanism had arisen as a philosophy to restore the dignity of the African person and indeed all humans."[22] Engaging with Pan Africanism on the basis of humanity, self determination, and independence, this work contributes to existing literature on Pan Africanism by drawing attention to the return of cultural heritage as an assertion of black humanity and dignity which was strategically stripped away through the colonial system and the manufacturing of European superiority. By linking the repatriation of African cultural heritage to the broader scope of reparative justice, this work centralizes the restoration of humanity and dignity to global Africa.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2, "Memory Laundering & The British Museum" , considers the way in which the statements and labels within the British Museum engage in the process of memory laundering. Through the obfuscation of the provenance of many of the objects within their

[21] Imanuel Geiss, "What Is Pan-Africanism? An Attempt at a Definition ," in *The Pan-African Movement: A History of Pan-Africanism in America, Europe, and Africa* (New York: Africana Pub. Co., 1974), pp. 3-15, 15.
[22] Martin S. Shanguhyia, Toyin Falola, and Horace Campbell, "The Pan-African Experience: From the Organization of African Unity to the African Union," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 1031-1088.

collections, the museum is complicit in shrouding the history and proper narratives of objects within the Africa collections. Through specific analysis of statements and labels throughout the Africa gallery, this chapter presents the British Museum as a participant in the framing of colonial history in a way that continues to celebrate the British Empire. Specifically, this chapter links the labeling practices of the museum with broader discussions of collective memory to highlight the way in which museum statements and labeling practices are indicative of socio-cultural values. By establishing that link, this chapter argues that the labels, statements and continued holding of African cultural heritage by the British Museum, within the context of the violence and subjugation of the British Empire, make the museum complicit in neocolonialism and the continued subjugation of African people.

Chapter 3, “Colonial Amnesia & France”, focuses on the Musée du quai Branly and the Louvre as examples of French colonial amnesia. The chapter offers historical background into the creation of the Musée du quai Branly and the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre, which emphasizes strategic efforts to transition African cultural heritage from ethnography to art. This attempted shift by the French allowed for France to continue to present itself as a country without racial hierarchy through its presentation of African cultural heritage. By drawing on the banlieues on the outskirts of Paris, this chapter presents France as a nation still ruled by colonial era practices. The engagement with the banlieues leads into discussion on how the over aestheticization and otherness of the Musée du quai Branly serves as a failed attempt by France to sweep its colonial history under the rug. Specific focus on the limited information within the museum and is problematic presentation of heritage from its former colonies within its museums is focused on to highlight France's attempt to forget about its colonial past to instead focus on and preserve its colonial values of its values of “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité”.

Chapter 4, “ A Decolonial Museum? Reflections on the AfricaMuseum”, focuses on the AfricaMuseum, located in Tervuren, Belgium. Formerly named the Royal Museum for Central Africa, the museum was created as propaganda for King Leopold II’s exploits in the Congo. Through analysis of the physical museum space, its history, and its displays, this chapter analyzes the museum's success at transitioning from a space of colonial celebration to a decolonial space. This chapter centers the museum within the broader exploits of Leopold and the Belgian State in the Congo to offer insight as to how the museum itself constitutes a space of violence and domination. Through this framing, the renovation and corresponding museum statements are analyzed. By engaging with the history of the recent renovation as well as its results, this chapter concludes that the AfricaMuseum was ultimately unsuccessful in its transition to a decolonial space.

The concluding chapter summarizes the analysis from the aforementioned museums and recontextualizes their holdings and presentation of African cultural heritage as being indicative of a failure to release colonial celebration, racial hierarchy, and control over former colonies. This thesis then concludes by linking the return of African cultural heritage to the larger conversation on reparations and reparative justice to offer the idea that the return of these objects constitutes a form of reparations. This thesis then concludes by linking the return of African heritage within Western museum spaces to the Pan-African ideals of the restoration of humanity, dignity, and self-determination for global Africa.

Chapter 2: Memory Laundering & the British Museum

Introduction

The British Museum is hailed as the epitome of the universal museum. Supported by towering columns and adorned with a pediment sculpture showing *The Progress of Civilisation*, the British Museum serves as both a physical and symbolic representation of the British Empire. The imposing physicality of the building highlights the dominance and power of the empire; while its contents and their presentation are used to represent the perpetuity of Britain imperialism and global influence. The palatial design of the building itself was chosen to represent the 'wondrous objects housed inside'[23] and continues to exist as a monument to empire. The triangular pediment sculpture, which depicts the evolution of civilized man, deploys Eurocentric conceptions of progress, civilization, social values, and knowledge. In turn, this pediment operates as a symbol of the values and theories applied to Britain and her colonies, and its presence atop the museum is emblematic of the dominance of knowledge and value application over the contents housed within.

> Beginning on the left, it shows the creation of man, represented as he emerges, in his ignorance, from a rock; he then meets the Angel of Religion and learns the basic skills of life, such as cultivating the land and taming animals. Man then expands his knowledge and understanding, and the next eight figures represent his learning in the fields of architecture and sculpture, painting and science, geometry and drama, music and poetry when he finally emerges as an educated man.[24]

Using this pediment as a starting point for this analysis, we can see how the outside of the museum alone exists as a tribute to empire and an example of the wonder of the world that Britain had colonized. The ways in which civilization is considered through the depictions on

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[23] "Architecture," The British Museum, accessed March 6, 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/architecture.
[24] Ibid.

this pediment represent the values and conceptions of culture that have influenced the museum collections.This is further exemplified by the contents of the space; which hail from around the world and are used to qualify the space as a universal museum. As elucidated in the name, a universal museum claims to represent universal values and exist as a space of celebration for all of humanity. Opponents of artifact repatriation rely on the idea that they (universal museums) best know how to present and preserve these objects. In reality, this approach and defense against repatriation limits the objects within these spaces to western aesthetic value. This idea is conceptualized in the work of Neil Curtis, who analyzes the problematic 2003 Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums by stating, "Instead, only those meanings consistent with the idea of what makes a 'great civilization' will be discussed, making it difficult for visitors to suggest an alternative narrative".[25] The establishment of the British Museum within this framework of universality ignores the reality in which these objects were taken, justifies the actions of the taking in the name of western paternalism and the great civilizing mission, and obscures the agency of those to whom these objects belong to. The narrative that the museum uses to present and justify continued holdings of contested collections both severely limits visitors' understanding of the objects as well as is used to advance the idea of the museum as a universal museum that exists for the celebration and advancement of all humanity. "The story-telling approach is intended not only to defend the British Museum but also the so- called universal museums in their contested detention of the cultural artefacts of others".[26] The characterization of the British Museum as a universal museum is used to distract away from the

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[25] Neil G.W. Curtis, "Universal Museums, Museum Objects and Repatriation: The Tangled Stories of Things," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 2 (June 4, 2007): pp. 117-127, https://doi.org/10.1080/09647770600402102, 122.

[26] Kwame Opoku, "A History of the World with 100 Looted Objects of Others: Global Intoxication?," Kwame Opoku: A History Of The World With 100 Looted Objects Of Others: Global Intoxication? - AfricAvenir International, February 6, 2010, https://www.africavenir.org/nc/news-details/article/kwame-opoku-a-history-of-the-world-with-100-looted-objects-of-others-global-intoxication.html.

fact that these museums exist as extensions of colonial era power and represent a western and eurocentric dominance over art, knowledge and value. Based on this characterization, the museum exists as a space to celebrate shared humanity. This thesis advances the idea that in reality, the museum is an imperial vault full of looted cultures and histories. In analyzing the depiction of the British Museum as a universal museum, this thesis hopes to question whose humanity is being preserved and celebrated through the museum holdings.

This chapter will analyze the British Museum and its Africa collection within the theme of memory laundering. While the museum does acknowledge colonialism in the collections, the statements are distant and neutral, and fail to disclose the severity and violence associated with British colonialism. Since museums exist as institutions that disseminate knowledge, the accuracy and accountability by which these spaces label and acknowledge their collections is paramount. In this way, the museum is engaging in what this thesis conceptualizes as memory laundering. Operating in the same way that money laundering does, memory laundering carried out by the British Museum is used to preserve the sanctity and celebration of the British Empire. By keeping African cultural heritage on display, the museum is maintaining the power and dominance associated with their taking and thus perpetuates the imperial celebration used in the founding of the space. By keeping the objects there, the museum and the country are able to control the narrative of their colonial exploits and maintain the oft used narrative of benevolence in British colonial practice. While misleading, the continued holdings of the museum, amid calls for repatriation, contribute to the debasement of African humanity. In considering museums as social institutions reflective of national narratives, values and priorities; the continued holding of African cultural heritage exists as a further extension of colonial era power over African people. This is especially highlighted in the refusal to return objects back to the continent, even though

thousands of objects remain unseen and undisplayed, hidden away in museum archives. Section 3(4) of the British Museum Act of 1963, essentially acts as a preventative measure against calls for the return of cultural heritage. The Act lays out powers of the trustees and responsibilities for keeping of the collections and prohibits the museum from disposing of its collections.[27] Taken within the context of the independence of many African colonies, this thesis considers this act to be a preemptive measure against calls for heritage that came with the formal end of the British empire. Furthermore, the arguments against restitution continue to be grounded in patronizing and racialized assumptions that paint African people as unable to care for their own histories and cultures, thus perpetuating the need for involvement by the benignant British empire.

History of the Museum

The first national public museum in the world, the British Museum was born in 1753 with the private collection of the late Sir Hans Sloane becoming the founding collection of the museum upon his death. In considering the founding collection of Sir Sloane, it is important to note that at this point, there existed no conception of universality. Rather, the collection of Sloane was bequeathed to the museum before the British Empire was at its peak, highlighting the long legacy of objects being taken from the continent and around the world. Instead, the collection, meant to satisfy the curiosities of Europeans, became used as one of the biggest testaments and boasts of British colonial power and influence.The museum, which remains free to access today; was created for "all studious and curious persons",[28] with Sloanes original collection including antiquities, coins, medals, a library, and natural history specimens.

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[27] "British Museum Act 1963," accessed March 3, 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/British-Museum-Act-1963.pdf.
[28] "The British Museum Guide," *The British Museum Guide* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum , 2016), 4.

The Museum itself is broken into over seventy galleries and is centered around the geographic and cultural themes of Africa, the Americas, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece and Rome, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Within these categorizations, the museum is further separated into special themes, galleries and exhibitions such as an exhibition on clocks and watches, medieval Europe, Chinese Jade, and the Enlightenment. As a 'repository of the material culture of empire',[29] this thesis considers the transfer of objects from Africa into the museum collections and their continued holding in the museum as a protraction of domination, violence and power associated with the British Empire. In considering the British Museum as a reflection of national pride, interests and values, this chapter engages with the ideas presented by Kwame Opoku, who references statements made by Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum from 2002 to 2015. Mr. MacGregor, who references the violence of the British Empire and its relationship to the museum collections as 'deep connections', paints the British Museum and London as the center of the world; a magnificent cosmopolitan city resulting from empire. In considering this statement; Opoku states, "MacGregor does not seem to realize that any emphasis on London as being the center of the world reminds victims of British colonialism and imperialism of their suffering, defeat and continued humiliation through the detention of their cultural symbols as war trophies by the British".[30] This scrutiny from Opoku guides this chapter's analysis of the British Museum by providing a lens in which to consider the continued holding of African cultural heritage as perpetual violence, humiliation and suffering in material form.

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[29] T. Barringer and T. Flynn, *Colonialism and the Object: Empire Material Culture and the Museum* (Routledge, 1998), 27.

[30] Kwame Opoku, "A History of the World with 100 Looted Objects of Others: Global Intoxication?," Kwame Opoku: A History Of The World With 100 Looted Objects Of Others: Global Intoxication? - AfricAvenir International, February 6, 2010, https://www.africavenir.org/nc/news-details/article/kwame-opoku-a-history-of-the-world-with-100-looted-objects-of-others-global-intoxication.html.

These material collections from the British Museum operated and continued to operate as indicators of imperial ideology, allowing for the museum to support a certain perception of empire that justifies the presence of these objects. “Museum collections of material culture from the colonies were far more effective as constituents of an imperial identity than has hitherto been acknowledged, but, crucially, this was not accomplished through a simple reproduction of imperial propaganda. Indeed, in certain respects,...the curators of ethnographic material cast themselves in the role of benevolent educators…”.[31] In framing museum collections as a form of imperial propaganda, this thesis challenges the statements and labeling practices of the British Museum and considers them in support of a neo-colonial social structure which simultaneously negates African struggles for self determination in the contemporary and maintains the domination of Europe and the West over Africa and other countries.

Analysis

This analysis of the British Museum is framed by the concept of memory laundering. The term memory laundering is used here to describe the practice of manipulating or obscuring information to support a certain narrative. Similar to money laundering, which is defined as the “disguising of financial assets so they can be used without detection of the illegal activity that produced them”,[32] the term memory laundering is used in conjunction with analysis of statements and labels from the British Museum to discuss the ways in which the British Museums continued holdings of African cultural heritage support a narrow version of history in which Britain is still able to maintain an image of bringing benevolence and civilization to Africa instead of the

[31] Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 43.
[32] “What Is Money Laundering?,” What is money laundering? | FinCEN.gov (United States Government), accessed March 2, 2023, https://www.fincen.gov/what-money-laundering.

reality of the colonial era which was fraught with violence and destruction of indigenous knowledge systems, practices and culture. In this way, this thesis considers the museum to be a homage to colonial power and an institutional extension of domination. By holding on to African cultural heritage and memory, the museum is controlling what is considered by Foucalt to be their cultural dynamism, "Since memory is actually a very important factor in struggle…if one control's people's memory, one controls their dynamism".[33] Using these ideas and other conceptions of memory and power, this thesis posits that the British Museums use of memory laundering in their presentation and continued holding of African cultural heritage is used to maintain British hegemony over its former colonies.

The framing of museums as keepers of memory is guided by the understanding of memory as source of power, "Memory is itself a source of power, a means of supposedly understanding the present and deciding the future".[34] This idea offers insight into the way in which museums operate as memory archives. In keeping with the ideas outlined by Mackenzie, the British Museum and its status as a social institution serves to perpetuate an understanding of memory and historical understanding. Drawing from the initial conception of the British Museum, which was to operate for 'all studious and curious persons',[35] the museum itself, as with all museums, must operate with a certain ethical obligation to honesty and accuracy in their presentation of history. By only alluding to or failing completely to acknowledge the realities of British colonialism, the museum is engaged in memory laundering by disguising what is historical fact in an attempt to preserve a certain idea of Britain and her empire for its audience. This is reflected by the obfuscation of violence carried out by the British empire from the

[33] Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, no. 1 (1998): pp. 105-140, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.105, 126.
[34] John M Mackenzie, *Museums and Empire* (Manchester University Press, n.d.), 7.*****
[35] "The British Museum Guide," *The British Museum Guide* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum , 2016), 4.

African collections and is further evidenced by a large number of British citizens still thinking colonialism was principled and of benefit to Africa.[36]

The African collection of the British museum is housed in the Sainsbury Galleries, and opens with a statement that reads,

> These galleries approach the rich history of Africa and its diverse cultures past and present. From sculpture to textiles, ceramics to metalwork, the displays explore the themes of identity, power, faith, and exchange. The objects shown here came to the British Museum by many different routes over time. Some were purchased, donated, or commissioned. Others arrived as a direct result of British Military expeditions. Significant portions of the collection were acquired in the content of the colonisation of large parts of Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries, by Britain and other European countries. Recent and contemporary art is featured throughout the displays, both by artists living on the continent and those of African heritage in the diaspora. Some of these works respond to contemporary events and global issues and many are informed by earlier creative traditions.[37]

This statement is followed by a diagram of the collections organization as well as reference to the British Museum website for the latest information on the collections, research, and efforts to redisplay the collection. While this statement does acknowledge that colonialism played a direct role in its acquisition of many of the objects, the statement remains neutralized and detached from the violence and impact that colonialism had and continues to have on Africa and her descendants today. Reference to 'British Military Expeditions' fails to disclose the state sanctioned violence that was carried out against Africans as part of the British civilizing mission. By detracting from that violence, the collection is able to preserve the idea of British colonialism bringing civilization to the backwards and savage African. Furthermore, the use of the phrase 'significant portions' leaves it up to the museum visitor to determine what is significant, and allows the museum to escape accountability for the violence that brought many of the objects into the collection. By using ambiguous language such as significant and acquired, the statement

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[36] Will Dahlgreen, "Rhodes Must Not Fall," YouGov, January 18, 2016, https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/01/18/rhodes-must-not-fall.
[37] Wall Text, The Sainsbury Galleries, *Africa*, The British Museum, London, England

distracts from true acknowledgement of the moral problems of continued holdings of objects within the collection. The concept of memory laundering can be considered in the context of this statement which presents British colonial involvement as distant and fails to go into detail on violence associated with British involvement in Africa.

The practice of memory laundering is further evidenced by the way in which museum labels describe the provenance of objects on display. Referred to as the "supremacy of caption over image"[38] by Nicholas Mirzoeff; the way in which objects are described provides museums with a power over the information presented to museum audiences and the ability to support or maintain certain narratives and historical 'truths'. In visiting the museum, the language and use of words like loaned, bequeathed, donated, and gifted, were tracked to highlight the way in which these labels can mislead and misinform the public on the way in which these objects came into the collection. A total of 449 objects were on display in the collection; this count did not include the presence of contemporary artwork in analysis in an attempt to focus on objects taken during the colonial era as compared to contemporary transactions that can be argued as fair sales or donations. The visible and corresponding labels were analyzed to understand the way in which the provenance of the collections were presented. The words looted/stolen were used only three times, twice in the statement on the Benin Bronzes and once in the exhibit on woodcarving. It is important to note that the reference to looting within the Benin Bronzes display was within the specific context of military looting; the wording of which suggests an attempt to distance the museums away from the way in which the bronzes ended up museum collections. The presence of these bronzes, which remains highly disputed, is the result of a retaliatory British military expedition that looted and razed the kingdom of Benin to the ground.

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[38] T. Barringer and T. Flynn, *Colonialism and the Object: Empire Material Culture and the Museum* (Routledge, 1998), 183.

The curatorial choice to focus on the military aspect of the looting ignores the fact that the violence was state sanctioned as part of the British colonial mission. Additionally, the framing of the looting as being part of a military expedition utilizes the ideology of militarist colonialism as it was employed by the British which was to blame the enemy for the crimes committed by the imperialist.[39] Consideration of the continued holding of the Benin Bronzes can be further analyzed as the perpetuation of three different forms of violence as conceptualized by Dan Hicks in *The Brutish Museums*. Democide, the destruction of cultural sites, and looting as forms of violence, are used by Hicks, and aid in analysis of how the continued holdings and presentation of these objects obscures reality and manipulates historical fact in pursuit of a narrative that both is supportive of the violence of the colonial era and justifies the refusal to rectify the wrongdoing through return of these and other pieces of African cultural heritage. As stated by Hicks, "There is a general misconception, which informs many dialogues about cultural restitution, that the looting of Benin City was a coherent exercise of collecting and safeguarding. Nothing can be further from the truth…".[40] It is this idea that informs analysis of the British Museums statement of the Bronzes. Specific consideration is made to the Benin Bronzes within the following paragraphs due to the highly publicized nature of their holdings as well as their strategic taking by many European powers during the imperialist partitioning of Africa. The presence of these Bronzes within the museum serves as a testament to the strategic destruction and exploitation of the African continent that resulted from the European scramble for Africa.

One such assertion made by the museum on the Royal City of Benin, in the context of the display on the Benin Bronzes, states that the bronzes were taken to cover the costs of the mission and compensate victims. "In 1897, following an attack on a British consular mission, a

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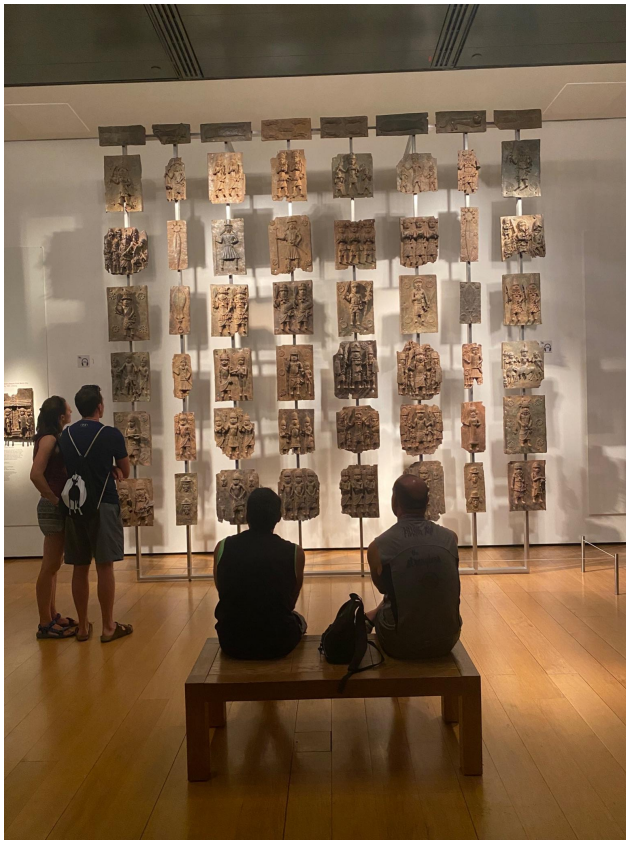
[39] Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto press, 2020), 43.
[40] Ibid., 142

British punitive expedition took Benin City and sent the King, Oba Ovonramwen, into exile. Many of the brass objects from Benin City fell to the troops and others were sold abroad to defray the costs of the expedition and compensate the victims".[41] The language used in this statement follows the ideas presented by Hicks whereas the victims are blamed for the actions of the British military without recognition of the fact that the mission itself was retaliatory in nature after the Oba refused to fall under British rule and influence. The language used in this object biography supports the idea that the objects were taken as a result of some wrongdoing by the Kingdom of Benin when in reality, the objects were taken as an extension of British domination and to serve as a warning to others about resistance to British control. A second panel goes on to describe the bronzes that came into the museum collection as 'spoils of war and personal trophies'. The terms spoils of war and personal trophies as used in this display, imply that the taking of the objects were legitimate in nature,[42] and contributes to the laundering of reality as it pertains to the initial wrongdoing of the sacking of the city. The taking, display and manipulation of language in the case of the Benin Bronzes supports the colonial narrative into the contemporary by presenting the victory and dominance of Britain over opposition while simultaneously supporting racial and cultural supremacy through the refusal of the museum to return objects that it overtly regards as being looted.

[41] Wall Text, The Sainsbury Galleries, *Africa*, The British Museum, London, England
[42] "Chapter 39 - Spoils of War," 50 USC Ch. 39: Spoils of War, accessed March 6, 2023, https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=%2Fprelim%40title50%2Fchapter39&edition=prelim.



Benin Bronzes, British Museum, July 2022

The concept of memory laundering is extended to consideration of the ‘Collecting and Empire Trail’ created by the British Museum. Advertised as allowing museum visitors to understand how colonial relationships shaped the museum's collections, the trail serves as an attempt to control the narrative of British colonialism. The British Museum website, which this thesis regards as a source of voice and authority for the museum, states that portions of the museum collection are shaped by empire and exploitation.

> From around 1500 to the mid-20th century, a number of European countries established overseas empires – Britain's empire was the largest. The British Museum was founded in 1753: its history and collection are shaped by empire and the colonial exploitation of people and resources.
> This trail highlights objects that were predominantly acquired during the age of empire and shows the different, complex and sometimes controversial journeys of objects that

> would become part of the Museum collection. Sometimes objects were acquired directly but often they were collected first by individuals, organisations or companies, passing through several owners before coming to the Museum.[43]

With this statement, similar to the statement at the beginning of the Sainsbury African Galleries, the museum attempts to acknowledge its colonial past while also maintaining control of the narrative and disguising the impact and violence associated with the British Empire. By acknowledging the controversial nature of the presence of many objects within the collection while simultaneously refusing their return, the trail itself serves as extension of power and domination. In discussing the trail, Brodhie Molloy notes that the trail itself is insufficient in that it fails to acknowledge how the trail itself, and the contents of the museum as a whole, justify the preexisting imperial narrative. "Overall, the information provided by the trail, either as object descriptions or an information leaflet, fails to align the full narrative of how archaeologist, museum and colonizing endeavours acted in a semiotic relationship to perpetuate a justified imperialist narrative".[44] Considering the trail within the context of decolonial theory, the trail itself exists as a buzzword and lacks the substance and reflexivity required of decolonizing. In considering the decolonization of museums spaces, Dan Hicks cautions against decolonization becoming "a pretty curio with no substance",[45] which is what this thesis considers the insubstantial Collecting and Empire Trail to be.

In using this lens, the trail itself becomes emblematic of the concept of memory laundering as it allows for the museum to be on the offensive and manage the information on

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[43]"Collecting and Empire Trail," The British Museum, accessed March 6, 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/object-trails/collecting-and-empire-trail.
[44]Brodhie Molloy, "Trailing Behind or Taking Strides? An Investigation into the Decolonisation of Archaeological Material in the Museum," *KLEOS - Amsterdam Journal of Ancient Studies and Archaeology* , no. 5 (September 2022): pp. 58-74, 69.
[45] Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto press, 2020), 19.

object provenance amid increasing calls for the decolonization of museum spaces and return of contested objects. The trail includes three objects that are located within the museum's Africa collections: a military tunic from Sudan, palace door and lintel from Nigeria, and an ancestral screen from Nigeria. In considering the choice to present these specific objects as part of this trail, which is stated to show the role and activity of the British Empire as it relates to the museum's collection, special attention must be paid to the language and provenance cited for each object. With reference to the military tunic, the trail notes, "This officer's tunic was taken from the Battle of Atbara as spoils of war in 1898 following the defeat of Sudanese nationalist forces by an Anglo-Egyptian army. The widow of the commander of the British Brigade at Atbara subsequently presented it to the Museum".[46] This statement describes the object as coming into the collection as a result of war spoils. This language suggests that the initial taking of the object was a legitimate practice of war when in reality, the battle itself marks the start of British colonialism in Sudan and the confiscation of independence for the people in the region. The Battle of Atbara took place as a result of Sudanese resistance to British rule and was engaged in for a number of reasons, one being as a symbolic mission to avenge the death of General Charles Gordon, and as a result of the Italian defeat in Ethiopia.[47] Under this context, the battle itself serves as an example of the violence and strategic nature of the British empire. Therefore, the presence of the tunic exists as a symbol of colonial domination, reflective of the values and violence of the empire and thus holding a much larger symbolic value than what is attributed to it in the trail. Further language of the trail notes that the Anglo-Egyptian involvement in the region led to the birth of the present Republic of Sudan. This phrasing,

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[46] "Collecting and Empire Trail," The British Museum, accessed March 6, 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/object-trails/collecting-and-empire-trail.
[47] "Battle of Atbara." British Battles. Accessed March 3, 2023. https://www.britishbattles.com/war-in-egypt-and-sudan/battle-of-atbara/.

specifically the focus on the involvement of the British as resulting in the formation of the contemporary Sudan, allows the museum to maintain the idea that British involvement in Africa was a positive benefit to the region. It ignores the struggles for independence from the British as a factor in contemporary Sudan, and instead preserves the idea that the British empire was successful in its proclaimed motives of bringing civilization and order to the region. The presentation and history used on the trail manipulate the memory of the object and present it historically and culturally decontextualized. By avoiding focus on the significance of the battle, the museum limits its complicity in the exploitation of the African continent.

The palace door and lintel are attributed by the trail to an exchange occurring in the early 20th century. “This door, carved for the palace at Ikere, Nigeria, was displayed in 1924 at the British Empire Exhibition, Wembley. It was presented to the Museum by the Ogoga (king) of Ikere who was given a European-style throne made in Britain in return”.[48] This statement suggests that equal terms of trade existed between indigenous Africans and Europeans and fails to take into consideration the unequal power dynamics that exist between those who are colonized and the colonizers. Additional acquisition notes on the piece note that it was borrowed from the Ogoga of Ikere before by Major C T Lawrence, “In 1924 this door was displayed at the entrance to the ‘timber exhibit’ within the Nigerian Pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, London. It had been selected by Major C T Lawrence, the commissioner for the display who described it as “the finest piece of West African carving that has ever reached England ". Lawrence had borrowed it for the exhibition from the Yoruba ruler, the Ogoga of Ikere, Nigeria, who had commissioned it for his palace around 1910-1914”.[49] The notes then

[48] Ibid
[49] “Door; Lintel: British Museum,” The British Museum, accessed March 6, 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1924-135-a-c.

state that it was eagerly requested to be purchased but that it was instead offered as a gift. The decontextualized nature of this statement and the use of words like borrowed, purchased, and gift within these contexts distance the museum from the domination and violence commonly associated with British colonial practices in Africa and ignores the unequal power dynamic that was in place. Instead, the language of the trail and its corresponding acquisition notes suggest that the exchange was fair and equitable.

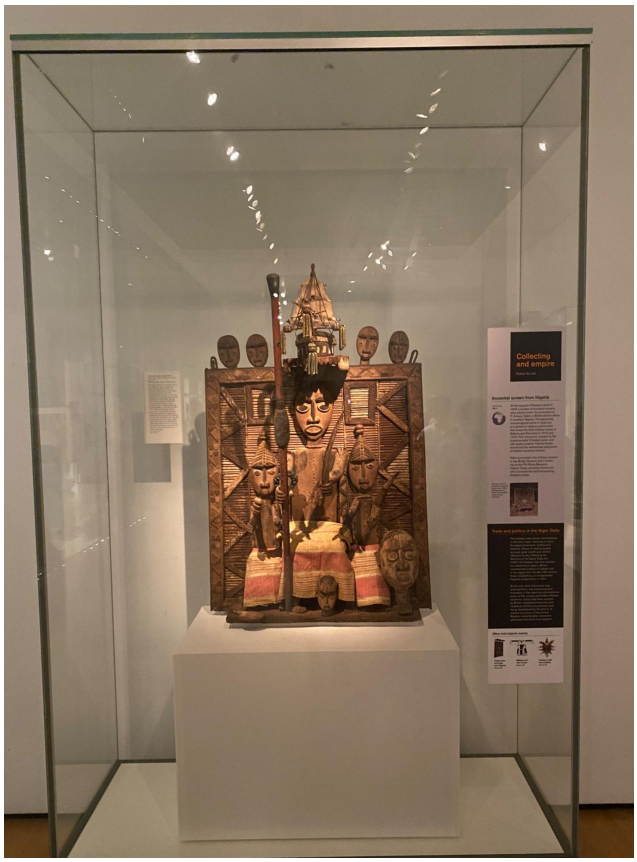
The final piece of African cultural heritage included in the Collecting and Empire Trail is an ancestral screen from Nigeria. The online trail database notes, "This is one of 11 ancestral screens entrusted by Kalabari chiefs to a British administrative officer between 1914 and 1916 to save them from destruction by a local fundamentalist Christian movement".[50] The screen contains no further acquisition notes besides the year in which it was collected (1916). In considering the many calls for the return of African cultural heritage, the use of the word entrusted due to fear of a specific action suggests that the terms of the handover were temporary. Considering the fear of destruction was over 100 years ago, the case could be made that the need for entrustment has passed. The decisions on which information to be included in the form of 'object biographies' can be used to shift focus from the initial wrongdoing associated with the taking of the object in the first place.

> But it has come, through sustained used by curators, over time to be used by the press officers of Britain's national museums to distract our attention from, to relativise and thus diminish, claims for the restitution of objects collected during European colonialism, and to encourage us in the fallacy that we might ever reasonably think to ourselves back to

[50] "Collecting and Empire Trail," The British Museum, accessed March 6, 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/object-trails/collecting-and-empire-trail.

> some past 'regime of value' in which wrongful actions might have been okay, in order to justify ongoing and resolved injustices.[51]

The continued holding of this object as well as others including on the trail serves as a reinforcement of the British Museum as carrying out the process of memory laundering. The deliberate choices in language and wording for the objects selected to be part of the trail contribute to the concealment and distancing of the museum from the impact of colonialism as it pertains to its collections.



Ancestral Screen, British Museum, July 2022

The presence of African cultural heritage within the British Museum advances the objectification and otherness in the way in which the objects are displayed. This in turn limits visitors conception of historical reality and decontextualizes the objects that are on display. "The

[51] Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto press, 2020), 26.

danger of doing this is that the differences between these cultures are minimised-homogenising them into an undifferentiated 'other'".[52] Decontextualized, both in their physical presence and with the corresponding labels, the objects remain at the mercy of museum narratives in support of the narrative of benevolent British colonizer. Tucked away on the lower level of the museum, similar to the location of many African collections in other 'universal museums' the galleries themselves have a solemn nature about them, full of the blatant silences by the museum on its status as a celebration of empire and failures to properly respond to requests for repatriation. The gallery itself opens with a look at contemporary African artists, whose presence in the collections this thesis considers to be an attempt by the museum and the country as whole to avoid the controversial nature of the collections and the nations colonial past; "...anthropology museums have often worked with artists, since they did not know how to deal with their own colonial legacy. This work was then simply left to artists…".[53] This reflection is not to diminish the role and importance of including contemporary African artwork but instead to consider the way in which the presence of this artwork, in this specific museum space, can be considered as a way to distract from larger issues of the museum's colonial past.

Furthermore, the curatorial decision to distinguish Ancient Egypt from Africa follows the trend of museums and scholars all over the world that attempts to keep the achievement of Egypt as an anomaly, separate from the continent and African peoples. As laid out by Senegalese scholar Chiekh Anta Diop, "Ancient Egypt was a Negro Civilization"[54]. In presenting this

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[52] Neil G.W. Curtis, "Universal Museums, Museum Objects and Repatriation: The Tangled Stories of Things," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 2 (June 4, 2007): pp. 117-127, https://doi.org/10.1080/09647770600402102, 123.
[53] Margareta von Oswald, Jonas Tinius, and Nanette Soep, "'Suggestions for a Post-Museum,'" in *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2020), pp. 324-335, 332.
[54] Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (New York, NY: L. Hill, 1974).

argument, Diop centers this understanding as a regaining of consciousness towards a genuine retrieval of the self. In considering the Museums presentation of Africa as separate from Africa, this thesis argues that it is a further intellectual and psychological attempt to subjugate African peoples to the superiority of western thought. By presenting Egypt as a separate civilization from that of Africa, the museum manipulates the memory and consciousness of visitors. This is limiting because it continues to present ancient Africa as backwards and without worldly contribution by presenting Egypt as a separate entity from the African continent. The nature of this distinction is reflective of the broader intellectual warfare engaged with by European scholars to diminish African contributions to history and culture as part of the manufacturing of African inferiority. This is important to note because it highlights the double standards and deliberate nature of these decisions as evidenced by other galleries and exhibits within the collection. An exhibit elsewhere in the museum on clocks, describes watches and clocks as being the contribution of Western Europe when in fact they were invented in Germany. While seemingly insignificant, this detail speaks to the broader practice of intellectual differentiation when discussing Africa and allows for consideration of the ways in which language and its uses by museums contributes to painting Africa as the dark continent. The ability and choice to attribute the contribution of one country to all of Europe stands in stark contrast to the deliberate decisions by scholars, politicians and museum curators to paint the contributions of Egypt as solely belonging to that country, not to all of Africa. Additionally, the decision to label certain galleries as ancient or medieval, while keeping the Africa galleries and collections labeled as Africa, without the preluding ancient, failed to distinguish the temporal nature of the collections and makes the African culture and its people appear static; which in the specific case of Africa, maintains the presentation of the continent in mainstream media and consciousness as a

backwards and failing. In this way, the mislabeling and misleading nature of the labeling of the galleries contributes to a broader theme of memory laundering in that it distracts a viewing audience away from the history, progress and advancement of the people whose culture is on display while advancing a set narrative and understanding that maintains a historical and social status quo.

Conclusions

In closing, this chapter has argued that the presentation and continued holdings of African cultural heritage perpetuates the initial violence associated with their taking and serves as an extension of the power and domination associated with the British Empire. The use of memory laundering as a guiding framework for analysis of the museum depicts the way in which the statements and labeling practices of the museum distance the museum from its colonial past while failing to properly contextualize the objects under consideration. Through engagement with the idea of a universal museum, this chapter provides a basis for understanding the refusal to return as being grounded in eurocentrism and paternalism while challenging the museum as a propagator of knowledge and social values.

Through analysis of the British Museum; its physical structure, contents, statements and status as a universal museum, this chapter has aimed to highlight the way in which the museum operates as an imperial vault that maintains the dominance of the colonial system. The continued holdings of African cultural heritage and refusals to return are indicative of the paternalism associated with the British Empire and highlight the perpetual celebration of empire and dominance. Arguments against repatriation of these objects are based on the view that African people lack capability to care for their own culture, which is based on racialized assumptions and

European superiority over knowledge and aesthetic value. This not only removes agency from African people on how to present and care for their own cultural heritage, but also ignores African resistance to the museum's holdings and calls for repatriation. This thesis calls for the return of these objects as part of the process of reparative justice as it pertains to the colonial legacy that continues to perpetuate racial hierarchies. In conceptualizing the ability of repatriation to serve as an act of reparative justice, this thesis considers the return of cultural heritage to be a fundamental aspect of self determination and independence. Therefore, the strategic refusals of the museum to return heritage post independence, speaks to a broader refusal to accept African sovereignty and agency.

Chapter 3: Colonial Amnesia and the French Museums

Introduction

This chapter will analyze two French museums, the Musée du quai Branly, and the Louvre. This chapter will primarily focus on the Musée du quai Branly (here on referred to as the MQB) as it houses the majority of France's collection of African heritage. Through engagement with the concept of colonial amnesia, this chapter will relate the lacuna in French national memory about its violent and repressive colonial empire with the continued presence of African cultural heritage within the aforementioned museums. The chapter will begin with a brief history of the museums as well as a review of popular commentary on the creation of the MQB. The chapter will then discuss the French colonial empire in its stated goals of a civilizing mission versus its practice of engagement with racial hierarchies, before relating it to the continuation of colonial order in contemporary France through focus on the Parisian banlieues. This thesis focuses on the banlieues as further extensions of colonial power and repression over black people in France to emphasize the way in which French proclamations of *"Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité"* contrast with social reality. The chapter will then do a focused analysis of the MQB, drawing on my own visits as well as other scholarly interpretations of the museum's space and collections. The conclusion of the chapter will make specific reference to repatriation of African cultural objects as a way for France to move beyond its colonial amnesia and reconcile with its African populace. This is done in consideration of French president Emmanual Macron's 2017 Ouagadougou Declaration, and the commissioning of the Sarr Savoy report, both of which were aimed at returning looted African heritage.

History of the Museum

In June of 2006, the MQB opened its doors to the public. The result of years of divisiveness over its curation and display, the museum was created to indicate a shift of consciousness away from traditional ethnographic forms of display and towards an anthropological museum of the arts.[55] While museums were previously considered as the visual voice of anthropological scholarship, a transition took place in the middle of the twentieth century that resulted in museums displaying their anthropological collections as 'art'. Anne-Christine Taylor, former Director of the Department of Research and Education at the MQB, argues that art has replaced science as the new language of universalism.[56] Taylors statement places art at the nexus of the concept of universalism. This suggests that art itself can and is used as justification for what Immanuel Wallerstein highlights as expansionism. This thesis engages with Wallerstein's argument, that universalism is used to justify European expansionism and Western imperialism[57], by regarding the holding of objects under this auspice of art as universalism instead exists in support of neocolonial expansionism.

In the case of the MQB as well as the Louvre, the careful omission of references to colonialism or the way in which these objects ended up being housed in these spaces is indicative of the broader issue of colonial amnesia that is practiced in France. In framing this chapter around this theme, the way in which these museum spaces are manipulated in celebration of France's colonial legacy offer insight into how museum spaces that continue to hold onto African

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[55] Margareta von Oswald, Jonas Tinius, and Anne-Christine Taylor, " 'On Decolonising Anthropological Museums: Curators Need to Take 'Indigenous' Forms of Knowledge More Seriously,'" in *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2020), pp. 97-104, 98.
[56] Ibid., 99
[57] Olivier Doubre , "'European Universalism Is Used to Justify Imperialism': An Interview with Immanuel Wallerstein," MR Online, March 26, 2008, https://mronline.org/2008/03/26/european-universalism-is-used-to-justify-imperialism-an-interview-with-immanuel-wallerstein/.

cultural heritage perpetuate Euro-western supremacy and the paternalism associated with the colonial empire. For France, the refusal to reconcile with its colonial past through museums is indicative of a much broader contradiction of French republican values and universal humanism to the racial realities and hierarchies that continue to exist in France. The lack of reference to colonialism within the museums allows for the spaces to escape questions of context and how the objects ended up there. In considering the imperial and postcolonial historiography of France, Jennifer Dueck argues that the failures to properly contextualize objects or properly engage in conversations about their return is "a microcosm of polemics about colonial memory in French society at large".[58] This is evidenced in France's refusal to create public programs on colonialism, they remain the only former colonizer who has not done this, and the issuing of a 2005 parliamentary decree aimed at highlighting the positivity of the French colonial empire, "This legislation stipulates that school textbooks recognize the positive role of the French presence overseas, most notably in North Africa. This measure is unique among the former imperial powers in its effort to rehabilitate the French colonial image".[59] The legislation was eventually redacted after the backlash and riots in 2005 that were the result of France's continued refusal to engage with its colonial past.[60]

The use of colonial amnesia for analysis of the MQB and the Louvre is aimed at creating a distinction between the ways in which various European museums approach their colonial legacies. For the use of this analysis, colonial amnesia fits within the framework of '*Mémoires françaises alzheimerisées',*[61] referenced by Dueck as, "...a lack of knowledge about the empire in

[58] JENNIFER M. DUECK, "The Middle East and North Africa in the Imperial and Post-Colonial Historiography of France," *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 4 (August 2007): pp. 935-949, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0018246x07006449, 942.
[59] Ibid., 942
[60] Itay Lotem, "A Decade after the Riots, France Has Rewritten Its Colonial History," The Conversation, September 13, 2022, https://theconversation.com/a-decade-after-the-riots-france-has-rewritten-its-colonial-history-50499.
[61] Dubbed by Dominique Vidal and used by Dueck, not sure how to cite

France, as well as the uneasy duality of imperial memory which necessarily combines nostalgic colonial glory and the trauma of decolonization".[62] Colonial amnesia as employed by the French government and practiced within the museums is juxtaposed with the prior discussion of memory laundering by the British Museum to highlight the different ways in which museums engage with the collective memory of colonialism.

In specifically considering the way in which France has avoided the process of decolonization, Todd Shepard argues that the 'invention of decolonization' has allowed France to avoid the reality of the violence, injustice and abuses of their empire while still associating with the loss of empire.[63] "What French leaders and the French public had previously resisted - decolonization - was subsequently psychologically reinvented as a step in the progress toward an enlightened society, much as colonization itself had been conceived as the mission of a superior civilization".[64] Considering this idea within the broader context of the French colonial mission, both in the past and the contemporary, the idea of being able to decolonize a museum space or the idea that France can engage with its colonial past in a decolonial way becomes much harder to conceptualize and in turn lends itself to the the necessity for the repatriation of African cultural heritage within the aforementioned spaces.

In considering the way in which museums operate as indicators of values and sites of remembrance, this chapter considers two French Museums; primarily the MQB and the way in which they operate under the conceptualization of colonial amnesia. These museums were chosen in conjunction with one another due to the MQB being recently created as a museum

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[62] Ibid., 941
[63] Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).
[64] JENNIFER M. DUECK, "The Middle East and North Africa in the Imperial and Post-Colonial Historiography of France," *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 4 (August 2007): pp. 935-949, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0018246x07006449, 949.

specifically for the housing of the “other” and the use of the Louvre as extensions of the MQB collection. This chapter will explore the ways in which both the Louvre and MQB collectively engage in colonial amnesia while connecting it to the broader French rhetoric on colonization and Frances ‘color blind racism’ that prevails today. In linking these things, this chapter aims to highlight the ways in which these museums operate as social institutions guided by values and priorities of the French state and are reflective of a reminiscence for colonial past that is manifested in the creation of a neocolonial world order that continues to subjugate people of African heritage.

Analysis

At its apex, the French colonial empire was second to only the British. With colonies in the Americas, Africa, and Southeast Asia, the French colonial system was globally expansive and brought an estimated 69 million people under its dominion. Spurred on by France's history of economic and political competition with other European countries, the French colonial system sought to enrich the metropole and launch the French state as global leader. The colonial policy of the French empire was based under the guise of assimilation. Under this system, Africans were to become “French”, absolving them of their racial inferiority by way of French civilization. In reality, the French colonial system operated with violence and strict racial hierarchies. Compared to its British counterpart, French colonial delegation of responsibilities to native populations was much more limited. The broader goals of the French colonial system were stated as to bring uncivilized peoples into French civilization. This conception of the French civilizing mission is largely misleading, and fails to account for the strategic exploitation and removal of resources from the African continent at the expense of the native populations to ensure the global status of the metropole. “The latter is to make Africans Frenchmen and to

educate them to appreciate and to share in the advantages of French civilization".[65] While this is an idealized account of the French colonial system, pulled from the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, this statement offers insight to the ways in which the French metropole considered their colonial system. It is necessary to contrast this with the reality of the colonial system which itself was created as a system of exploitation based on the social, political, and intellectual degradation of black humanity. In his reflections on the colonial system, Frantz Fanon notes, "Colonized society is not merely portrayed as a society without values. The colonist is not content with stating that the colonized world has lost its values or worse never possessed any. The "native" is declared impervious to ethics, representing not only the absence of values but the negation of values."[66] The French colonial system itself closely reflects this idea from Fanon through their insistence on assimilation, which can itself be understood as a form of violence by which the African is stripped of dignity and identity and centered within the predetermined status assigned to him by the colonizing power.[67]

Marketed as a 'civilizing mission' or *mission civilisatrice* , this idea of French benevolence through the institution of colonialism was used as justification for French expansion into Africa. The idea of bringing civilization to Africa is in itself a marker of assumed European superiority as reflected in the above quote from Fanon. This further illustrates the overarching concept of assimilation, which in its stated goals was to make Africans French. This practice aimed at keeping the differences between colonies and the metropole only of geographic not fundamental significance. Due to this, French colonialism is considered to be more direct and

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[65] H.R. Tate, "The French Colonial Empire," *Journal of the Royal African Society* 39, no. 157 (October 1940): pp. 322-330, 328.
[66] Frantz Fanon et al., *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2021), 6.
[67] Conceptualized based on the "psychological mechanisms" of colonialism as described by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*

more paternalistic over its colonies, as is evidenced through the continuation of French presence on the continent, despite the official removal of French colonial administrators.

This thesis considers the continuation of French presence in Africa as colonialism rehabilitated.[68] Through his chapter on the 'real history' of French Colonialism, Alain Ruscio argues that a *néo-Parti colonial* has been established through the rhetoric and practice of memory of the French colonial empire. This rhetoric is used by politicians and intellectuals who justify French colonialism through references of positive relations between those who colonized and those who were colonized and infrastructure created. He references Nicolas Sarkozy, Claude Guéant, Nadine Morano and others to highlight the ways in which major French figures are working to reframe and reinstitute French colonial image. Referring to these people as 'rehabilitators', Rusico references Alain Finkielkraut, who is of the belief that there is no racism in France, except for racism from those with non-French backgrounds. "Hating France has become de rigueur among a large swath of the new French population. You would have to be living under a rock to believe that militant Francophobia is actually a response to racism".[69] This statement fails to consider the colonial past of France and its use of 'color blind racism' as a means in which Francophobia could emerge. Furthermore, this statement, as well as other forms of rhetoric from these rehabilitators is further indication of the colonial amnesia by which the French state operates. The consequences of such amnesia and Frances treatment of those not of "pure French stock",[70] is evident in the treatment of people of African descent, which is most clearly evidenced in the physical organization of the capital city.

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[68] Nicolas Bancel et al., "Toward a Real History of French Colonialism ," in *The Colonial Legacy in France: Fracture, Rupture, and Apartheid* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), pp. 386-394, 387.
[69] Ibid., 387
[70] Ibid.

On the Banlieues

The banlieues of Paris exist at the outskirts of the city. These spaces are primarily inhabited by people of French African descent and African migrants, and highlight the way in which the physical space of Paris exists as an extension of colonial organization. In discussion of banlieues, Hervé Tchumkam refers utilizes Didier Lapeyronnies conception of banlieues as "colonial theaters"[71] where the status and treatment of the space and the people who inhabit it are evocative of French colonial empire; "...the inhabitants of the French *banlieues*, offspring of migrants from Africa or the African diaspora, occupy a paradoxical situation that considerably blurs the boundaries between the *banlieues* and the colonies in Africa: this is the paradox of necessity and expendability".[72] Tchumkam suggests that the spatial organization of banlieues and the division between it and the city center is indicative of colonial thinking and order that continues today. Through this discussion, it is offered that the continued presence of the banlieues and the extension of systematic oppression through the conception of such spaces contributes to the broader French policy of colonial amnesia. This replication of colonial rule and the repression that these spaces represent for people of African descent is drawn upon to highlight the way in which French republican values and other ideas from the French Enlightenment are not extended to its African populations. In making this connection, this thesis hopes to highlight the way in which the holdings of the French state and the collections of the MQB and the Louvre, exemplify the systematic oppression that continues to exist within French society, despite its proclamations that race and racism are non-existent.

As this chapter is centered around analysis of French museums as representations of empire and of French colonial amnesia, it becomes necessary to explore the way in which

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[71] Etienne Achille et al., "Banlieues," in *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 101-108, 102.
[72] Ibid.

banlieues were both conceptualized and continue to exist today, to be able to draw connections to the way in which the French state continues to view and engage with the idea of and people from its former African colonies. The creation of the banlieues emerged post World War II with the massive influx of French Africans and migrants to Paris. These spaces were originally created as low cost housing and were constructed to ethnically group the inhabitants within.

> In the aftermath of World War II, numerous institutions intended to maintain the distinctive cultural traditions of minority groups were undertaken. State agencies in charge of housing, education and access to social benefits based their activities on ethnic quotas. For example, HLM (public housing) authorities were asked to relocate immigrants on the basis of their national origin in particular urban areas. As a result, the percentage of immigrants in these areas increased from 15 percent in 1975 to 24 percent in 1982 and 28 percent in 1990.[73]

Considering this within the context of the alleged French policy of assimilation allows us to recenter the conversation on the alleged neutrality of the French state when it comes to people of African descent and the reality in which African people are continuously subjected to the same colonial orders of their grandparents. This sort of 'inclusive exclusion'[74] That is present within the banlieues, both in their physical space and the vernacular used when talking about the space and its inhabitants speaks to the broader idea on how black people within France are continuously othered as part of the maintenance of French national power and sentiment for colonial order.

> Just like the *'indigènes'* once in the colonies, the *banlieusards* are necessary for the glory of the sovereign power when their bodies are used in the construction of national power, but this very power that often derives its visibility from the use of bodies does not hesitate to punish them or track them down, by means of an often impressive deployment of repressive measures: double jeopardy, profiling, prohibition of the veil, creation of anti-crime squads and so on.[75]

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[73] Jennifer Fredette, "Housing: The Banlieues as Geographic and Socially Constructed Place," in *Constructing Muslims in France: Discourse, Public Identity, and the Politics of Citizenship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), pp. 126-150, 129.
[74] Etienne Achille et al., "Banlieues," in *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 101-108, 103.
[75] Ibid., 102

This thesis has engaged with the banlieues to highlight the socio political landscape in France regarding the treatment and inclusion of its black citizens. In doing so, this allows for clearer understanding of the ways in which the museums spaces of the MQB and the Louvre exist in support of the current neo colonial practices engaged by the French state both within the boundaries of the country and on the continent.

On the Museums

Consideration of the Louvre and MQB engages with the concept of colonial amnesia as part of the broader French practice on the collective memory of its colonial empire. As stated earlier, contemporary France is marked by efforts to rehabilitate its colonial past, forgoing the chance to acknowledge or rectify its wrongdoing. The careful removal of colonial acknowledgement both within the museum as well as well in its online publications is linked to the French states practice of colonial amnesia. This erasure offers insight into how France is perpetuating its colonial empire, both in the literal sense in its failure to decolonize its practices and rhetoric within the banlieues and its practices on the continent such as its CFA holdings, and in the symbolic sense through its continued holdings of African cultural heritage.

The creation of the MQB was met with high hopes and ultimate disillusionment on the ability of the space to create a non-ethnographic museum. This thesis considers the creation of such a space to display *'arts primitifs'* as a French attempt to shift the narrative on these objects and contextualize them as 'art'[76] within a non ethnographic space. The MQB was created from two colonial era anthropological museums that had fallen into disarray, with no clear organization and full of colonial and anthropological trophies. The merging of the "musée de

[76] The conception of art can largely be attributed to western aesthetic value. For indigenous African people, art was not separate from life itself. The objects that are now considered as art were not created for aesthetic value but rather held a specific function and role within communities

l'Homme", infamous for its holdings and display of Saartje Baartman,[77] whose remains were recently repatriated to South Africa in 2002 and the "musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie" was done in an attempt to reclassify and represent the contents within the museum as 'art' amid increasing critique of anthropological systems of collection and display. The commissioning of this museum by then President Jacques Chirac, appeared as an attempt to respond to France's colonial past and its contemporary manifestations in the racial organizations of Paris. "With this action, Chirac had appeared to respond to France's postcolonial troubles, contemporary racism, and the demonstrations in the *banlieues* that had rocked the French capital in fall 2005. Branly, he had pronounced in his inaugural speech, would "restore the dignity" of violated peoples, serve as acknowledgement of diversity, and ensure a "dialogue of cultures and civilizations".[78] It is within this conceptualization of what the museum was aimed to do that this analysis is situated.

Located adjacent to the Parc du Champs, and visible from the Eiffel Tower, the physical location of the MQB next to the symbolic representation of France, yet full of objects cited as "others", helps exemplify the paradox of French Republicanism, its treatment of its African citizens of African descent, and the presence of African cultural heritage within the MQB. In considering how the museum was created and limitations placed on curators, it should be noted that a large portion of funding for the museum comes directly from the French Ministry of Research and Higher Education, meaning that the museum is closely linked and most certainly bound by the guidelines and opinions of the French state and the research community.[79] A key

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[77] Saartjie Baartman was traversed throughout Europe as an example of the sexual prowess of black women. Dubbed the "Hottentot Venus", Baartmans body was subjugated to European perversion and racism after her death through the public display of her body parts in Paris until the returns were repatriated in 2002.

[78] Tamara Levitz, "The Aestheticization of Ethnicity: Imagining the Dogon at the Musée Du Quai Branly," *The Musical Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (2006): pp. 600-642, https://doi.org/10.1093/musqtl/gdn001, 600.

[79] Margareta von Oswald, Jonas Tinius, and Anne-Christine Taylor, " 'On Decolonising Anthropological Museums: Curators Need to Take 'Indigenous' Forms of Knowledge More Seriously,'" in *Across*

concern of those scholars and critics who have visited the museum lie in the decontextualized and over aestheticized presentation of objects. This view is one in which I shared during my visit to the museum. The collections of objects from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas are brightly lit while the rest of the museum remains bathed in darkness. Former director of the museum, Anne-Christine Taylor notes that the decontextualization of the objects was to avoid a single and one-sided view so as to allow a visitor to experience them on their own.

> The objects are presented with the bare minimum of information, so as not to interfere with the visitor's immediate experience of them, but her or she also has access to an expanding circle of documentation: first the variety of audio programs, then the many short multimedia stations dotting the expanse of the permanent collection, then the resources of the reading room, and eventually of the large research library, not to mention the many scientific events (international conferences, work-shops, lectures and seminars, film projections, dramatic performances, etc.) that are held at the museum.[80]

This thesis argues that the lack of information presented within the MQB contributes to the pervasion of French colonial amnesia. While it is argued by Taylor that the lack of labeling was to not interfere with the visitors' experience, in reality it decontextualizes the objects and contributes to their hyper-aestheticization.

In considering the hyper-aestheticization of objects within the MQB, it is important to recognize how this process 'others' and exoticeses the objects as they exist within Western spaces and under Western aesthetics. In analyzing the presentation of non-Western objects within Western museum spaces, Katharine Conley notes, "...while the fairly recent inclusion of non-Western objects in Western museums could be seen as a step toward a desire for reconciliation -...- such an inclusion tends to situate these objects within a context that dehistoricizes and strips them of their original function, which often would have been spiritual or

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Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2020), pp. 97-104, 97.

[80] Ibid., 98

ritualistic".[81] Conley goes on to note that the MQB is representative of the latest step in the migration of objects previously displayed in anthropological museums into French art museums.[82] This transition has shifted focus away from the problematic nature in which France views its colonial past and its non-white populace. By centering these objects as art, France is able to maintain the positivist view as so pushed by the 2005 legislation that centers French colonial action, which is what brought many of these objects into the collection, as part of its *mission civilisatrice.*

The presentation of these objects and their lack of text creates a distance between what is understood about the reality of French colonization. In this way, the refusal to contextualize the collections allows France to disconnect from how these objects came into the collection by way of colonialism. This distance is one in which has been celebrated by the MQB as creating a sort of 'fascination' for visitors.

> These objects exercised a fascination because they retained a certain distance, a space in which fantasies of the unknown could be played out. This vision was and continues to be at the origin of passions for faraway lands, emotion vying with stereotype, admiration for new forms mingling with exoticism. A group of collectors, all while reveling in the competition with one [an]other, relentlessly explored every nook and cranny in the hope of unearthing "treasures", that would fulfill their passion and entrance them with the idea of coming ever closer to these unknown and savage worlds untouched by civilization.[83]

This statement made in 2009 by the editor of the MQB catalog, highlights the regard in which the museum views its collection. The direct reference to collectors and the need for collecting as a way to come closer to 'unknown and savage worlds' is indicative of the way that the collections are othered. The distance that the editor speaks of is considered both literally and

[81] Katharine Conley, "Is Reconciliation Possible? Non-Western Objects at the Menil Collection and the Quai Branly Museum," *South Central Review* 27, no. 3 (2010): pp. 34-53, 37.
[82] Ibid.,39
[83] Ibid., 46

figuratively in the way it allowed for visitors to come in contact with the 'other' while also serving to create distance between France and its colonial past.

The conception of the MQB itself was based on then president Jacques Chirac's declaration that a hierarchy of peoples no longer existed.[84] While in practice, this statement and belief could seem to rectify the colonial past of France which was based on racial oppression in the face of supposed French superiority, reality of post colonial France is categorized by stark social and racial divisions that are extensions of colonial era models. The MQB, painted as "a political will [*volonté politique*] to render justice to extra-European cultures",[85] was in turn viewed as the solution to France's turbulent postcolonial reality. By presenting these things as worthy of artistic attention and evaluation, France hoped to diminish its colonial practice of subjecting, othering, contemporary racism and the 2005 demonstrations, which can be seen through Chirac's statement that a hierarchy of people (with Europeans at the top and Africans at the bottom) no longer existed. This idea is further emphasized within Chirac's inaugural speech at the museum, which argued that the museum would "restore the dignity" of violated peoples, serve as an acknowledgement of diversity, and ensure "a dialogue of cultures and civilizations".[86]

Considering these two ideas, both made by Jacques Chirac, we can see the way in which the MQB was conceptualized as a passive response to France's colonial past. The way in which the museum was talked about, as though the space itself was providing justice and renouncing the French empire's dominance over its colonized populations through the presentations of their culture as valuable art coveted by the French state. Not only does this idea exhibit paternalistic ideas, as though the intellectual shift from ethnographic museums to art museums should be

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[84] Caroline Ford, "Museums after Empire in Metropolitan and Overseas France," *The Journal of Modern History* 82, no. 3 (September 2010): pp. 625-661, https://doi.org/10.1086/654828, 638.
[85] Ibid., 640
[86] Tamara Levitz, "The Aestheticization of Ethnicity: Imagining the Dogon at the Musée Du Quai Branly," *The Musical Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (2006): pp. 600-642, https://doi.org/10.1093/musqtl/gdn001, 600.

celebrated due to the French state considering these peoples' culture as something to be revered and celebrated instead of studied, it also rings of the goals of the *mission civilisatrice*; which were to convert the French colonized people into true Frenchmen. This can be juxtaposed within the broader failures of the French state to deal with its contemporary forms of racism to instead be seen as a further extension of French colonial power. The presence of these objects in the MQB, overly aestheticized and presented as 'art' speaks to the idea that these objects, having been considered worthy of capture by French colonizers, deserve recognition as beautiful. As though the want of the initial taker is what places the value on the object. Not only does this view limit the value and decontextualize the object from what its initial value was, it furthers French supremacy by assigning predetermined values based on French or European conceptions of beauty, science, and culture.

The continued existence of a racial hierarchy in spite of the beliefs of French leaders, is further emphasized by the French response to the creation of Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre. A permanent extension of the MQB collections, the space was inaugurated in 2000 at the request of Jacques Chirac. The space itself holds 104 objects from the MQB and was created by Chirac to highlight the cultures of the Americas, Africa, Oceania and Asia to the Western world. The placement of these objects, considered to be "primitive art",[87] within the Louvre, home to some of the most famous artworks in the world, was met with outright disgust and disinterest by the broader French public. Upon the opening of the Pavillon des Sessions, a journalist writing for the French newspaper Le Monde noted, "African fetishes under the same roof as the Mona Lisa, savage masks within striking distance from the Venus de Milo…The unthinkable has happened".[88] Considering this statement, and its use of the terms fetishes and savage underscores

[87] Caroline Ford, "Museums after Empire in Metropolitan and Overseas France," *The Journal of Modern History* 82, no. 3 (September 2010): pp. 625-661, https://doi.org/10.1086/654828, 640.
[88] Ibid., 640

the way in which both African cultures and African peoples are seen in France. The presence of these objects, within the Louvre and the MQB is not justice as Chirac would like to view it, but rather is representative of colonial amnesia that France approaches its colonial past with.

By attempting to present these cultural objects as 'art', the French state and these museum spaces are ignoring the context under which they were taken and assigning them value based on their own perceptions of beauty and importance. The decontextualized presentation of these objects does not allow the visitor to react on their own to them but instead allows the French state to ignore their colonial past by 'celebrating' the culture of others through the display of these objects. This is evident in the way contemporary racism, a by-product of France's colonial past, manifests itself. While this chapter has focused on the banlieues as an extension of colonial order, they are a microcosm of the broader failures of the French state to acknowledge and respond to its colonial past. The denial of agency, both to the objects through the refusal to repatriate and to the people of global Africa living in France immortalizes the violence and superiority associated with French colonial order. The MQB, encapsulated by the motto "where cultures converse"[89] and its appendage at the Louvre (Pavillon des Sessions) exist in support of this immortalization through their presentation and holdings of African cultural heritage.

The idea that the MQB could be a place 'where cultures converse' or '*Là où dialoguent les cultures'* fails to reconcile with French and broader European beliefs on who has culture and which cultures should be valued and considered normative. In his analysis of the MQB, Herman Lebovics considers the presentation of the MQB as a spectacle. In this way, he argues that the MQB might just be able to be considered a successful postcolonial museum.[90] While this thesis vehemently disagrees with Lebovics assertion that the MQB constitutes anything close to a

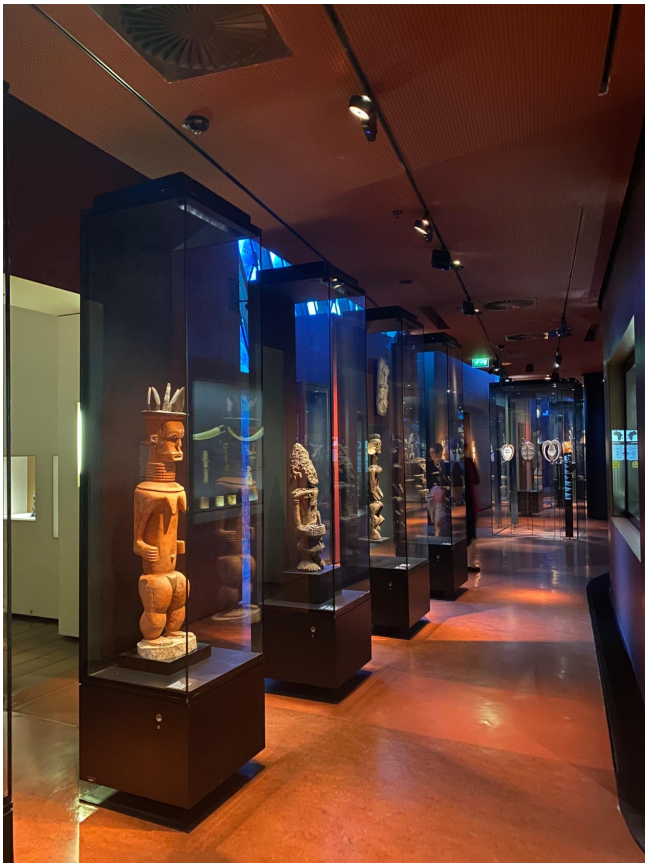
[89] Ibid., 642
[90] Herman Lebovics, "Echoes of the 'Primitive' in France's Move to Postcoloniality: The Musée Du Quai Branly," *Globality Studies Journal*, no. 4 (February 5, 2007): pp. 2-18, 8.

'postcolonial' museum, his conception of the museum as spectacle offers a useful approach for analysis. "Here is a museum apparently honoring objects gathered during a less honorable colonial past. It serves, to adapt the words of Guy Debord, "as the visible negation of life, as a negation of life [among the colonized] which has become visible".[91] This statement by Lebovics considers the spectacle of the museums as being the honoring of objects taken during an unhonorable past. While this statement is correct, it fails to connect the broader contradictory notion of these objects being celebrated while the humanity of France's African citizens continues to be denied. The antithetical nature of these things should force visitors to question how in which the museum can truly be considered a place 'where cultures converse'. Arguably, there is no conversing taking place within the museum, the lack of information on the objects presented in conjunction with the broader failures of the French state to rectify its colonial past stifles any attempt at cultural conversation. Instead, the museum itself through the over aestheticization of its contents as primitive furthers the conception of 'otherness' and in turn reaffirms the superiority associated with colonial empires.

The initial experience upon walking into the MQB is one of confusion. While other museums bathe their collections in light, the MQB is haunted by darkness. The "river" leading down into the collections and faint drumming music lead you into what Michael Kimmelman has dubbed the "Heart of Darkness".[92] This name, taken from Joseph Conrad's highly controversial book *Heart of Darkness,* is used by Kimmelman to argue that the museum itself constitutes a new form of French condescension. He engages with statements on the theme of the museum, which was meant to evoke a jungle forcing visitors to confront the 'complexity of non- European

[91] Ibid., 8
[92] Michael Kimmelman, "A Heart of Darkness in the City of Light," The New York Times (The New York Times, July 2, 2006), https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/02/arts/design/02kimm.html.

societies'.[93] Kimmelman sees this for what it is, a retelling of the old noble savage argument. The choice to frame the museum as a jungle does nothing except perpetuate colonial stereotypes of barbarism, backwardness and savagery that were used to justify European colonization. The museum, by playing up these things through its music choices, color schemes and lighting, feeds into these ideas and in doing so continues to present these objects and the people whom they represent as uncivilized and in need of European intervention.



Interior, Musée du Quai Branly, July 2022

While both dangerous and immoral, the presentation and holdings of these objects also fails to engage with the idea of ownership and who gets to decide value. By presenting these objects dehistoricized and decontextualized, the museum curators operate in continual denial of the

[93] Ibid

claims for repatriation of cultural heritage. The presentation of these objects, which feeds into colonial era stereotypes, continues to paint them as needing French ownership to protect and give value to. Whether intentional or not, the framing of the museum operates as a denial of African humanity and agency, both by perpetuating stereotypes used to justify domination and by denying ownership of cultural heritage.

The museum is home to a fifty-three piece collection, bequeathed to the museum by doctor Pierre Harter. While the museum itself offers limited statements on the origin of the many of the objects on display, the statement on the bequest of Pierre Harter is as follows,

> Pierre Harter first went to Cameroon in 1952, where he decided to specialise in tropical disease. From 1956, Doctor Harter travelled across the west of the country, living among villagers and befriending several chiefs in the Bamileke, Bangwa and Bamun regions. In thanks for medical treatment received, the chief of Banka gave the doctor a sculpted pot, the first item in a collection from which fifty-three pieces were given as a bequest to the French State. Presented here in its entirety, this bequest illustrates one man's commitment to the peoples of the Grassland and, thanks to his vision, the artefacts it contains show the power and diverse forms of the country's art.[94]

This statement minimizes the impact of colonialism and supports the French narrative of positive colonial interactions that the French state aims to push. The focus on the provision of medical treatment and the commitment of doctor Harter support the premises on which the *mission civilisatrice* was based on. In his chapter, "Toward a Real History of French Colonialism", Alain Ruscio challenges narratives like the one used in describing the bequest of Pierre Harter. Opposing the nostalgia for the positive aspects of colonialism, Ruscio reminds readers that the benevolence through the creation of roads, hospitals and schools was not done for the benefit of the native populations but rather because the native populations constituted a means to an end for the French colonial expansionism. It was the native populations who bore the cost of these advancements as noted in the pervasive use of forced labor and the twenty thousand deaths

[94] Wall text, *Afrique*, the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, France

associated with the Congo-Ocean railway construction project.[95] "Let's not be naive: the system built infrastructure (or rather, as we have just seen, had it built) because it *needed* it. It provided healthcare to *natives* because it needed the labor. It educated some natives because it needed local and subaltern administrators".[96] This is the context under which Doctor Harters actions need to be seen, ignoring the reality of colonialism as a mechanism for the support of the larger metropole is to engage in colonial amnesia.

The presentation of statements like these within the broader lack of context that the MQB utilizes; allows for the museum to distance itself from the negative realities of the French empire while instead emphasizing the 'positive' aspects of French involvement on the continent. It is important to note that arguments like the ones presented in the statement on Pierre Harter are often used by those who attempt to justify the colonial system. It is with this idea that I argue the need for repatriation of African cultural heritage. The manipulation of truth within the context of colonial amnesia for the French or memory laundering by the British contributes to a broader negation of the negative impacts of empire on the African continent that was based on the denial of humanity to those who lived there. This is further manifested through the continued holdings of this heritage in these spaces that were designed to celebrate empire, treasure and superiority and through the artifice by which these collections are presented.

In considering the way in which the MQB manipulates silence through the lack of context and reference to colonialism, Tamara Levitz analysis of how the Dogon is aestheticized at the MQB offers insight into how the presentation of the objects and the physical space of the museum limits colonial responsibility and supports the othering of non-Western culture. "The cognitive rupture and painful silence created when an object's history is suppressed in favor of its

[95]Nicolas Bancel et al., "Toward a Real History of French Colonialism ," in *The Colonial Legacy in France: Fracture, Rupture, and Apartheid* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), pp. 386-394, 390.
[96] Ibid., 391

symbolic meaning within a conceptual framework based on constructions of aesthetic difference is nowhere more evident at Branly than in the case of one of its most iconic objects: *a dynamo, lièvre*, or rabbit mask, created by the Dogon of the Bandiagara cliffs in the former French Sudan, today Mali".[97] Levitz notes how the mask is presented as "untainted by colonial power relations, financial transactions or performative interventions".[98] It is this presentation, which rings true for a majority of the objects within the museum that this thesis engages with. The continued assumption that this cultural heritage came to be in these spaces by way of positive colonial interaction and is in celebration of world cultures is one that Levitz and this thesis hopes to challenge. Levitz goes on to note the history of the object and how it made its way into the museum collection while simultaneously engaging with the disregard for the Dogon people and the presentation of the mask as being solely to stroke ego and promote exoticism. In considering the way in which the MQB functions as an emissary of France's colonial amnesia, this analysis offers Levitz' warning, "Branly teaches us to exercise caution in using the aesthetic to political ends, and to recognize the human tragedy of the irreconcilable differences created when identity politics are corrupted in the hands of those who use them to acquire power over, or usurp and misconstrue, the lives of others".[99]

Conclusions

This chapter has explored the MQB and the way in which its inception, over-aestheticization and decontextualization of its objects function as an extension of French colonial amnesia. Guiding the thematic decision to situate the MQB within the guides of colonial

[97] Tamara Levitz, "The Aestheticization of Ethnicity: Imagining the Dogon at the Musée Du Quai Branly," *The Musical Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (2006): pp. 600-642, https://doi.org/10.1093/musqtl/gdn001, 601.
[98] Ibid., 603
[99] Ibid., 604

amnesia can be attributed to France's refusal to acknowledge its post colonial reality. By situating itself 'above' its colonial history, France engages in what this chapter has laid out as colonial amnesia. As highlighted through the chapters engagement of the *banlieues* as an extension of colonial ordering, this chapter aimed to indicate the way in which Frances contemporary racism is a by product of its refusal to engage with its colonial past in a meaningful way that gives recognition to the violence of French colonialism, and places agency back with the global Africans living within its borders.

Situating these ideas within the broader context of the MQB, this chapter showed how the over aestheticization and lack of context to the collections or individual objects lends itself to the support of France's *mission civilisatrice.* By avoiding reference to France's colonial past, the museum is mimicking the overall French practice of colonial amnesia or '*mémoires françaises alzheimerisées'*[100] as defined by Dominique Vidal. This allows France to avoid responsibility for its colonial past while also ignoring the incompatible nature of French values of Republicanism and its continued denial of humanity to its former colonies and their descendants. Considering museums as ends to political means, it becomes necessary to question how these spaces function as neocolonial ambassadors, in celebration of colonial power relations. Salam Al Quntars notes on museum display offer insight into considering how the exoticised display of the MQB works in favor of perpetuating a certain vision of Africa and African culture, one that is sullied with the undertones of colonial beliefs and understanding of the world. "How museum displays of 'primitive' Third World or non-Western art often misrepresent or even invent foreign cultures for what are ultimately political purposes".[101] In considering the political purposes of display as

[100] JENNIFER M. DUECK, "The Middle East and North Africa in the Imperial and Post-Colonial Historiography of France," *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 4 (August 2007): pp. 935-949, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0018246x07006449.
[101] Salam Al Quntar, "Repatriation and the Legacy of Colonialism in the Middle East," *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 2017): pp. 19-26, https://doi.org/10.5325/jeasmedarcherstu.5.1.0019, 21.

being a reinforcement of colonial era power and domination, this thesis offers reparative justice as a guiding framework for which to consider as a way to move forward.

The return of these objects to their countries of origin offers a return of agency to the people there as well as constitutes an acknowledgment of wrongdoing. For France, which is alone in its refusal to engage with its historical past, the return would allow them to truly engage with the concept of decolonization in a way that acknowledges the violence and negative consequences of its empire. While admitting that repatriation is largely symbolic, Al Quntar notes, "I see it as a symbolic act of acknowledging the violation of cultural rights that happened in the past and as a means for reconciliation over the historical tragedies that continue to resurface and manifest in problems of integration, exclusion and even terrorism".[102] At the point of writing, the statement made by current President Emmanuel Macron and the publishing of the Sarr-Savoy report have yielded no real changes in how France deals with its colonial past or efforts to return African cultural heritage. The concession by Macron that the initial collection and continued holdings of these objects and the call for their return is considered to be inconsequential with the lack of action. The return of 28 objects[103] back to Africa is minor when considering the vast amount of African cultural heritage that exists in French museums. In engaging with repatriation of these works as a way to move forward, the words of Macron must be followed through with action.

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[102] Salam Al Quntar, "Repatriation and the Legacy of Colonialism in the Middle East," *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 2017): pp. 19-26, https://doi.org/10.5325/jeasmedarcherstu.5.1.0019, 25.

[103] Vincent Noce, "Why Macron's Radical Promise to Return African Treasures Has Stalled," The Art Newspaper - International art news and events (The Art Newspaper - International art news and events, February 3, 2022), https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/02/03/why-macrons-radical-promise-to-return-african-treasures-has-stalled.

Chapter 4 : A Decolonial Museum? Reflections on the AfricaMuseum

Introduction

The Royal Museum for Central Africa offers a unique enigma for this thesis to engage with. The museum, initially created as a key propaganda tool for the Belgian colonial mission in the Congo, recently underwent a massive renovation project in which the museum aimed to transition itself from a colonial museum, that is a place in which colonialism was celebrated and not critically evaluated, to a decolonial museum. The process towards this transition was tumultuous and as this thesis regards, ultimately unsuccessful. This chapter will explore the ways in which the museum renovation has rehabilitated rather than decolonized the space, and what this means in terms of contemporary Belgian-Congo relations. In considering the museums inability to successfully decolonize, this chapter supports the broader arguments employed in this thesis that these museum spaces, through their continued holdings of African cultural heritage, continue to perpetuate the violence and supremacy associated with their initial taking and thus exist as a function of neo-colonialism.

This chapter relies heavily on my own observations while visiting the museum, the museum guidebook, website, and other scholarly reviews and critiques of the museum. To aid in the historical contextualization of Belgian rule in the Congo, this chapter utilizes the influential text, *King Leopold's Ghost: A story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* by Adam Hochschild as well as *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa* by Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim to offer historical context for analysis. These texts, placed in conversation with each other, provide a historical lens for which to consider the contemporary museum.

History of the Museum

Analysis of the museum must be prefaced by a brief history of Belgian rule in the Congo and an overview of the museum as a colonial functionary. This section primarily relies on the

work of Hochschild, which focuses on the exploitative and violent nature of Belgian rule in the Congo. In providing historical context of the inherent violence of Belgian rule in the Congo, this section hopes to highlight how the museum itself exists as a symbol of the violence, built with colonial profit and filled with colonial trophies. Set up initially as King Leopold II's own personal colony, the Congo provided a major source of extraction, both in material and cultural goods. As Leopold's personal colony, it was funded and run by a multitude of concessionary companies which operated with such brutality that it led the broader international community, also engaged in violence of their own within their respective colonies, to speak out. Leopold's ambition to colonize the Congo was driven largely by increasing competition from other European powers and the relatively small size of the Belgian state. His opening speech to his 1876 Geographical Conference noted the chance to bring civilization "to pierce the darkness which hangs over entire peoples",[104] and further emphasized that this "crusade" was not driven by egotism as, "Belgium may be a small country, but she is happy and satisfied with her fate; I have no other ambition than to serve her well".[105] The use of the Congo as Leopold's own personal playground for violence and extraction suggests otherwise, and contextualizes the construction of the RMCA as commissioned by Leopold as a symbol of his own personal power and ego over the Congo and allows for questioning of it as a symbol of power today.

In considering the way in which Leopold used his power and the Belgian state to control and extract from the Congo, Hochschild provides us with the array of titles that the former king used in describing his relationship to the Congo, from the 'Emperor of the Congo' to 'the Congo's King-Sovereign' and finally to 'the Congo's proprietor'.[106] It is this last name, that of

[104] Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020), 44.
[105] Ibid., 45
[106] Ibid., 87

proprietor, that highlights the king's consideration of the Congo as merely a site of extraction. This can be viewed in opposition to the colonial empires of France and England which were disguised under the intention of bringing civilization to the backwards people of the African continent, all while deriving political and economic benefit. That is not to say that Leoplold was so overt in describing his aims in the Congo as being purely economic, he did engage in similar rhetoric of philanthropy.

One of the most common associations of those critical of Belgian rule in the Congo is engagement with 'red rubber'. This term red rubber comes from the violence associated with rubber harvesting in the Congo. Violence and terror was widespread in the Congo. Henry Morton Stanley, Leopold's point man in the Congo referenced the use of violence in a letter to Brussels by saying, "The best punishment is that of irons…because without wounding, disfiguring, or torturing the body, it inflicts shame and discomfort".[107] The casual nature of this statement is reflective of how violence was used in Belgian colonization. The militarization of rubber collection was supported by Force Publique[108] garrisons and individual sentries for each company. "In military matters as in almost everything else, the companies operated as an extension of the Congo state, and when hostages had to be taken or a rebellious village subdued, company sentries and Force Publique soldiers often took to the field together".[109] Outside of being militarized, the rubber extraction operation relied on a quota system that was enforced by the *chicotte*, a heavy leather whip that was regularly employed in the Congo. Hochschild notes the use of hostage taking and restricted movement with metal disks to allow for companies to track you and your quotas.[110] The red rubber system emerged in reference to the blood that

[107] Ibid., 67
[108] The Force Publique is the military arm of Belgian rule in the Congo. It subdued anti-colonial resistance and was used to militarize the extraction of resources in the Congo.
[109] Ibid., 163
[110] Ibid., 163

flowed throughout Belgium's rubber extraction process, specifically evidenced by the policy of severing hands for those who did not meet their quotas or as evidence of kills for those who resisted Belgian rule. “Like the hostage-taking, the severing of hands was deliberate policy, as even high officials would later admit.”[111] Understanding this as a sanctioned policy, and not the actions of a few individuals brings light to the atrocities that are commonly associated with Belgian rule in the Congo.

In November 1908, control over the Congo was transferred from Leopold to the Belgian State. The Congo was no longer the personal colony of one man, but instead now served as a more ‘traditional’ extension of the colonial empire. This transfer took place under heavy pressure from the international community which was outraged by the violence and manipulation of Leopold's reign in the Congo. This transfer did not occur without Leopold being set to receive fifty million francs, to be extracted from the Congo, “as a mark of gratitude for his great sacrifices made for the Congo”.[112] This transfer of power was largely symbolic, as the Belgian state continued to control the colony based on the profitable extraction systems that had been set up by Leopold. In considering Leopold’s legacy, this thesis supports critics of his empire and the crimes against humanity that he carried out. There are an estimated 10 million Congolese who lost their lives during this regime which was carried out in pursuit of personal glory. The wealth accumulated as a result of these lost lives went on to build some of Belgium's most familiar imagery. The Royal Palace, the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Laeken, and the Cinquantenaire arch were all built with Leopold's blood money from the Congo. Standing today as signals of empire and dominance, they fail to reconcile with Belgium's colonial past. They serve as examples of what Adam Hochschild refers to as ‘The Great Forgetting’.[113] Reflections

[111] Ibid., 165
[112] Ibid., 259
[113] Ibid., 292

on these built environments, specifically the museum, are useful for considering how Belgium engages with its colonial history.

Analysis

Analysis of the museum should begin with the name and the imagery it provokes. The 'Royal Museum for Central Africa' is a highly provocative name and suggests heavy involvement by the ruling family in the construction of the museum. While we do know this to be true, the museum was created as part of King Leopold's justification for his personal colony, the decision to continue using this name indicates a lot about how the museum continues to conceptualize this heritage. Interestingly, post renovation, the museum did shift its name to the AfricaMuseum, yet the guidebook taken during the summer of 2022 and printed in 2020 still is titled the Royal Museum for Central Africa. The continued use of this name with its well understood history and connotations, suggests that the museum has not fully transitioned to a decolonial space, as the name itself was created in celebration of the Belgian colonial empire. In considering how the physical space of the museum, which largely resembles a palace contributes to the historical legacy of the place, the guidebook notes that the building contains about 45 examples of the king's initials, largely representing the royal association with the building. The guidebook draws attention to the architecture of the building by stating,

> This building, laden with so much colonialist symbolism and propaganda, was restored to its former architectural splendor between 2013 and 2018. Nowadays, colonialism as a system is unequivocally condemned on moral grounds. Consequently, one of the many challenges faced by the museum has been the creation of a new story to puncture that colonialist mechanism which, even today, is still very widespread. Providing a prominent place for African perspectives on the past, present, and future is among the duties of the 21st-century AfricaMuseum. It underpins what it means to be citizens of the world.[114]

[114] "The Royal Museum for Central Africa Guidebook ," *The Royal Museum for Central Africa Guidebook* (Kontich, Belgium: BAI Publishers, 2019), 5.

This statement acknowledges that the building itself serves as colonial propaganda and that colonialist mechanisms are still very much alive, yet fails to recognize that the museum itself plays a role in this. Considering museums as a politically-discursive place,[115] the way in which this museum, as well as others operates is largely indicative of larger political motive and engagement.

This thesis argues that because of this, the refusal to seriously engage in repatriation of cultural heritage is indicative of a larger political system that refuses to truly acknowledge African independence, agency, and sovereignty. Further analysis of this opening statement within the guide questions the use of 'citizens of the world' as justification for the continued holding of African cultural heritage. The idea of citizens of the world, much like the trope of universal museums, is regularly engaged as a way to justify the imperial projects that led to the removal of many of the African objects we see in museums today as well as is used as another word for the current expansionist projects that continue to treat Africa and her citizens as in need of western paternalism and benevolence. As will be explored later in this chapter, the idea of 'citizens of the world', similar to the idea of shared heritage, is limited and selective as to who receives the benefits and humanity of being a citizen of the world. "The uncritical depiction of heritage as substantiver reality, however, and the sacralization of heritage values conceal the fact that heritage is always the outcome of a process of cultural production, determined by the discourse and agency of those involved".[116] This idea pushes back on what it means to be a citizen of the world and thus challenges the way in which the museum engages it as part of their mission.

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[115] Sarah Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art and the Promotion of Belgian Colonialism (1945–1959)," *History and Anthropology* 24, no. 4 (2013): pp. 472-492, https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2013.813849.
[116] Hein Vanhee, "On Shared Heritage and Its (False) Promises," *African Arts* 49, no. 3 (2016): pp. 1-7, https://doi.org/10.1162/afar_a_00295, 7.

The two forewards to the guidebook, from Director General Guido Gryseels and Operational Director for Public-Oriented Services Bruno Verbergt, both regard the museum as a scholarly institution and draw reference to the relationships between Belgium and its former colony. In specific reference to the recent renovation of the museum, the Director Generals foreward states,

> The museum closed its doors at the end of 2013 for a major programme of renovations, both in terms of its content and its infrastructure. Our objective was to become a contemporary museum about present-day Africa, while including critical reflections on our colonial past. The AfricaMuseum also seeks to be a forum for debate and a meeting place for everyone with an interest in Africa.[117]

The following sections will analyze the success of the critical reflections on Belgian colonial past in an investigation of the museum's attempt at transitioning to a decolonial space.

In analyzing the success of the museum in transitioning from colonial to a decolonial space, this section begins with exploring the state of the museum pre-renovation. In considering how the idea of African 'art' was constructed in Belgium as an aspect of the colonial mission, Sarah Van Beurden highlights the way in which African heritage was used as political propaganda. The transition of cultural heritage to being considered as 'art' can be linked to the broader shift that occurred within the disciplines of anthropology and museums shift from displaying ethnographic material. The aestheticization of these objects as art, promoted them onto the world scene and as Van Beurden notes, was then utilized to promote colonialism as protecting and extracting economic and cultural value. The linking of art and culture, which Van Beurden conceptualizes as the 'art-culture-system', reinvented African heritage as fitting within some 'universal' aesthetic of beauty. Once this was done, the motives for collecting also shifted. Those doing the taking were now charged with 'protecting' these valuable pieces of artwork. It is

[117] "The Royal Museum for Central Africa Guidebook ," *The Royal Museum for Central Africa Guidebook* (Kontich, Belgium: BAI Publishers, 2019), 8.

important to recognize that this value is the value determined by the takers and ignores any original placed on the object by the takers. “This commodification contributes to the objects’ redefinition as another exceptional resource of the colony, supporting the idea of Congo as an exceptional place,deserving of the welfare colonialism of the Belgian state”.[118] Considering this statement within the broader context of Belgium's extraction politics, the taking and consequent display of this art was done as an extension of power, both in the ability to extract and also in the ability to assign value to culture, making it art. As stated by Van Beurden, these objects then become ‘signs’ for the museum which then diminishes them as representatives of another culture.

The 2013 renovation was aimed at shifting the museum from a site of colonial celebration to a site of colonial reflection and scholarly research on Africa. This was challenging since, as stated earlier, the physical building itself and its architectural splendor are itself an issue of contestation. The renovations took place in light of concerns over the largely fossilized representation of Africa that remained in the 21st century. “From crocodiles to colonial helmets, the RMCA continues to depict Africa as an exotic continent to be civilized by adventurous settlers”.[119] Overwhelmingly, the failures of the museum to document the atrocities associated with colonialism were seen as the museum continuing to be a propaganda tool, aiding in Belgiums ‘great forgetting’. Patrick Hoenig quotes journalist Neil Aschersons reaction to the museum, “...the RMCA worked as a force of denial in the face of overwhelming evidence that the Belgian colonial administration of the Congo was one of the ‘most atrocious and criminal

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[118] Sarah Van Beurden, “The Value of Culture: Congolese Art and the Promotion of Belgian Colonialism (1945–1959),” *History and Anthropology* 24, no. 4 (2013): pp. 472-492, https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2013.813849, 483.

[119] Véronique Bragard and Stéphanie Planche, “Museum Practices and the Belgian Colonial Past: Questioning the Memories of an Ambivalent Metropole,” *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2009): pp. 181-191, https://doi.org/10.1080/17528630902981332, 183.

regimes in history'".[120] The erasure of public memory and the trauma of Belgian rule in the Congo were also cited as failures of the museum pre-renovation. Arguably the lack of "responsible memory work"[121] within the museum aided in the museum serving as a purveyor of colonial propaganda, in that it allowed for the museum to not have to critically engage with its colonial past; instead being able to still exist as a medium for Belgian national pride and colonial power.

The most recent renovation of the RMCA aimed "to present a contemporary and decolonised vision of Africa in a building which had been designed as a colonial museum".[122] Attempts at acknowledging Belgium's colonial past are evident within the museum, guidebook, and website but as noted by Vicky VanBockhaven, largely failed in its ultimate goal of transitioning from a colonial to a decolonial museum. She references an UN report that remarked on these failings, stating, "a UN expert group stated that the renovated RMCA did not sufficiently bring to light the abuses of the colonial era, recommending that Belgium apologises for its colonial past".[123] This thesis ultimately agrees with the assessment of the UN group and Van Bockhaven that the museum's language and inconsistencies in establishing a decolonial space ultimately hinder the success of the renovations. Van Bockhaven considers these inconsistencies as being the result of a lack of clear vision and competing interests, noting that the museum "lies at a nexus of different forces within Belgian society".[124] This can be seen in the

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[120] Patrick Hoenig, "Visualizing Trauma: The Belgian Museum for Central Africa and Its Discontents," *Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 4 (February 2014): pp. 343-366, https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.967334, 349.
[121] Marouf Hasian and Rulon Wood, "Critical Museology, (Post)Colonial Communication, and the Gradual Mastering of Traumatic Pasts at the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA)," *Western Journal of Communication* 74, no. 2 (March 25, 2010): pp. 128-149, https://doi.org/10.1080/10570311003614484.
[122] "History and Renovation," Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren - Belgium, accessed August 14, 2022, https://www.africamuseum.be/en/discover/history_renovation.
[123] Vicky Van Bockhaven, "Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium's Second Museum Age," *Antiquity* 93, no. 370 (August 2019): pp. 1082-1087, https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.83. 1082.
[124] Ibid., 1085

way in which the museum is organized and the various corresponding statements placed throughout the space as well as the inconsistencies in outside consulting from the likes of COMRAF, a permanent commision for consultation created by the museum in 2003 and the G6, whole were six professionals of African origin elected by COMRAF in 2014 to help create the new renovation.[125] "These divisions are evident in the displays, which are eclectic to the point that the work of different curators is recognisable, mixing progressive and conservative messages, and self-reflexivity with defensiveness".[126] The lack of thoughtful overviews to the collections and the display of the objects decontextualized within glass cases yet the promoting of the museum under a new name and the new introductory exhibit situate the museum awkwardly in a position that this thesis considers to be part of the museums status as rehabilitated, not decolonized. The museum ultimately has made a major transition away from the celebratory tone prior to the renovation but appears to distance itself from colonialism instead of confronting it.

The consultation process for renovations is indicative of the challenges that the museum faced in its transition. Arguably, the way in which African consultants were used speaks to the broader unwillingness of the museum to actually engage in decolonial practices. The way in which the museum engaged with potential consultants extended the extraction politics associated with Belgian colonial rule. As stated by Sarah Demart, extraction politics are not just limited to natural resources and land but also extend to knowledge, bodies and the use of a labor force.[127]

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[125] Hein Vanhee, "On Shared Heritage and Its (False) Promises," *African Arts* 49, no. 3 (2016): pp. 1-7, https://doi.org/10.1162/afar_a_00295, 7.
[126] Vicky Van Bockhaven, "Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium's Second Museum Age," *Antiquity* 93, no. 370 (August 2019): pp. 1082-1087, https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.83. 1085.

[127] Margareta von Oswald, Jonas Tinius, and Sarah Demart, "Resisting Extraction Politics: Afro-Belgian Claims, Women's Activism, and the Royal Museum for Central Africa," in *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2020), pp. 142-172, 145.

Demart argues that knowledge is rarely considered under the lens of expropriation or extraction, and uses this exclusivity to discuss epistemic exploitation as it relates to the curation of the new RMCA. Epistemic exploitation is derived from epistemic injustice which , "...the fact to ignore a knowledge because of the marginalized group of the knower or the incapacity of the concepts available to make knowledge understandable and to politcise experience".[128] As explained by Demart, epistemic exploitation occurs when the expertise of a particular person is disregarded or devalued due to their status within a socially marginalized group. In considering Afro-feminist resistance to such exploitation, Demart offers insight into the ways in which the attempt at decolonization was minimally engaged. Specific reference is made to the 'diversity politics' employed by the museum and how such politics led to a broad denunciation from those of African descent within Belgium, "The temporary inclusion of people of African descent through specific tools for representing 'the community' , in addition to the lack of an agenda concerning restitution, refuted the museums claim of any policy for genuinely cooperating with diasporas".[129] In considering the way in which museum spaces, as with other western institutions, prioritize certain knowledge and ways of knowing, the lack of true inclusion or attempts to shift this beyond an end goal of a renovated museum is indicative of the museums broader failure to truly decolonize. At its core, decolonization is radical and requires a total transition in colonial practices, psychology and organization. It is both an end goal and a work in progress. To be able to decolonize requires a fundamental understanding of the ways in which all systems that we operate within are linked to pre-existing power structures.

This thesis argues that the RMCA failed to have a strong theoretical grasp of what decolonization meant for the museum as can be evidenced in the lack of cohesion post

[128] Ibid.,146
[129] Ibid.,147

renovation, the continued holding of African cultural heritage despite many claims for its return, and the way in which the museum attempted to engage with those of African heritage to consult for the renovation. Demart references a letter, sent from the RMCA to BAMKO-CRAN which is an afro-feminist organization aimed at interrogating the manifestations of anti-blackness, which is a request for an interview for how the museum and what role the diaspora could play in the museum. While a seemingly innocent request, Demart argues that it is instead emphatic of the epistemic exploitation. The devalorization of information and knowledge as requested from BAMKO-CRAN, was situated as an interview, not an official consultation, which would imply value and interest in the response and in which no compensation could be derived for the provision of services. Situating this request within the dominant colonial practices which disregarded the knowledge, value, and humanity of the people they conquered, this can be seen as extension of such practices. "Furthermore, the colonial shape of these consultation processes lies not only in the fact that activist or Afro-descendant discourse are not recognised as expertise or knowledge, but also in that institutional economy can be perceived as a coercive way to get access for free to epistemic labour".[130] Discussion of this is used to aid in understanding the failure of the museum to truly decolonize. The way in which those of global Africa were regarded in terms of value-added to the renovation process highlights a lack of decoloniality in the hierarchical ways that knowledge is valued.

The current RMCA post renovation is home to a new visitor center, underground gallery and introductory exhibit, all aimed at providing visitors with more context to Belgium's colonial past. Upon moving through the introductory exhibit, you make your way into the official museum of which exhibits are placed around a larger courtyard space. The museum has 16 sections: Languages and Music, Rumba Studio, Afropea, Transit-Memory, special collections on

[130] Ibid., 152

Unrivaled Art, Taxolab, Landscapes and Biodiversity, The Great Rotunda, The Resource Paradox, Imagery, Mineral Cabinet, The Crocodile Room, Colonial History and Independence, Long History, Studio 6+, and Rituals and Ceremonies. As highlighted by that expansive list, the museum itself attempts to encompass all of what it considers to represent Africa which in itself poses a number of problems. The conflation of history, natural history, art, science, and the environment, lends itself to an overwhelming experience. The broadness of scope that the museum is trying to represent lacks focus as well as commitment to truly providing a decolonized vision of Africa. The presentation of sacred masks and ritual objects next door to life sized stuffed animals limits the visitors' understanding of Africa and arguably perpetuates the same colonial stereotypes of indigenous witchcraft, backwards people, and dangerous jungles.

In considering the museum's attempts at owning up to its colonial legacy, the Introductory exhibit, the Grand Rotunda, Imagery, and Colonial History and Independence rooms will be further analyzed. The introductory exhibit, titled ‘A Museum in Motion’ offers insight into the museum's attempts to reconcile with its colonial past. The exhibit itself is opened by a long white hallway with the words *'Everything passes except the past’* placed on the wall alongside a 22.5 meter long pirogue. The guidebook notes that former King Leopold III made a journey in the canoe. The guidebook attempts to engage with the commissioning of the canoe by questioning whether or not it had been commissioned by the colonial administration and not just given as a ‘gift’ as stated by the museum archives.[131] This caveat within the guidebook centralizes a guiding idea within this thesis, which is how provenance of objects are displayed and consequently manipulated to present a certain narrative of colonial empires. The hallway also has an exhibit entitled ‘Already Said? Already heard?’ which attempts to educate visitors on microaggressions.

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[131] “The Royal Museum for Central Africa Guidebook ,” *The Royal Museum for Central Africa Guidebook* (Kontich, Belgium: BAI Publishers, 2019), 17.

The introductory exhibit itself offers insight into the history of the Tervuren site, collecting practices, and insight into acquisitions. The exhibit offers minimal references to colonialism or its impact, instead choosing to speak of it passively. In reference to the Tervuren site a wall placard within the exhibit states, "With the profits from the Congo Free State, the monarch started an ambitious construction programme. Ultimately, only the museum building and two pavilions were realized, designed by the architect Charles Girault. The fact that revenues from the Congo Free State flowed to Belgium, rather than remaining in Congo, resulted in a furore in parliament".[132] This statement is similar to others in that the existence of an exploitative colonial state is acknowledged, but little context is given to the way in which this occurred at the expense of Africa or the resistance of the African people to colonial influence. Interactive technologies within the exhibit offer additional insight on the museum's position on colonization by defining colonialism as "a form of government baked on military occupation, authoritarian and racist administration, and exploitation", before stating, "The museum therefore explicitly distances itself from it. It takes responsibility for the impact that its previous propaganda for colonialism has had on the multicultural society of today, and for the message of Western moral and intellectual superiority it has conveyed in the past".[133] This statement openly states that the museum is attempting to distance itself from it while also forgoing an apology in favor of accepting responsibility. Together, these two things neutralize and minimize the museum as a beneficiary of the colonial empire and an extension of political power. In this way the museum fails to evolve into a decolonial space or even as 'contact-zone' as considered by Véronique Bragard and Stéphanie Planche. In discussing museums and their attempts to deal with their colonial legacies, Bragard and Planche state, "they will need to become 'contact zones' in a

[132] Wall Text, A Museum in Motion, *Introductory Exhibit*, The AfricaMuseum, Tervuren, Belgium
[133] Interactive Screen, A Museum in Motion, *Introductory Exhibit*, The AfricaMuseum, Tervuren, Belgium

broader sense: they will have to establish dialogues among cultures, but also between memory and history, between official institutionalised history and counter-discourses, between constructed narratives and spaces where viewers can create new meanings for themselves".[134] The failure to engage in conversation between institutionalized history and the counter histories minimizes the success of the introductory exhibit.

Accompanying the exhibit is The Sculpture Depot which houses the overtly racist statues that used to be a part of the official museum exhibit. These statues include the well-known 'Leopard Man' and other statues that were used as colonial propaganda to support the colonial mission. The corresponding statement to the depot notes that by placing the statues within the depot, "they bear witness to deep-rooted prejudices and stereotypes that contributed to racism in our modern society".[135] The presence of these statues is significant for two key reasons. First, as the statement says, their presence assumes that the stereotypes they represent are no longer contributing to racism. This is evidenced by the decision to put contributed in the past tense. This thesis is of the position that these stereotypes are instead still *contributing* to racism. Second, these statues, specifically *The Leopard Man*, were highly contested, with many of the people of African descent working on the G6 and COMRAF requesting its removal. This is evidenced by a painting hanging adjacent to the statue which is entitled *Reorganization*. Made in June 2002, the painting was commissioned by the museum staff and depicts museum curators and Congolese people quite literally playing tug of war over the statue while the museum director looks on. The refusal to truly part with these statues poses the question of how committed the museum as well as the broader Belgian public are to the process of decolonization.

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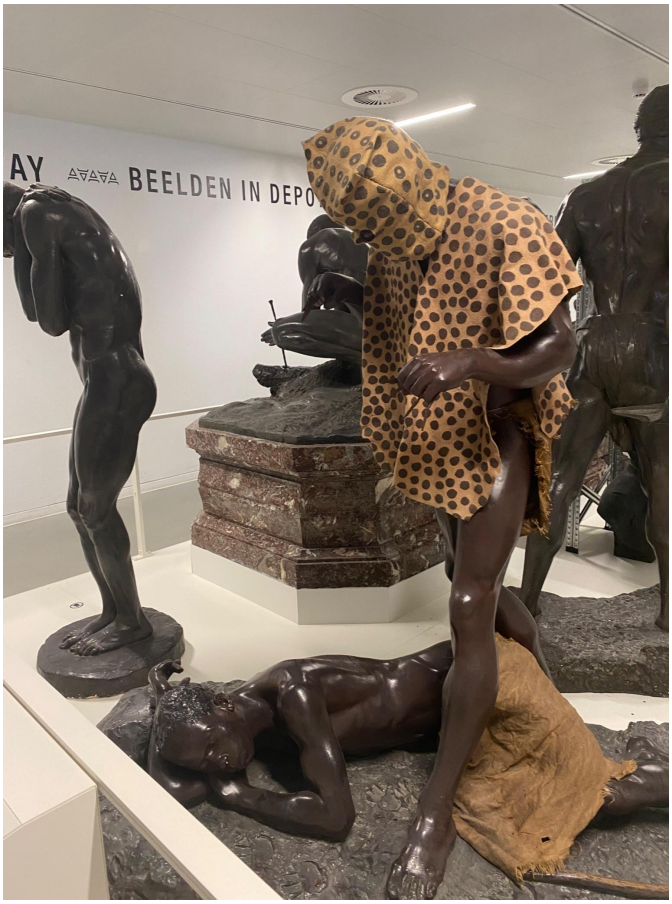
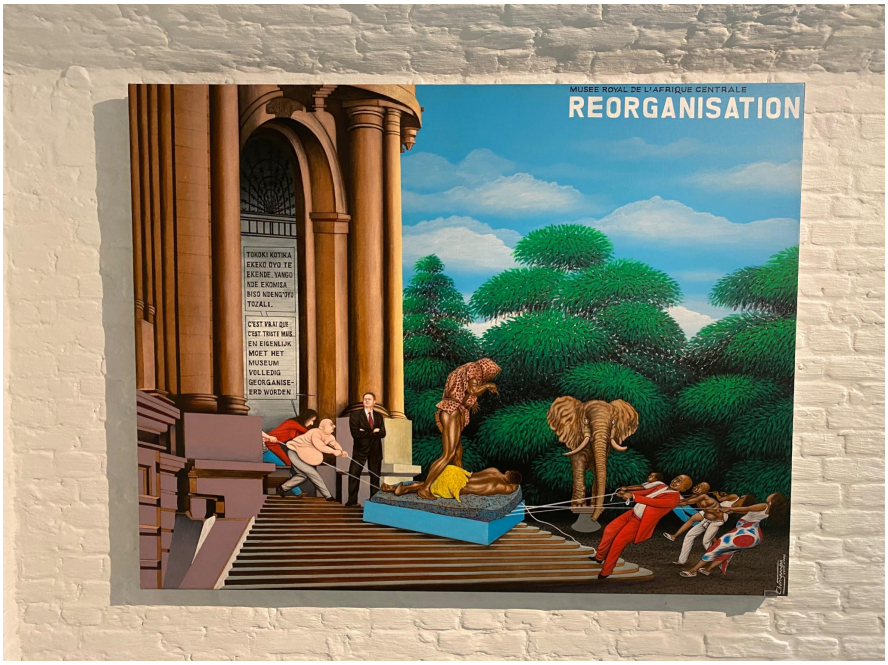
[134] Véronique Bragard and Stéphanie Planche, "Museum Practices and the Belgian Colonial Past: Questioning the Memories of an Ambivalent Metropole," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2009): pp. 181-191, https://doi.org/10.1080/17528630902981332, 188.
[135] Wall Text, Sculpture Depot, *Introductory Exhibit*, The AfricaMuseum, Tervuren, Belgium



Leopard Man Statue, AfricaMuseum, July 2022



Reorganisation, AfricaMuseum, July 2022

The Grand Rotunda offers an interesting approach for how the museum attempted to reconcile its colonial past in the face of limitations imposed on the space due to the location's status as a protected heritage site. The rotunda, once a physical site of colonial celebration due to its architecturally imposing nature, has been redone in a way that "invites criticism and commentary".[136] This was done through what Adam Hochschild refers to as an "explicit response".[137] Such a response allows for artwork to be added to a space in response to another. This sort of concept was used within the rotunda. Two sculptures are faced opposite each other, the *Nouveau souffle ou le Congo bourgeonnant*, and the *Skull of Chief Lusinga*[138] are both done in open woodwork and meant to exist in conversation with each other.[139] The website for the museum argues that these sculptures and the corresponding veils covering the non-removable statues depicting Belgians bringing civilization to the Congo, allow for a new way to deal with difficult heritage while challenging the historical and ideological connotations traditionally associated with the space.[140] A similarity situated 'renovation success', can be seen in the room devoted to imagery and colonial propaganda. This space offers a specific analysis of themes and tools that were used in colonial propaganda films and highlights how subtle manipulations were used to reinforce ideas of superiority. "Colonial photographs didn't just show life as it was. They were carefully staged and offered a partial, selective, or distorted view of colonial society. What

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[136] "History and Renovation," Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren - Belgium, accessed August 14, 2022, https://www.africamuseum.be/en/discover/history_renovation.
[137] Adam Hochschild, "The Fight to Decolonize the Museum," The Atlantic (Atlantic Media Company, December 15, 2019), https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/01/when-museums-have-ugly-pasts/603133/.
[138] The Skull of Chief Lusinga was kept in the museum until 1964 before being passed o to the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences. The skull was taken during a raid by Belgian office Emile Storms on the village of Lusinga in 1884, during which the chief's head was cut off before being returned to Belgium.
[139]"History and Renovation," Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren - Belgium, accessed August 14, 2022, https://www.africamuseum.be/en/discover/history_renovation.
[140] Ibid

these images don't show is just as important as what they do show. Absent is not necessarily the same as non-existent."[141] This statement is important because it cites colonial photographs and films as propaganda and provides context to visitors.

One of the major failings of the museum lies in the Colonial History and Independence Room. The room itself subdues the colonial history of the Congo and fails to mention the red rubber system or extreme violence of Belgian rule. Figures that could be helpful in depicting this history, such as the number of deaths are minimized through small fonts. Similarly, the chicotte is displayed, but is decontextualized. A small image accompanies the whip, depicting a man, dressed in all white, raising the chicotte over a man, who is face down , held in place by other Congolese men. The failure to contextualize such a symbolic representation of Belgian colonial rule or to engage with the red rubber system and the severing of hands, indicates a lack of commitment to the process of decolonization or true engagement with the counter discourse to the popular narratives of Belgian colonialism and operate as part of the 'great forgetting'. The opening statement for the room is equally as distanced as the presentation of the chicotte,

> Taken in the context of the long history of Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi, the colonial period was relatively short. Yet, it has been decisive for the evolution of postcolonial society in the three countries, and in shaping their image in Belgium. Today, historians fundamentally agree about the reconstruction and interpretation of the colonial past, but in terms of the public debate, it remains a very controversial period. The collections of the Royal Museum for Central Africa have been composed by Europeans; it remains a challenge, therefore, to the tell colonial history from an African perspective. The RMCA wants to stimulate interest in this period and to be a forum for lively debate.[142]

This thesis considers the museum's statement regarding the controversial nature of the colonial past to show a refusal to engage with the idea that the Belgian colonial empire was wrong. By passing it off as controversial, the museum is able to avoid formal acknowledgement of wrongdoing. Furthermore, the statement fails to engage in any meaningful way with the impact

[141] Placard, *Imagery*, The AfricaMuseum, Tervuren, Belgium
[142] Text, *Colonial History and Independence,* The AfricaMuseum, Tervuren, Belgium

of colonialism and the way in which it directly enriched the Belgian state through profits derived from the labor of Africans. Further problematic is the museum's depiction of Congo post independence. The statement for that section begins by stating, “The postcolonial history of Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda is dominated by complex, tragic, and controversial conflicts”.[143] This statement fails to consider how the legacy of Belgian colonialism contributed to the conflicts and instability that the statement references. One specific and striking omission is the relationship of the Belgian state and the west in the death of Congolese leader, Patrice Lumumba. The threat of Lumumba and his calls for economic as well as political independence from the West led to his assisination. After he was shot and killed, all of his body, albeit one tooth, was dissolved in acid so as to remove culpability for the death. In regards to this, the museum offers a short statement, which fails to disclose the premeditated violence and deliberate efforts to hide involvement in the death. “Lumumba is murdered in 1961. After his death, he becomes a martyr. In 2001, a Belgian parliamentary inquiry commission acknowledges that the then Belgian government bore a moral responsibility for the murder.”[144] The single tooth that was removed from Lumumba's body was taken as a personal trophy by a Belgian police officer. The tooth was recently returned in June of 2022 to Lumumba's family.[145] The failure of the museum to critically engage with the darker portions of Belgium's colonial past are indicative of the museum's inability to accurately claim that it has made the successful shift from colonial to a postcolonial museum. The references and inclusion of a colonial past within the museum are not to be diminished. The museum has made a major shift from celebration of colonialism but has failed to

[143] Text, The postcolonial era, *Colonial History and Independence,* The AfricaMuseum, Tervuren, Belgium
[144] Wall text, Patrice Lumumba, *Colonial History and Independence*, The AfricaMuseum, Tervuren, Belgium
[145] News Wires, “Belgium Returns Lumumba Tooth to Relatives,” France 24 (France 24, June 20, 2022), https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220620-belgium-returns-lumumba-tooth-to-relatives.

make the leap and offer a critical look at the way in which colonialism functioned in Africa and the ways in which the Belgian state ultimately benefited from it.

Conclusions

In closing, this chapter analyzed the AfricaMuseum as a decolonial institution. Drawing on visits to the museum as well as engagement with other critiques, this thesis argues that while the AfricaMuseum failed in its attempt to transform from a colonial museum to a decolonial one it achieved a state of rehabilitation. This thesis conceptualizes this status of rehabilitation as a way to note the progress and effort that was made with the renovation while also recognizing the flaws and indecisiveness within the museum today. The framing of this museum as existing within this concept of rehabilitation is under the consideration of the British Museum and the MQB still existing within a colonial framework. The lack of effort to engage in the process of decolonization by those two institutions is juxtaposed with the attempts made by the AfricaMuseum with its most recent renovation. Outside of the physical museum, the AfricaMuseum website offers statements regarding the provenance and further histories of items within their collections, of which no such statements or regard is given by the MQB or the British Museum.

The shift towards a truly decolonial space would entail responding to requests for the return of African cultural heritage. This transfer would be a true indicator of justice and a marker of the shift away from colonial power modes. The refusal to do so by the museum and its neutralized presentation, limit the museum's capacity to be considered distinct from neocolonialism. The return of heritage has the potential to constitute what Sarah Demart

considers to be a double campaign, that would achieve social justice and remedy historic injustice.[146]

[146] Margareta von Oswald, Jonas Tinius, and Sarah Demart, “Resisting Extraction Politics: Afro-Belgian Claims, Women's Activism, and the Royal Museum for Central Africa,” in *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2020), pp. 142-172, 163.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis concludes at a time when the issue of repatriation of cultural heritage is being discussed weekly. There have been recent instances of return, Germany returned 22 Benin Bronzes in December of 2022, and the Smithsonian returned 29 bronzes in October of 2022. These events, while important, must not be seen as a completion of all requests for return. The return of these important pieces of heritage and history are but a small percentage of total African cultural heritage that remains captive in museum spaces. The return of these objects would act as a formal marker away from the colonial period which allowed for the taking of these objects in exercises of dominance and power. The continued presence of these objects within these spaces despite persistent and documented requests for their return is indicative of a larger refusal to fully acknowledge the agency and independence of African nations. The intellectual violence associated with the taking and presenting of these objects within the bounds of Western aestheticism aids in the perpetuation of dominance and control over African people and their culture. Through exploring how three museums, the British Museum, the Musée du quai Branly, and the Royal Museum for Central Africa display and present their collections, I highlighted how these spaces manipulate memory and colonial narrative through their presentation of African cultural heritage. While each museum carried this out in a different way, they are all bound by similar colonial histories that are marred by violence and exploitation on the African continent.

In framing the analysis of these museums through the concepts of memory laundering, colonial amnesia, and rehabilitation; this thesis has interrogated the ways in which former colonial countries and their museums manipulate the memory of colonialism. All of these museum spaces existed as spaces of self-expression and symbols of empire. In considering what

the legacy of these spaces is in the contemporary, this work has argued that the continued holdings of African cultural heritage within these museums, serves as an example of neocolonialism through the continued dominance and control over the heritage of former colonies. The British Museum's engagement in memory laundering, that is the purposeful obscuring of information to aid in the disguise of their colonial activities through labeling practices and parliamentary decrees, has largely allowed for the British Museum to avoid claims for the return of African heritage. This practice of distancing the museum from colonial violence is not limited to the British Museum. The MQB closely follows what this thesis considers to be a French policy of colonial amnesia. The museum itself largely glosses over any mention of colonialism and how the museum came to hold such a large expanse of non-Western African cultural heritage. The shift towards presenting these objects as art instead of as ethnographic objects created the over-aestheticized presentation that is so heavily criticized within this work. Through this presentation, and the glossing of the French colonial past, the museum itself exists as an extension of colonial ideals and power. The chapters focus on the French *banlieues* allowed for a closer examination of how the museums structure and holdings of African cultural heritage are a microcosm of the colonial legacy and contemporary racism that continues to exist in France today. Consideration of the Royal Museum for Central Africa varied in that the analysis of the museum was largely centered on measuring the success of the space to transition from a site of colonial celebration to one that has been decolonized. This thesis argued that the museum failed in achieving decolonization, largely due to a lack of grounding in what decolonization truly means as well as due to the continued presence of African cultural heritage within the museum space. In framing the transition as a failure, this thesis does not mean to detract from the progress

made through the renovation, but rather to bring to light the necessity for repatriation for a museum to truly be decolonized.

The decision to center this thesis on museum analysis came from an understanding of museums as social institutions. These are places that are inherently not neutral. This thesis considers these spaces to be indicators of social memory, consciousness, and political strategy. By selecting only certain aspects of history to be displayed, or by displaying contested histories in a way that supports a certain narrative, these spaces are waning in their ability to properly display such information. Opposition to the repatriation of African cultural heritage largely cites the 2003 Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums, which argues that the repatriation of such objects would be a disservice, noting instead that these objects within these spaces, serve not individuals but instead the whole world.[147] What this statement fails to recognize is that individual citizens of the world are not all treated with the same humanity. The colonial system and the intellectual frameworks that developed from it were based on the fundamental dehumanization of people of African descent that arguably still manifests itself today through contemporary racism and the imposition of neocolonial practices on the continent. Employment of this declaration and its use to deny the return of African cultural heritage thus is seen as perpetuating the removal of dignity for African people. Through analysis, this thesis has argued against the conception of universal museums, by instead focusing on the ways in which their continued holding of African cultural heritage exists as an extension of colonial power, thus, contributing to the dehumanization and subjection of global Africa.

This thesis argues that the refusal of museums to not return these objects is not just about the objects, but about what return would mean for the maintenance of global order. This is

[147] "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums," accessed March 20, 2023, https://ia804708.us.archive.org/33/items/cmapr4492/20030000%20Information%20Declaration%20on%20the%20Importance%20and%20Value%20of%20Universal%20Museums.pdf.

especially significant when considering that what is on display in these museums is only a fraction of what is held in collections, never to be viewed by visitors. The refusal to return even those things, indicates that this conversation is not about the objects themselves, but instead about control. The return of these objects is rightly considered by museums and western governments as a symbol of justice and a redress for historical wrongdoing. For museums to return these objects, as allowed by their respective governments, would mean engaging in a formal apology and acknowledgement of wrongdoing. Doing this would in turn require these governments and other social institutions similarly situated with museums, to critically analyze the ways in which they operate as extenders of colonial patterns and traditions that are based on the inherent subjectivity of African bodies. The creation of this thesis brings this requirement and consequent refusal to light and offers an examination as to how these sites, that are supposed to provide access and knowledge, are instead operating as sites of violence and suppression through their holdings.

Opponents of repatriation often cite the concern that it is an attempt to empty out western museums, robbing them of their collections and value. This thesis instead conceptualizes repatriation as an aspect of the broader goals of reparative justice. Reparative justice is inherently designed not as punishment for offenders, but rather offers a way in which to achieve social reconciliation. The return of these objects therefore is not punitive but instead is meant to offer a new way forward that values the agency of African nations and the humanity of African people to assume control and agency over their own heritage and history. It should not be up to western countries to assume superiority of knowledge and value over African culture. The return of these objects would serve as an aspect of reparative justice and constitute an aspect of decolonization for these museums by rectifying one aspect of colonial injustice.

In conclusion, this thesis has sought to challenge the permanence and immortality of museum collections through their holdings of African cultural heritage. The continued holdings of these objects not only perpetuates the violence associated with their removal, but also constitutes a denial of African agency through the paternalistic ideals of colonial empires. The return of these objects would serve as an extension of acknowledgement of humanity and would aid in rectifying some of the injustices associated with colonial empire. In considering this work as a contribution to the broader Pan African thought, this thesis has engaged with the central idea of Pan Africanism, which is aimed at restoring the humanity and dignity of African peoples. This thesis drew a link between the keeping of African heritage within museums created as spaces of colonial celebration to the denial of agency and humanity to global Africa. In analyzing these spaces and arguing for their return, this thesis links repatriation of heritage to the restoration of African humanity and dignity.

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