

**CAN MUSEUMS TRULY BE DECOLONIAL? A CLOSE LOOK AT THE
SWISS BENIN INITIATIVE**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation uses the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI) as a case study to examine how decolonial repatriation can take shape through a cross-institutional, federally funded framework. Through a critical discourse analysis of texts produced by participating museums, I assess both the promise and limits of the initiative. Positioning museums as colonial institutions that construct national identity and Western epistemologies, I draw on Glissant's (1990) notion of opacity to suggest that artifacts possess living, entangled histories with their colonizers. I remix Schrödinger's Cat to argue that museums function as carceral spaces (Robinson, 2020) where artifacts exist as "always-dead," reminding us of their complex, living ties to source communities. Grounded in Fanon (1952) and Césaire (1950), I examine how colonial legacies continue to shape identity, belonging, and cultural memory, situating the SBI within broader efforts to restore being and agency through repatriation. Drawing on Hall (1990) and Gilroy (1993), I interpret the Benin Bronzes as diasporic objects formed through routes rather than roots—linking displacement, memory, and cultural survival. I also explore film as visual, decolonial discourse that translates colonial histories and the emotional dimensions of repatriation. Ultimately, I argue that the SBI is both innovative and constrained, reflecting Switzerland's distinctive political, cultural, and institutional context—its perceived distance from colonialism, its peace-first national reputation, and its government-backed funding model.

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Sofia, and my husband,
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Museums are institutions dedicated to preserving culture, art, and history. Through exhibitions and accompanying texts, museums showcase the world's diverse cultures. They present narratives about people and places to onsite and online audiences. By influencing collective memory, legitimizing cultural heritage, and framing historical events in ways that reflect and reinforce societal values and power dynamics these narratives play a pivotal role in shaping national identity and supporting nation-building endeavors. Museums—primarily those located in nations that are central colonial powers—have also served as instruments of colonization, perpetuating entrenched colonial ideologies, reinforcing racial hierarchies, presenting incomplete or biased historical narratives, and suppressing the voices of marginalized groups, including those represented within their displays.

This dissertation examines these colonial legacies through a case study of the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI). I analyze how museums within the SBI navigate decolonization—how they are permitted to engage in it, the forms it takes, and under what conditions it is deemed legitimate. Central to this inquiry are the silences and omissions that reveal the lingering influence and stubborn persistence of colonial power structures. My central question is: can museums truly be decolonial? If so, in what ways? Additionally, I am asking: If museums begin to decolonize their spaces, what might that look like in practice and what conditions are necessary to enable this? To explore these questions, I apply a

range of theoretical frameworks—drawing on decolonial scholarship, museology, and studies of museums as nation-building institutions—to examine how the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI) addresses the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes.

There are eight museums comprising the Swiss Benin Initiative. The participating museums have produced texts that present themselves as advancing transparency, acknowledging colonial histories, and engaging with the provenance of the Benin Bronzes. While some texts exemplify best practices, others expose gaps, silences, and problematic framing. These same texts expose significant limitations, as they often rely on selective acknowledgement, strategic omissions, and narrow framings of what counts as decolonial work. This raises the questions of whether such gestures are genuinely substantive or whether they function more as performative responses to the growing calls for repatriation. In the following chapters, I analyze texts produced by Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB), Museum Rietberg, and the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum, unpacking how each institution's contributions highlight particular successes while also revealing areas in need of further critical engagement. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how collective and individual museum practices shape the discourse surrounding cultural restitution and decolonial work.

I employ critical discourse analysis to examine both what SBI museums communicate and what remains silenced. This approach uncovers the ways power dynamics and colonial ideologies are embedded in museum language and how subtle or concealed meanings ultimately contribute to influencing public

understanding, since these texts are public facing. By analyzing content produced by museums, this dissertation reveals the complexities of colonial legacies, their impact on cultural heritage discourse, and the role of museums in addressing or perpetuating the lostness of cultural objects.

By critically analyzing the discourse in texts produced by the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), I examine how meaning is produced, what lies beneath it, and how it is shaped by ideologies of colonialism, representation, cultural appropriation, and repatriation. I draw on the view of museums as nation-builders—as repositories for preserving and disseminating ideologies. I also draw on the idea that museums are sterile stages where colonizing nations display their wealth and conquests through elaborate exhibitions of the ‘Other’. I investigate whether narratives that reinforce colonial legacies—such as those surrounding the looting of the Bronzes and their continued possession by Western institutions—persist in museum discourse addressing calls for decolonial repatriation.

I unpack how SBI museums both continue to rely on Western epistemologies, while also attempting to move beyond Western research methodologies, and the collision that happens when these two simultaneously take place. I investigate how discourse about the Benin Bronzes and the action (or inaction) regarding their repatriation is being portrayed to the public through various Swiss Benin Initiative texts. I explore whether narratives that justify the looting of the Benin Bronzes and continued possession persist in contemporary repatriation debates. Ultimately, my analysis revealed that there are three unique

conditions that enable Switzerland to embark on this work—its perceived distance from colonialism, its carefully maintained peace-first national reputation, and its government-backed funding structure.

Should Museums Decolonize or Refuse?

By examining how the Swiss Benin Initiative museums address the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes, I am also investigating how colonial institutions apply decolonial theories to transform their spaces. Within decolonial work, what remains most important is putting theory into practice. Focusing on the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI) allows me to examine whether, and to what extent, a collective of museums can genuinely decolonize their spaces, prompt audiences to critically engage with colonialism, and take ethical action to return looted African artifacts.

Decolonial theorists, such as Walter Mignolo, Arturo Escobar, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, contend that the true measure of decolonial work ultimately hinges on translating theory into practice, with repatriation offering a critical site for this testing. Repatriation encompasses not only the historical trajectories of artifacts, but also the rupture and dislocation that occur when objects are looted and removed from their cultural contexts, as well as the process of restoring them to their place of provenance. This act of restoration seeks to reconnect artifacts not only with their homeland, but with their very identity, challenging the erasures imposed by displacement.

On one hand, proponents of repatriation are calling for all looted and displaced objects to be returned home, insisting on the imperative nature of

cultural restitution. In contrast, scholars like Édouard Glissant (1990), whose articulation of the right to refusal and opacity, invites us to question whether such objects should be displayed in museums at all. For example, there are research efforts underway at the Museum der Kulturen Basel to make Nigerian voices central, Museum Rietberg recently opened an exhibition of the Bronzes in a manner that connects them to ancestry and time, and the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum relied on film to engage the public in repatriation and colonial discussions, all marking an important shift away from museums typical Western epistemological framework.

Yet, as long as these sacred objects remain within the walls of the museum, their presence continues to enact the colonial demand for transparency and ownership. Repatriation, in context of refusal, would not only return the Bronzes materially, but also restore what Glissant (1990) calls the right to opacity—the right for communities to reclaim sacred knowledge beyond the museum’s terms of intelligibility and visibility (Glissant, 1990). The museum’s continuous attempt to display these objects, however respectfully, still centers on Western epistemic norms, where reverence is performed through visibility and documentation. True reparative work requires embracing opacity—not just consultation or display—but a full return of and relinquishing of institutional control over the terms of cultural meaning and of cultural display.

There are also scholars such as Robinson (2020) who challenge us to confront the inhumanity of incarcerating artifacts in museums—spaces that strip them of their full humanity and deny communities their right to mourn—reminding

us that these objects, understood as living beings, carry histories, relationships and grief of their own. From this perspective, repatriation is not only an ethical imperative but also a necessary act of restoration, allowing artifacts to return to the communities and contexts that sustain their vitality. Glissant (1990) and Robinson (2020) remind us that the decision to display—or not display—artifacts, whether at home or abroad, should ultimately lie with the very communities to which these artifacts belong. Drawing on Glissant (1990) and Robinson (2020), choice emerges as a central element in considerations of repatriation. These tense provocations and threads—that stretch without end—are examined further, specifically in the chapter on Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB).

Considering further how refusal, opacity, and life-death are theorized within objects and artifacts in museums, I explore the dynamic interplay between museums and material culture, leaning metaphorically into the quantum theory of an ‘always dead’ Schrödinger’s cat—that once displayed in museums objects are always dead. Using film as my lens, I analyze how five films from the *Restitution in Five Films* film series, organized by the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum, to show how the screen can be used to portray repatriation. These films liken African artifacts in museums to an always deceased anthropological-ethnographic-museological Schrödinger’s Cat. In the Schrödinger’s Cat thought experiment a hypothetical cat in a closed box is considered to be simultaneously both alive and dead while it is unobserved, illustrating the paradoxes of quantum superposition (Schrödinger, 1935). However, once observed, the cat can either be alive *or* dead, but not both. In the famous Schrödinger’s cat thought

experiment the cat is both alive and dead until observed, highlighting superposition and the role of *observation* in determining a state of being.

Using this concept metaphorically, I suggest that once objects are displayed in museums they are not only treated as dead, but they are always dead—no life remains in them, and their agency and cultural vitality are effectively frozen and negated by the very context of being on display in a museum. Inspired by Schrödinger's Cat, and how this is a metaphor for how cultural artifacts are deactivated and void of life as museum possessions, I use this as further inspiration and validation towards the need to decolonize museums and repatriate artifacts.

I also examine how *Restitution in Five Films* connects to Frantz Fanon's (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks* and Aimé Césaire's concept of the "coloniality of being" (1950). In relation to Fanon, the film *Black Girl* (1966) highlights the symbolic ties between a Senegalese mask and Diouana's (the protagonist) enduring connection to her homeland. Césaire's coloniality of being (1950) captures the dehumanizing effects of colonialism on both colonized and colonizer—a framework that resonates with the ongoing impact of looted cultural artifacts on communities.

Colonialism, and the plunder that accompanies it, not only strips people of culture and identity through "thingification," but also corrupts the colonizer, producing moral decay and a distorted sense of self on both sides (Césaire, 1950). I further argue that museums' seemingly altruistic gestures towards repatriation cannot be divorced from institutional self-interest, as these efforts

often prioritize safeguarding reputation and maintaining the status quo over genuine repair. *Restitution in Five Films*, as well as the numerous texts I closely analyze, makes these tensions visible, showing how the question for returning objects is never just about the past, but about the power, image, and futures that institutions and communities continue to negotiate.

I conclude by discussing the unique conditions that have enabled Switzerland to embark on this groundbreaking work—emphasizing that it represents a truly novel approach to handling the vast task of decolonizing museums. No other initiative in the world operates in this way. The Swiss Benin Initiative serves as a model; and although there are gaps and limitations, the work being done is remarkable. Nonetheless, there are conditions unique to Switzerland’s government, funding, and role in colonialism that enable their proactive work. Considering how reluctant most museums are to cede power, and how deeply they function as nation-state builders, this effort is even more historically significant. My hope is that other museums will feel challenged—perhaps even embarrassed—by this example, and that those with courage will recognize that an alternative path is possible. The SBI demonstrates that restitution is not only necessary but also achievable, and it dares others to follow suit.

A Focus on Repatriation: What is Repatriation?

Over the past few years, conversations regarding the global repatriation of cultural artifacts have garnered substantial attention. Repatriation is “the return of stolen or looted cultural materials to their countries of origin” (German, n.d.).

Experts are closely looking at how museums are “approaching decolonization *through* repatriation” (Adams, 2021). Provocations into who owns and is entitled to possess antiquities have ignited debates throughout Western nations.

Repatriation and restitution have become crucial components in discussions to confront and address the legacies of colonialism within museums. Among these debates is the international initiative for the return of the Benin Bronzes, which has emerged as a pivotal point in reconciling historical injustices and reclaiming cultural heritage.

The topic of repatriation has been spotlighted in mainstream pop culture, as illustrated by a memorable scene in the film *Black Panther* (2018). In this pivotal scene, a British Museum guide mistakenly attributes a mask as originating from Benin. However, Killmonger (a character in *Black Panther*) corrects her, asserting that its true origin is Wakanda, and takes steps to reclaim it for his homeland, eventually returning it to Wakanda. Importantly, Killmonger is the central villain in *Black Panther*. His actions to repatriate stolen artifacts to Wakanda enforce an idea that repatriation is something that “bad” (or villainous) post-colonized subjects do, which in turn reinforces that “good guys” do not repatriate. Rather, the “good guys” behave similarly to the fictional character Indiana Jones—known for his adventurous exploration and retrieval of valuable artifacts—to enter and take precious antiquities in order to protect them from the risks present in their dangerous native homelands.

This Eurocentric, white-savior mindset—epitomized by the Indiana Jones trope—forms one of the primary arguments against repatriation, as it positions

mainly American and European countries and institutions as the rightful protectors, arbiters, and legitimate stewards of non-Western cultural heritage. This paternalistic ideology is a reoccurring limitation, evident in colonizing countries offering, usually partial, loan agreements of looted artifacts in lieu of full repatriation. This issue is explored further in the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum chapter where I examine how film can serve as a medium for advancing repatriation discussions.

Growing international controversy over “who owns antiquities” has sparked contention between museums, curators, researchers, archaeologists and anthropologists, and the countries where artifacts originate. In *Who Owns Antiquity?* (2010) James Cuno contends that antiquities belong to the collective cultural heritage of humanity rather than being the exclusive property of nations claiming them. Viewed by some as cultural property belonging to all of humankind (Cuno, 2010), those critical of stricter cultural property laws have dismissed the repatriation of cultural artifacts and precariously acquired art collections. Some critics believe that repatriation denies museum visitors cultural heritage. Others believe museums should uphold their roots as “encyclopedic museums, where things are gathered, examined, and organized so that one may compare and contrast them to expand understanding of the world’s cultures” (Cuno, 2009) without any restrictions. Repatriation, restitution, and cultural property laws are being contested and dismissed by those arguing that museums are preordained vehicles for global inquiry and universal tolerance.

There are growing disputes regarding whether “museums should acquire and display ancient art to entertain and educate visitors and whether modern governments have the right to reclaim historic artworks from foreign museums” (Cuno, 2009) housing them. Critics of repatriation, like Cuno (2009), caution against overly restrictive cultural property laws and repatriation initiatives, claiming that these laws could endanger antiquities located in countries with “unstable governments” (Cuno, 2009). This also brings forth the issues of what antiquities are for. If antiquities are meant to be in living relation with communities, then preserving them in a museum is already a loss (Robinson, 2020). While the potential loss of antiquities is a factor to consider heavily, this argument does not engage with museums’ complicity in invading, excavating, and forcefully displaying people and artifacts in ways that reinforce a Eurocentric, modernity-obsessed worldview.

What also fails to be recognized in many arguments is that cultural property laws and proactive repatriation agreements help reduce excavating, looting, and further destruction of archaeological sites and loss of cultural heritage. This is significant because repatriation addresses the immense cultural and historical loss caused when artifacts are looted and housed in foreign museums. Returning these objects not only helps to restore displaced narratives but also helps prevent further cultural loss from additional looting and displacement.

However, the importance of responsibly, accurately, and inclusively exhibiting artifacts is disregarded by critics who also fail to acknowledge that

many cultural artifacts are mishandled and misattributed. Those critical of repatriation neglect the necessity of safeguarding complete and accurate histories rather than promoting the selective narratives exploited by nationalist agendas within museums. The notion that museums are essentialized, inclusive, archival collections that equitably expose visitors to history and culture must continue to be critically interrogated. Namely, this neglect legitimizes the racial pseudoscientific beliefs that museums uphold and the fragmented histories they share, including nationalistic ideologies with, at best, “a dubious connection with the ancient cultures they claim to represent” (Cuno, 2010). By advocating for the return of cultural artifacts that often have impartial or unclear documentation from museums, accurate historical information can also be reinstated to looted cultural artifacts.

Often, arguments against repatriation support the notion that museums are neutral, safe spaces, but, as I discuss in forthcoming sections, the belief in neutrality has been debunked. As Autry & Murawski (2019), aptly titled their global advocacy initiative, #MuseumsAreNotNeutral, they expose the myth of museum neutrality by spotlighting how “the claim of neutrality fosters unequal power relations” (Autry & Murawski, 2019, p. 2). Although museums “strive to remain above the political and social issues that affect our lives—embracing a myth of neutrality”—museums have long supported colonial logics that put forth the idea that colonized subjects are inferior to colonizing nations and that museums have the right to put the world on display. Museums “have the potential to be relevant, socially engaged spaces in our communities, acting as agents of

positive change” (Murawski, 2020), a role exemplified by the Swiss Benin Initiative, which is actively conducting provenance research on the Benin Bronzes and fostering public dialogue about their repatriation.

Similar to the viewpoint taken by those who are part of the #MuseumsAreNotNeutral movement, museums should be understood as institutions that produce important meanings about artifacts, art, and culture. As Anderson (1991) explains, museums are not separate from governments and nations. Governments and other institutions use museums to highlight their power and influence through the artifacts and peoples on display from formerly colonized lands. Museums are crucial to nation-building; they are complicit in creating ethnic boundaries and the process of Otherizing specific groups of people, fostering a didactic of "us versus them." They often exhibit peoples and cultures through a lens of fetishization and exoticization, turning them and their cultural artifacts into spectacles (Ewen & Ewen, 2008).

Framed as globally trusted institutions, museums have historically gone unchecked, operating under very little oversight (Carlsson, 2024). In defending art as a legacy for all of humanity, the curator’s misattribution of the Benin mask in *Black Panther* exemplifies why it is crucial to recognize the true history of looted artifacts. The museum art heist scene from *Black Panther* places debates about repatriation into dialogue with superheroes, agency, and misrepresentation, underscoring the urgency of acknowledging the origins and cultural significance of stolen artifacts worldwide. The repatriation of the looted Benin Bronzes raises complex ethical questions about curatorial practices and

theft, the legacy of colonial pillaging, and the ongoing influence of institutionalized colonial ideologies. As calls for repatriation and acts of restitution continue to emerge and gain momentum, it is worthwhile to explore how museums utilize their institutional influence around a contentious, contemporary repatriation initiative that disrupts the very inception of museums.

Applying Decolonial Scholarship to Museums

Decolonial thought emerged alongside “the very inception of modern forms of colonization” (Maldonado-Torres, 2011, p. 1). At its core, decolonial theory critiques dominant Western epistemologies by questioning “what counts as knowledge and what does not” (Gallien, 2020, p. 28). It emphasizes pluralities— “different local histories, embodied conceptions, and practices,” the different conversations that enter, leave, and build understandings that cross “geopolitical locations and colonial differences and contest the totalizing claims and political epistemic violence of modernity” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 1). Decolonial theory encourages multiple perspectives, histories, and understandings of the self, knowledge, and others around us. It challenges the hidden structures of oppression that shape our world, many of which are reproduced in museum displays and exhibitions—most visibly in the case of the looted Benin Bronzes, whose display continues to embody colonial power even as institutions debate their return. Through a decolonial lens, the Swiss Benin Initiative exposes how museums can attempt to undo colonial harm while still operating within the very epistemologies of power and exclusion that made looting possible in the first place.

A decolonial approach embraces multiple ways of knowing and “offers alternative ways to conceptualize and experience the world” (Gallien, 2020, p. 28). This framework points to how museums must operate if they are to move beyond colonial epistemologies—an approach the Swiss Benin Initiative is beginning to model in its collective work on repatriation. While the SBI begins to model a decolonial shift, its work reveals the challenges museums face in moving beyond entrenched colonial epistemologies.

Rather than offering a single framework, decolonialism is both a theory and praxis, encompassing diverse perspectives, expressions, thoughts, struggles, processes, and practices (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). As a self-aware theory and praxis, decolonialism “entails a recognition of one’s own positionality” (Gallien, 2020, p. 28) and the need to decenter exclusionary Western knowledge formations. This self-reflective approach is adopted by the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) as it questions the purpose of its provenance research and the deeper meaning behind the works on display.

Decentering is evident across all three museums and the entire initiative: the Swiss Benin Initiative partners with Nigerian delegates; MKB brings in Nigerian researchers and incorporates non-traditional research methodologies like oral histories, Museum Rietberg incorporates architects to design an exhibition rooted in ancestry; and the University of Zurich engages filmmakers to introduce perspectives from beyond the institution. As I discuss in my findings section, the three museums I analyzed—Museum der Kulturen Ethnographic Museum (MKB), Museum Rietberg, and University of Zurich Ethnographic

Museum—are taking different approaches to decolonizing their institutions through repatriation. Despite these efforts, as outlined above, limitations remain, including reliance on a single perspective, removed and inconsistent documents, gaps in research methodology, and an ongoing imbalance between Swiss and Nigerian perspectives.

Decolonial theory addresses the ethical and epistemological problems rooted in colonialism and its enduring legacy in institutions like museums. It contests and decenters Eurocentric worldviews and the partial narratives they produce, calling instead for recognition of non-Western knowledge systems and the epistemic violence colonialism has perpetuated. Theorists such as Walter Mignolo and Arturo Escobar critique the universalist claims of European culture and values, arguing that they erase diverse perspectives and marginalize non-Western voices. Central to this critique is the concept of the coloniality of knowledge—the idea that colonialism continues to shape how knowledge is produced and legitimized. As Mignolo (2009) argues, colonialism functioned not just through territorial conquests—through the control of land and people—but also through the imposed hierarchy of knowledge, or a “coloniality of knowledge”.

Similarly, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) critiques how Western research traditions have often served colonial interests, extracting knowledge from Indigenous communities without regard for their worldviews or authority. The Swiss Benin Initiative can be read as an effort to confront this coloniality by experimenting with more collaborative and inclusive approaches to repatriation and by directly engaging with their colonial history. Even as the SBI engages with

decolonial critiques by reshaping museum practice to acknowledge and challenge the coloniality of knowledge, it also highlights how deeply entrenched this colonial knowledge system remains within museum institutions.

Museums are deeply embedded in colonial ways of knowing. The colonial foundations of museum practices have long served as instruments of racial capitalism and colonial violence (Lee, 2022). Despite claims of neutrality, museums present authoritative representations of history, culture, and knowledge that reflect linear colonialist narratives. Scott (2007) further shows that museums perpetuate evolutionary narratives, portraying humanity as progression from African bestial past to a modern European present—the underpinning of colonial ideology. These narratives perpetuate the coloniality of knowledge, shaping how societies understand history and humanity. Decolonial theory offers a framework to challenge these colonialist narratives and reimagine museum practices—an approach the Swiss Benin Initiative brings to model in their efforts to confront the legacies of colonialism.

Embracing decolonial theory becomes essential in challenging and redefining historical narratives, prompting reconsidering how entrenched institutions like museums present, or misrepresent, history. In the context of the Swiss Benin Initiative, a decolonial lens reveals how repatriation efforts simultaneously challenge and remain entangled with the colonial epistemologies that originally structured museum practices. While a few museums globally are actively returning the Benin Bronzes, many others continue to hold looted artifacts, and human remains with no plans for restitution. From a decolonial

perspective, initiatives like The Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI) are significant because they confront the colonial legacies in museums, primarily through action.

However, with any decolonial work there are limitations. Oftentimes, decolonial work falls short of making material change, rarely changing the ideologies and structures of the institution. Rather, decolonial work can lazily rely on social media posts, hashtags, and empty apologies and acknowledgments—and only when it is trendy and acceptable to do so. Museums rarely act out of genuine altruism or a commitment to challenge their entrenched power, which makes true decolonial transformation the exception rather than the norm.

Lee (2022) argues that decolonizing museums requires museums to do more beyond repatriation. Rather, it necessitates a foundational reimagining of the very structure of and purpose of a museum. Museums must move beyond empty mission statements and embrace a true reorientation, including their role in communities and their purpose for future generations. While the SBI exemplifies how museums can begin to confront colonial legacies and the coloniality of knowledge through collaborative reparation and more inclusive practices there are still gaps in their actions and much more work to be done.

Decolonizing by Uncovering the Undiscovered

With roots in Latin America, decolonial theory is well-situated to apply to frame this study of the Benin Bronzes. Decolonial theory insists that theory and practice must be intertwined; without practice, it cannot fully capture the essence of decolonization. Countries across Latin America, much like those in Africa,

have long called for the return of looted artifacts and continue to grapple with their fraught histories and legacies of colonialism. One striking example comes from Gabriela Wiener, a Peruvian journalist, who examines her family's complicated colonial history, initiated during a visit to the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. As described by Gabriela, the Musée du Quai Branly is:

“A museum “that houses large collections of non-Western art from the Americas, Asia, Africa and Oceania. In other words, a very pretty museum built on something very ugly. It's like someone thought that painting the ceiling with Aboriginal art and sticking a few palm trees in the corridor would help us feel at home and forget that everything in this place should be thousands of kilometers away from here.” (Wiener, p. 3-4, 2023)

While viewing “an exhibition of pre-Columbian artifacts, spoils of European colonialism, many stolen from her homeland of Peru” (Wiener, 2023) Gabriela confronts the memory of her great-great-grandfather, Charles Wiener, an Austrian explorer and the man responsible for the pillaging and looting of many of these artifacts. Looking at her reflection in the display case of her ancestors' relics, Gabriela considers how “a great-great-grandfather is just a relic in a person's life, unless the man in question took the non-insignificant sum of four thousand pre-Columbian artifacts to Europe” (Wiener, p. 3, 2023). With family ties to both the colonizer and colonized, Gabriela's provocative autobiographical novel, *Undiscovered* (2023), is a deeply emotional, personal, and historical reckoning.

As Gabriela Wiener explained, her great-great-grandfather, Austrian explorer Charles Wiener, “has gone down in history not only as a scholar but as the ‘author’ of [his collection of artifacts], erasing its real provenance, with

science as his alibi, and the financial backing of an imperialist government” (Wiener, 2023, p. 5). To call Charles the author deepens the wound—transforming looting into legacy, silencing the voices of the pillaged, and inscribing instead a false tale where the colonizer is cast as ‘the good guy’ and the Indigenous are rendered insignificant. Attributing authorship to Charles compounds the violence already inflicted on the communities he pillaged. It erases their histories and replaces them with a fabricated narrative that upholds the colonizer-as-hero-ideology, while silencing indigenous perspectives. Like art dealers, explorers often embodied voyeurism, fetishism, and exploitation in their encounters with the Indigenous communities they gazed upon—the very communities that Gabriela is also part of.

Gabriela's encounter in the museum with her family history illustrates what Clifford (1997) describes as the museum being a “contact zone”—a site where unequal encounters and power relations are embedded in the very display of peoples and objects. Marked by power imbalances and exploitation, as contact zones, museums are sites where legacies of colonialism remain visible in both the artifacts on display and the power asymmetries surrounding their display (Clifford, 1997). The concept of museums as “contact zones” helps frame Gabriela's experience: the museums become not only a place of personal memory and ancestral connections, but also a site where meanings, power and authority, and access are actively contested. Gabriela's confrontation with her family's colonial entanglement demonstrates how these asymmetries are lived on a personal level. At the same time, the logic of the “contact zone” extends far

beyond one family history. Rather, it shapes global disputes such as the struggle of the Benin Bronzes, where Nigerian communities continue to press for repair, recognition, and return.

By grappling with her family's colonial entanglement and the experience of bearing witness to artifacts stolen from her homeland and displayed in European institutions, Gabriela undertakes a journey of both personal and collective repair. Her confrontation with her own family history becomes a form of reparation or of reparative justice—an act of piecing together what was shattered long ago in the hope of making it whole again (Wiener, 2023). Gabriela Wiener's story is just one among many. Like all family stories and histories, it carries countless layers waiting to be uncovered. In *Undiscovered*, the act of discovery itself becomes central: colonialism often conceals truths and fractures families, yet Gabriela pieces together the hidden connections in her own lineage. *Undiscovered* underscores how decolonial theory links the personal to the political, reminding us that the struggle over the Benin Bronzes is not only about returning objects, but about repairing the enduring wounds of colonialism.

Clifford's (1997) framing of museums as "contact zones" highlights how these institutions stage encounters marked by asymmetry, surveillance, illicit acts, and control. Gabriela's experience underscores how such spaces expose personal histories to public display while reinforcing broader colonial power dynamics. This understanding sets the ground for considering how museums themselves operate as a carceral space (Robinson, 2020), and how communities

might assert a right to opacity against the demand for total visibility (Glissant, 1990).

Artifacts in Museums are an Always-Dead Schrödinger's Cat

Schrödinger's Cat is a 1930's thought experiment about quantum superposition—an analysis that is still revisited and used today. It was developed by physicist Erwin Schrödinger in 1935 during a discussion with Albert Einstein (Matthias & Meg, 2025). In the Schrödinger's Cat concept, a cat in a box is both dead and alive until observed. However, unlike Schrödinger's Cat, which may still be alive, African artifacts housed in Western institutions are inevitably 'dead' the moment they are displayed—regardless of whether they are observed or unobserved. Once African art is removed from its historical, cultural, and spiritual context and placed in Western institutions, the art becomes depleted of life and origin, always to be found dead; observation only confirms what has already occurred. Removing these artifacts from their places of provenance—where the artifacts were given life—not only fundamentally alters what the artifact is, but it renders the artifact lifeless. The artifact is turned into something else—something dead—in the sense that its livelihood has been colonized and erased.

According to Vilensky (2012) in his critique of the film *Statues Also Die* (1953), the concept of Schrödinger's Cat can be explained as such:

“As comprehensive analysis of the institutional mechanisms of museologics, *Les statues meurent aussi's* (*Statues Also Die*, 1953) prime contention is, in effect, that anthropology and ethnology have their Schroedinger's Cat; that the removal of an object from its spiritual context-in-community, it's enslavement and caging in the museum and it's sacrifice to the white deity of Art, cannot but change its state. The black cat, once its museum-box is opened, is

always found dead.”

Whereas in the traditional quantum concept of Schrödinger's Cat, the statues exist in a suspended state—neither fully dead nor alive, in both Vilensky's (2012) analysis and Marker's *Statues Also Die* the artifacts are always dead when housed in museums. Tying Vilensky's always-dead Schrödinger's Cat reference to how museum displays collapse multiple states of the object into one state, here, it is clear where the quantum superposition becomes explicitly visible. Just as Schrödinger's Cat exists in multiple states until observed, the artifact, removed from its community, might be imagined as carrying the potential of both life and death. Yet, the moment it is observed in the museum—(re)encountered as art within a Western framework—its state collapses into only one possibility: death.

Vilensky's (2012) use of the phrase “institutional mechanisms of museologies” refers to the practices, systems, and logics that ground how museums operate—how they collect, display, categorize, and interpret the artifacts in their care. In the context of *Statues Also Die*, this phrase underscores the film's argument that these mechanisms are not neutral: the act of removing artifacts from their spiritual and communal contexts, placing them in museums, and reframing them as “art” fundamentally alters their meaning and vitality. These institutional mechanisms are tied to the discourses and power structures that shape how museums, both of which are reflected in the Swiss Benin Initiative texts that I analyze. As explained in Chapter 1: Part IV, these

“museologics,” are not neutral. Rather, they are ideologically loaded processes shaped by colonialism and Eurocentrism.

While African artifacts displayed in Western museums are admired, valued, and made accessible to audiences from around the world, the very nature of their removal and confinement within these institutions strips them of cultural heritage, rendering them spiritually and culturally dead. Separated from their communities, these artifacts are presented under the guise of encyclopedic knowledge, mass accessibility, and preservation (Cuno, 2009). Yet, this process of removal—of cultural isolation and stripping—done by Western museums is a deeply violent and entrenched colonial act. This dynamic illustrates what Vilensky (2012) identifies as “institutional mechanisms of museologics,” where practices of collection and display mask the colonial violence that underpins them.

Focusing on Vilensky’s (2012) description of African artifacts as “enslaved and caged” highlights how these objects are reclassified as art only when viewed through a Eurocentric lens and housed in Western institutions. Vilensky emphasizes that the “enslavement and caging in the museum and its sacrifice to the white deity of Art” equates museum acquisition with colonial violence—enslavement and captivity—while critiquing how African artifacts are reclassified as “art” when observed by properly trained Western eyes (i.e. Anglo, Christian, and high-class/high-culture) (Hall, 1981). Here, the reclassification of art functions like secular religion: the museum becomes a temple, and art is the God or deity to which colonized objects are scarified and immortalized.

This framing elevates Western aesthetics as universal, imposing an ethnocentric lens placed on African art and artifacts. It implies that non-Western objects must be transformed to conform to the universalized Western gaze, reinforcing the authority of the West as absolute. Even when artifacts are preserved as art, their meaning and life are mediated through a colonial lens. Vilensky's (2012) invocation of deity critiques this process, revealing how Western institutions de-spiritualize African objects, stripping them of their original cultural and ritual meanings and reconfiguring them to serve Western tastes, ideologies, and systems of value.

The violent severing of cultural artifacts from their place of provenance directly speaks to Robinson's (2020) concept of the museum as a carceral space. Placing Vilensky into conversation with Robinson (2020) clarifies that the museum "cannot but change [the artifact's] state" Vilensky (2012). The emphasis here is that the state of the object cannot remain intact—there is no alternate possibility. The point is not simply that the object is altered, but that alteration is inevitable—there is no possibility of 'preservation' or display without transformation. Its state is transformed simply by entering the museum. Once an artifact is placed in the museum, the artifact embarks on its transformation, and the object is rendered dead, by the very act of museological containment.

We can also see Schrödinger's Cat clearly embodied with the title of the film itself; statues *also* die. It speaks to Robinson's (2020) and Lonetree's (2012) idea that artifacts are living creatures, despite Western notions that artifacts are just objects—things with no meaning. Actually, artifacts are living, meaning they

can also die. Hence, the title statues also die—implying that death is something that occurs to statues as it does to other living, organic organisms. The name of the film itself is provocative and telling in that it emphasizes that statues have life and therefore can die too—and where they die, is in the museum.

This metaphorical passage powerfully critiques how museums—through their origins, collecting practices, and reliance on anthropology and ethnology—have historically decontextualized African artifacts in ways that dilute, distort, or completely destroy their original meanings. In this way, museums become carceral spaces where objects are frozen in time and treated as remnants of a past rather than as living cultural heritage. The artifacts become aesthetically admired but spiritually and culturally void of life—an act of epistemic cultural violence (Graves & Spencer, 2022) masked as appreciation and preservation.

The Swiss Benin Initiative's provenance research aims to challenge the 'always-dead' condition imposed by museums. By tracing the histories and stories of the Bronzes, the Initiative works to restore some measure of cultural and spiritual life back to the artifacts. The University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum's film series, *Restitution in Five Films*, which portrays artifacts as living entities, similarly reflects a willingness to rethink how these objects are understood and experienced, offering alternate ways of conceiving of the artifacts in their collections. Making provenance research and the *Exhibiting In Dialogue With Benin* exhibition on the looted Benin Bronzes a permanent fixture, Museum Rietberg signals the SBI's attempt at restoring life and significance to these artifacts, instead of rendering them temporary and discardable. At the same time,

it raises the concern noted by Robinson (2020) that artifacts need rest and should not be continuously displayed or consumed.

Framed through Vilensky's (2012) 'always-dead' Schrödinger's Cat metaphor, the Bronzes exist in a state of suspended life until their histories and contexts are actively engaged with and restored. However, it is impossible for repatriation alone to collapse this superposition into a fully restored life for artifacts. The extent to which museums equate to the death of artifacts raises the question of whether repatriation alone can truly restore their life and meaning.

Theorizing Museums as a Carceral Space

As Dylan Robinson (2020) explains, museums are not attuned to, what he calls, the intersubjective relationship that exists between objects and Indigenous communities. These "intersubjective relationships are not at all extraordinary in Indigenous life and artistic practice" (Robinson, 2020, p. 86). The intersubjective relationship reflects the life and ancestral connections that cultural belongings on display have to their communities and homelands. These cultural belongings are displayed in museums across the globe in "glass vitrines" (Robinson, 2020, pg. 86) to the public, almost always cordoned off behind barricades to, allegedly, preserve and protect the objects from damage. These displays are "offered to members of the general public primarily for their aesthetic contemplation" (Robinson, 2020, pg. 86), offering a "cornucopia whose abundance is intended to show artistic and cultural variance" (Robinson, 2020, pg. 86).

However, beyond surface level aesthetic analysis—focused on color, size, and stylistic variations across regions or time periods—very little engagement

occurs. These cultural belongings are primarily considered through a Western aesthetic lens, with minimal attention paid to their deeper cultural, spiritual, or historical significance. To the Indigenous people, who these objects belong to, “the experience of such displays can often be traumatic and triggering” (Robinson, 2020, pg. 86). The experience of witnessing one's own cultural belongings on display illicit such a negative reaction “because of the histories of cultural prohibition, including the seizure of cultural belonging and the separation of such belongings from communities” (Robinson, 2020, pp. 86-87). Similar to Vilensky's (2012) analysis that once displayed in museums, artifacts are an always-dead Schrödinger's cat, Robinson (2020) also critiques the display of cultural belongings in museums as severing the intersubjective relationship that innately exists between Indigenous communities and their belongings. According to Robinson (2020) the experience of encountering these “solipsistic” displays is “traumatic and triggering” because:

“The very objects that are held behind glass are not objects at all. Instead, what exists behind the glass goes by other names; they have life, they are living beings, or they are ancestors. Indigenous people have intimate kinship with these beings. As such, the fact that they are “held” behind glass, in drawers, in storage might be understood in terms of the containment and confinement of life. Encountering “loved ones” behind glass, in drawers, and in storage puts into question the ways in which museological standards of “preservation” and “conservation” might instead be understood as containment or even incarceration. In many Pacific Northwest communities, we understand that such beings must be cared for as loved ones; the work that they do is treated as precious and sacred. They are not expected to be in continuous use, but are allowed to rest once they have completed their work. They also have a life cycle, and are not expected to live on forever. In this context Git Hayetsk Dance Group Leaders Mike Dangeli (Nisga'a) and Mique'l Dangeli (Tsimshian) have called museum display a form of “life support” that extends the life of those loved ones beyond their

natural life span (Dangeli and Dangeli, 2015). Moreover, such beings have specific roles and work to do. The energy these beings expend is respected—for example when drums and masks are used in performance—by “putting them to sleep” after their work is done. Under the continuous gaze of museum display, however, they are forced to perform—to labor—without rest (Hopkins, n.p.).” (Robinson, 2020, p. 87)

For many communities, the objects on display are not merely artifacts, but living beings, imbued with roles, responsibilities, agency, spiritual significance and presence. These beings are meant to exist in relation to land, people, and ritual. They possess life cycles that are meant to include practices of care and are meant to conclude within their communities through culturally specific rituals of mourning, grief, and reverence. When museums extract and confine them, often through colonial violence, they sever these beings from their spiritual and cultural lifeworlds. Although “museums are not cemeteries, they look a lot alike” (Wiener, 2023, p. 7), at least in terms of appearance and what they embody and evoke. From this perspective, Robinson’s (2020) assertion that the museum is a “carceral space” becomes especially resonant. As a carceral space, the museum “disconnects ancestors and beings from their communities” (Robinson, 2020, p. 87) to whom they belong. In doing so, the museum transforms what should be sites of cultural continuity into sites of containment.

The museum becomes not only a space for incarceration and sterile containment but also a coercive spiritual space—one where visitors (the general public) are made to witness displaced sacred beings within a context, not of reverence, but of spectacle. To many Indigenous communities, the act of ‘witnessing’ is a vulgar insult where oftentimes outsiders are not supposed to

witness. As mentioned in *Phone & Spear: A Yuta Anthropology* (Miyarrka Media, 2019), Aboriginal Indigenous communities in Australia, often regard looking at photographs of deceased loved ones as deeply disrespectful, as it conflicts with cultural protocols surrounding death and remembrance. This stands in tension with modern digital phone use, in which images are indefinitely preserved, shared, and reproduced in cyberspace, creating a cycle of continual re-encounter that runs counter to cultural protocols. This is a form of colonial haunting, in which the afterlife of empire continues to structure how the sacred is accessed and mediated.

As Saidiya Hartman (2008) reminds us, the violence of the archive lies not only in what it withholds, but in how it stages presence through domination. Museums, through their forced display of spiritual beings, replicate colonial violence by transforming sacred presence into a form of public captivity and decontextualized voyeurism. They impose a kind of involuntary religious and spiritual pilgrimage, forcing Indigenous communities to engage with and see the museums as a religious or sacred site where they are forced to worship their ancestors. This coerced worship is ephemeral and estranged, severed from the object's original cultural and ceremonial context. In doing so, the museum self-elevates itself to a place beyond the realm of a secular institution and instead into a sacred, almost divine, religious place—assuming a Godlike status as the arbiter of spiritual access and cultural memory.

Cultural Artifacts and their Right to Opacity

The public form of display of artifacts as living beings that Robinson (2020) discusses speaks to Édouard Glissant's (1990) analysis of opacity, visibility and colonial violence in museums. Glissant's (1990) idea challenges the museum's encyclopedic tendency to know all and put all on display. The desire to fully know or categorize 'Others'—especially colonized people and their cultural expressions—should be reconsidered. Those on display should have a say in whether they wish to be displayed or not, how they wish to be displayed, and they should have the right to choose to remain opaque or unknowable. As nation-state builders rooted in colonial systems, museums deny those on the display the right to opacity. Communities are denied the right to exist without being fully known, categorized, or possessed. The museums display of spiritual beings under the guise of access and knowledge production violates the right to opacity. Instead, the museum enacts a colonial desire for total visibility and domination. Museums demand full exposure and full rights of interpretation of what they possess, most of which were never meant to be confused or interpreted in this way.

This is what Glissant (1990) refers to as the erasure of relationality in favor of totalizing knowledge. Therefore, under this framework, repatriation is not only a material return but also a reassertion of the right to opacity—the right of communities to withhold aspects of their sacred knowledge from systems of display and interpretation (Glissant, 1990). By insisting on the return of spiritual beings and ancestors, indigenous and African communities reject the museum's

colonial demand for full visibility and reclaim the right to relational knowledge, rooted in cultural specificity rather than universal legibility. Repatriation is about autonomy to self-define as well, rejecting the universal coloniality of knowledge and the voyeuristic consumption that commodifies and fetishizes. Repatriation becomes a radical act of (chosen) opacity and a refusal to allow museums to continue their violent transformation of sacred beings into knowable, ownable, viewable objects of desire as a forced part of the colonial archive. Perhaps, in beyond simply including Nigerian perspective, the SBI can allow the Nigerian perspective on the Benin Bronzes to determine what is revealed and what remains hidden.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A Swiss Focus: Questioning Switzerland's Repatriation Efforts

Amidst current global movements centered on repatriation, the case of the Benin Bronzes is an intriguing initiative to study. Adding a layer of depth to studying the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes is the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), a multi-institutional collaboration between eight Swiss museums and the Benin Dialogue Group, aimed at acknowledging and facilitating repatriation of the Benin Bronzes. This dissertation critically examines how Switzerland's motives, discourse, and framing of the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes shape the narratives being communicated to the public, and what meanings or intentions can be inferred from the way Swiss institutions position themselves within these broader debates on restitution, ethics, and colonial accountability.

Focusing on Switzerland—a country historically celebrated for neutrality, open borders, and peaceful diplomacy—adds a compelling layer for analyzing how national reputation, public perception, and institutional self-presentation intersect with claims of ethical responsibility and moral leadership in scandalous cases of looted art. Switzerland's firm stance on neutrality provides an interesting lens through which to analyze the SBI. Although Switzerland has not yet received a formal request from Nigeria to repatriate the looted Benin Bronzes, they are initiating provenance research and engaging in dialogue about the looting of the Bronzes in their collections and on their broader colonial history.

Museums are not neutral; language, discourse, and ideology are not neutral; and neither the violent acts of colonial theft nor the repatriation of stolen

goods can be considered neutral. Considering neutrality is especially important because, in practice, true neutrality does not exist—making the idea of a neutral European country inherently ironic. This inquiry allows me to interrogate whether the Swiss approach reflects a genuine commitment to reparative justice or if it functions, at least in part, as a performative gesture that consolidates cultural authority and soft power—highlighting the tension between Switzerland’s professed neutrality and the inherently political, ideological, and non-neutral nature of repatriation practices.

Underscoring the irony of a nation that has long branded itself as neutral engaging in an inherently political process, Switzerland’s approach to the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes cannot be understood as impartial or apolitical. A tension is unfolding between Switzerland’s proclaimed neutrality, reinforced by the SBI’s emphasis on transparency and collaboration, and the inherently political nature of repatriation. It is crucial to bear this in mind when embarking on this research, as it shapes how Swiss institutions frame their role, discourse, and actions in relation to the Benin Bronzes. Through their discourse they reveal whether their approach is substantively reparative and decolonial or, simply put, no better than other hollow, symbolic gestures that mask ongoing colonial dynamics. In this sense, they are also no better than the rest of the colonial nations they seek to distinguish themselves from.

Switzerland is the Same as Everybody Else

The titles of the next two sections are inspired by the book *As Cruel as Anyone Else: Italians, Colonies and Empire* (2024) by Angelo Del Boca. *As Cruel*

as *Anyone Else* explores how Italy—often perceived as an ethnic minority within the broader white population and distinct from Anglo colonizers like their European counterparts—shares the same colonial history, complicity in fascism, and racism as the rest of the European Union. Del Boca (2024) “reveals a dark chapter in the Italian government’s colonial history that has been largely hidden from view.” As *Cruel as Anyone Else* (2024) recognizes the history of colonial destruction and racist violence that was carried out during the former fascist dictatorship but also reveals how colonialism and racism have persisted under more recent liberal government changes of power in Italy. Like many other European countries, Italy invaded and occupied the Horn of Africa, Libya, and several other territories.

Much like Italy’s reputation, which cultivates the myth of being distinct from other Western European countries with overt colonial identities, Switzerland has created a reputation of being detached from colonization and exempt from its consequences. These narratives echo the myths that Italy never truly practiced colonialism, similar to the misconception that the Netherlands did not have enslaved people living within its borders. In Switzerland’s case, the story is one of an imagined neutral, peaceful nation—defined by open borders and international collaboration—with little colonial entanglement. Yet, attending to the nuances of colonialism, this image obscures the reality: Switzerland’s entanglement with colonialism is not peripheral, but is actually central to its national identity and to its rise as a powerful, wealthy global leader. The very ability to project neutrality and peace has been built on the foundations of

colonial networks and exploitation. Switzerland's reputation as a global, peaceful country has enabled them to recast its image for the world. The power of their nation lies in their ability to completely transform their perception to the rest of world, a privilege that many countries do not possess.

In line with the image of peace, acceptance and neutrality that Switzerland projects to the world, according to *U.S. News & World* 2024 Best Country Report, Switzerland is ranked #1 in the world, retaining its top spot from the 2023 report and the 2022 report. Their rankings are "based on how global perceptions define countries in terms of a number of qualitative characteristics – impressions that have the potential to drive trade, travel and investment, and can directly affect national economies" (*U.S. News Best Countries*, 2024). *U.S. News & World* describes their methodology as the following:

"In consultation with U.S. News & World Report, the study and model used to score and rank countries were developed by global marketing and communications services company WPP and its proprietary BAV brand analytics tool, and by the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, specifically Professor David Reibstein. A set of 73 country attributes – terms that can be used to describe a country that are also relevant to the success of a modern nation – were identified. Various attributes and nations were presented in a survey of nearly 17,000 people from across the globe from March 22 to May 23. Participants assessed whether they associated an attribute with a nation." (*U.S. News Best Countries*, 2024)

There are ten categories comprised of the overall ranking: adventure, agility, cultural influence, entrepreneurship, heritage, movers, open for business, power, quality of life, and social purpose. Cultural influence includes attributes such as "has an influential culture" and "prestigious." Heritage includes attributes

such as “culturally accessible” and “has a rich history.” Power includes attributes such as “a leader,” “economically influential,” “politically influential,” “strong international alliances,” and “strong military.” Social purpose includes attributes such as “cares about human rights,” “committed to social justice,” “racial equity,” “respects property rights,” “trustworthy,” and “well-distributed political power.”

Like all countries, including Switzerland, “behind a country’s wealth and success are the policies that create possibilities, the people that drive the effort, and the history that shapes the nation’s environment and perspectives” (*U.S. News Best Countries*, 2024). With an increase in globalization, a country’s presence has expanded beyond its physical borders (*U.S. News Best Countries*, 2024). *U.S. News & World Best Countries* ranking “seeks to examine a nation’s worth beyond hard metrics” (*U.S. News Best Countries*, 2024) to include more societal and cultural factors as well.

In addition to being ranked the best country in the world, Switzerland is ranked number thirteen on the annual World Happiness Report. Out of the top fifteen happiest countries, only three are not located in Europe (#6 Costa Rica, #8 Israel, and #10 Mexico). Although Switzerland does not collect demographic information about race, they do collect data pertaining to ethnic breakdown. According to a 2020 estimate by the CIA Factbook, Switzerland’s ethnic breakdown is 69.2% Swiss, 4.2% German, 3.2% Italian, 2.5% Portuguese, 2.1% French, 1.1% Kosovan, 1% Turkish, and 16.7% other (*Switzerland - the World Factbook*, 2025). Overall, Switzerland’s global image and reputation are viewed favorably.

However, Switzerland, like many European countries often celebrated as the 'best' or 'happiest,' is predominantly homogeneous, with little racial or religious diversity. Most of the Swiss population is either Swiss or from other European nations, and primarily Christian. This demographic homogeneity shields Switzerland from everyday realities of pluralism and difference, making it easier for the country to posture as progressive on issues of colonialism without reckoning with its living legacies. Swiss citizens are rarely forced to confront people who are different in their daily lives. Instead, they live and work in a context where sameness is the norm, making diversity an abstraction rather than a lived reality. Simply put, the majority of Swiss citizens are the same as everybody else living and working in the country.

As I argue in my conclusion, Switzerland can engage in what appears to be proactive decolonial work precisely because it is not grappling with the presence of large communities of formerly colonized peoples, such as African diasporic populations, within its borders. Switzerland can approach colonial questions at a comfortable distance—abstract, academic and detached. In contrast, countries such as England, France and America cannot escape these legacies so easily, as large populations of formerly colonized and enslaved peoples live within their borders, making conversations about colonialism more immediate, contested, and unavoidable. Whereas Switzerland does not necessarily confront legacies of colonialism in an immediate, lived terms, America, England and France must confront them in the presence of formerly colonized and enslaved communities, making denial or avoidance more fraught.

Switzerland's global image remains overwhelmingly positive and strong. While Switzerland does have a strong national identity on the global scale and plenty of national pride domestically, similar to other Western European countries, Switzerland has a deep colonial history. Despite the myth that Switzerland has never truly practiced colonialism, Switzerland has ties to the transatlantic slave trade and was complicit in the depletion of resources from many African countries. Both of which helped Switzerland grow to become one of the wealthiest and therefore most powerful countries in the world.

Switzerland is No Better Than the Rest

Switzerland's colonial history is being researched more closely. Although Switzerland had no colonies of its own, "rather than taking place solely on Swiss soil" (Eugster, 2020), Switzerland's colonial entanglements is "set on all continents in a world of global networks" (Eugster, 2020) that began in the sixteenth century and have lasted through the present day. Switzerland "worked hand in hand with the colonial powers and profited from their seizure of land and resources on other continents" (Eugster, 2020). Numerous "individuals, companies and communities in all parts of Switzerland have benefited from European colonialism" (Amstad et al., 2024). As Amstad et al. explain:

"There were Swiss trading companies that were commercially involved with enslaved people in the eighteenth century. There were mercenaries from Switzerland in the armies of colonial powers who subjugated the local population. Swiss colonial settlements, missionary work, colonial administration, and science are also sectors in which Swiss men and women played a part." (2024, p.15)

It is because Switzerland had no formal colonies of its own that the country was able to profit so successfully from colonialism (Eugster, 2020). Some Swiss officers and merchants “were taken on by the Dutch and British East India companies from as early as the beginning of the 17th century” (Zangger, 2020). Some of these Swiss trading companies, “earned large sums through the three-way trade between Europe, Africa, and America in textiles, slaves, and plantation produce” (Zangger, 2020). However, “it was not just private firms which invested in transatlantic trade: in 1719, the city of Bern, for instance, was the biggest investor in the British South Sea Company, which provided slaves to the British colonies in southern America” (Zangger, 2020). Switzerland’s involvement in the three-way trade helped the country partake in another fundamental aspect of colonialism— “exploiting asymmetrical power relations to the economic advantage of the colonists” (Eugster, 2020).

The Swiss were heavily involved in different aspects of the slave trade, profiting in various direct ways from their involvement. “Swiss individuals and companies made money out of slavery as investors and traders, organizing slave-hunting expeditions, buying and selling people as slaves, and, as slave owners, running great plantations which they often proudly called “colonies” (Eugster, 2020). These successes helped “boost the development of the Swiss financial industry” (Zangger, 2020). In addition to buying and selling of people, Switzerland also profited from the transatlantic slave trade through their involvement in the cotton industry. “According to author Hans Fässler, by the 18th century, Switzerland had imported more cotton than England” (Eugster,

2020), which led to the development of the entire Swiss textile industry, which the country profited from significantly.

While “Swiss mercenaries helped spread colonialism in faraway lands” (Zangger, 2020), like many Western European nations, Switzerland was also “part of the prevailing framework of [racialized] assumptions about the world” (Zangger, 2020). The Swiss also took up and spread the racist belief that “peoples in colonized lands were inferior to white Europeans” (Zangger, 2020). Similar to the generations of Dutch individuals who grew up with haunting, racialized tales of Zwarte Piet, “generations of Swiss grew up with tales of “half-witted negroes”, travelers' accounts of naïve, child-like savages, and advertising where the colonized were at best a decorative backdrop for colonial products” (Zangger, 2020). Like the Netherlands, Switzerland has had a hard time moving beyond these racist visualized depictions and racist ideations of a degenerate ‘Other.’ Similar to the rest of Western Europe, Switzerland’s financial success as a global economic powerhouse is directly tied to the pillaging, looting, and enslavement of non-Western peoples. Despite the peace-first, neutral image they put forth, Switzerland is no better than the rest of its colonialist Western European counterparts.

Switzerland has long ignored the topic of colonialism, specifically avoiding conversations about Swiss involvement in colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. More recently, Switzerland has come to terms with its colonial past—and the continued residue of colonialism in the present. Both of which have worked its way into public consciousness in Switzerland (Tonella, 2024). According to

Denise Tonella, Director of the Swiss National Museum, “Because Switzerland perceives itself as a neutral state, colonialism remains a challenging topic for the country’s collective memory” (2020, p. 9). Regardless of the recent challenges in grappling with their colonial past, what remains true is that “Switzerland’s colonial entanglements were numerous, and the colonial system and its way of thinking has left its mark on the population as a whole” (Tonella, 2024, p.9). Just as the population bears the imprint of colonial entanglements so too do cultural institutions, with the museum itself functioning as a colonial archive.

The museum as a whole is a colonial archive; Engaging with the objects and artifacts in museums’ collections includes reassessing the colonial contexts in which these objects originated. This includes “critically examining discriminatory and racist terminology in databases” that “attest to the perception of the ‘unfamiliar’, the ‘Other’, and the ‘exotic’, all of which “reflect colonial ideologies and power structures” (Tonella, 2024, p. 9). In thinking about putting decolonial work into practice, confronting these colonial legacies and the colonial language that is still used is the first step. The second step is atonement.

Switzerland's Law of Neutrality

Switzerland takes pride in being a neutral, but peace-forward, country. They take measures to ensure that they continue to be a generative “source of peace and stability in Europe and beyond” (*Neutrality*, 2025). This is reflected in The Law of Neutrality which was codified during “The Hague Conventions on October 18, 1907” (*Neutrality*, 2025). The Law of Neutrality is in Switzerland’s Federal Constitution, and it ensures “that the Federal Council and the Federal

Assembly must take measures to safeguard Switzerland's neutrality" (*Neutrality*, 2025). According to Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) neutrality is defined as:

"Permanent neutrality is an instrument of Swiss foreign policy. It is a generating source of peace and stability in Europe and beyond. It ensures the country's independence and the inviolability of its territory. According to the law of neutrality, Switzerland must not participate in a war between states." (*Neutrality*, 2025)

The FDFA explains the Law of Neutrality in these terms:

"[The Law of Neutrality] Is part of international customary law, defines the rights and obligations of a neutral state. The most important of these rights is the inviolability of a neutral state's territory. The main obligations are as follows: refrain from engaging in war, ensure its own defense, ensure equal treatment for belligerent states in respect of the exportation of war material, not supply mercenary troops to belligerent states, not allow belligerent states to use its territory. The law of neutrality applies to international conflicts but not to internal conflicts, which the majority of conflicts currently represent. The law of neutrality does not apply to a military operation authorized by the United Nations (UN) Security Council, for the latter is acting under a mandate from the community of states in order to re-establish peace and international security. Nor does the law on neutrality prevent neutral states from supporting such operations. The policy of neutrality is not governed by law. It is a combination of all the measures a neutral state takes of its own accord to ensure the clarity and credibility of its permanent neutrality. The implementation of the neutral policy is determined according to the international context of the moment. Switzerland attributes its neutrality to its humanitarian and peaceful inclination, in keeping with its tradition of providing good offices and humanitarian aid. Switzerland manages its neutrality according to the needs of international solidarity, and places it at the service of peace and prosperity. (*Neutrality*, 2025).

Switzerland's humanitarian position and neutrality in global politics adds another layer to the inception of the Swiss Benin Initiative, making it a compelling case study in how cultural diplomacy can transcend national and institutional

interests. “Switzerland attributes its neutrality to its humanitarian and peaceful inclination” and to “keeping with [the country’s] tradition of providing good offices and humanitarian aid” (*Neutrality*, 2025). They manage their “neutrality according to the needs of international solidarity, and places it at the service of peace and prosperity” (*Neutrality*, 2025). As a host to numerous international organizations and international cooperative research projects, The Swiss Benin Initiative speaks to Switzerland’s mission of “ensuring individual autonomy as well as cohesion” (*Politics and History*, n.d.) nationally and abroad.

Switzerland's approach to the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes is both historical and political. It is historical because it led to the creation of the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), an international collaboration between Switzerland and Nigeria, and the only initiative of its kind. This initiative aims to explore trade routes, investigate acquisition histories, and conduct provenance research on the Benin Bronzes by collaborating with the Benin Dialogue Group (BDG) and Nigerian researchers, an uncommon move. This historic move decenters Western narratives about the African artifacts in their collections, confronts colonial histories in museums, and seeks to atone for past wrongdoings through research and repatriation. Notably, Switzerland has not only volunteered to repatriate the Benin Bronzes back to Nigeria but also initiated the creation of the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI).

What is the Swiss Benin Initiative?

The Swiss Benin Initiative was created in Spring of 2021. It is a joint research project “centering on networked and cooperative provenance [and

postcolonial] research regarding holdings from the Kingdom of Benin (Nigeria) in Swiss Museums” (*The Swiss Benin Initiative: Research and Dialogue*, 2021) (*Mission*, 2016). The Swiss Benin Initiative “is headed by the Museum Rietberg and involves eight cantonal and municipal museums in Switzerland which, together, are in possession of over a hundred objects from Benin” (*The Swiss Benin Initiative: Research and Dialogue*, 2021). They have four main areas of research: networked provenance research in Switzerland, basic research on the art trade and on Switzerland during colonial days, provenance research in collaboration with Nigeria, and openness and transparency (*The Swiss Benin Initiative: Research and Dialogue*, 2021).

The Initiative is funded by The Federal Office of Culture (FOC). The FOC is Switzerland’s “federal cultural policy authority” (*Mission*, 2016). They prioritize cultural diversity as an essential feature of Switzerland” culture. The FOC states that they are “committed to culture as an essential element of an open and democratic society – in Switzerland and internationally” (*Mission*, 2016) and to ensuring that culture is an essential element to Swiss identity. The FOC “brings together a network of Swiss museums and accords great importance to cooperative and exchange with Nigeria” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.).

I focus on the Swiss Benin Initiative to carefully explore how a cooperative and diplomatic strategy can serve as a blueprint for other institutions grappling with similar repatriation challenges. Switzerland’s model emphasizes shared

responsibility, cultural sensitivity, and a commitment to addressing the historical injustices tied to colonialism.

The Swiss Benin Initiative's transparent communication strategies and engagement with both the public and the stakeholders in Benin City highlight an important discourse on ethical stewardship of cultural heritage. Placing the Swiss Benin Initiative at the focus of my analysis allows me to critically examine how language and power dynamics are negotiated in the discourse surrounding repatriation, as well as how a multi-institutional collaboration can shape broader narratives on decolonization in the museum sector. Yet, even with these transparent practices, looted artifacts continue to reflect underlying power structures, highlighting that repatriation involves not only cultural restitution but also the redistribution of wealth and influence. However neutral-first Switzerland is, the Swiss Benin Initiative—and repatriation generally—is a deeply political endeavor.

Switzerland's approach remains political: looted artifacts embody both wealth and power, and museums' prestige is inseparable from such collections. The wealth of museums cannot be separated from the objects in their collections—rare, foreign, and looted objects often acquired under precarious circumstances, often through wartime excavations or colonial opportunism. These extensive collections enhance its financial value, increase its influence over local and international audiences, and bolster its cultural prestige, which in turn can positively affect museum funding, endowments, and reputation.

Repatriation, therefore, is not just cultural restitution—it is also a transfer of wealth and power from colonizing nations back to formerly colonized lands.

While these Swiss Benin Initiative's efforts deepen our understanding of the Bronzes, they also highlight the very troubling reason behind their original looting: the Benin Bronzes are culturally valuable artifacts that carry considerable, difficult-to-quantify, level of wealth. Those who possess the Bronzes hold this wealth, and because so many are currently in Western institutions, much of that value remains with these institutions rather than with Nigeria. Additional questions worth considering are: To what extent is Switzerland relinquishing its wealth by repatriating the looted Benin Bronzes? Is the hesitation to return these artifacts primarily driven by museums' reluctance to give up this cultural and economic wealth?

Understanding What an Ethnographic Museum Is

Two of the three museums I analyzed are ethnographic museums, the Museum der Kulturen Basel and the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum, while one, Museum Rietberg, is an art museum. Museum Rietberg focuses on both “traditional and contemporary arts and cultures of Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Oceania” (*About*, n.d.). Like most art museums globally, there is a white dominant culture present. Dr. Kelli Morgan (2020) explains the ways in which white supremacy permeates inside art museums:

“It is no coincidence, then, that for over two centuries the traditional art-historical narrative in this country has remained predominantly Eurocentric and male in nearly every major museum. It follows that only 4% of the positions outside service and security in US art museums are held by Black professionals. We know very well that

art museums are some of the strongest cultural bastions of western colonization. Through very deliberate racist and sexist practices of acquisition, deaccession, exhibition, and art-historical analysis, museums have decisively produced the very state of exclusion that publicly engaged art historians and curators (including myself) are currently working hard to dismantle. What we do not speak honestly enough about are the very distinct ways in which racism and sexism are utilized to traumatize us and oftentimes undermine our work—the very work that our respective institutions claim they want—and often recruit us to do.”

Unlike Museum Rietberg, The Museum der Kulturen Basel and the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum are both ethnographic museums. The International Council of Museums (Montella, 2024) defines ethnographic museums as:

“Ethnographic museums, also known as anthropological museums, contributed to the definition of ‘culture display’. This practice became very popular in the 19th-century Western world, along with the habit of classifying, categorizing and institutionalizing objects and identities from different cultures.”

According to anthropologist Giulia Grechi, in her book, *Decolonizzare il museo: Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati* (translated from Italian to English as *Decolonizing the Museum: Exhibitions, Artistic Practices, Embodied Gazes*, 2021), the majority of ethnographic museums were born as a consequence of colonial looting, which means the collections come with a ‘dirty baggage’ of genocide, pillage, and death. Despite this, many museums decide to remain silent on the origin of their collections and do not provide a narrative that opposes the knowledge that has been constructed around their representation” (Grechi, 2021) (Montella, 2024). Ethnographic museums “adhere to the ordering principles that Western museums and collections have imposed on their objects presented since the 19th century” (Chwatal, 2018). Whereas anthropology “is an

inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life in the world” (Ingold, 2017), ethnography “aims to describe life as it is lived and experienced, by a people, somewhere, sometime” (Ingold, 2017). Anthropology and ethnography share similar characteristics, are often used in tandem, and contribute a lot to one another as a discipline, but their “aims and objectives are different” (Ingold, 2017).

Ethnographic museums have been the focus of waves of decolonizing museums critiques. Ethnographic museums “were pivotal places of exposure and conversation in the cultural investigations of interwar Europe. (They provided Picasso’s access to the African and Oceanian masks that inspired the physiognomies in his Cubism-catalyzing *Les Femmes d’Alger*, for example, or so the story goes.)” (Chwatal, 2018). Ethnographic museums are institutions “whose critical force in narrating Western modernity’s view on its exotic or “pre-modern” ‘Other’” (Chwatal, 2018). They have been particularly hesitant to reflect contemporary changes within museums. Specifically, ethnographic museums have had a hard time severing ties with “the ordering principles that Western museums and collections have imposed on their objects presented since the 19th century” (Chwatal, 2018). However hesitant ethnographic museums are generally, they are starting to reflect the shift happening across museums of all types. In particular, some ethnographic museums have started to rebrand themselves, starting with changes to the institution’s name.

Some of these ethnographic museums that have changed their names include the Weltmuseum Wien (the World Museum Vienna), until 2013 called the Museum of Ethnology (Museum für Völkerkunde); the Wereldmuseum (World Museum) in the Netherlands, formerly named the Tropenmuseum or Tropics Museums to reflect its focus on artifacts from former Dutch colonies; and the Wereldmuseum Berg en Dal (World Museum Berg en Dal), formerly named the Afrika museum, due to its sole focus on artifacts and peoples—notably including reconstructed African villages— from across the continent of Africa. Attempting to move away from their colonial associations, these museums' renaming reflects not just a linguistic shift, but an ideological one as well. The Tropenmuseum has a very literal linguistic meaning—it is one that also has colonial ideological underpinnings as well. In the case of the Tropenmuseum, specifically the word tropics directly, reflects an exoticized Eurocentric gaze that viewed the tropics as a distant, exotic land filled with resources, people, and objects to be gazed upon, collected, studied, categorized, and displayed for Dutch audiences.

Name changes reflect the growing pressure on European museums to rebrand, reframe, and repair their colonial pasts. They can help distance museums from their colonial pasts, both linguistically and ideologically. Similarly in Switzerland, The Museum der Kulturen Basel and the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum, have started to rebrand by “programmatically, shifting their focus away from archives and taxonomies and toward discourse, cross-disciplinary research, and participation—taking a cue, perhaps, from museums of modern and contemporary art, where institutional critique and relational

aesthetics began to affect curatorial priorities in the 1990s” (Chwatal, 2018). Some ethnographic museums are attempting to decolonize by acknowledging that they are not neutral institutions, and that their naming, collections, and histories are bound up in the dizzying array of colonial violence enacted by each institution's nation. Navigating public pressure and an increase in decolonial museum scholarship their name changes reflect a response to critics who have long demanded greater transparency and responsibility from European museums. Name changes can also be seen as a step towards symbolic repair. The renaming of ethnographic museums reflects an attempt to reframe the narrative and shift the gaze of the ‘Other’ to a more global, inclusive, shared framing of culture and heritage that decenters the European gaze.

However intentional, name changes cannot undo colonial violence or atone for the damage done as a result of colonial violence, looting, and the racist ideologies that have been reflected in the museum displays. Name changes like land acknowledgments are a gentle nod to acknowledgement but they often fail to take the secondary necessary step of decolonial work – action. Similar to name changes, land acknowledgments can start conversations regarding how to support Indigenous sovereignty and land repatriation, but they only go as far as acknowledgment performance—stopping short at only seeking affirmation and validation to assuage guile. As Sobo et al. (2020), explains:

“In most cases these statements fail to acknowledge the violent trauma of land being stolen from Indigenous people – the death, dispossession and displacement of countless individuals and much collective suffering. The afterlives of these traumas are deeply felt and experienced in Indigenous communities.”

However well-meaning land acknowledgments are they can “erase Indigenous people and sanitize history” (Sobo et al., 2022). After acknowledgements are made, there is never any follow-up and no plans are made to give land back, or repatriate. What ends up being articulated is “what was once yours is now ours” (Sobo et al., 2022). According to Amna Khalid and Jeffery Aaron Snyder, “No data exists to demonstrate that land acknowledgments lead to measurable, concrete change. Instead, they often serve as little more than feel-good public gestures signaling ideological conformity to what historians have called – in the context of higher education’s diversity, equity and inclusion efforts – “a naïve, left-wing, paint-by-numbers approach” to social justice” (2022). As in the case of the British Museum, they have acknowledged that the Benin Bronzes in their possession are looted but have not repatriated any of them back yet. Here, we see acknowledgment of looted artifacts, followed by nothing; acknowledgement as a decolonial action is shaky, at best, and, still, is built on colonial power rather than consent.

Like land acknowledgements, oftentimes, the only purpose name changes serve is symbolic. They operate as performances of care that risk reinscribing the very colonial power they claim to unsettle. Behind these performances, gestures, and presentations is simply “plunder [masquerading] as charity, conservation, and care” (Lee, 2022). Changes to museums’ names offer little material change; they are simply part of a trend in rebranding museums in recent years. Both are safe choices—they are easy to do, carry little risk, do not disrupt, and, without additional action, create almost no systemic change. Naming land or changing

names—or acknowledging the looting but not repatriating—is not the same as returning what was taken, and it is against this backdrop of power’s persistence that situates my analysis of the looted Benin Bronzes and the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI).

In our current landscape, amidst calls to decolonize museums, these institutions—both art museums and ethnographic ones— “must be active agents in the rewriting of anthropological history, rather than remaining passive storage sites” (Chwatal, 2018). Museums such as Museum Rietberg, Museum der Kulturen Basel, and the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museums have “become aware of the need to leave the 19th century behind not only in name but also in practice, and to question the very principles of collecting still so deeply embedded with colonialist thought” (Chwatal, 2018).

Providing background on both art museums and ethnographic museums—specifically the history of ethnographic museums—reveals how these institutions were founded on systems of racial classification, extraction, and colonial spectacle display. Situating this alongside empty examples of land acknowledgements and institutional attempts to distance themselves from colonial pasts through name changes, it is clear that these are not neutral gestures, but an exertion of soft power: a way to rebrand authority without dismantling the colonial structures that sustain it. Museums exert soft power by rebranding themselves as progressive and self-critical without fundamentally altering the structures of ownership and authority on which they are built.

An acknowledgement or name change may signal responsiveness and earn them moral 'brownie points' in the public eye, but these symbolic actions deflect attention from the deeper work of repatriation. This underscores Scott's (2007) observation that most museumgoers do not negotiate meanings from museums; they accept the narratives presented to them without question, rarely interrogating the meanings conveyed effectively surrendering intellectual authority to the museum. Such uncritical consumption and trust amplify the power of museums to shape understanding and reinforces a blind public trust in museums—even when that trust may obscure underlying biases or colonial legacies, as documented in the American Alliance of Museums Trust Report (2021). This trust allows museums to quietly perpetuate colonial frameworks—the same ones that built the institution—and put forth exploitative narratives about 'Other' cultures on display. In this way, soft power enables institutions to maintain control over the narrative of colonialism—deciding what to acknowledge, when, and how—while leaving the underlying hierarchies of cultural authority intact. These decolonial attempts exemplify how these gestures are not purely altruistic but are more performative responses—operating as 'good PR'. All of this shapes how institutions negotiate their pasts and imagine their futures. It is within this tension that my analysis of the Swiss Benin Initiative unfolds.

Both ethnographic museums, art museums, land acknowledgements, and name changes reveal how institutions attempt to narrate belonging while masking dispossession. They reveal contradictions in the idea that these

institutions are the rightful caretakers and authorities of cultural heritage or land. They expose the fractures in claims to stewardship and authority. This is exposed when museums make ownership claims over looted objects and make decisions about whether to repatriate them or not, and when institutions make land acknowledgements without returning land. These acts unintentionally show the cracks in authority and the shallow nature of these acknowledgments and changes.

All of these shallow ‘acknowledgements’ and changes lay bare their fragility—exposing that what these institutions claim to ‘care for’ or ‘speak for’ is built on a mirage of suppression, violence, and colonial possession. By situating ethnographic museums within histories of colonial histories and acknowledging the contested nature of land itself, I set the stage for my analysis of how these institutions narrate their own roles and responsibilities in the present.

History of the Benin Bronzes: Africa’s Greatest Treasures

The Benin Bronzes are a collection of intricate brass and bronze sculptures and artifacts. Some of these artifacts comprise other materials, such as ivory, wood, coral, and even human remains (i.e., skulls, hair, and teeth) (*Digital Benin*, n.d.). This again suggests that these artifacts are more than objects; they are relatives. The Benin Bronzes are known for their exceptional craftsmanship and artistic quality. In addition to the commonly shared Benin Bronze relief plaques, the collection of Benin Bronzes includes alter tusks (carved elephant ivory), bells, jewelry (rings, arm cuffs, and charms), combs and hair ornaments, bowls, cloth, elephant tusks (uncarved ivory), jugs and other

containers, stools, figures, heads and masks, statues, and carvings of animals and people, among other relics and regalia (*Digital Benin*, n.d.).

The Benin Bronzes are ceremonial and used for altars. Other Bronzes have spiritual representations, are musical instruments, are used as personal ornamentation, are everyday household objects, or are used for healing and divinity purposes (*Digital Benin*, n.d.). Some Bronzes are religious objects used in shrines and others were created to adorn the city's royal palace and other important buildings in the city. The Oba (king) would carry masks during important ceremonies, like the rare, delicate mask of Queen Idia made out of ivory. In the case of the Queen Idia mask, only five are known to exist in the world, with "one of the most exquisite [located] in a display case in a basement of the British Museum in London" and the other in "the Africa gallery in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art" (Maclean & Marshall, 2021).

The Bronzes have immense cultural value to Nigeria, depicting "the stories and the beliefs of a civilization that traces its origins at least another 500 years further back in time" (Phillips, 2021, p. 1). These artifacts are narratives that hold important cultural and spiritual information. They are "part of the bedrock of the identity, culture, and history of Benin" (Maclean & Marshall, 2021). These masterpieces were "made to tell stories, to keep memories, and to hand over all these stories and memories from one generation to another" (Maclean & Marshall, 2021). They were created to contain within them the history and culture of the Kingdom of Benin and to showcase the ancestry of Benin City. Each

Bronze tells a unique and deliberate story of the Kingdom's history, and together, they create a cohesive narrative of a nation's depth, breadth, and culture.

The Theft

The Benin Bronzes originate from Benin City, which is located in present-day Nigeria and is not to be confused with the country of Benin. The Benin Bronzes date back to the 13th century, although they were created well into the 16th century (*The Kingdom of Benin*, n.d.). The history of the Benin Bronzes is intertwined with the Kingdom of Benin and its interactions with European powers, mainly England, during the colonial period.

The Kingdom of Benin, also referred to as Benin Kingdom, was the capital of Benin City and was established in West Africa in the 1200s C.E. Prospering as early as the 1200s and well throughout the 1800s (*The Kingdom of Benin*, n.d.), the Kingdom of Benin was a powerful and sophisticated pre-colonial (pre-British colonization) African kingdom. A significant center of trade and cultural exchange, the Kingdom was known for its advanced metallurgy, art, and administrative structures. Benin Kingdom became successful primarily through trade, including Benin artists trading gold, artwork, ivory, and pepper and through Benin's involvement with the West African slave trade. Benin tradesmen would "capture men, women, and children from rival peoples and sell them into slavery to European and American buyers" (*The Kingdom of Benin*, n.d.), providing a "significant source of wealth for the kingdom" (*The Kingdom of Benin*, n.d.). Throughout most of the 1800s, The Kingdom of Benin maintained its

independence, even throughout most of the Scramble for Africa, primarily due to Benin's complicity in selling enslaved people to European and American slavers.

Eventually, Benin Kingdom began to experience internal conflicts and civil wars began to break out. This weakened Benin's administration and their economy, diminishing Benin's power. Benin Kingdom's struggle to resist foreign interference in its trading network left them susceptible to foreign invasion. In particular, the British wanted to control all of Western Africa's trade and their territories, and conquering Benin was part of the British's goal to control all of Western Africa.

The British looted the Benin Bronzes from the palace of the Kingdom of Benin during their Punitive Benin Expedition in February of 1897. The Punitive Benin Expedition was a military campaign conducted by British forces against the Kingdom of Benin in response to armed conflict between the British and the local ruler, the Oba of Benin. Often framed as a justified act of retaliation, the Benin Expedition was a fabricated "violent sacking and pillaging of Benin City" (Laciste, 2023), led without England's permission, James Robert Phillips, Deputy Commissioner and Consul, Philips acted without formal approval from the British government (Laciste, 2023). His ill-fated expedition was unauthorized.

Notably, the Benin Expedition of 1897 was neither an anomaly nor an isolated incident. Instead, it was "part of a recurring pattern in which the British used violent means to conquer lands that they claimed for themselves and to terrorize and subdue their inhabitants" (Laciste, 2023). While the death toll is unknown, British soldiers and sailors embarked on a 3-week campaign where

they “machine-gunned, bombarded, and torched villages, towns, homes and palaces, indiscriminately massacred countless Edo people, the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Benin, and blew up a sacred tree” (Laciste, 2023). The massacre that resulted from the Benin Expedition of 1897 is referred to as “one of the most brutal massacres in the colonial era” (Wiggins, 2020).

The expedition resulted in the capture and sacking of Benin City, the overthrow of the Oba, who was deposed and exiled, and the hanging of Benin chiefs, who were viewed as impediments to the success of British rule, marking a significant event in the colonial history of Nigeria. These violent means to conquer and claim lands and people eventually led to The Kingdom of Benin being forcefully incorporated (or absorbed) into the British Empire and a British official being appointed to govern (Laciste, 2023). In addition to stealing the Benin Bronzes, British forces also stole “thousands of other objects, including statues, commemorative heads, and ivory carvings” (Phillips, 2022, p. 1), as well as human remains. These stolen artifacts were used to pay for the British expedition, as the British were in significant debt after their voyage and seizure (Wiggins, 2020). While some of the Benin Bronzes were taken by individual officers, the “vast majority were auctioned in London” (Wiggins, 2020), which is how the majority of the Benin Bronzes wound up on display and stashed away in storage units in the British Museum.

England's Early Role

While there are only estimates of how many Benin Bronzes were created and later looted in 1897 by the British, researchers estimate that about 10,000

Benin Bronzes were stolen (Laciste, 2023) (Hicks, 2020). After their initial theft by British forces in 1897, some British Navy members also kept Bronzes for themselves, but there is no estimate of how many Bronzes were kept by individual officers in the British Navy. The mass looting of the Benin Bronzes resulted in the widespread dispersal of these artifacts to various museums and private collections worldwide (Phillips, 2021). Many of these artifacts ended up in European museums and private collections, including the British Museum in London, which holds about 950 of these Bronzes (although only about 100 are on display) (Phillips, 2021), as well as in institutions across the United States, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, and many others across Western Europe, all of which hold significant numbers of looted Benin Bronzes. Only some of these artifacts are accounted for in museums, while many others are held by private collectors and will likely never be accounted for (Hicks, 2020).

This historical background illustrates England's prominent role in the looting of the Benin Bronzes. England is where the journey of the *looted* Benin Bronzes began—not their story entirely, as they had a rich, important pre-colonial history. England's invasion and sacking of Benin City and looting of the Benin Bronzes led Nigeria to make formal claims for the return of their looted Benin Bronzes. As detailed earlier, the British Royal Navy invaded Benin City—an expedition not sanctioned by the British government—and looted the Bronzes as booty to settle their debt (Phillips, 2021).

England was the first stop for the Bronzes after the initial theft. The majority of Bronzes were auctioned to the British Museum. The British Museum

remains in possession of about 900 Benin Bronzes, that we know of, and most of them are locked away in storage. Once the Bronzes were sold to the British Museum in London in 1897, they were exhibited immediately after.

In Annie E. Coombes' (1996) article, "Ethnography, Popular Culture, and Institutional Power: Narratives of Benin Culture in the British Museum, 1897–1992" she photographed and analyzed the first exhibition of the Benin Bronzes in the British Museum in 1897. Included in this article are photographs taken by Coombes (1996) of this first exhibition of the Bronzes, making Coombes' photographs some of the earliest visual records of the Benin Bronzes—post-looting—being housed and proudly displayed in England. Coombes (1996) contextualizes these photographs within British historical and political relations with Benin City, alongside racial ideologies about racial degradation and ethnographic display, which were pervasive at the time.

Coombes (1996) highlights that the Bronzes were displayed in the British Museum in 1897 without any form of protection, meaning that they were not housed in protective display cases and, therefore, were susceptible to being touched by onlookers and damaged by both people and natural elements in the museum. This poses a concern for artifacts, as natural oils, acids, salts from human skin, or foreign dirt and other substances can damage them (Texas Historical Commission, n.d.). The lack of protection also left the objects vulnerable to vandalism, breakage, or even theft... again. Recently, The British museum was incriminated for loosing artifacts in their collections and there is substantial evidence that proves staff have been secretly stealing objects from

the museum's collections for decades (Sherwood, 2023). The British Museum was in the news again once it was revealed that artifacts that have been stolen from the British Museum may be “untraceable due to poor record keeping” (Batty, 2023). Coombes (1996) argues that the unprotected display of the Bronzes undermines England’s original claims that retaining looted artifacts were done so for preservation and conservation purposes—an argument that The British Museum, and many others, continue to uphold.

The British Museum continues to be in possession of the most extensive collection of Benin Bronzes in the world. According to the British Museum’s webpage about the Benin Bronzes in their collection:

“In the autumn of 1897, the British Museum displayed 304 Benin plaques on loan from the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and subsequently petitioned successfully to receive 203 of these as a donation. The majority of the remaining plaques were sold to UK and German museums and to private dealers, while a few were retained by the Foreign Office. Other early collections were purchased or donated by members of the Benin expedition. The British Museum collection only grew to its current size following the acquisition of major private collections, such as that of Harry Beasley in 1944, William Oldman in 1949, and Sir Henry Wellcome in 1954. In 1950 and 1951, the Museum deaccessioned some of the Benin plaques in the collection and these were subsequently sold, exchanged, or donated to the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria (25 in number) and the government of the Gold Coast (1). A further number of such plaques (12) were sold to or exchanged with private dealers and collectors between 1950 and 1972.” (*Benin Bronzes*, n.d.-b)

Although exact trade routes from England to other countries are unknown, we know that the Bronzes were sold between private collectors and museums and that the British Museum sold Bronzes back to Nigeria and to the Gold Coast (likely Ghana), Germany, and other countries in the United Kingdom (Northern

Ireland, Scotland). From England, the Bronzes became dispersed across much of the Western world, including the United States and Switzerland.

Over the years, there has been increasing international pressure from the Federal Government of Nigeria and The National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) for the return of the Benin Bronzes. Since the artifacts were illegally acquired (looted) through colonial violence, advocates argue that they should be repatriated to their place of origin (Cuno, 2010). Various museums across the world have begun to engage in discussions about the possibility of repatriation or long-term loan agreements of the Bronzes. The history of the Benin Bronzes is complex and delicate, encompassing issues related to cultural heritage, colonial history, and cultural survival. In addition to the restitution of looted artifacts, ongoing debates center around matters of rightful ownership, the manner in which artifacts are exhibited and stored, and the contentious nature of loan agreements.

Efforts to address these issues are continuous, and the struggle for, long and well overdue, restitution and reconciliation has yet to be resolved. As these conversations continue, my dissertation research is both timely and essential as it analyzes the discourse of the institutions—the ones who have been complicit, however knowingly or otherwise, in the continued theft, acquisition, and profiting of looted artifacts. The discussion of repatriation and restitution highlights a crucial aspect deeply intertwined with the origins of museums, shedding light on the complex relationship between colonial acquisition practices and the ethical responsibilities museums bear towards their collections.

The Origins of Museums – Cabinets of Curiosities

To understand the current discourse in museums, it is important to understand the origin of museums, including why they were created and their early role in safeguarding racist ideologies and creating a space for nations to exhibit their power and wealth. The origin of museums can be traced back to the 16th-century Cabinets of Curiosities. Commonly referred to as curiosity cabinets, they were a common way to display private collections of artifacts, oddities, and rarities alongside ethnic and racial monstrosities, looted artifacts, and even human remains (Ewen & Ewen, 2007). These curiosity cabinets emerged during the Scientific Revolution (from about 1543 - 1687) and continued into the Age of Enlightenment (1685 - 1815), alongside the rise and popularity of pseudo-racial science, phrenology, and imperialism. The unsystematic display of these objects conveyed a sense of mysticism, exoticism, and wonderment. These curiosity cabinets always appeared in disarray. They were designed to convey a “theater of memory - a way of organizing facts and ideas as stories in a real or imagined space” (Lubar, 2018).

Owners of the curiosity cabinets understood the “power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it emerged” (Lubar, 2018). Curiosity cabinets offered a way to “reimagine museum collections and display” (Lubar, 2018) of bodies, places, art, and antiquities. Providing a rationale for arranging objects, “these ideas offered a way of understanding the world and viewing objects” (Lubar, 2018).

Eventually, this worldview and arrangement of objects and people were reflected in museum collections. Objects were displayed in a systematic, categorized way, where linkages between geographies, peoples, cultures, art, and artifacts were drawn and offered a means of categorizing, documenting, and understanding the world. Given their origins and the enduring perception of museums as bearers of truth and impartiality, it is crucial to scrutinize how museums embody "pre-existing universal Enlightenment values" (Lord, 2006, p.2). Additionally, it is imperative to attribute moral significance to "museums' Enlightenment heritage" (Lord, 2006, p.2), which continues to influence them in contemporary times.

As an example of an early antiquities collector, British East India Company Official Thomas Stamford Raffles maintained a cabinet of curiosities. While working in the region between 1805 and 1824, British East India Company Official Thomas Stamford Raffles "collected material from Java (in present-day Indonesia) and other parts of Asia" (*Benin Bronzes*, n.d.-b). Raffles amassed a collection of over two thousand artifacts from all over Asia. Subsequently, as a British official, the artifacts he acquired, under very precarious circumstances, ultimately became part of the British Museum's collection, coexisting alongside other looted artifacts, including the Benin Bronzes.

Raffles was the first "prominent colonial official not merely to amass a large personal collection of local objects, but to also systematically study their history" (Anderson, 1991, p. 254-55). He collected the objects in "large sets in order to classify them systematically in keeping with natural history practices of

the time” (*Benin Bronzes*, n.d.-b). While his objects were carefully categorized and labeled with names and titles, his “collections were not systematic compilations by Javanese standards, indicating his incomplete understanding of local culture” (*Benin Bronzes*, n.d.-b). Rather, his categories and labels were based purely on a Western perspective and Darwinian-style nomenclature, completely divorced from the Javanese culture and meaning embedded in these artifacts.

Raffles’ collection is an early example of how collectors systematized, “disinterred, unjungled, measured, photographed, and reconstructed” (Anderson, 1991, p. 252-253) the people and cultures represented in their collections. The objects that were looted were subjected to the imposition of Western scientific discourse such as measuring, cataloging, and organizing via type. This allowed for sites to be fenced off and excavated and for artifacts to be looted, “analyzed and displayed” (Anderson, 1991, p. 252-253) inside museums. The evolution of museums from curiosity cabinets to institutional entities reflects a pivotal aspect of nation-building, illustrating how the collection and display of artifacts were utilized to bolster the national identity of Western nations and reinforce the cultural authority that these Western countries imposed over non-Western nations. Displaying objects to bolster national colonial identities diminishes—if not completely erases—the artifacts’ true meanings, divorcing them from their homelands both physically and spiritually.

While the British East India Company Official Thomas Stamford Raffles is an early example of collecting looted ethnographic artifacts, collecting

ethnographic specimens is not limited to artifacts. It extends to the collecting of humans and human remains as well. Similar to many other contemporary museum exhibitions, there are similarities that can be traced to early 18th and 19th century ethnographic displays and human exhibitions. All of these displays—from artifacts to humans such as Ota Benga, Sarah Bartman and George and Willie Muse—are part of a greater colonial ideology about racial purity and generalized notions of African deviation.

The British troops who invaded Benin City in 1897 believed that “they were cleansing the city and breaking the power associated with fetishes or juju through [their] acts of demolition and vandalization” (Laciste, 2023). This colonial mindset not only justified the looting of the Benin Bronzes, but also underpinned the creation of curiosity cabinets, ethnographic displays, and, eventually, modern museums. From their origins, these institutions have been shaped by colonial ideologies, which continue to influence the narratives they continue to tell. Racialized perspectives remain embedded in curatorial and exhibition practices, as well as in the discursive frameworks that structure museum knowledge. The same colonial ideology that legitimized destruction and theft has produced a discourse around stolen African art and artifacts—a discourse that persists within museums to this day.

Museums are Putting the World on Display

Museums quite literally put the world on display—a particular version of the world that is. Having existed for centuries, museums are pillars of “Western society since the Renaissance” era (Crooke, 2008). Analogized to Greco-Roman

columns, museums are “immovable, like the columns that supported these facades” and as being “too old to change like the objects displayed inside them” (Solomon, 2023). As some of the most trusted institutions in the world, museums have the “power to reflect and shape our society” (Carlsson, 2024).

With this power, museums can transform perspectives and shape the ideologies of audiences who enter their spaces. Charged with presenting the history of humankind to its visitors, the trust that the public has in museums situates them as empowered institutions. Museums are seen as untouchable institutions, entrenched and far removed from the ability or need to be questioned, yet alone changed (Solomon, 2023).

Over the last few decades, the power and influence of museums have been placed under a microscope for close looking, interrogation, and criticism (Lonetree, 2012). Museums’ internal authority and external outputs are critiqued as reinforcing institutional ideologies built on colonial, modernity-obsessed foundations (Murawski, 2019). There is a growing dialogue around museums, specifically about the power they wield and the ideologies they frame. Most of these critiques focus on curation practices, narrative structures, repatriation and restitution, and the global influencing force of museums.

As influential colonial institutions, museums play a significant role in shaping ideologies regarding both nearby and distant cultures through their collecting, curation, and exhibition practices. Serving as nation-building entities, they often put forth a colonized worldview through a lens tainted by Victorian to Enlightenment-era values and a voyeuristic exhibitionary gaze. Whether they are

natural history, cultural heritage, ethnographic, art, or other historical museums, these institutions wield significant influence within their respective domains. Their reinforcement of colonialism is evident in their exhibition practices, notably their complicity in retaining looted artifacts and shaping accompanying narratives. Additionally, much of the museum's discourse serves to further solidify this colonized worldview. Frequently, museum discourse is accepted without question by audiences and is seldom subject to renegotiation.

According to Scott (2007), museums communicate through their exhibitions and the accompanying information provided, such as exhibition labels and descriptions, reports, and other official write-ups. The very notion of a museum—the notion that they are honest, ethical, and trustworthy universalist institutions—is embedded in the ideological discourse of the museum as well. Museums articulate specific ideologies about the world, world orders, people groups, culture, and art through their exhibitions and the textual information offered to visitors. Through various forms of visual and textual content, museums convey their ideologies to visitors, whether they are experiencing the museum in person or online.

Those scrutinizing museums closely monitor whether museums are explicitly or implicitly reorganizing the “savagery to civilized” evolutionary narrative they so commonly put forth. Scholars such as Scott (2007), Lonetree (2012), Clifford (1997), Hicks (2020) and Murawski (2021), to name a few, are closely paying attention to whether museums are reconstructing their colonial gaze and antiquated flows in logic that represent a linear history from bestial

African prehistory to a civilized European present. As part of researching museums' institutional power and discourse, it is crucial to investigate any evolutionary narratives that might still be present in museums' discourse. By doing so, I shed light on potential reconstructions of colonial perspectives and antiquated logics within the narratives of the museums participating in the Swiss Benin Initiative.

The Misery in Which We Are Still Debating within Museums

Racialized, evolutionary concepts have long shaped the foundations of Western art, cultural, and natural history museums. These institutions present human development as a linear progression from a deviant, bestial, and uncivilized African past to a civilized, knowledgeable Western-European present (Scott, 2007). Racial ideologies reinforce the colonial positioning of the West as dominant. Western countries and the racialized ideologies they produce are “stratified along the lines of race, class, and gender, as well as other aspects of social identity that help structure our experience” (Dines & Humez, 2002, p. xii), both within and outside of institutions.

This framing served an important function: it normalized Western domination and exploitation. The representations it produced reinforced racial hierarchies that soon circulated in mainstream narratives and culture (Said, 1995). Since the Enlightenment era, this discourse of progress and human development has “justified colonial expansion” and “the pretension to know what the colonized ‘Other’ wants, should want, thinks, and how he/she should think” (Gallien, 2020, p. 32). Upon closer inspection, we can see that such racial

ideologies, however emblematic of a certain era, endure today. They permeate broader fields of scholarship and society, from science and medicine to politics, history, and popular culture. These concepts have seeped into everyday consciousness and the institutions that shape how we understand ourselves, producing narratives that simultaneously construct and constrain the 'Other.'

The Western narrative validates itself and denies the 'Other' agency and autonomy by controlling what can be said, shaping portrayals, and dictating how cultural heritage is preserved. The West "envisions the world from a single privileged point" in a way "that centralizes and augments Europe while belittling Africa and dividing the 'East' into near, middle and far," further "making Europe the arbiter of spatial evaluation" (Shohat & Stam, 2014, p. 2). This centralizing of Europe becomes apparent when countries in possession of looted artifacts offer to 'loan' back these objects to their places of provenance.

Hard-coded into loan offers is the implicit falsehood that the 'Other'—non-European—is incapable of safeguarding their own artifacts, and thus they must remain under European 'custody' for safe keeping, returning home only briefly, under terms dictated by the very powers that looted them. The Western conceptualization of ownership and the relationship between artifacts and people is rooted in a particular epistemological framework that often marginalizes non-Western perspectives. Consequently, the art and artifacts on display not only are exhibited through a Western exhibitionary lens, but are also captured and treated as property, and used to legitimize power (Joselit, 2023) and delegitimize others. I explored this relationship further through Robinson's (2020) concept of artifacts

possessing embedded life. How ownership is dictated by Western institutions forms part of my critique of the language and decolonial tactics employed by the Swiss Benin Initiative: while the initiative is commendable for adopting non-western methodologies and including perspectives and media from outside the institutions, it remains limited with their reliance on a single researcher and missing or fragmented information.

From art museums to natural history museums, these institutions were built upon racial ideologies. This is evident in their design—Asia and Oceania collapsed into single halls while vast galleries are devoted to the minutiae of European art—embedding racial hierarchies into the everyday discourse of the museum. Such formations dictate who is granted voice, choice, and bodily autonomy, and who is reduced to spectacle—cast as deviant and sub-human and rendered unworthy of the dignity afforded to others. This echoes the same logics of domination and dispossession that underpinned colonial violence. Despite possible efforts to cleanse themselves of their racially tainted, colonial roots, museums often continue to perpetuate their origins and fall short of truly grappling with and altering the racialized beliefs instilled in them during their inception.

Examining the mishandling of looted artifacts reveals that these objects—long treated as the rightful property of the very institutions that stole, exploited and displayed them—remain enmeshed in colonialist frameworks. From paternalistic claims of ‘protection’ to curatorial practices severed from their cultural origins, such management not only erases the agency of source

communities but also perpetuates the legacies of exploitation. Not only is their agency erased, but communities are often denied both ownership—and access to their cultural artifacts.

Those denied ownership are often from marginalized groups, who are only granted limited access to their cultural artifacts—either by visiting museums in person and viewing their artifacts behind glass in museums or by looking at photographs online. Artifacts on display are typically accompanied by sparse text only provides estimated origin dates and locations, withholding the cultural, religious, spiritual, ancestral, and heritage knowledge that communities seek—and that many visitors may not even realize is missing. As Amy Lonetree (2012) demonstrates in her research on Indigenous perspectives, Native peoples experience this limited access, confined to the role of visitor in museums where displays remain tightly controlled by curators.

For example, when viewing the full object record for the Leopard Aquamanile on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's (The Met) website we are provided with the following information:

“Title: Leopard Aquamanile; Artist: Edo artist; Date: 16th–19th century; Geography: Nigeria, Court of Benin; Culture: Edo; Medium: Brass; Dimensions: H. 6 3/4 x W. 2 5/8 x D. 8 5/8 in. (17.2 x 6.7 x 21.9 cm); Classification: Metal-Containers; Credit Line: Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991; and Accession Number: 1991.17.53. The provenance attributed to the Leopard Aquamanile is art collectors “Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, New York, until 1991” (*Leopard Aquamanile*, n.d.).

The provenance is not actually attributed to the object's place of origin or earliest known history, but to a couple who were art dealers in the 1990s. While

the description of the Leopard Aquamanile does explain what aquamaniles were used for, the first two lines of the description states, “Probably influenced by European examples, aquamaniles in the shape of animals are among the brass works cast in Benin. Like their European counterparts, aquamaniles cast in Benin are used, as their name suggests, for washing the hands” (*Leopard Aquamanile*, n.d.).

Not only is the object denied details about its actual place of provenance, the first detail given to readers attributes this sculpture as being “influenced by Europeans.” This diminishes and blurs the skill needed to create this specific Bronze by suggesting that its sophistication exists solely because of direct European influence. More importantly, beginning the object description with two mentions of its European influence highlights that The Met thinks the most important detail of this artifact is that it was influenced by Europeans. By attributing the object's significance primarily to European influence, The Met implies that Nigerian artifacts derive their sophistication solely from European influence. This underscores The Met's ideology that any cultural work owes its existence to European influence; a reductive perspective embedded within the description of this particular object.

The Benin Bronzes were being auctioned off to the highest bidder, from the British Museum to the Met and museums in Switzerland. They were displayed by private collectors who “doubted ‘primitive’ Africans could create such works” (Gbadamosi, 2021). We can turn to two examples of Europeans

involved with the theft and transfer of African artifacts who shared these colonialist notions:

“German archaeologist Leo Frobenius, who was accused of having stolen a sacred Yoruba Ife head in 1910, argued they were of Greek origin and not African. “I was moved to silent melancholy at the thought that this assembly of degenerate and feeble-minded posterity should be the legitimate guardians of so much loveliness,” he wrote in his book, *Voice of Africa*, published in 1913. Charles Read, a British Museum curator between 1880 and 1921, had a similar reaction to the Benin Bronzes. “We were at once astounded at such an unexpected find, and puzzled to account for so highly developed an art among a race so entirely barbarous as were the Bini,” he said.” (Gbadamosi, 2021)

Despite being in disbelief that the Bronzes were of African origin, Frobenius and Read still stole them. Even though Europeans refused to believe that Africans were capable of creating such extraordinary works of art like the Benin Bronzes, they still looted, displayed and sold these artifacts at high value. This contradiction highlights how African artifacts were stripped of their cultural and historical context and transformed into exoticized commodities by the West. Their value was no longer rooted in their provenance or in the rich traditions and culture of their creators. Instead, the value of the Benin Bronzes became attributed to the European assumptions bestowed upon them—European assumptions that these cannot possibly be made by primitive-’Others’ but are true works of art worthy of being exhibited, emphasizing that true, high-art of value can only be created by Europeans.

Here, we can see how a colonialist logic clashes with itself and quickly unravels, losing any semblance of authenticity, depth, and stability. On one hand, the looters doubted that artifacts of this caliber could be made by Africans; on the

other hand, they still decided to steal them. The Benin Bronzes were viewed through a colonial lens that simultaneously dismissed African ingenuity and technical artistic craft while fetishizing the objects for their aesthetic and exotic qualities. While I am not studying The Met specifically, it serves as a key example of an institution holding looted artifacts with misleading descriptions, highlighting the need for reparation and broader cultural reparative work, especially as such reparation efforts are taking place globally, most of which are connected through a shared history of colonialism, excavation, theft, and continued devaluation.

The looted Benin Bronzes represent a poignant chapter in the larger system of colonialism, echoing a myriad of different processes of communication surrounding actions that fueled the illegal acquisition of cultural artifacts. These Bronzes serve as tangible expressions of an ideology deeply intertwined with notions of race, inadequacy, deviation, and the perceived entitlement to own people and possess objects. The discourse that emerged from colonial encounters constructed a language around culture and historical origins, prompting critical questions about ownership and identity, which pushed many, including myself, to ask: whose culture is it anyway and who gets to define culture?

By closely analyzing museums' discourse about the Benin Bronzes, the subtle discursive patterns, racialized ideologies, and power dynamics are illuminated. I can also clearly see how some narratives are silenced, while others have the power to fabricate false stories, create language to support these

falsehoods and present them to the world as truth with authority and conviction. Narratives surrounding the Benin Bronzes continue to echo through time, underscoring the profound impact of communication in solidifying ideas about race and cultural heritage and shaping historical legacies.

Museums for Nation Building

This research is situated with the critique that museums are colonial institutions. My research extends ongoing debates about whether museums can truly decolonize their spaces—and if so, how. Focusing on the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), I position museums within Benedict Anderson’s (1991) theory of nation-state building, which identifies museums, maps and censuses as the key technologies, or institutional powers, used to produce and establish modern nations and statehood. Nation-building is tied to “the imaginings of the colonial state,” specifically the ways in which “the colonial state imagined its dominion - the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry” (Anderson, p. 243, 1991). The colonial states’ imagined dominion was expressed through three primary institutions of power: the census, the map, and the museum.

Colonizing nations developed the census, the map, and the museum for the sole purpose of shaping a colonial mindset to help structure colonial borders, define ethnicities, classify people by race, create subcategories of ‘Others’ and degenerates, and (re)imagine and enforce territory. While maps delineate territorial borders and ownership of land, censuses are used to track people—to organize and categorize populations—museums are used to establish ideology.

Museums function ideologically, displaying power, asserting cultural dominance, and defining national identity. The role of museums is simple—they are necessary for nations to show off their power and their bounties. Museums help construct national narratives by showcasing imperial spoils and framing histories of conquests as cultural achievement. In this context, my research into the SBI examines how museums that once served as instruments of empire are now confronting the colonial legacies embedded in their collections, particularly through the discourse and decolonial practice of repatriation.

Considering the events that led to the inception of the SBI—England’s invasion of Nigeria, the plunder of Benin City, the theft of the Benin Bronzes, their auction in London, their subsequent scattering across the West, and their continued possession in Western institutions—the role of museums as nation-state builders is crucial to understand. While the cultural history of the Benin Bronzes predates colonial violence, the history of the *looted* Benin Bronzes begins with the theft. Looting has long been a common consequence of war, enabled by both opportunity for the colonizer and vulnerability of the colonized. Yet under colonial regimes, looting became more than just a byproduct of conflict—it was institutionalized as a tool of domination. Colonial powers deliberately attached themselves to looted cultural goods, using them to construct imperial identity, assert cultural superiority, and legitimize territorial conquests. By far, England is not the only country to use looted goods to help establish their imperial power.

In addition to England looting the Benin Bronzes and immediately exhibiting them in the British Museum to display their successful conquest, other colonial regimes were also using looted antiquities to assert their imperial dominance and attach themselves symbolically to their conquests. Colonial regimes displayed their looted antiquities as monuments, exhibiting them as a mechanism to visualize nation-building. Museums were used to normalize their domination and extraction of people and places as a crucial aspect establishing nationhood. Some of these ancient antiquities were distributed and sold as a direct (or lineal) continuation of colonial archaeology (Anderson, 1991, p. 254). They illustrated how colonial powers could infiltrate, seize control, plunder, and exhibit their conquests. The spoils of their plunder were exhibited in museums to showcase to the world the extent of the colonial empire, glorifying the achievements of the colonial era. These antiquities became “state regalia” and a powerful sign of the “colonial state’s style of thinking about its domain” (Anderson, 1991, p. 254).

The most poignant example is the British Museum in London, which holds numerous artifacts from various cultures around the world, including many objects acquired during the colonial period through looting, pillaging, or other questionable acquisition practices. For instance, the Elgin Marbles, originally from the Parthenon in Athens, Greece, were removed by Lord Elgin in the early 19th century and later acquired by the British Museum (Clark, 2022). The museum’s decision to retain and prominently display such artifacts not only reflects its complicity in historical looting but also contributes to the construction

of a national narrative of cultural superiority, dominance, and arrogance. By exhibiting these artifacts, the museum reinforces a narrative of British cultural and imperial supremacy, perpetuating the colonial worldview that underpinned the acquisition of these objects. The Elgin Marbles illustrate the intricate connection between looting, exhibiting, and nation-building within the context of museums.

The act of looting an artifact from an exotic 'Other' underscores a power imbalance between the nation that appropriates it—meticulously cataloging its significance—and the place of origin, which lacks the means to articulate its own cultural heritage. As discussed previously, communities are denied agency and access, with little say in how their artifacts are displayed. Extracting and displaying artifacts from foreign lands not only asserts the dominance of the nation acquiring them, but it also marginalizes the voices of those from the place of origin, relegating it to a subordinate place in the narrative. This hierarchical relationship between the nation exhibiting the artifact and the place of origin is stark: the museum assumes the authority to define an artifact's cultural significance, while the community remains voiceless, unable to assert its own interpretation. By showcasing artifacts extracted from distant lands, nations reinforce their perceived cultural superiority while silencing the voices of the communities from which these objects originated, perpetuating a colonial mindset.

Extracting, cataloging, and displaying looted artifacts amplifies the authority of the nation acquiring them, shaping the narrative of their cultural

significance and relegating the place of origin to a subjugated position, where communities are unable to articulate their own heritage. The museum's voice becomes dominant, while the voices of the communities on display are pushed into the margins, forgotten and neglected. Anderson (1991) refers to this mindset—which treats certain aspects of culture or history as subordinate and static exhibits—as “museumizing imagination.” This concept suggests a tendency to freeze aspects of culture or history in time, often through classification and categorization, much like the ways items are stored and displayed in a museum.

The museumizing imagination promotes a linear, static, and curated view of culture or history, one that cannot fully capture its dynamic and evolving nature (Anderson, 1991, p. 243). By presenting artifacts as fixed symbols of a culture, a “museumizing imagination” reinforces colonial ideologies, naturalizing the dominance of the collecting nation while portraying originating communities as passive, static (i.e. unevolving, unmodern), or invalid. It creates a lasting influence on societal perceptions, shaping how both museum visitors and the broader public understand and value the cultures and peoples on display.

This also illustrates Anderson's (1991) concept of the nation as an “imagined community” where cultural symbols and narratives—the very ones found inside museums—consolidate national identity and power. As Jan Assmann (1955) notes, museums act as instruments of collective memory, controlling which histories are highlighted and which are silenced, thereby reinforcing the nation's authority over cultural heritage. From this, we can see how museums are not only nation-state builders, but they extend into the deep

arena of human memory, shaping the memories of the communities on display and of those who visit the museums. This imagined community, which shapes collective memory, is also conveyed through the visual history presented in displayed state regalia.

State regalia was put on display to highlight connections between colonized territories and their colonial predecessors. State regalia inherited a form of political museumization, which involved the use of museums to convey political messages or ideologies. Hence, the artifacts exhibited in museums serve as visual representations of colonial nations. They create a visual history of “colonial-era logoization” (Anderson, 1991, p. 254), where visual representations of a colonized country’s past are collapsed into the colonial powers’ national identity.

To exemplify this, we can turn to New Zealand and the Indigenous Polynesian Māori people. In 1984, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) organized an exhibition titled *The Te Maori*. During the process of the exhibition, they consulted with Māori elders to secure explicit consent to exhibit the taonga (treasures) being displayed. Interestingly enough, The Met already possessed taonga, meaning they were the property of The Met, and consulting with the elders was “not strictly necessary” (Karp & Lavine, 1991, p. 2), but ethically speaking, it was encouraged. The consultation that occurred “reflected the feeling among white, middle-class New Zealanders that their identity was traceable to the Māori and that the Māori still had a spiritual right to the taonga” (Karp & Lavine, 1991, p. 2). The Māori people hoped that the consultation would

result in their art objects being used to direct attention to how their culture was presented in museums. In reality, The Met's exhibition catalog fell short of upholding the accurate ethnological and historical background that the elders communicated to them. Instead, The Metropolitan Museum of Art's portrayal reflects the vague belief among white New Zealanders that their identity is intertwined with Māori Indigenous culture. The notion that museums should speak with originating communities leads them to seek validation from Indigenous elders, but only as a way to assuage feelings of guilt. Yet, it ultimately reinforces their own authority and control over the narrative, and a continued dismissal of communities.

This exhibition illustrates two significant phenomena: first, the enduring influence of white perspectives and ambiguous claims of Indigenous ancestry in shaping the portrayal of Indigenous cultures, granting white individuals the authority to dictate their descriptions and 'put on' ethnic identities when it suits them. Second, it underscores the assimilation of Māori indigenous culture into the dominant culture of white New Zealanders, who originated from England and colonized the Māori people. This collapsing of identities erases distinct indigenous identities and highlights a systemic issue where Indigenous cultures are frequently denied the agency to define their own heritage. As Karp & Lavine (1991) explain:

“Decisions about how cultures are presented reflect deeper judgments of power and authority and can, indeed, resolve themselves into claims about what a nation is or ought to be as well as how citizens should relate to one another.” (p. 2)

The three institutions of power—the census, the map, and the museum—render a certain “grammar” (or vocabulary) that is visible through the ways they “changed the form and function of the colonized zones they entered” (Anderson, 1991, p. 243). Nation-building grammar includes the colonial ideologies and policies that deploy a nationalistic, colonial worldview. This grammar presents itself in the colonial state’s desire “to create, under its control, a human landscape of perfect visibility, where the condition of this visibility was that everyone and everything had a serial number” (Anderson, 1991, p. 255) to be categorized, systematized, and tracked. The influence of colonial grammar is evident in how museums present and describe artifacts within their collections. In the case of the Māori community, the Met museum’s disregard for elders’ guidance effectively erased Indigenous voices, exemplifying how colonial grammar manifests in museum curation. Here, colonial grammar was so pervasive that it dominated the exhibition, literally overshadowing all Indigenous voices. By erasing all community input the Met reinforced that Indigenous perspectives do not matter and have no place inside museums. Comparatively, requests for the repatriation of looted Benin Bronzes reflect a demand to recover not just the objects, but the authority to tell their true stories—underscoring the importance of decolonial practices, such as those pursued by the Swiss Benin Initiative, which seek to restore agency to Nigerian communities and challenge the legacies of colonial control.

The colonial state redefined and reinforced its presence by establishing, within its dominion, a fully visible human landscape of all colonized nations within

museum spaces (Anderson, 1991). The colonial-like displays in museums imply the presence of "political inheriting" and the deliberate practice of colonial archaeology that paved the way for the existence of museums (Anderson, 1991, pp. 254-55). As Foucault explains:

"Museums are instances of state power, as it is embodied in the built environment. Like encyclopedias and libraries, museums are monuments of the eighteenth-century drive to categorize, classify, and order the world into a totality, universal in scope and universally intelligible" (Lord, 2006, p. 2).

The purpose of the census, the map, and the museum are to structurally define, make visible, and keep track of everyone in colonial territories. The assumption is that everything, everywhere, can be acquired, bound, determined, counted, and displayed. Together, the census, map, and museum shed light on the all-encompassing system of classification, which can be applied with infinite adaptability to anything within the actual or potential jurisdiction of the state: populations, territories, religions and spiritual traditions, languages, goods, monuments (Anderson, 1991), and museums. This logic is visible in the case of the looted Benin Bronzes, where colonial frameworks have historically dictated their display and interpretation, prompting repatriation efforts that seek to restore Nigerian communities' authority to tell their own stories and reclaim what is rightfully theirs.

Museums as Agents of Power

As described by Peggy Levitt (2015), museums make the world a better place. Museums function as institutionalized power, where the institutions justify

themselves, the state legitimizes its authority through them, and Anglo individuals (including museum visitors) reinforce their social, economic, and cultural dominance through them. In this way, the museum is a mirror that reinforces preexisting hierarchies and notions of world order. Museums are deeply embedded in structures of racial capitalism and settler colonialism (Lee, 2022). They have long served as instruments of colonial violence, reimagining white European atrocities through narratives of benign curiosity and masquerades of respect for occupied, annihilated, and colonized cultures (Lee, 2022). These curious (i.e. fetish) yet authoritative narratives are integral to the authority, aesthetics, and entrenched nature of museums (Lee, 2022).

In an era marked by heightened global economic crisis, war, genocide, and massive waves of migration (followed by mass deportations), museums are portrayed as playing a positive role in helping humans foster tolerance and understand cultural differences (Dewdney, 2017). As Dewdney (2017) discusses, museums function as institutions of power, mediating cultural authority and shaping public understanding of other cultures through their selective representation (exhibitions, displays, texts, accompanying media) (Dewdney, 2017). Museums are complex cultural assemblages showcasing cultural collections and global heritage to visitors. They play a crucial role in facilitating the interaction, engagement, and interpretation of diverse and culturally distinct groups of people who are globally distant and may otherwise never have the opportunity to be exposed to one another.

Museums play a significant role in shaping how citizens see themselves and other cultures in both similar and distinctly unique ways. Therefore, the ways museums portray cultures through artifacts on display is deeply important. The practices within museums reinforce dominant cultural narratives while marginalizing alternative perspectives—the “dominant” refers to Anglo-European and “alternative” encompasses all others who fall outside of that framework. We see this reinforced in the way museums devote multiple wings—and even individual halls—to European art, breaking down into highly specific categories such as decor from a particular era, clothing or regalia, while all of Africa, Asia, the Pacific and Oceania are grouped together in much broader, less differentiated galleries. Cultures are segregated, not necessarily to highlight their uniqueness or justify dedicated space to celebrate and study the complexity of varying cultures. Rather, they are separated to emphasize how the ‘Other’ differs from Europeans. The separation is both physical—material—and intellectual—immaterial. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, the arts of Africa, Oceania and the ancient Americas are housed together, while European collections are physically and conceptually separated from these regions.

The Met is one of many museums designed to separate the ‘Other’ from the European, while also conflating all non-Europeans into one broad sweeping category. This segregation reinforces a hierarchical, Eurocentric framework in museum display practices that reinforces us versus them—or in direct colonialist language, primitive versus civilized. Considering museums’ institutional

perspective helps contribute to a growing venerable tradition of thinking about the social role of museums as places where the civic is enacted and valued (Dewdney, 2016) (Levitt, 2015, p. 10). This highlights the need to continue the legacy of interrogating museums, critically assessing their roles in perpetuating colonial narratives, and challenge the existing power structures of museums.

Critics are increasingly scrutinizing museums for their “unexamined narratives of nation, empire, and colonialism that are implicit in their collections and continued in representational displays” (Dewdney, 2017, p. 30). Critique has primarily focused on the “Eurocentric and imperialist world views, contained by what has and has not been collected and displayed in national museums” (Dewdney, 2017). It is crucial to closely examine the origins of museums and their historical wrongdoings in many communities worldwide to determine if this worldview persists. The connections that museums establish or dissolve with various groups of people significantly influence which artifacts are exhibited and how they are portrayed within the institution.

The scrutiny museums face over their implicit narratives of nation, empire, and colonialism highlights the urgent need to study their discourse. My focus on the Benin Bronzes, in particular, examines how museums both forge and fracture relationships with the communities they engage. The dynamics involved in determining which artifacts are displayed and how they are represented within cultural institutions profoundly impact collective perceptions and understandings. By delving into this discourse, I contribute to a broader comprehension of the intricate interplay between museums, their narratives, and the cultural heritage

they curate. As agents of power, museums play a pivotal role in showcasing humanity's diverse cultures, histories, and artistic expressions to the world.

Museums are Entrenched Institutions

Regarded as neutral, safe spaces, museums often host racial, geographical, religious, and cultural negotiations. Typically, museums' established goal or mission is to "educate visitors" and to "convey the history and visual identity and expression to a wide set of viewers" (Johnson & Pettway, 2017, p. 351). Museums were established to provide comprehensive education on diverse cultures, art, and histories. However, they have often operated on the premise that history is unchanging and uniform, promoting a total history that disregards or fails to account for specific details and variations at particular moments and locations. Instead of providing a thorough understanding of nearby and distant cultures, museums adhere to the notion of a fixed history that "overlooks details and differences at particular places and times" (Philo, 1992, p. 210)

High levels of public trust in museums have been sustained throughout the 21st century. According to the American Alliance of Museums (American Alliance of Museums, 2021), "museums consistently rank among the most trusted institutions in the U.S." (American Alliance of Museums, 2021). The Museums and Trust Report (2021) revealed that "museums are the number one trusted source of information" (American Alliance of Museums, 2021). This finding confirms that "the public continues to regard museums as highly trustworthy—ranking second only to friends and family—and significantly more

trustworthy than researchers and scientists, NGOs generally, various news organizations, the government, corporations and business, and social media” (American Alliance of Museums, 2021). An illuminating finding in the report is that this high level of trust is consistent across “museums of all types, from art museums to zoos” (American Alliance of Museums, 2021). The public’s trust in museums applies to museums regardless of size, topic, location, or affiliation. “The top three reasons cited as contributing to this blanket trust are that museums are fact-based, present real/authentic/original objects, and are research-oriented” (American Alliance of Museums, 2021).

This report also revealed that there is a nonpartisan trust in museums for “people who identify as conservative, moderate, and liberal” (American Alliance of Museums, 2021), primarily attributed to the belief that museums are “nonpartisan/neutral” institutions. In response to the role of museums’ stance on important issues, a generalized public attitude surrounding neutrality emerged in the report. While the report also revealed that museum-goers, defined as people who “indicated they had visited a museum in the past two years,” believe that museums “have a point of view,” it also revealed that people think “museums should always be neutral” (American Alliance of Museums, 2021), with emphasis being placed on should. Overall, the “people who think museums are neutral express higher levels of trust (in organizations overall, and in museums specifically) are two times more likely to consider museums to be credible sources of information than people who believe museums have a specific agenda” (American Alliance of Museums, 2021).

Museums are responsible for curating how the public begins to approach, understand, and negotiate with the world around them. The public's view of museums as trustworthy, neutral, and credible sources of information signifies that museums' curation and exhibition practices have an insurmountable impact on how visitors comprehend the information being presented to them. The meaning imparted to visitors remains with the visitor. Even after they depart the museum, the public continuously derives meaning from the museum's exhibitions. The particular narratives that museums push forward regarding history, culture, art, and people remain with the audience as they encounter new interpretations and experiences. As audiences navigate new encounters, they grapple with the enduring influence of the museum's curation practices. Their interactions with the museum shape their understanding, placing visitors in a suspended state of unconscious negotiation and comprehension dictated by the museum.

Museums' cultural objects have meaning, and that meaning is translated through the lens of the museum and onto its audience. As trusted institutions, the meanings put forth by museums are influential and authoritative. The interpretations conveyed by museums persistently embed themselves within audiences, evolving and resurfacing over time. The trust bestowed upon museums gives them access and influence over how the public views information about the world. "Museums craft their dialogue with the public around the positions they take" (American Alliance of Museums, 2021), reinforcing how museums shape the grammar, language, and discourse embedded in museums,

particularly about nations, history, and how cultures should be viewed and understood. Perceiving museums as neutral, the public understands the world in a way that reflects the deliberate curation practices of museums' world views. Unchallenged and uncontested, the public interprets the atmosphere of culture, interests, and beliefs that the museum presents to them. The general public's perception of these institutions is significantly influenced or shaped by the context within which they encounter them.

Negotiated Readings in Museums

As Scott (2007) explains, Museum audiences actively derive meanings that are consistent with a dominant ethos put forth by the museum. Museum curators circulate images, histories, and imaginings of an ancestral Africa and of an 'Otherized' colonized land to the public. Museums circulate antiquated, partial histories, allowing visitors to 'pick up' these partial narratives and carry them with them as they leave (Scott, 2007, p.3). These "common interpretive frameworks structure how museum audiences, with varied intersecting identities, come to understand" (Scott, 2007, p.2) museum exhibitions and comprehend or make connections to larger narratives about culture and history. Focusing on natural history and art museums, the "public perceptions of African origins have long been saturated by fantastic notions of exotic and bestial African people, the troublesome manifestations of Victorian social-evolutionist lore" (Scott, 2007, p.2). Museums have projected a Victorian subconscious onto the entire world that has proliferated and become normalized.

Colonial origins are embedded into the foundation of museums and are reinforced in museums' spaces, making them difficult to combat. Because of this, museums are being pressured to rewrite their acquisition, curatorial, and exhibition practices with the hope that more ethical and consensual practices will emerge. Unfortunately, those aiming to integrate thoughtful and comprehensive textual information into exhibition descriptions must adhere to strict guidelines regarding what can or cannot be included (Parry, 2013). Additionally, there are strict limitations on word count for exhibition displays and exhibition labels, creating additional challenges to navigate for those trying to rewrite partial narratives.

The content that is omitted is equally as crucial as the content included in exhibition descriptions. The selective nature of what is excluded can significantly impact visitors' understanding and interpretation of the exhibited materials. Deliberate exclusions can shape perceptions and contribute to the types of narratives constructed by the museum, influencing how audiences engage with and interpret the displayed artifacts and information. Therefore, what the museums choose to include or omit is critical—not only in shaping visitors' experiences within the museum, but also in influencing how the institution presents itself through digital platforms, websites, and other public texts. Interrogating these texts is crucial, as they reveal what museums are saying and not saying, what actions they are taking and not taking, and how they perpetuate or challenge colonial frameworks. This analysis forms the crux of my research into the Swiss Benin Initiative, focusing on how the Initiative's practices are

communications reflect—or fail to reflect—a truly decolonial approach to repatriation and engagement with communities.

While there is a narrative of human progress hardwired into the structure of museums, sometimes “visitors are active ideological agents projecting their own complex meanings onto exhibitions” (Scott, 2007, p. 2). Museum exhibitions are interpreted through visitors’ “prior experiences, culturally learned beliefs, values, and perceptions” (Scott, 2007, p.3). Exhibitions may undergo reinterpretations, renegotiations, or oppositional readings due to the preexisting notions that museum visitors bring with them. The visitors having an oppositional reading of museum exhibitions are part of a niche “interpretive community” (Scott, 2007).

As Scott (2007) explains, some interpret the museum through a unique lens that critiques the structure of the museum and the relationship between the museum, the exhibition, and the audience. Because of this, the meanings being ‘read’ by audiences “are socially constructed and profoundly shaped by visitors’ previous insights and experiences” (Scott, 2007, p.2), i.e., the prior knowledge that visitors bring with them. As Karp & Lavine (1991) explain, “diverse individuals bring unique understandings to the museum exhibitions. Therefore, when people enter museums, they do not leave their cultures and identities in the coatroom” (p. 22). Moreover, when people enter museums they do not passively respond to or always ‘read’ the exhibitions as intended either.

To facilitate their own comprehension, certain narratives will situate themselves prominently within interpretive communities. These narratives may

predominate “museum visitor’s perception” (Scott, 2007, p.2) or the preferred reading of the museum as interpretive visitors navigate the museum. However, even within niche interpretive communities, most museum audiences derive the dominant meanings that are reinforced by the museum’s curatorial practices. This is because there are “patterns and limitations to the universe of meanings” (Scott, 2007, p. 2) that visitors can infer and negotiate. The dominant readings—portraying a pre-colonial, pre-civilized past—put forth and encouraged by museums are critical in maintaining the globalized influencing power of the museum.

As audiences encounter exhibitions, they are faced with the challenge of reorganizing their knowledge. This act of reorganizing knowledge and experience is “an aspect of exhibition experience” (Karp & Lavine, 1991, p. 22). This also means that “audiences do not bring to exhibits the full range of cultural resources (cultural competency) necessary for comprehending them” (Karp & Lavine, 1991, p. 22). As Karp & Lavine (1991) go on to explain, audiences lack cultural competency, and their preexisting knowledge is being confronted and possibly reorganized. This means “audiences are left with two choices: either they define their experience of the exhibition to fit with their existing categories of knowledge, or they reorganize their categories to fit better with their experience” (Karp & Lavine, 199, p. 22) visiting the museum and taking in the information presented to them.

While museum visitors bring outside frameworks into the museum, what is most important is maintaining the lore of the museum. “Museum visitors are

situated within the culture of museums” (Scott, 2007, p. 2), meaning visitors also “bring the idea of the museum itself to the museum—vague notions of the institution’s grand or intimidating history and specific recollections of its past politics and exhibitions” (Scott, 2007, p. 4). Museumgoers are “attracted to the authority of museums” (Karp & Lavine, 1991, p. 7). The elaborate exhibitions and prestigious atmosphere of museums are closely linked to visitors' trust in institutions, their belief in an entirely accurate historical narrative, and the authority attributed to museums. From art museums to natural history museums and ethnographic museums, the museum’s identity and public image “is intricately bound to politics of race, class, culture, and history—a political matrix that affects the museum visiting experience, engaging some while marginalizing others” (Scott,2007, p. 4).

Museums serve a tripartite function bound to the politics, curation practices, and power structures embedded within the museum. These institutions select objects, preserve them for posterity, and provide access to future audiences. However, the collections that result from these processes are not (and can never be) neutral or objective (Pauwels, 2023). Since the act of selecting is inevitably shaped by how objects are valued as cultural commodities, cultural objects are neither neutral nor vapid. Historical biases, social pressures, material survivance, and power structures determine who controls what is preserved, why, and for whom. This means that all museums carry the residue of the circumstances of their formation. Specifically in the United States and throughout the Western world, the legacies of colonialism, racism, and slavery

shape what collections do and do not contain, molding what meanings are to be derived and inferred (Pauwels, 2023). More often than not, the derived meanings reflect an Anglo-Western ideology concerning people and history.

The anthropologists, historians, and curators working with these collections must develop critical strategies for repairing the resulting absences, erasures, and false histories. These cultural objects convey to us—the audience—what meanings are to be assumed about the world. This is intrinsically connected to where and whom objects were looted from, where objects are currently located (usually under the possession of colonizing nations), and how meaning and knowledge are extracted, displayed, and disseminated.

Museums produce meaning, often shaped by a “dizzying array of institutional, historical, cultural, popular, religious, political, and personal dimensions” (Scott, 2007, p. 4). Public trust in museums underscores the significance of understanding how museum discourse and exhibition practices construct this meaning. Some museums are trying to transform their Enlightenment and Victorian-era ethos. This is in part due to an increasingly diverse audience who brings a multitude of shifting identities and ideological frameworks about history, culture, and art into the museum with them. Part of this shift has led to the decolonizing museum movements (and a growing practice of iconoclasm), which include calls to repatriate looted artifacts and human remains, to have reflections of resistance and joy included in collections and archives, and to rewrite fraught historical narratives.

The collecting practices of museums—rooted in colonialism, looting, illegal trade, and enslavement—reveal the complex process through which objects like the Benin Bronzes have been acquired and displayed. Although audience reception is not the primary focus of the study, it is important to recognize that visitors interpret museum narratives in diverse ways, highlighting the stakes of curatorial authority. Decolonial approaches, as exemplified by repatriation and collaborative practices, seek to redistribute this authority, allowing communities to participate in shaping the narratives about their culture—or, in line with Glissant (1990), to assert a right to withhold certain knowledge and maintain opacity over making visible all aspects of their heritage.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Applying Method to Answer Questions

In this chapter, I explain how I used critical discourse analysis to examine the ideologies embedded in the Swiss Benin Initiative's discourse on the looted Benin Bronzes. During analysis, I examined patterns in how museums discuss the history and provenance of the Benin Bronzes, acknowledge their colonial legacies, and engage with issues of looted artifacts and repatriation. Ultimately, I have explored how these institutions navigate the decolonial repatriation of the Bronzes, which were taken during colonial looting.

Discourse Defined

The term discourse has been defined in different ways by various scholars. Discourse is used to "emphasize the fact that every social configuration is meaningful" (Mouffe & Laclau, 1985, p. 100). Discourse is about more than language or words. Rather, discourse is about the production of knowledge alongside the production of meaning (Hall, 1997, p. 42). Foucault conceptualizes discourse as being concerned with where meaning comes from (Foucault, 1976). Discourse can also be defined as "ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images, and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society" (Hall, 1997, p.4). What is true across various definitions of discourse is that discourse is concerned with *how* language is used to give meaning to everyday

practices of life, objects, and culture. Critical discourse analysis takes these definitions to study the social, cultural, and power dynamics embedded within discourse.

Discourse in museums includes many things, from social media posts to exhibition labels, books published by the museum, media releases, exhibition write-ups and research reports—which I analyze. From the use of blue-green oceanic colors to reconnect with lost ancestral ties in the *In Dialogue With Benin* exhibition, to the location of where colonial complicity is mentioned in a media release—both of which will be analyzed in upcoming sections—these various forms of discourse and aesthetic choices produce different meanings. Museums' discourse is ultimately concerned with what audiences derive from the museum (Karp & Lavine, 1991, p. 15). I focus on how museums embed and shape meaning in public textual content, mindful that “the struggle is not only over what is to be represented but over who will control the means of representing” (Karp & Lavine, 1991, p. 15).

Although there are many forms of discourse, the most important discourse in museums to study are their public-facing texts, all of which are made available on museums' websites. Museums have begun to rely on websites to convey vital information to visitors and to reach a larger audience, unrestricted by physical site visits. The particular texts found on museums' websites are important to critically understand since they reach a broad audience, and the texts do not have to abide by physical space limitations, strict word counts, or formulaic label restrictions. These public-facing texts are important because they represent the

meanings, actions, and sentiments the museum wants to present to the public. Understanding how the museum presents itself through public texts is crucial to my study because the meaning that the museum 'puts out there' reflects how the museum wants to be seen, what it represents, and reflects its ideologies. This concept of public image is analyzed in depth, with a focus on its unique application to the carefully curated presentation of Switzerland and the Swiss Benin Initiative.

Theorizing Critical Discourse

Critical research analyzes power relations, uncovers societal inequities, and explains specific socio-cultural relations and meanings. Like all critical research, critical discourse analysis (CDA) focuses on the underlying ideologies that give meaning to the world around us and the ideological formations that "play a role in either the reproduction of or resistance against dominance or inequality" (Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018, p.13). Critical discourse analysis is an issue-oriented approach used to investigate "social problems such as sexism, racism, and other forms of social inequality" (Van Dijk, 2003, cited in Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018, p.12).

Being an interdisciplinary, "explicitly critical approach, position, or stance of studying text and talk," CDA focuses on the "relations between discourse and society" (Van Dijk, 2003, cited in Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018, p.12), by "uncovering, revealing or disclosing what is implicit, hidden or not immediately obvious" (Van Dijk, 2003, cited in Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018, p.13). In this way, CDA focuses on "manipulation, legitimation, the manufacture of consent and

other discursive ways to influence the minds (and indirectly the actions) of people in the interest of the powerful” (Van Dijk, 2003, cited in Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018, p.13).

Critical discourse analysis is used in many studies, from history to art, politics, and communication and is used to investigate themes across the fields of cultural studies, decolonial theory, and race and gender studies, among others. Researchers using CDA “are looking for patterns that emerge across various observations... and these patterns or themes are the essence of qualitative research because they provide the core sense of what the findings indicate and a useful way to characterize relationships” (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020, p. 350). While adjacent fields like linguistics, rhetoric studies, or textual analysis were insufficient at implementing criticism, CDA filled a gap by focusing on rigorous critical analysis by analyzing “social problems and the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 96).

Critical discourse analysis is concerned with the relationship between language and power, making it concerned with “analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in language” (Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018, p.11). CDA analyzes the descriptive language alongside the “interpretation of discourse in context” (Rogers, 2004, p. 3) to explain why and how discourse works to create, maintain, or reify unequal power relations. Ultimately, CDA is focused on the meanings that are produced, embedded, and understood, the ideologies that

form as a result of certain uses of language, and the dynamics of power that appear or are often hidden.

When performing a CDA of museum texts, I repurpose the term discourse to emphasize the fact that “every social configuration is meaningful” (Mouffe & Laclau, 1985, p. 100). As Mouffe and Laclau (1985) argue, “physical objects do exist, but they have no fixed meaning: they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse” (Hall, 1997, p. 45). As an example, we can consider how a carved decorated piece of wood is a wood carving (a physical object), but when that carved wood is displayed in a museum alongside a sign detailing that this is a unique carving created with a cultural purpose, and made during a specific time and place, the wood carving becomes an artifact. Within the context of the museum setting, a wood carving is more than a physical object; it becomes an artifact on display and a valuable work of art; both the meaning and the name of the object change once placed inside a museum.

In this example, the museum determined both the name and meaning of the wood carving, not the community that produced it. This highlights the broader issue in museum discourse: the interpretation of objects is often detached from provenance and community-defined meaning, resulting in separation between museum narratives and the cultures they represent. Within museum discourse, objects acquire new interpretations that are divorced from their communities. This also illustrates how the act of placing an object in a museum fundamentally changes its state of being, speaking to Robinson (2020) and Vilensky, (2012).

Artifacts play an unwilling, unknowing part in a larger story that museums try to create through their visual displays and textual materials.

Importantly, there are cultural resources, differing skill sets, and limitations involved with “the production and appreciation of objects” (Karp & Lavine, 1991, p. 20), especially given that we cannot assume “the way we experience exotic objects in contemporary settings is similar to the way such objects are or were experienced in their original settings” (Karp, 1991, p. 21). Physical things exist, “but they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse” (Hall, 1997, p. 45). As explained by Karp (1991):

“All exhibitions are inevitably organized on the basis of assumptions about the intentions of the objects’ producers, the cultural skills and qualifications of the audience, the claims to authoritativeness made by the exhibition, and judgments of the aesthetic merit or authenticity of the objects or settings exhibited.” (p. 12)

Discourse embeds meaning and representation in objects, and it is impossible to determine the meaning of an object outside of its context of use. All of the various ways critical discourse analysis is conceived, and the different approaches it entails, were useful for understanding and applying the method as I critically analyzed texts. I drew from scholars who use critical discourse analysis to study meanings, language, and museums, focusing on the institutions themselves, the texts they produce, and the meanings embedded within them.

Focus of Collected Data: The Swiss Benin Initiative

The first step in conducting a critical discourse analysis was deciding what to focus on. As Boyle and Schmierbach (2020) explain, most research design

involves “having to select a subset - or sample - of [the] population” that is being studied “in order for the research project to be feasible” (p. 187). My research design draws on a deliberate representative sample, “which is a selected group of individuals who make up a subset of a larger population, chosen with the expectation that the characteristics of the sample can be used to describe the traits of the overall population” (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020, p. 187). A deliberate, or purposive, sampling targets specific types of individuals to include within the study” (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020, p. 205). The population of museums I am studying “represents the group of individuals about whom to draw conclusions” (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020, p. 196) about. The purpose of my dissertation guided how I “made decisions about the research process, including those of sampling and the representativeness of the sample” (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020, p. 189). When choosing a sample, it was important that I “ensured that the sample is as representative as possible” (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020, p. 189) of the theoretical purpose of my dissertation.

Therefore, my sample was selected to explore how the Swiss Benin Initiative engages with the looted Benin Bronzes in their collections and implement strategies to decolonize their spaces. There are eight institutions in possession of looted Benin Bronzes in Switzerland. Together, these eight museums have formed the Swiss Benin Initiative. Although the eight Swiss museums act as a singular, unified voice, Museum Rietberg is leading the SBI communication efforts. For example, both the Museum der Kulturen Basel and the Ethnographic Museum direct those interested in learning more about SBI to

press releases that Museum Rietberg has released. Beyond Museum Rietberg, I focused my analysis on texts produced by the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) and the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum, the two other museums leading efforts within the SBI. All three museums have produced numerous texts about their roles and research within the initiative.

The Swiss Benin Initiative represents a pioneering model for how museums can collaboratively approach the sensitive issue of repatriation, particularly in the context of the looted Benin Bronzes. The Swiss Benin Initiative stands out due to its collective framework, where multiple museums have come together to engage in discussions and actions around the repatriation of Benin Bronzes. Switzerland is novel in the unification of eight museums across the country to form an initiative that focuses exclusively on the repatriation and restitution of the Benin Bronzes.

The Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI) illustrates how museums are beginning to decolonize their institutions through both repatriation and collaborative practices. Examining these museums allowed for a focused investigation of their colonial histories, the looting that shaped their collections, and the ongoing repatriation of the Bronzes. This approach enabled a critical assessment of the successes and limitations of repatriation efforts, illuminating the complex challenges museums face in addressing the enduring and complex legacies of colonialism

The Swiss Benin Initiative provided a concentrated case study that allowed for a nuanced exploration of how museums are grappling with identity crises in the context of decolonizing through repatriation. The collaborative

nature of the initiative, involving multiple Swiss museums, offers a clear representation of how institutions are collectively negotiating their roles in addressing historical injustices. This hyper-focused sample is thus essential in helping me understand how museums are reshaping their public and institutional identities, particularly in their commitment to ethical, decolonial practices. In the following section, I detail my sampling frame, and I explain my decision-making behind choosing the textual content I analyzed.

Repatriation on Screen: Using Film to Communicate

Film operates as a form of visual discourse, communicating debates over looted artifacts and repatriation through powerful visual storytelling. It translates abstract issues such as colonialism, international art theft, and cultural survivance into accessible narratives that resonate with broad audiences. Having earned my bachelor's degree in Media Studies from Hunter College, where I took film courses, I am particularly attuned to the theoretical and analytical frameworks used to study visual communication. This background informs my ability to analyze film as a vital mode of discourse—one that both reflects and shapes public understanding of complex ethical and historical issues.

Films such as *Black Girl*, *Statues Also Die*, and *Dahomey* not only depict the political tensions surrounding repatriation but also reveal its profound spiritual, cultural and emotional significance for source communities. They bridge emotion and history, allowing viewers to grasp the affective dimensions of cultural loss and return. The university of Zurich Ethnographic Museum exemplifies this approach through its restitution in five films series, which uses

film as a medium to explore repatriation across diverse regions and historical moments. Through this series, the museum highlights the emotional and ethical complexities of restitution in ways that textual analysis alone cannot capture. By privileging visual and emotional storytelling, the museum demonstrates how film can function as a decolonial practice—centering marginalized perspectives, conveying complexity, and humanizing the process of restitution. With a critical discourse analysis framework, film itself can thus be understood as text that shapes public understanding, reproduces or challenges power and offers a visual space to imagine decolonial futures.

Textual Corpora Analyzed from the Swiss Benin Initiative

The next step in conducting a critical discourse analysis was selecting the textual content to analyze. I examined publicly available texts produced by each of the three institutions being studied: the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB), Museum Rietberg, and the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum. The texts analyzed include media releases on the progress of the Swiss Benin Initiative and the texts detailing research and collaboration efforts. The media releases, exhibition materials, research reports and other write-ups were used to explore the SBI's approach to repatriation of the Benin Bronzes in their collections and to explore their articulation of the museums' mission, purpose, and decolonial efforts thus far.

Reports, media releases, and other official write-ups each serve distinct purposes and offer varied insights into how the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI) approaches the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes. Reports provide in-depth

analysis of their actions and provide detailed itemized accounts of the looted Bronzes across the eight SBI museums' collections. As an example of a write-up, I analyzed exhibition texts produced by the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum about the *Benin Dues* exhibition which provided rich details about the Pan-African approach taken by the museum. As another example of a research material, we can turn to a research report titled *Benin Collection Latest Research*, located on Museum Rietberg's website. This is a central material I analyzed which offered a detailed explanation of the current research between Museum Rietberg and researchers from Benin City. This report—which is analyzed in-depth in my Findings chapter—provides insight into the type of reparative research work that Museum Rietberg is doing, and importantly, the lapses in knowledge and gaps present in the research collaboration.

Media materials highlight key milestones for public awareness, denoting them as the knowledge that SBI feels is most pertinent to succinctly make available for the mass public globally. There were three media releases produced on behalf of the SBI: January 2021, a media release distributed when the SBI was first created, announcing the launch, which I reference to explain what the SBI is and to use as evidence of inconsistencies; February 2023, a media release distributed to announce the SBI's research findings, which I analyze; and a media release announcing the opening of the exhibition, *In Dialogue With Benin*, which I also analyze.

Media releases are important to collect and analyze since they are the documents presented to the public to speak for and represent the museum in the

most forward-facing manner. While my analysis does not focus on audience reception, the very nature of a media release—as a public-facing document intended for broad distribution—means that it carries significant weight in shaping public understanding. Drawing on Hall's (1980) notion of negotiated meanings, the choices of what to include, omit, and emphasize are not neutral; they position the audience to interpret the text in particular ways, even if those interpretations are not wholly predetermined. This heightens the importance of what is included, omitted, and emphasized, and allowed me to infer interpretations of such texts.

Additionally, as I analyzed texts produced by the three museums, I closely reviewed each institution's history and mission. Mission statements frame the Initiative as well as the museums' identity, revealing how each museum envisions itself, the role of each museum within the Swiss Benin Initiative, and the goals and aims that each museum has for its visitors and as a participating institution in the SBI. Understanding the history and mission of each museum is especially important since two of the three museums studied are ethnographic museums—museums with very problematic histories, as discussed in Part II: A Swiss Focus – Understanding What and Ethnographic Museum Is. The mission of the museum is very important in understanding the identity of the museums, specifically how the museums' mission aligns or misaligns with their participation in the SBI, their repatriation efforts, and the communication they are putting out.

Collectively, these texts are evidence of the discourse, motives, and intentions of the SBI, including how the SBI is engaging with the contentious ethical dilemma of looted artifacts and the limitations and efforts of repatriation

and reparative work. These various texts work in tandem to reveal how the SBI is handling repatriation of the Benin Bronzes and how the SBI is positioning itself as a global emblem in communicating its reparative efforts and in handling the decolonial act of repatriation.

Using Swiss Museums' Websites to Locate Texts

I retrieved my textual evidence from each museum's website, since most textual evidence published by the museum, including reports, research updates, and other public-facing press releases and statements are made accessible via their websites. I used the individual websites to compile textual evidence such as: web pages, digitized press releases, official write-ups, and reports on the status of the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes, their acquisition history, and provenance; updates on ongoing Benin Bronzes focused research initiatives; and itemized lists of looted objects released by the Swiss Benin Initiative. Compiling and analyzing this information allowed me to understand how each museum describes the research and activities being done as part of the SBI.

Museums have increasingly begun to rely on websites to reach a wider audience. Websites allow museums to “extend their educational mission” (Johnson & Pettway, 2017, p. 351) since museums ability to educate visitors is often “limited by the museum’s geographic range” (Johnson & Pettway, 2017, p. 351). The emergence of these digital formats extends the institutions' outreach to museum audiences who may not have the opportunity to visit in person. Analyzing and understanding the information available on museum websites is crucial as it enables insights into reaching a broader audience, thereby

highlighting the significance of digital platforms in disseminating cultural knowledge and heritage to a diverse global audience.

As a media and communication scholar, I find the museums' capacity to convey information about artifacts, cultural identity, and various forms of expression to a broad audience beyond their physical confines particularly intriguing. Websites provide access to vast amounts of textual information produced by the museum, from press releases to detailed object descriptions. As can be seen with The Met, which has made archival texts from the early 20th century accessible on their website, websites also serve as a historical database or digital archive holding all the digitized textual materials produced by the museum. The use of databases as a decolonial digital tool and for repatriation transparency is explored in my conclusion.

Websites can be seen as large online repositories where information, such as institutional statements, exhibition history, and descriptions of objects within the museum, are stored and made accessible to website visitors. Museums' websites are more than just assorted web pages with information pertaining to admission fees and opening hours. They are extensive online repositories, giving visitors access to everything from their collections, including what is currently on display, previous displays, object's locations (in storage, location in the museum), press releases and other institutional statements, events (past, present, upcoming), exhibition descriptions, object descriptions, and much more. Therefore, I am utilizing the search function on the museum's website to access their collection of assorted institutional texts. This method grants me access to

extensive stored information and facilitates the effortless retrieval and collection of desired data. As a student researcher, accessing texts through websites offers several advantages: centralized access, diverse content, updated information, accessibility, and search functionality.

Data Collection & Organization Process

I began collecting data by identifying the eight museums that are part of the Swiss Benin Initiative. From there, I collected textual content produced by each institution. To find and compile the textual content, I individually searched each museums' website for information related to the Benin Bronzes using their built-in search feature. The documents and web pages related to the Benin Bronzes were downloaded, saved as PDFs, named, dated with the published date (if made available), and organized into folders by their corresponding institution.

Since web pages change and online documents are susceptible to removal, it was important that all the content I analyzed was saved to prevent it from being lost. Additionally, while media releases are always dated, other write-ups, such as those about exhibitions, are not always dated. Once a web page is removed there is no way to retrieve content from the respective museums' website. As I searched and compiled textual content about the Bronzes my guiding questions were: how are eight SBI museums discussing the Benin Bronzes and what observable details am I able to discern as I perform a critical discourse analysis?

Performing a Critical Discourse Analysis

To perform a critical discourse analysis, I began by reading the compiled texts individually by museum—starting with the Museum der Kulturen Basel, followed by Museum Rietberg, and then the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum. As explained earlier, all the analyzed content was downloaded, saved, and organized by museum. Having a saved version of all text to access allowed me to annotate the documents: leaving notes, posing valuable questions to ask myself and investigate further, adding details, observations, and writing down any connections I formed to other SBI documents I read. After reading the texts, I referenced my notes on each document as I wrote my analysis and continued my research. I continuously referenced reading materials about the history of the Bronzes in books such as *The British Museum: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (Hicks, 2020), *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes* (Phillips, 2021), *The Whole Picture: The colonial story of the art in our museums & why we need to talk about it* (Procter, 2020), *The Museum of Other People* (Kuper, 2023), among many other articles and helpful texts, all of which take a different approach to studying decolonizing museums, colonial acquisitions, repatriation and the colonial history in museums.

During the analysis process, documents were analyzed for thematic patterns, the presence or absence of certain details, repetition, conflicting or misleading statements, among other embedded information. Additionally, I assessed whether the museums provided details about the acquisition history of the Benin Bronzes, including how they were looted, transported, and eventually

ended up in their collections, paying close attention to how the SBI museums directly address or negate this. To complement my critical discourse analysis, I incorporated relevant numerical data that provided additional context to the ongoing repatriation initiative, such as how many Benin Bronzes each museum possesses and how many Bronzes have been repatriated back.

Considering the historical perspectives of museums, colonialism discourse was another focal point during analysis. I discerned patterns pertaining to how SBI museums discuss colonialism and colonial histories by examining the historical perspective they adopted. I analyzed which aspects of colonialism are addressed and how they are portrayed. During analysis, I kept asking myself: How can I discern the SBI's stance on the looted Benin Bronzes in their collection? What other important characteristics, both ideologies and actions, are reflected in this text? Do their public statements reflect attempts to decolonize their institutions?

Given that "identifying key themes can take some time" (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020, p. 350), iterative adjustments and refinements were necessary during the close reading. As Boyle & Schmierbach (2020) explain, "the unique challenge of analyzing themes is in the process of understanding the meaning of potentially complex and highly detailed texts" (p. 351). This also means that the interpretation of themes were ultimately shaped, in part, by the theoretical perspective I took when conducting the analysis (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020, p. 351).

As explained, the Benin Bronzes are a contentious collection of cultural artifacts layered with meanings tied to their place of provenance—the Kingdom of Benin, their looting as a result of British colonial powers, as well as contemporary meanings related to the commodification of cultural artifacts and growing pressure from international coalitions to repatriate looted artifacts. As I analyzed texts, I remained aware of the historical details that did or did not emerge about the Benin Bronzes, including their origin, provenance, cultural significance, colonial ties, and the events that led to their theft, migration, and ultimate arrival in the collections of the eight Swiss museums.

A Brief Positionality Statement

With over a decade of experience in marketing, communication, and public relations, I bring a qualified practitioner’s insight into the study of institutional communication. Having worked to craft and manage public-facing messages for clients across sectors—including NGOs, political organizations, nonprofits, corporations, and individual activists and authors—I am well-positioned to critically analyze how institutions construct and maintain their public image. My research merges this professional expertise with scholarly inquiry to examine how museums communicate their missions, ethics, and decolonial commitments to the public. Drawing on over ten years of professional experience, I approach this research with an awareness of both the power and strategy embedded in institutional messaging. Having worked professionally to shape public narratives for clients, I now turn that lens toward museums themselves. This background uniquely positions me to critically assess how

institutions manage their public image and communicate their ethical commitments.

My professional career began in the fashion industry, where I worked at one of the leading fashion public relations firms, PR Consulting, and later as an operations assistant at Tiffany & Co. This early experience deepened my understanding— and informed my sensitivity to the nuances—of how branding, presentation, and consumer perception shape public narratives. For instance, while the Swiss Benin Initiative's mention of acquiring an artifact from a high-end department store may appear like a minor, insignificant detail my familiarity with retail and luxury merchandising practices made this statement stand out as highly unusual. Department stores do not typically sell unbranded artifacts or allow private sellers to operate within them, which raises important questions about the realities of acquisition histories and the presentation of such acquisitions. This detail, while seemingly small, illustrates how my professional background uniquely equips me to recognize and interrogate inconsistencies in institutional communication that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Critically Analyzing Museum Discourse

Critical discourse analysis analyzes the entire discourse—all of the words being used and the omissions—to parse out meaning and uncover the ideologies that are embedded. CDA is concerned with the ways language produces ideology. This means continuously asking what the author is trying to convey, questioning the intended meaning, considering what information may go unnoticed (or is missing), and critiquing what the author hopes the reader will

understand. Performing a CDA means closely paying attention to how history, provenance, and ongoing relationships between the museum itself and the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes are being described and framed.

To do this, I had to balance reading the selected textual content holistically as its own statement that has its own power and influence while also maintaining the reality that these texts are part of a larger narrative. In the textual content put forth by museums, I had to consider that these texts are evidence of a larger communication program that the museum is curating or orchestrating. I also had to bear in mind that these texts may have their own set of motives and discreet agendas. Regardless, for all the textual content being analyzed, I had to critique and compare what is present and what is omitted very carefully. Performing a critical discourse analysis means exploring the surface-level observations and meanings that manifest and latent - more hidden and interpretive meanings (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020, p. 348-9). By doing this, I developed a more thorough understanding of the characteristics and the “different themes present in the content of that text” (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020, p. 349).

These artifacts have centuries-old histories, laced with residues of forced invasion, demolition, murder, theft, expropriation, spectacle display, and contemporary ethical debates. Given that the Benin Bronzes are primarily housed in Western museums that emerged within the boundaries of Western traditions (Karp, 1991, p. 12), it is important to “consider problems that arise when different cultures and perspectives come into contact, as they inevitably do” (Karp, 1991, p. 12). In analyzing museum discourse around the Benin Bronzes, it

is important to remember that the “arguments about whether to privilege context or object, whether to highlight the aesthetics of objects or propositional knowledge about them, or whether a curator’s message about the history of an object and its original context is more authentic than the provenance of the object itself” (Karp & Lavine, 1991, p. 12). Any discourse present about the Benin Bronzes is not isolated but rather interwoven with previous ideologies and historical narratives.

As I began to immerse myself within the embedded meanings present in museums’ discourse, I had to keep in mind that “the words used to tell us about the objects displayed are of critical importance” because they carry with them the “burden of making us feel, hear, smell” (Postman, 1996, p. viii) and understand what we are looking at and comprehending. The discourse put forth by museums is more than a creative interpretation of words or factoids on a website. Rather, the words compensate for experiences and understandings. They carry with them the “resonance to awaken us fully to what is in our presence” (Postman, 1996, P. viii). Texts produced by museums are language put into order and this language promotes a particular ideology. Together—the museums and the texts they produce—are part of the idea that there are rules that accompany objects. Whether they are texts or items on display, the museum creates a system, and that system has rules from which we engage with and take meaning from.

Museums are a form of theater. Therefore, the words they produce “compensate for a sensory experience denied” when visiting the museum since visitors are usually unable to touch, feel, taste, play with, or visit the artifacts in

their place of provenance. This reiterates how, alongside the objects on display, the words themselves work together to create a full story. But, like all words, they can be misdirected, trivialize crucial aspects, neglect to detail the total history, and worsen or even miss the entire point of the object on display (Postman, 1996, p. viii). By viewing the implicit words and examining discourse around the Benin Bronzes as a “forum for re-presentation,” I can interrogate “fundamental assumptions about the exhibition [and discourse] as a medium of and setting for representation” (Karp & Lavine, 1991, p. 12) and process for producing meaning.

The growing public demand and scrutiny around repatriation make this moment especially significant, as museums have never faced this level of attention or external pressure to return cultural artifacts back to their place of provenance. This methods chapter can be viewed as a map that conceptualizes and describes how I methodologically approached my research. In the following sections, I examine how the eight Swiss Benin Initiative museums discursively represent their role in the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes, highlighting both the gaps and the partialities in the knowledge they present, as well as the successes of their ongoing research and repatriation efforts.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Looking at Swiss Museums Jointly: Repairing Reputation and Harm

The Swiss Benin Initiative brings together eight Swiss museums “under the leadership of Museum Rietberg to investigate the provenance of their holdings from the historical Kingdom of Benin in Nigeria” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland*, n.d.). There are eight museums in Switzerland that are in possession of looted Benin Bronzes. They are: Museum Rietberg Zurich, Bernisches Historisches Museum / Einstein Museum (the Bern Historical Museum), Kulturmuseum St.Gallen - Historical and Folklore Museum (formerly Historical and Ethnographic Museum), Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel (the ethnographic museum of Neuchâtel) (MEN), MEG - Musée d'ethnographie de Genève (Geneva Ethnography Museum), the Museum Schloss Burgdorf, Museum der Kulturen Basel (Museum of Cultures Basel) (MKB), and Völkerkundemuseum (University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum). Together, they have joined to form the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI).

According to the Swiss Benin Initiative, their aim is to investigate the origins and biographies of the Benin Bronzes with full transparency and to “generate synergies with a view to future research and dialogue with Nigeria, home of the works in question” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.). The Swiss Benin Initiative strives to “shed light on the contexts of acquisition in the colonial past and to understand Switzerland’s role in the trade of looted art works from Benin City” (Hertzog & Uzebu-Imarhiagbe, 2023). They state that “exchange and dialogue with Nigeria are at

the forefront of this venture” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland*, n.d.). Bringing together a network of museums across Switzerland, the SBI “focuses on postcolonial and cooperative provenance research and accords great importance to cooperation and exchange with Nigeria” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland*, n.d.).

Funded by the Federal Office of Culture (FOC), an administrative unit of the Federal Department of Home Affairs, based in Bern, Switzerland, the Swiss Benin Initiative is the first of its kind. The FOC has two extensive areas of responsibility: promoting Swiss culture and preserving the country’s cultural heritage (*Cultural Policy*, n.d.). The SBI is “the first time that the Swiss Federal Office of Culture is supporting a Switzerland-wide research project on colonial acquisitions from Africa although individual projects on this sensitive topic have already received support in the past” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.). According to the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum, the FOC “focuses on postcolonial and cooperative provenance research” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.).

The Swiss Benin Initiative works to present a cohesive narrative when describing its mission and objectives. The eight Swiss museums collaborating under the SBI umbrella have developed a collective discourse that unites their work on provenance research, reparative collaborations with Nigeria, and public communication to address the ethical and historical complexities of repatriating the Benin Bronzes. While I examined the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI) as a collective effort, I also analyzed select participating institutions individually to

uncover museum-specific perspectives and nuances that may be obscured in the initiatives unified messaging. This dual approach provided a deeper understanding of how repatriation is being framed and enacted across the initiative—on an individual and group level. It also allowed me to identify ideological distinctions between individual museums and the collective narratives disseminated by Museum Rietberg, the primary spokesperson for the SBI.

Among the eight participating museums, five have released some form of public textual material related to the initiative and their roles in its ongoing research and collaboration. These include the Bernisches Historisches Museum - Einstein Museum (the Bern Historical Museum), MEG - Musée d'ethnographie de Genève (Geneva Ethnography Museum), Museum der Kulturen Basel (Museum of Cultures Basel) (MKB), the Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich (the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum), and Museum Rietberg. However, the texts produced by the MEG and the Bern are insubstantial, consisting of only a few documents with very sparse details and insufficient content to analyze.

Only three museums— Museum Rietberg, Museum der Kulturen Basel and the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum—have published substantial public materials that document the initiative's provenance research, discuss the looted Benin Bronzes in Swiss collections, engage with colonial histories, and detail ongoing participation with the Swiss Benin Initiative. Their contributions provide a particularly rich foundation for close analysis. Furthermore, the decision by Swiss museums to work collaboratively through the SBI adds another compelling dimension, positioning this cross-institutional model as a unique and

evolving approach to the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes—and repatriation more broadly—within broader global implications.

My discourse analysis began with a joint document released by the Swiss Benin Initiative, which reflects the unified voice and goals of all eight participating museums. From there, I examine individual documents produced by Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB), Museum Rietberg, and the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum. Each museum has its own relationship with the Benin Bronzes and its own acquisition, collecting, curatorial, and display practices. Analyzing texts from each museum allowed me to identify specific examples that highlight the successes and the shortcomings present in their approaches. The specific texts analyzed present the clearest examples of the various successes and shortcomings that are present across the museums.

Analyzing the February 2023 Media Release

As part of communicating their research findings to the public, the Swiss Benin Initiative has periodically published media releases. Media releases are intended for the public and are accessible on the webpages of the participating SBI museums. Media releases serve as public-facing communication tools designed to share information, updates, and research with a broad audience. While the Swiss Benin Initiative's media releases demonstrate transparency and a commitment to public engagement, it also contains significant issues that warrant scrutiny. Media releases carry weight because they are widely distributed on behalf of the institution itself, and audiences often accept their content at face value rather than critically negotiating meaning (Hall, 1980). Many readers may

never visit the museum in person, relying solely on textual materials, like media releases, for information.

Although the SBI's media release is positive in its intent to inform and be transparent, its public-facing nature and its role in representing all SBI museums heightens the importance of examining the embedded problems and limitations of the text. In this media release, I address several key areas: collaborative research, research findings, Swiss colonial history, and the funding structure, all of which encompass both significant challenges and notable successes. While such issues are common across many texts and museums, this particular media release is especially illustrative because it is public facing, widely distributed, and intended to speak on behalf of all museums in the SBI. As such, it carries considerable weight and credibility, making the patterns it exhibits—both problematic and constructive—especially consequential. Examining the language, structure, and emphasis within the release reveals the patterns that shape how the SBI seeks to present its work to the public.

In a media release published on February 2, 2023 by Museum Rietberg, on behalf of the Swiss Benin Initiative, and in connection with the Swiss Benin Forum, the SBI presented their research report to the general public. The Swiss Benin Forum is a two phased research cooperation between the participating SBI institutions and representatives from Nigeria, the Nigerian delegation. The cooperative research aspect is powerful because it shifts authority in knowledge-making to Nigerian representatives, rather than relegating them to the margins of history to belated, minor acknowledgments. This cooperative research is

important because it disrupts the museum's usual pattern of hoarding authority, allowing Nigerian representatives to shape knowledge in the present rather than being confined to the role of passive recipients beholden to the museum and with little to no say.

According to the Benin Initiative Switzerland (BIS) webpage:

“Between the two phases, the Benin Forum was organized at the beginning of 2023, during which around 30 experts expressed their willingness to transfer ownership of the looted and most likely looted works and to negotiate restitution, permanent loans or circulating objects. At the end of the second phase, a restitution forum will be organized to discuss the transfer of ownership, restitution and cooperation.” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland*, n.d.)

The first phase of research took place from 2021-2022 where research was conducted to document the provenance of the Benin Bronzes. Phase two, which began in 2023 and continued through 2024, investigated the various histories related to the Benin Bronzes. Phase Two also focused on communicating the results of the research and evaluating the methods used when conducting the provenance research (*Benin Initiative Switzerland*, n.d.). Although the two phases have officially concluded, as I write this dissertation, new research findings are being produced; Repatriation is an ongoing process, with no fixed endpoint.

The media release published in February of 2023 explained that the SBI research report was officially handed over “to a delegation of ten representatives from Nigeria” (Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), 2023). The media release states that:

"All partners involved have also agreed in a Joint Declaration of the Swiss Benin Forum—on the future of the Benin Collections held in Swiss museums and on the planned further collaboration. In June

2021, a joint SBI research project funded by Switzerland's Federal Office of Culture (FOC) was launched in which eight Swiss museums joined forces under the lead of the Museum Rietberg Zurich. In addition to creating an effective network among the participant museums, primary focus was on the collaboration and exchange of information with Nigeria for the purpose of investigating the provenance of the collections from the Kingdom of Benin held by the said museums in Switzerland." (Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), 2023)

The above paragraph highlights the collaborative nature of the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), particularly the prominent role of the representatives from Nigeria. Yet, because the SBI is built on principles of collaboration and transparency, it has a clear incentive to frame the Forum as a success story. Rather than offering a neutral account, this framing serves as institutional self-promotion, highlighting Switzerland's absence from the looting of the Benin Bronzes but ignoring its wider role in colonialism and slavery, addressed in a later section.

The question becomes: success for whom and by whose standards? At this stage, the only available evaluations come from the SBI itself, making it impossible to separate genuine progress from institutional PR (public relations). Without independent analysis, it is difficult to evaluate the outcomes beyond the institution's self-reporting. The media release, then, should not be read as a straightforward—or even objective—record of achievement, but as a strategic tool designed to shape public perception and bolster the SBI's legitimacy.

While the signing of formal agreements with Nigeria is a concrete outcome—and a success in its own right—the emphasis placed on publicizing it reveals how museums use transparency selectively—inviting critique in

appearance while carefully curating the story being told. This tension exposes the limits of transparency as a decolonial practice, and the ways museums continue to manage their image even as they claim to dismantle colonial legacies. If decolonizing is about relinquishing power, that includes a willingness to sidestep the priority of maintaining one's own image positively, in favor of doing true decentering, decolonial work. With this in mind, what the SBI frames as transparency is less about dismantling colonial power. Rather, it is about reasserting control over the narrative of decolonization itself—how it happens and how it is shared with the public.

This media release functions as a tool of transparency, allowing the Swiss Benin Initiative to publicly communicate its process, findings, and institutional position on repatriation in a carefully curated way. The formal agreements made with Nigeria is a measurable outcome that the media release makes sure is front and center. Even with the valid skepticism about the role of the media release, it does exemplify one way that museums can open up their collections—and ultimately their doors—to allow room for dialogue and greater critique with the public, a step toward decolonizing their opaque systems of knowledge.

Collaborative Provenance Research

Collaborative provenance research is “at the heart” (Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), 2023) of the research being conducted by the Swiss Benin Initiative. The media release explains the primary goal of the SBI, stating:

“The goal was to shed light on the contexts of the acquisitions back in the colonial days and to understand how Switzerland became involved in the trade with looted art from Benin City. What was new

about this approach was that the project not only relied on Western archives and records, but equally incorporated Nigerian perspectives regarding the history and the present status of the Benin objects. For this purpose, the SBI team and anthropologist Dr. Alice Hertzog worked closely with the Nigerian historian Dr. Enibokun Uzébu-Imarghiabge, who looked into the oral history side of the objects in question and conducted interviews with local experts from academia, museums, palace associations, and artisan guilds.” (Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), 2023)

It is unclear how the Nigerian perspective was incorporated and if the incorporation of Nigerian perspectives was actually done so equally. Regardless, Switzerland maintains the power in this research collaboration with Nigeria. It is worth questioning if equality is something that can truly be achieved given the power imbalance between Switzerland, and its federally funded research team, and external researchers from Nigeria, who bring their own different set of vested interests.

Although bringing together experts from different fields shows inter-institutional and interdisciplinary collaboration it is unclear the basis by which this particular historian—and only one—was selected. There have been critiques from the likes of Joseph Chinedu Ofobuikwe (2025); Tim Livsey (2016); Kamela Heyward-Rotimi and Omotayo Owoeye (2018); and Atelhe George Atelhe, Samuel Edet, Nwankwo Guzoro Chi Confidence (2023) critiquing Nigerian universities as being neo-colonial institutions, highlighting the enduring impacts of colonialism on education policies, curricula, and knowledge production in Nigeria. As with any university, there is a need to carefully analyze Nigerian institutions, and their scholars, as well.

It is important to identify the current and ongoing hierarchies that may be present in Nigeria, alongside their relationship to colonial ideologies, especially

given that elites in formerly colonized countries tend to collaborate with colonizers or replicate their hierarchies, as the aforementioned scholars critique in their research. While I am in no way suggesting that Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe embodies the lingering reverence for Western epistemologies or plans to uphold the dominance of whiteness in academic discourse, the media release—a text intended for public consumption—should clearly explain why she was chosen and highlight her credentials, especially given that she is the sole Nigerian historian representing the Benin Bronzes’ Nigerian perspective. Failing to do so is a missed opportunity for the Swiss Benin Initiative, as they are given the opportunity to express that they are decentering themselves by electing a qualified Nigerian historian to step in. However, the media release does its intended job of emphasizing a unified national approach, showing that the Swiss museums are not working in isolation—a move away from how museums have typically operated—but instead are acting in some sort of coordinated partnership.

Notably the February media release highlights that the Swiss Benin Initiative is incorporating sources beyond traditional Western records, by including oral histories, a move that reflects the non-Western subject matter at the heart of the project – the Benin Bronzes. The archival record is notoriously Anglo, Christian and Male. Expanding research beyond Western archives demonstrates that the museums involved in the Swiss Benin Initiative are beginning to move away from a Western-centric approach to knowledge. This shift reflects an effort to decenter Western epistemologies and include other

forms of knowing, particularly those rooted in Nigerian cultural and personal perspectives.

Anderson (1991) highlights the connection between museums and nation-state building noting that traditional historical records are “constrained by their placement according to arcane colonial logics of organization,” making it hard to move past the “nation-state periodization” (Mirzoeff & Halberstam, 2018, p. 122). By including personal interviews with Nigerian communities connected to the Bronzes and embracing oral histories and non-written forms of transmission, the SBI acknowledges that valuable historical knowledge does not reside exclusively or solely in written records or institutional archives.

The SBI’s inclusion of Nigerian voices and non-Western knowledge practices signals a move toward what Mignolo (2009) terms epistemic disobedience: a refusal to accept the universality of Western knowledge. This also aligns with Smith’s (2012) call to decolonize methodologies by valuing Indigenous and local epistemologies on their own terms. Western historiography has long privileged linear, Aristotelian narratives that elevate Western storylines and systems of documentation, while marginalizing and even erasing others. Here, the SBI gestures toward a more pluralistic and culturally responsive approach to understanding the past, although there is still more to be done.

Conducting interdisciplinary work helps the SBI’s goal to make their research accessible to the public since collaborating across disciplines helps ensure the language being used is accessible to a wide audience, as opposed to

being insular. The media release also details the tangled history that Nigeria has had with the “Global North,” stating:

“The Kingdom of Benin in modern-day Nigeria looks back on a long history of entanglement with the Global North, reaching back to the 15th century. While in the early contact years, the emphasis was on cultural exchange and trade (among other things, brass items), the colonial expansion and conquest of the African continent culminated in a military operation carried out by the British army against the capital of Benin City in 1897. In the course of the action, the palace was burnt to the ground and the king (Oba) exiled. Roughly 10,000 items made of bronze, ivory, and wood were looted. The items, which became known as the “Benin Bronzes”, found their way into private and public collections across the world through the art trade — among others into Swiss Museum.” (Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), 2023)

While the Swiss Benin Initiative engages with Britain’s colonial relationship with Nigeria and acknowledges early, mutually beneficial, economic exchanges between Nigeria and the Global North, it notably omits a critical and uncomfortable dimension of this history: Nigeria’s role in the transatlantic slave trade. Like many regions in Western Africa, Nigeria is not free of involvement in the slave trade and they experienced the internalization of colonial hierarchies. This absence is not just a historical oversight but a questionable exclusion—one that obscures the complex power dynamics and complicities that shaped Nigeria’s position within the colonial matrix. Various Nigerian kingdoms, including the Kingdom of Benin, profited from the sale of enslaved Africans and were deeply entangled in the economic structures of the slave trade (Jackson, 2021).

While mentioning Nigeria’s role in the slave trade may seem unrelated, it actually adds a layer of historical context that complicates simplistic narratives of victimhood and highlights the broader entanglement of global power, commerce,

and (mutually beneficial) colonial exploitation that shape the history of the Benin Bronzes. This participation arguably afforded certain protections from the immediate territorial seizures faced by neighboring regions during the Scramble for Africa. To frame Nigeria solely as a victim of colonial exploitation, without grappling with its role in the commodification and trafficking of human lives, flattens the historical narrative and forecloses deeper understandings of complicity, power, and survival under colonial capitalism. Not only was Nigeria involved with the “trade of brass items,” they were involved in the trade of human beings.

Key Numerical Findings from the Report

The media release also includes key findings from the research conducted by the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI). The media release notes that “in the eight Swiss museums under inspection, a total of 96 objects were identified as originating in the Kingdom of Benin, with the number ranging from 3 pieces at the Schlossmuseum Burgdorf museum to 21 works at the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB)” (Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), 2023). They go on to state:

“The research results show that only eight objects were acquired by the Basel Museum der Kulturen immediately after 1897, while the majority of items entered Swiss museums later over a longer period of time until 2022. In this context, private collectors along with international and Swiss art markets played a pivotal role.” (Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), 2023)

Noting that eight objects were acquired by the MKB directly after the British Expedition of 1897 serves as an acknowledgment that at least some of the looted artifacts entered Swiss collections immediately. This suggests that

Swiss museums, alongside the British Museum, were among the earliest institutions to obtain the looted Benin Bronzes. However, the release quickly notes that the majority of the Bronzes in Swiss Museums were acquired until 2022, implying that most entered collections long after the initial looting. This framing helps distance Swiss museums—and the SBI as a whole—from direct involvement in the original theft and early circulation of the looted artifacts. This shifts attention away from Swiss museums and minimizes their guilt and their complicity. This sentence functions less as a candid admission and more as a strategic acknowledgment: it acknowledges that some looted artifacts entered Swiss collections immediately, while framing this as a limited exception, not the majority.

In addition to researching when the objects were acquired by Swiss museums and presenting that information to the public, the SBI “research team developed four categories according to which the Benin objects were classified”:

“Categories 1: looted and 2: probably looted: All in all, 21 objects belong to category 1 which corresponds to 22% of the Swiss Benin holdings. In these cases, records in writing of circumstantial evidence such as burn marks provide a direct link to the fateful events of 1897. Category 2 includes a total of 32 Benin objects (34%). In these cases, we have no written evidence to link them directly to 1897. However, since we are dealing here with court, or royal, artworks, which until well into the 19th century were exclusively produced for the palace and kept there, we may assume with considerable certainty that they were violently appropriated in 1897 when the palace was occupied and sacked by the British troops. In view of the discussions with the Nigerian delegation regarding the future of the Swiss Benin collections, categories 1 and 2 play an important part. Categories 3: probably not looted and 4: not looted: Research showed that the remaining 16 and 27 objects, respectively (16% and 28%) probably or, in the other case, certainly do not stand in connection with the military operation of 1897. They include objects that are in no way related

to the practice of courtly art or they were produced and traded later in the colonial period or even in the post-colonial era. These objects are not part of the talks. However, they are still of significance because they point to the ruptures and continuities of artistic production after 1897 (Neo-Benin) and the emergence of a local art trade in Nigeria.” (Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), 2023)

The categorical separation as described above is seen in other SBI texts, notably in a write up on MKB’s website. The use of these categories is analyzed in-depth in a forthcoming section, but it is worth mentioning an important consideration here as well. While the categories are applied as appropriately as possible to looted African artifacts—objects not innately bound to such classificatory systems—the very act of categorization reflects a colonialist ideology invested in defining, systematizing, and separating. However, the use of these categories—however colonialist—is necessary for provenance research. Distinguishing which artifacts were looted and which were not is important to repatriation discussions, as it directly informs questions of ownership, ethical responsibility on behalf of the institutions, and the legitimacy of claims for return. Although the distinction can also obscure important facts, i.e. not looted does not necessarily mean fairly acquired.

As discussed in the section *Questioning the Gift from a Swiss Woman* about the opacity around a Swiss art trader, structural inequalities often compel individuals—particularly those facing economic hardship, as well as women, children, and African, Indigenous, and other people of color—to sell their cultural works to foreigners under pressure or necessity. These transactions reflect structural exploitation. Therefore, such exchanges are not necessarily liberating

or fully autonomous, since the buying and selling occur under dire circumstances marked by a clear power imbalance and limited choice. Selling one's cultural works should not be innately understood as an act of free will.

Claims of legitimacy are bound up in the dizzying array of colonial ideologies that demand proof, documentation, and legal paperwork—standards rooted in Western systems of recordkeeping that are not universally applicable. Similar challenges arise in music contexts as seen in the collective, oral traditions of Caribbean music, which U.S. copyright law fails to accommodate. Because the skills for such record-keeping are not universally accessible and do not align neatly with collaborative music-making traditions in the Caribbean, colonizers and Western institutions gain a strategic advantage by forcing Caribbean musicians to adapt. When adaptation is difficult—since U.S. law does not accommodate these traditions—they are able to exploit the musicians' rights, ownership, and autonomy. This is not so dissimilar from the reliance on Western recordkeeping to legitimize repatriation claims.

Many non-Western cultures have not historically operated within fixed Western frameworks, nor have they always had the privilege or opportunity to do so. Moreover, during colonial invasions, existing records—if they even existed—were often destroyed, and many communities were deliberately taken advantage of by Western powers who intentionally avoided formal documentation to obscure the violence and theft involved.

The media release includes measurable outcomes from the completed research thus far, detailing the exact amount of Benin Bronzes held by museums

in the SBI and percentages of how many Bronzes were 1: looted; 2: probably looted; 3: probably not looted; or 4: not looted. In addition to the media release, inventory information is available to the public in the “Benin Collections in Switzerland The Swiss Benin Initiative: August 9, 2021” spreadsheet. The Museum Schloss Burgdorf - Ethnologische Sammlung (3), the Bernisches Historisches Museum(4), the Historisches und Völkerkundemuseum St. Gallen (8), the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève (9), the Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich (16), the Museum Rietberg Zürich (18), the Musée d'ethnographie de la Ville de Neuchâtel (19), and the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) (20). The Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) boasts one of the largest collections of cultural artifacts in Europe and they hold one of the highest amounts of looted Benin Bronzes in Switzerland.

Alongside looted Bronzes inventory numbers, dating information is provided. Sixteen Bronzes listed under the “Provisional Dating” column are labeled as “20th century,” two are labeled as “early 20th century,” one is labeled as “19th/20th century?,” and one is labeled as “20th century.” Across the eight SBI museums, only eighteen Benin Bronzes may have been created as late as December 31, 2000, but these eighteen Bronzes are a small fraction of estimated 100 Benin Bronzes in possession across the Swiss museums (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.). This underscores that most Benin Bronzes in Western museums were created well before 1897 and were subsequently looted during the British invasion of the Kingdom of Benin, highlighting how these objects continue to circulate under colonial frameworks

and are interpreted and displayed through Western museum authority rather than by the communities from which they originate.

All eight Swiss Benin Initiative museums disclose the exact number of Benin Bronzes in their individual collections, which speaks to the transparency that the SBI prioritizes. This collective reporting reflects the unified voice and shared acknowledgment of responsibility that the Swiss Benin Initiative is striving for. However, numerical data is not always the most important form of information, and it cannot account for more contextual, culturally specific insight. It is often privileged by Western institutions in ways that overlook other forms of knowledge. However, numerical information remains crucial for quantifying, at scale, the damage caused by pillaging and looting. It is also crucial as it holds institutions responsible for repatriating all of the looted artifacts back. As in the case of Benin—even with numerical data—France only repatriated 26 out of an estimated 7,000 looted artifacts.

Joint Declaration of the Swiss Benin Forum

To round out the emphasis on collaborative research and the success in incorporation and adoption of SBI research by the Nigerian delegation, the media release includes a joint statement from the Swiss Benin Forum about Switzerland's lack of colonial involvement in Benin City. This statement is located toward the end of the media release, on the second to last page. The statement reads:

“Switzerland never owned any colonies and was not involved in the looting of the palace in Benin City in any way. Nor have any Swiss museums faced restitution claims from Nigeria so far. Still, the

Swiss Benin Initiative offers an important opportunity for museums in Switzerland to engage with their colonial collections in a responsible and proactive manner. The main focus is on dialogue with the partners in Nigeria and the African diaspora as well as on promoting transparency and openness to the best of ability. Together, the Nigerian delegation and the members of SBI have drafted a joint statement concerning the future of the Swiss Benin collections and the possibilities of forthcoming collaboration which will be announced on 2 February in connection with the Benin Forum. In the document, the museums concerned express their openness to a transfer of ownership of looted and probably looted objects (categories 1 and 2); this could involve a repatriation of the works, a circulation or loans to Swiss Museums. Both the Nigerian and Swiss sides are in agreement on the importance of future cooperation at the museum, scientific as well as artistic levels. The declaration was signed by all museums involved in the SBI, palace representatives, the Director of General of the National Commission on Museums and Monuments, members of the Nigerian embassy in Switzerland as well as by Nigerian scholars and artists.” (Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), 2023)

There are three key points that stand out in this statement on the joint declaration. First, the document makes it explicitly clear that Switzerland was not involved in the sacking of and looting of Benin City. While this distinction is important, asserting that Switzerland had no colonial involvement with Nigeria highlights the glaring omission in the media release concerning the broader colonial entanglements Switzerland did have, leading me to question if this media release is more concerned with Switzerland's reputation over a recognition of a historical injustice. Although Switzerland did not participate directly in colonial activities in Nigeria—and clarifying their lack of direct involvement in the looting of Benin City is important—the country remains implicated in other forms of colonial violence and economic exploitation, particularly through its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and other global colonial enterprises. Switzerland

remains complicit due to its historical involvement in colonial enterprises and is significant financial gains from colonial activities and enslavement. While Switzerland did not establish former colonies, Swiss individuals and institutions profited from the transatlantic slave trade, textile production linked to slavery, and investments in colonial ventures (Illien, 2020).

Both in Nigeria and elsewhere, Switzerland remains complicit and structurally embedded in global systems of colonialism. As detailed in the Swiss National Museum's exhibition and accompanying book, *colonial – Switzerland's Global Entanglements*—which I discussed in Chapter 1, Part II: A Swiss Focus—Switzerland not only profited from colonial systems, including the slave trade, but they were integrally involved in the infrastructure that enabled colonial exploitation, even if they lacked formal colonies.

Therefore, the omission of this context from the media release risks implying that Switzerland has no colonial history whatsoever. The omission risks misleading the public into believing that Switzerland bears no responsibility for colonial violence—a narrative that the Swiss National Museum is trying so hard to engage the public in and open up greater institutional dialogue about. It is troubling that the media release, which is such an important public facing document, fails to acknowledge the role that Switzerland did have in colonialism.

While the clarification about Nigeria is valid, the complete absence of reference to Switzerland's other colonial ties is questionable. This omission, paired with the omission about Nigeria's colonial entanglements, paints a clear picture—the Swiss Benin Initiative is engaging in colonial discussions, but only

as so far as to maintain their positive public image and to not incriminate Nigeria in the process, letting them avoid the layered discussion about African nations that were themselves complicit in slavery. Although Switzerland was not involved in the looting of the Benin Bronzes, their involvement in other colonial activities and colonial ideologies is historically and ethically relevant, especially considering how entrenched colonial ideologies related to race are in Switzerland.

As Museum Rietberg is leading public communication for the SBI, it is essential and ethically imperative that key historical truths like these are not omitted from collaborative SBI materials, including this media release, which was distributed by Museum Rietberg. The silence seems strategic, especially given the importance of this particular media release. This strategic silence reflects a selective historical narrative that conveniently distances Switzerland from its entangled colonial history.

Another notable, and positive, aspect of the February media release is that even objects in Category 2 —those with less direct or uncertain ties to the 1897 looting— are being considered for repatriation or long-term loan. It is significant that the discussion is not limited to objects in Category 1, which are clearly linked to the British military raid, but extends to those with more ambiguous provenance. This acknowledges that evidence of looting is not always linear, neatly documented, or easy to verify—especially given the historical erasure, destruction of records, and informal channels through which many artifacts were acquired. The inclusion of these less-certain cases

demonstrated that the SBI is adopting a more inclusive and ethically responsive approach to repatriation—one that resists rigid, documentation-heavy standards and instead embraces a broader, more nuanced understanding of historical harm and possible repair.

Lastly, it is also made clear in the February media release that no Swiss museum has received formal restitution claims from Nigeria. This underscores the Swiss Benin Initiative’s collective commitment to upholding ethical museum practices and shared cultural stewardship, even in the absence of external pressure. Rather than being compelled by legal demands or public outcry, the SBI is taking autonomous action, proactively addressing the legacies of colonialism and the ethics of holding onto contested artifacts. However, even the seemingly altruistic inception of the Swiss Benin Initiative is up for debate. It is important to emphasize that as a media release, its function is to shape perception through selective framing and this release demonstrates that strategy clearly.

Outlook and Further Procedure

The concluding section in the media release, Outlook and further procedure, states that “In December 2022, Switzerland’s Federal office of Culture (FOC) issued its decision to financially support the Swiss Benin Initiative for a further year” (Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), 2023). Specified in the media release, as well, are three objectives for the next phase of the Swiss Benin Initiative:

“The first goal aims at jointly developing new ways and forms of conveying what we have learnt about the provenances of the Benin collections to the general public as well as within specialist circles.

Secondly, together with our Nigerian project partners, we hope to shed more light on the contexts within which the Swiss Benin pieces were acquired—from the way they were produced and used to how and when they were traded. The third goal is to jointly develop new methods of collaboration between museums regarding controversial collections and problematic provenances. Several satellite exhibitions are planned for 2024 in various SBI museums in collaboration with our Nigerian colleagues, with the intention of sharing the findings of the research with a wider audience and highlighting the process of negotiating the handling of the shared heritage.” (Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), 2023)

Securing federal funding to continue provenance research on the Benin Bronzes allows the Swiss Benin Initiative to continue their work and hopefully encourage other museums across Switzerland to follow suit. As the Swiss Benin Initiative continues its work, it is clear that ongoing provenance research is fundamental and will remain a priority for the eight participating museums.

The media release from February 2023 includes key findings from the Swiss Benin Initiative research thus far and it highlights the collaborative approach taken by the SBI, including the collaboration with Nigerian delegates. However, mention of Switzerland’s colonial history is missing—a notable and troubling absence. Since one of the goals of the SBI is transparency and openness, it is imperative that in public facing texts hard truths do not become convenient emissions and become forgotten in texts and that there is uniformity across participating museums (remembering that MKB does discuss Switzerland’s colonial history). With this in mind this makes exploring each museum individually even more important since the discrepancies between them become apparent.

Hopefully by identifying the gaps and differences, the participating museums will work on an agreed upon consensus regarding how to address—and hopefully repair—the gaps and discrepancies. Acknowledgement is a critical foundation of decolonial work and also an essential first step in the process of repatriation. As Smith (2012) argues, decolonization requires naming and confronting colonial violence as part of a broader strategy to reclaim Indigenous and marginalized histories. In this context, acknowledging Switzerland's colonial entanglements becomes a necessary act for the Swiss museums seeking to engage in genuine decolonial practices and is necessary towards taking meaningful steps to repatriate the Benin Bronzes and engage in dialogue about them.

The information provided in this media releases offer an overview that summarizes the findings of the research conducted by the Swiss Benin Initiative, primarily through its two-phase approach. A more in-depth account, which I analyze in upcoming sections, can be found in the write up published on Museum Rietberg's website titled, *Benin Collection: Latest Research*, which explores the provenance of the Benin Bronzes in their collection, their links to the 1897 British invasion, and detailed findings on their acquisition history. This media release represents all of the partnering institutions within the Swiss Benin Initiative and highlights both strengths and weaknesses highlighted in their approach. While the media release provides a broad overview of how the SBI is communicating its mission and research to the public, the following sections turn to specific

nuances within the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB), Museum Rietberg, and the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum.

Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB)

I began my analysis of the museums individually with the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) due to the vastness of its collection, which lends the museum a particular influence and prestige. Since MKB holds one of the largest collections in Switzerland, featuring artifacts from across the globe—including rare and contentious items—it serves as a strong starting point for examining the texts produced by the individual participating museums. Although Museum Rietberg is leading the communication of the Swiss Benin Initiative, the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) has published several compelling texts that highlight how the power and wealth of museums are deeply tied to the vastness of diversity of their collections, the rarity of their artifacts, and the often unchecked, controversial ways in which those artifacts were acquired. At the same time, MKB is also beginning to publicly grapple with the challenges of decolonial work—an ongoing and imperfect process that, while marked by gaps and limitations, nonetheless represents meaningful progress worth analyzing the context of the SBI and Benin Bronzes.

Museum der Kulturen is an ethnographic museum located in Basel, Switzerland. One of the eight SBI museums, Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) has one of the largest collections of global, cultural artifacts in Switzerland. They focus on the study and exhibition of ethnographic artifacts and cultural objects from around the world, highlighting diverse cultures and their histories through

their exhibitions and displays. According to the 'About Us' section on their website, MKB "is the leading anthropological museum in Europe," collecting and exhibiting "works and objects from around the world for the purpose of raising awareness and understanding for all cultures" (About Us, n.d.).

Preserving the collections is just as much a part of the MKB's tasks as doing research on them and their "findings are imparted by means of exhibitions, events, and publications" (*About Us*, n.d.). Museum der Kulturen Basel aims to promote understanding and appreciation of global cultural diversity through its exhibitions and educational programs, also emphasizing that "preserving the collections is just as much part of the MKB's tasks as doing research on them" (*About Us*, n.d.). MKB's "renowned" collections include "around 300,000 photos, 400 films and sound recordings" claiming to be the "largest anthropological museum in Switzerland" and the "most eminent of its kind in Europe" (*About Us*, n.d.).

MKB acknowledges that "research is an indispensable field for an institution" and they work with both "in-house and external scholars" to do extensive work on their collections, and the histories of the objects in their collection, prioritizing provenance research and drawing out "the essence" within their collections (*About Us*, n.d.). Alongside their willingness to conduct provenance research, internally and externally, MKB publishes their research projects on their website to make their research accessible to a wider audience. Ensuring that their research is accessible via their website (offered in two languages, French and English), MKB speaks to the importance of the presence

of websites for museums' outreach and ability to connect to audiences across the globe, especially on internationally connected, contentious topics related to looting and colonialism.

The MKB is Reconstructing Routes

One of the primary goals of the Swiss Benin Initiative is to “establish whether the objects acquired by Swiss Museums in the colonial era were seized during the punitive Benin Expedition or whether they possibly entered the art market via other channels” (*Swiss Benin Initiative*, n.d.). This echoes the four categories defined in the February media release. MKB is taking it upon themselves to investigate the acquisition history, focusing on reconstructing the routes the looted Bronzes may have forcefully taken.

According to a research report published on Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB)'s website titled, *Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI): Research and Dialogue with Nigeria* reconstructing the routes of the Benin Bronzes from their place of provenance in Benin City to their locations across Switzerland is one of the most important research findings SBI is hoping to uncover. With a focus on “reconstructing routes,” the SBI is working on reconstructing the migration or trade “routes taken by individual artworks from the Kingdom of Benin and present-day Nigeria to Switzerland, and their accession into Swiss museum collections” (*Swiss Benin Initiative*, n.d.). Establishing how the Benin Bronzes came to be in the possession of Swiss museums, potentially including whether they were legally or illegally acquired and if there is evidence of their purchase is of primary concern to the eight SBI museums. In tracing how the Bronzes

entered their collections, including their acquisition histories, it is important to consider two things.

First, placing too much emphasis on the specific pathways through which the Benin Bronzes entered the market can diminish the core principle of repatriation: that cultural objects should be returned to their place of origin, regardless of the exact circumstances under which they were acquired. There is a risk that focusing on how they entered may overshadow this central goal of repatriation—to return artifacts to their place of provenance—no matter when or how they were acquired. While acquisition history is relevant and important to consider—particularly given that many of these artifacts were looted during colonial conquest, war or illegally acquired during opportunistic Western exploitation—the broader principle of repatriation rests on acknowledging historical injustice and restoring cultural heritage.

Additionally, legality is typically defined through a Western framework that fails to account for the nuances of Indigenous ownership. When determinations of legality—especially regarding colonially looted items—rely solely on Western standards, they obscure the central issue: the return of artifacts. Despite the various ways looted artifacts have ended up in foreign institutions, repatriation efforts must prioritize returning cultural property, art, and even human remains to their countries of origin as an act of restorative justice and historical accountability—regardless of the route they took.

Repatriation claims emphasize the sense of loss experienced when cultural heritage is held by foreign institutions that strip them of their context and

significance. This loss is further reinforced by the inaccessibility of these objects to people from their places of provenance. Artifacts are often housed in geographically distant museums, available only to those who can afford admission fees, and are typically displayed behind glass or plastic, cordoned off with ropes, and marked with “DO NOT TOUCH” signs. As Gabriela Wiener (2023) explains during her visit to the Musee du Quai Branly in Paris, when viewing the pre-Columbian exhibition she looked “around for a suggested route, a timeline to ground the objects, but they were displayed randomly, in isolation, their labels vague or generic” (p. 4).

Just like land was seized and became private property during the extermination of the Native Americans in North America (primarily Canada and the U.S.), and the Congo was colonized, becoming privately owned by King Leopold II, looted artifacts became privately owned and no longer accessible by the people of the land from which they belong to. As land no longer was communal, artifacts resided in the sole possession of museums, located inside these grandiose colonial institutions behind signs not so dissimilar from the “PRIVATE PROPERTY DO NOT TRESPASS” ones found on land, and on people. More often than not, these artifacts—now privately owned by foreign collectors—are unlikely to be permanently returned.

Still held by colonizing nations, continued possession of the Benin Bronzes reflects not only material control but also the persistence of discreet, paternalistic and colonialist ideologies embedded in museum narratives. These paternalistic attitudes promote the colonialist belief that non-Europeans (the

‘Other’) are incapable of properly caring for and safeguarding their own cultural artifacts, and that only the colonizing nations possess the expertise to care for and safeguard them—arguably keep them safe, or away from, their countries of origin. Yet, this logic is deeply contradictory: as mentioned earlier, when the British Museum first displayed the looted Benin Bronzes they were left completely exposed—vulnerable to damage from visitors and the environment. This reveals a claim of protection built on a history of neglect. Contemporary offers by European nations to loan artifacts back to their countries of origin further reinforce this logic, suggesting that such objects are only truly safe under European stewardship. As was stated in *Dahomey* (2024)—loan agreements and partial repatriations are a “savage insult.”

The second important consideration rests in the following acknowledgement in the same report by Museum der Kulturen Basel:

“The Kingdom of Benin (present-day Nigeria) was attacked in 1897 by British colonial forces. They plundered the Royal Palace, seizing some 4,000 works of art, and destroying it. Known subsequently as the “Benin Bronzes,” these works of art were handled by art dealers before entering the private and public collections around the world.” (*Swiss Benin Initiative*, n.d.)

Museum der Kulturen Basel goes on to state:

“In terms of artworks that entered Switzerland only after Nigerian independence in 1960, the aim is to examine whether there is nevertheless a connection with Benin Expedition or whether they were produced after it.” (*Swiss Benin Initiative*, n.d.)

Whether or not the Benin Bronzes were produced after 1960 is not a clear or justifiable rationale for denying repatriation or other forms of reparative

restitution. Although Switzerland does not make this claim, suggesting that repatriation decisions should, in any way, hinge primarily on the date of an artifact's creation or the verification of trade or purchase routes—especially when proposed by the country leading the return of the Benin Bronzes—risks undermining the ethical, international, cross-collaborative foundation on which repatriation efforts rest—and on which the SBI was created. For many institutions and countries, relying on European standards of verifiability is deeply problematic. It reinforces the harmful notion that formerly colonized peoples lack legitimate knowledge of their own cultural heritage or do not truly deserve its return without Western-sanctioned documentation. In this context, the demand for paperwork reflects a distinctly Western ideal, privileging archival traceability over embodied, communal memory.

The statement referencing “artworks that entered Switzerland only after Nigerian independence in 1960” (*Swiss Benin Initiative*, n.d.), connects back to the categories laid out in the February 2023 media release. There were four categories that the Benin Bronzes were organized into: Category 1 – looted, Category 2 – probably looted, Category 3 – probably not looted, and Category 4 – not looted. Based on the February media release, it seems that some of the investigative work about the artworks that entered Switzerland after Nigeria independence in 1960 has commenced, hence the SBI being able to categorize some of the Benin Bronzes in their collection as Category 3 – probably not looted and Category 4 – not looted.

Considering the contentiousness of the Benin Bronzes, there is a case to be made that looted or not looted, the Bronzes deserve to be returned home. In light of the staggering statistic that 90% of all African cultural assets reside outside the continent (Jacobs, 2019), returning artifacts back to their place of provenance is much more than a debate that should rest solely on how the objects were acquired: looted, probably looted, probably not looted, or not looted. This is a matter of returning people's sense of self, sense of community, sense of culture and sense of identity back.

Beyond objects with spiritual, religious, or artistic significance, utilitarian objects—those used in everyday life and often perceived as seemingly ordinary—also deserve to be returned home. Even when the artifacts in question are everyday utilitarian objects rather than grand antiquities, their continued possession reflects the West's encyclopedic (Cuno, 2009) impulse—the belief that it has the right to keep everything and only needs to return objects explicitly marked as colonial loot. Communities value the ordinary just as much as the extraordinary. This stresses why all artifacts should be returned, not only the grand antiquities. It should not be up to Western institutions to impose their own standards of what counts as significant or grand, since these categories are rooted in Western assumptions rather than values of the originating cultures.

The continued possession of such objects by Western museums reflects an encyclopedic and voyeuristic logic: a belief that museums have the right to collect and retain items from other cultures, regardless of their significance or context. This worldview (an encyclopedic orientation) assumes that only objects

and antiquities with monumental or explicitly colonial provenance and colonial acquisition ties are worthy of repatriation, while everyday items are not. However, communities have the right to reclaim these cultural objects and to determine for themselves whether and how they should be displayed. The question of what constitutes a “prized possession” must not be defined by Western institutions. Museums cannot justify holding on to objects simply because they deem them significant—it is not their place to make that determination. All artifacts that have been removed from their place of provenance have a right to be returned home.

Repatriation is a matter of returning people's cultural heritage and spiritual relics back. Whereas in the West, African artworks are regarded as objects, “for Africans they are subjects – important parts of their lives. And they often have a spiritual, religious significance. Losing them is like a wound that never heals. They are a perpetual reminder of the colonial era, of the violence experienced by the continent” (Hampel & Heybrock, 2020). Even the objects categorized as “probably not looted” or “not looted” still serve as a stark reminder of the rest—which happens to be the majority—of the other artifacts that are in fact directly tied to colonialism.

Additionally, the majority of Benin Bronzes held in museums across the United Kingdom, Europe and North America (except for Mexico, which holds none) are confirmed to have been originally looted during the invasion in 1897 by British colonial forces. There is little debate as to whether the majority of Benin Bronzes housed abroad are disconnected from the Benin expedition; most are directly linked to the plunder of Benin City and mass looting that followed the

invasion. As cited in the February media release, between Category 1: looted and Category 2: probably looted, “21 objects belong to Category 1 which corresponds to 22% of the Swiss Benin holdings” and a “total of 32 Benin objects (34%) (Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), 2023)” belong to Category 2. In total, 56%—over half—of the Bronzes in Swiss Benin Initiative Museum collections were looted.

However, identifying when each Bronze was made—whether that was pre-British colonization or after Nigerian independence in 1960—is still valuable for building a fuller historical and cultural narrative of the Benin Bronzes. This information helps highlight their ongoing significance within Nigerian history and heritage. As noted above, it remains important to determine whether a given object has a direct connection to the 1897 Benin Expedition, and if so, to understand the nature of that connection. It is also essential to identify which Bronzes may have been produced after the expedition and are Neo-Benin (the term for Benin Bronzes created after 1897), as this contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how Nigeria’s artistic traditions have persisted, adapted, and evolved over time.

Tracing the specific “routes taken by individual artworks” (*Swiss Benin Initiative*, n.d.), as the MKB is doing, is essential for uncovering, acknowledging and understanding the history of colonial artifacts—their migration patterns, and the ways in which they have been transported, traded, borrowed, sold or stolen, both historically and in the present. This illuminates the broader necessity of repatriation. Tracing the specific trajectories of individual artworks draws out

additional connections to how the Bronzes were continuously created, used and viewed in Nigerian culture throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century. Provisional dating is an important detail to verify and include with ongoing provenance research since it offers more context around importance, use, and cultural heritage of each Bronze in Nigerian culture, including how the relationship between the Bronzes within Nigerian culture has changed throughout the centuries. While colonial era provenance dating should not be the sole criterion for repatriation, historical context and dating still matter for understanding the broader story and cultural significance of Bronzes.

The MKB's Problem with a (Single) Nigerian Perspective

In line with their mission to “enrich cultural life and awareness for all forms of culture” (*About Us*, n.d.), Museum der Kulturen Basel published a write up on their website about their recent research collaboration with researchers and historians from Benin, Nigeria to engage more with the “Nigerian perspective” about the Benin Bronzes in their collection, alongside the, already present, “European perspective” (*Cooperation and Dialogue Research Visit From Nigeria*, n.d.). Titled, *Cooperation and dialogue: research visit from Nigeria*, MKB's research write up details their partnership with Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe, an academic researcher at the university of Benin in Edo state. Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe is the single researcher contributing “a Nigerian perspective” (*Cooperation and Dialogue Research Visit From Nigeria*, n.d.) to the Swiss Benin Initiative research project. Her Nigerian viewpoint is being evaluated and implemented “both in terms of the origin, meaning and the provenance of the

works, and their ongoing significance in Benin culture today” (*Cooperation and Dialogue Research Visit From Nigeria*, n.d.).

It is worth pointing out that Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe is the only researcher appointed to work on the provenance research about the Benin Bronzes in MKB’s collection. This single appointment is telling. It suggests a troubling oversimplification of what a Nigerian perspective is. It also implies that a single individual can adequately and solely represent the diverse and historical perspectives of an entire country. By appointing only one researcher, the Nigerian perspective is essentially reduced. This makes the Nigerian perspective at risk of being monolithic *and* reductive, as if the Nigerian perspective is something that is easily defined by just one voice. In order to truly bring forth a Nigerian perspective, MKB would benefit from appointing more than one Nigerian researcher and by including more Nigerian perspectives from outside of academia to offer more than a single (academic) perspective.

Within the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB), only one Nigerian Researcher has been appointed—an opaque decision with unclear criteria. The opacity raises concerns about representation and voice. Concentrating authority in one individual risks reproducing the very asymmetries of power that postcolonial repatriation efforts should be working to dismantle. As Michael F. Brown (1998) observes, selecting one person to speak on behalf of an entire community not only places immense pressure and an unrealistic burden on that individual but also produces new political tensions over legitimacy and authority. Such a choice reinforces hierarchies of representation, privileging a singular,

institutionally sanctioned voice while excluding a broader range of community perspectives.

There is a well-documented problem in which Black and other people of color are reduced to a single representative—appointed as “the one” to speak for an entire community – placing immense pressure on that individual and flattening the complexity and diversity of the group they are meant to represent. As a counter example to a single perspective, in the film *Dahomey* (2024), the concluding debate models a more constructive approach to engaging with diverse perspectives, revealing the wide range of feelings and beliefs held by citizens—a level of nuance and depth that the discourse surrounding the Benin Bronzes urgently needs. The debate in *Dahomey* (2024) highlights the benefits of multiple voices contributing to the conversation, a perspective that, so far, is absent at the MKB, and the Swiss Benin Initiative at-large.

At Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB), appointing only a single Nigerian researcher limits the diversity of perspectives and flattens the diversity of voices. Relying on a single Nigerian researcher is not problematic as it functions also as a form of tokenism. This mirrors the tokenism problems described in Niemann (2003), in which a single representative is burdened with speaking for an entire community, reducing rich cultural knowledge to one sanctioned voice constraining truly community-centered engagement. As Neimann describes, tokenism is a symbol for diversity. Tokens often serve “mascot-like” roles and are often “listed as consultants on grants, projects, or committees to enhance the diversity component of these projects” (Niemann, 2003) (Niemann, 2011). These

elected tokens “are often deliberately thrust into the limelight as the university's representative when it is in the interest of the institution to demonstrate a belief in diversity” (Strauss & Kanter, 1978).

Much like the superficial “one Black friend” defense often used to deflect accusations of racism, appointing a single Nigerian researcher for the Swiss Benin Initiative creates the appearance of diversity and inclusion while failing to meaningfully engage multiple perspectives or address deeper structural inequities. This contrast underscores the limitations of current institutional practices and the necessity of incorporating a broader range of voices to achieve genuinely community-centered engagement and decolonial work.

Gramsci's (1971) concept of the organic intellectual is particularly relevant here. By privileging an academic researcher embedded within institutional frameworks over community-based knowledge holders, the Initiative risks reinforcing cultural hegemony—where dominant institutions control which voices are legitimized and heard. While scholarly expertise is valuable, relying exclusively on institutional intellectuals marginalizes the “organic” intellectuals who emerge from within the community itself. These individuals, grounded in lived experience and collective memory, can offer perspectives that are both culturally rooted and politically transformative. Without their inclusion, the narratives surrounding the Benin Bronzes remain filtered through frameworks that risk reproducing the very colonial logics that repatriation processes seeks to resist.

Although institutional scholars, such as Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe, with traditional academic expertise bring rich, valuable perspectives, it is equally important to incorporate voices from outside the academy to ensure a fuller, more inclusive representation. It is worth asking who is deemed an appropriate Nigerian researcher to consult for the Swiss Benin Initiative, and on what criteria this determination is made. Must the appointed researcher always come from within academia? If so, why? These questions are important because they reveal unrecognized traces of how selection processes may still be shaped and largely influenced by colonial hierarchies, valuing Western-trained knowledge (i.e. the elites or “high-class”) over local non-Western expertise and reinforcing structural inequalities in whose knowledge is recognized and legitimized, and whose is subordinate and marginalized. As scholars such as Gramsci (1971), M. F. Brown (1998), and Neimann (2003) have noted, appointing a single voice concentrates pressure and risks reinforcing hierarchies, raising political questions about who is chosen to speak.

The Museum der Kulturen Basel’s choice of vocabulary regarding a “Nigerian perspective” is particularly interesting. While the Museum der Kulturen asserts that Nigerian researchers arriving to study the Bronzes in their institution provide “a different perspective on the history of the Bronzes,” in reality, these scholars offer *the* authentic history of the Bronzes. Researchers such as Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe and other Nigerian historians challenge the incomplete narrative that frames the Bronzes simply as artifacts that originated in Africa and now reside in Switzerland. Instead, they provide a more comprehensive,

compelling, and humanizing account of Bronzes' cultural significance and violent displacement.

The Nigerian perspective is not merely an alternative or additional viewpoint—it is the perspective through which the full history of the Benin Bronzes is understood. This stands in contrast to the Swiss perspective, which remains largely undefined in MKB's text. Could it be that the Swiss perspective is so dominant—so assumed to be the default—that the Museum der Kulturen Basel does not see the need to define or explicitly name it? Oftentimes, dominant perspectives go unnamed because they are treated as default or 'common sense. This lack of clarity again underscores the need for more than one Nigerian scholar to contribute to the interpretation of the Bronzes within MKB. The absence of a clearly articulated Swiss position creates critical gaps in the narrative. As with many non-Western artifacts held in Western European, British and American institutions, the Swiss framing stops after acknowledging possession, avoiding deeper historical accountability until prompted. This raises broader questions about the investigative efforts—or lack thereof—made by museum professionals when these artifacts first entered their collections.

MKB's partnership with Nigerian researchers aligns with their stated commitment to "review and reposition parts of our collections on an ongoing basis" and to "treat all subject matters with a view to the here and now" (*About Us*, n.d.). In the same report, MKB claims that this collaboration is "opening an avenue to having a different perspective on the Benin Bronzes, bringing a Nigerian perspective, and joining it with a European perspective – putting

everyone on the same page” (*Cooperation and Dialogue Research Visit From Nigeria*, n.d.). However, while the Museum der Kulturen emphasizes its openness to including the Nigerian perspective on its collection of looted Bronzes, there is little evidence of a meaningful integration between the Nigerian and European perspectives. Rather than a shared platform, the Nigerian viewpoint often appears adjacent to—but not fully embedded within—the museum’s dominant narrative.

What warrants further critical interrogation is the question of how everyone can truly be “put on the same page” (*Cooperation and Dialogue Research Visit From Nigeria*, n.d.), as MKB suggests, when a clear power imbalance exists. On one side are the Swiss museums and their body of researchers. They not only possess the looted artifacts but also benefit from the prestige and capital that come with housing these valuable objects in their world-renowned institutions. Additionally, they hold the authority to decide if and how they will cooperate with the Benin Dialogue Group (BDG). On the other side stands a lone Nigerian researcher, representing both her country and the BDG—a coalition whose broader restitution requests across Europe remain largely unmet, despite no formal request being made to Switzerland. This makes the symbolic and practical imbalance in these collaborations all the more striking. The stark contrast highlights the disparity in influence and resources, raising important questions about the fairness and equity of these negotiations and collaborations. This imbalance will be explored further in the subsequent section, as I examine texts produced by Museum Rietberg, the museum at the forefront of the SBI.

This report also notes that Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe's findings will “complement the provenance research Dr. Alice Hertzog is doing in European archives on the question of how the Benin artworks arrived in Switzerland” (*Cooperation and Dialogue Research Visit From Nigeria*, n.d.). However, Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe's research should do more than simply “complement” Dr. Alice Hertzog's research—it should be centered, or at the very least weighted equally. The framing of her findings as merely complementary highlights a persistent problem: the ongoing question of whose perspective is prioritized and whose remains marginalized. Describing her findings as merely complementary reflects what Stuart Hall (1997) identified as the persistence of dominant meaning-making structures that marginalize subaltern voices in the construction of knowledge.

As Dr. Hertzog's inquiry into the artworks arrival in Switzerland is framed as being “complemented” by Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe's Nigerian perspective, it raises a broader question: how can the perspective of Nigerian researchers, the Nigerian public, and the Benin Dialogue Group be genuinely centered in this work? For reparative efforts to succeed, the question of how the Benin Bronzes came to reside in Switzerland must be answered through meaningful engagement with those directly connected to the Bronzes—not solely by Swiss institutions. Put another way, it is crucial that reparative efforts do not rely solely on Swiss institutions to answer how the Benin Bronzes came to reside in Switzerland; decentering the Swiss perspective is critical. Relying exclusively on Swiss perspectives or Swiss researchers risks recreating the same enclosed

epistemological loop that prioritizes and centers the European perspective above all else. As Tuck and Yang (2012) argue in their critique of “settler moves to innocence,” surface-level inclusion without structural change can reproduce colonial dynamics under the guise of progress.

This surface level type of inclusion is also critiqued by Mignolo (2009), in what he calls the “colonial matrix of power.” The colonial matrix of power emphasizes that true decolonial work must go beyond inclusion and instead dismantle Eurocentric systems of knowledge that uphold museum authority. Both Smith (1999) and Mignolo (2009) insist that centering Indigenous and colonized epistemologies is not symbolic gesture but a foundational shift necessary for ethical and transformative decolonial practices.

Relegating perspectives to be complementary does not truly do the work to restructure or decenter. We see how the colonial matrix of power can be resisted in *Dahomey*. The debate at the end of the film reveals a powerful moment of resistance against the colonial matrix of power. It presents a thoughtful and inclusive approach to navigating the diverse perspectives of local citizens, students, and museum staff. This exchange highlights the complexity of public sentiment—something similarly needed in conversations about the Benin Bronzes. Such nuanced, multilayered engagement is essential to understanding the broader cultural, historical, and emotional significance of these artifacts—a perspective that the Benin Bronzes are in need of as well.

Equally important is a critical examination of the circumstances surrounding the acquisition of the Benin Bronzes: what transactions,

intermediaries, and institutional decisions facilitated the dispersal of the Bronzes across Swiss museums? How have Swiss institutions historically justified their ongoing possession of these looted artifacts over the years? These questions must be addressed as part of what Sandell (2007) calls the ethical imperative for museums to reckon with their entanglement in colonial histories and their responsibilities in the present.

Given that the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI) was voluntarily established by the Swiss government and partnering museums, further questions emerge: how have Swiss institutions adapted to evolving ethical standards in museum practices? Does this self-driven initiative reflect a broader Swiss cultural and political commitment to peace-building and international communication and collaboration? Looking ahead, how can future dialogues foster more equitable engagement, ensuring that multiple perspectives—especially those historically marginalized—are prioritized? How much the entrenched power imbalances between countries impacted by looting and those holding looted artifacts be effectively restructured?

To achieve reparative justice, power dynamics between countries impacted by looting and those holding looted artifacts must be structurally reconfigured. As Mbembe (2017) argues, decolonization is not merely about the return of objects but the reorganization of knowledge, authority, and voice. As Mbembe points out, “Europe is no longer the world’s center of gravity” (2017). While it is essential to decenter the long-dominant European perspective, it remains important to include it—not as the authoritative voice, but as a

necessary element for understanding the colonial histories that enabled looting, acknowledging institutional complicity, and supporting processes of social memory, reconciliation and restitution. Including it alongside, but not above, the Nigerian perspective allows for a fuller understanding of the colonial past and the shared responsibilities of institutions today.

However, the central question of how the Benin artworks arrived in Switzerland has yet to be answered in this text by MKB. What continues to be at risk is museums framing themselves as neutral or benevolent actors. As the American Alliance of Museums report discovered most museumgoers see museums as neutral, trusted institutions:

“Museums are the number one trusted source of information. The public continues to regard museums as highly trustworthy - ranking second only to friends and family - and significantly more trustworthy than researchers and scientists, NGOs generally, various news organizations, the government, corporations and business, and social media.” This high level of trust is consistent across “museums of all types, from art museums to zoos” (American Alliance of Museums, 2021).

This self-positioning aligns with what Mignolo (2009) identifies as “coloniality masquerading as universality”—a way in which Western institutions continue to assert control over global narratives under the guise of neutrality or progress. Furthermore, there is still a gap in how the European or Swiss perspective are being put into conversation with the Nigerian perspective, and how they are complementing one another as equally as possible. These questions underscore the need for a comprehensive dialogue that includes both

Nigerian and European perspectives in understanding the full historical and ethical implications of these cultural artifacts.

The MKB is Recovering Lost Histories

Through MKB's collaboration with Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe, the SBI aims to deepen its understanding of the intrinsic meanings embedded in their collection's objects, echoing a sentiment often stressed by proponents of repatriation. However, many museums possessing looted artifacts from across the continent of Africa, including the eight SBI institutions, fail to grasp the true nature of these objects: their uses, purposes, and profound spiritual, cultural, and historical significance. Whether this lack of understanding stems from negligence or intentional oversight is less pertinent. What matters is that these gaps persisted until recently and are only now being earnestly examined, uncovered, or bridged amid ramped calls for repatriation. These looted artifacts have resided in Swiss collections for decades, devoid of their cultural essence and the profound connections that tie them their place of origin – the very lands from which these objects were taken from.

Working as a researcher with MKB, Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe's investigation into how the Benin artworks found their way to Switzerland revealed the forgotten narrative embedded in the Bronzes themselves—the rich historical and cultural ties that the Benin Bronzes in MKB's collection have to Benin City and the people of Benin, a history that deserves to be remembered and recounted alongside their display in foreign museums. As part of her historical research about the Bronzes, Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe compiled oral histories about colonial and post-

colonial collecting practices found with museums. These oral histories are the “voices and narratives of the guilds, the palace society, and other relevant persons” making them “an important source for the entangled history of Benin and Europe” (*Cooperation and Dialogue Research Visit From Nigeria*, n.d.) for museums to understand and grapple with.

The inclusion of oral histories in museum provenance research and exhibition practices represents a move away from traditional notions of epistemic authority as articulated by philosopher Linda Zagzebski (2013). In her theory, epistemic authority refers to our tendency to trust individuals or institutions as sources of knowledge based on their perceived expertise, reliability, or social legitimacy (Zagzebski, 2013). Typically, this preference reinforces established hierarchies in knowledge production, privileging those recognized as experts within dominant academic or institutional systems.

In the context of museums, epistemic authority manifests through the institution’s power to define, curate, and validate what counts as legitimate knowledge. Museums have historically functioned as authoritative sites of knowledge, rooted in Western scientific, anthropological and art historical traditions. This authority is sustained by their institutional legitimacy, public trust, and connections to academic and governmental structures. However, the inclusion of oral histories about the Benin Bronzes—particularly those rooted in Indigenous, African, and non-Western traditions—challenges the exclusivity of this authority. Oral histories are often transmitted through memory, storytelling,

and lived experience rather than through archival or objective documentation through the written word.

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Walter D. Mignolo (2009) argue, these forms of knowledge production are frequently devalued in Western epistemological frameworks, which prioritize textual, empirical, and linear narratives of history. Therefore, incorporation of oral histories into museum research is not just an act of inclusion, it is a decolonial intervention that disrupts the authority of Western epistemology. It signals a shift away from Eurocentric definitions of legitimacy and opens space for plural, situated, and community-based knowledges that have long been marginalized or dismissed.

This shift is historical reparative work in practice. This dynamic is especially relevant in the context of the Benin Bronzes and the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI), where European institutions have long exercised epistemic authority (Mignolo, 2009) by narrating the history of the Benin Bronzes through their own archival records and curatorial frameworks, which, as critiqued, have left significant gaps and omissions. By incorporating oral histories and centering Nigerian scholars like Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe, the SBI signals a tentative shift away from this authority, creating space for epistemologies rooted in community, memory, spirituality, and Indigenous knowledge systems. Such moves challenge the legacy of colonial knowledge production, where African perspectives were historically excluded or rendered supplementary, hence why the SBI's mention that Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe's work is complementary is so problematic.

Bringing Smith (2012) into conversation again, decolonizing research requires privileging Indigenous methodologies and disrupting hierarchies of knowledge production. Additionally, Mignolo's (2011) concept of epistemic disobedience calls for a refusal to accept Western epistemologies as the sole legitimate framework. Including, and hopefully centering, oral histories challenge the epistemic authority of museums and affirm alternative ways of producing knowledge and research.

This also speaks to Saidiya Hartman's (2008) concept of critical fabulation, which explains that engaging with oral histories, ritual memory, and community testimony offers a method to reimagine these beings beyond the colonial archive's constraints, allowing space for the spiritual truths that elude empirical verification by remain deeply felt and true. Critical fabulation speaks to the breaks in the archival record and the omissions in the historical narrative. Often depicted as the sole and complete truth, we know that for many, the record has excluded them, their knowledges and their experiences. Critical fabulation also lends room to use alternate methodologies, departing from the traditional Western methods to see a truer, fuller story, even if that means leaning into guesses and strongly dissuading from written, 'formal' or official, Western records. Evoking critical fabulation here, the story of the Benin Bronzes includes much more than what has been recorded by Western (i.e. British or Swiss) historians. In order to get a full picture of the Benin Bronzes we must lean into the margins—the subaltern—and make space for the story that is untraditionally documented.

While the inclusion of oral histories signals a step toward decolonial transformation within participating SBI museums, nevertheless, it remains imperative that these oral histories and Nigerian perspectives are not treated as an aside and are not relegated to the margins as supplementary or symbolic gestures, but are instead centered as authoritative forms of knowledge. To do otherwise is to reassert colonial epistemic hierarchies that privilege Western archival and institutional frameworks over Indigenous and community-rooted “ways of knowing” and “ways of being” (Mignolo & Escobar, 2013).

Furthermore, historical reparative work illustrates the importance of returning artifacts to their rightful place of origin, and if nothing else, at least prioritizing meaningful steps toward restitution. Research by scholars such as Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe supports these efforts by tracing the enduring cultural, historical, and spiritual ties between the Benin Bronzes and the people of Benin City. Her work reinforces the case for repatriation by demonstrating the deep significance these objects hold within their original context. Emphasizing these not only strengthens advocacy for continued restitution but also affirms the living relevance of these artifacts to the communities from which they were taken.

Because storytelling—particularly through oral histories—plays a central role in decolonizing knowledge systems and humanizing looted artifacts, embedding these narratives into museum practices not only affirms the cultural and spiritual significance of the objects, but also strengthens reparative efforts by reconnecting them to the communities and lands from which they were taken. By grounding the Bronzes in the historical and cultural context of their place of

origin, incorporating these narratives not only emphasizes their significance but also strengthens museums' reparative work by fostering deeper understanding and connection to their origins.

The MKB's Efforts into Researching Provenance

Provenance research on the looted Benin Bronzes draws out critical connections to their place of origin by meticulously tracing their histories and the circumstances of their removal. This work involves examining historical records, colonial archives, and oral histories—as performed by Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe—to reconstruct the journey of these artifacts from their original context to their current locations in museums around the world.

According to Molly Fannon, Director of the Office of International Relations and the Smithsonian Institution, “the looting of cultural heritage has been happening since the very existence of cultural heritage, it is not anything new” (2016). However, what we have seen with more recent looting, “is that looting has become highly organized” (Fannon, 2016). In the case of the Benin Bronzes, which were looted by British forces during the colonial expedition in 1897, and immediately dispersed across various institutions globally, the passage of time helped expedite the loss of their cultural significance.

Time, paired with an initial lack of documentation and lack of interest in their origins has resulted in many of these artifacts losing their connections to their place of provenance completely. Besides being briefly mentioned in exhibition labels that they are Nigerian or are from Benin City, little about the cultural and spiritual connection between the Bronzes and the Kingdom of Benin

have been retained and made publicly accessible alongside the actual Bronzes on display, until recently. Historically, museums have dedicated much of their focus and research to the aesthetic or monetary value of the artifacts rather than their cultural and historical significance. As a result, detailed records of the artifacts' origins were frequently neglected or lost.

Without documentation, acceptable record keeping and transaction history, and lagging ongoing research and documentation, the Benin Bronzes became decontextualized objects within museum collections, detached from the rich cultural narratives and historical events that they embody. The decontextualization of looted artifacts makes provenance research even more crucial in restoring these connections by identifying the specific cultural, historical, and geographical context of each artifact. Iterative provenance research not only enriches the understanding of the artifacts themselves but also strengthens the case for their repatriation by highlighting the cultural significance and rightful ownership of the objects.

Moreover, it is beneficial for museums to continue conducting provenance research as it allows them to engage in more informed and ethical practices. Furthermore, museums are trusted institutions, most with mission statements that include their commitment to educate their visitors, maintain ties to the local and distant communities featured in their displays, be seen as respected spaces for informed critique, intercultural discussions, and intellectual inquiry, and to continuously encourage evolution as “agents of change” (Murawski, 2021). By acknowledging and addressing the colonial histories and looting practices

associated with their collections, museums can contribute more deeply to impactful reparative work and foster a more inclusive and truthful representation of history, instead of partial histories that reflect many but are only told by few. In doing so, this helps build greater trust and cross-collaboration with “source communities” (Norby, 2023), ensuring that the stories and cultural heritage of these artifacts are preserved and respected.

Combining repatriation with reparative efforts helps those working inside museums, and visitors alike, to see the space and its collections as an ongoing negotiation of viewing, learning, and experiencing, which constantly “invites visitors to reflect on and reinterpret the familiar, according to the motto ‘seeing the world with different eyes’” (*About Us*, n.d.). While repatriation represents the more substantial and proactive aspect of reconciling histories involving looted artifacts, uncovering the forgotten, lost, or obscured histories of these objects advances the cause of repatriation for looted artifacts such as the Benin Bronzes and many others.

In Full View: Openness and Transparency at the MKB

Although the MKB did not curate an exhibition focused solely on the Benin Bronzes, they did curate an exhibition titled, *In Full View*. *In Full View* is a project series that asks, “who owns the objects in the MKB’s collections?” *In Full View* feels that “an answer to this question is needed for every single item” (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.). *In Full View* takes a unique approach to by having members of their staff move their “workplace to one of the museum’s showrooms” where they will spend “a few weeks working in the Hedi

Keller-Room during museum opening hours” (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.). In doing so, visitors are now given the chance to observe provenance research up close. According to the *Project Series: In Full View* description:

“Researchers, conservators, photographers, as well as the logistics and communications teams, can be observed at close quarters, and will actively seek to engage you in conversation. They are there to explain the work they do, answer your questions and discuss things with you. If you would like to know more, you can take your time to look through a wide range of documents, from letters and index cards, diaries, contracts and applications to measurements, media folders along with publications. Photos projected onto the wall provide further insights.” (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.)

To ensure maximum engagement, “visiting the *In Full View* project series is included in the admission fee” (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.). Provenance research taking place in the public showrooms includes objects from Sri Lanka, the French Polynesia, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, and Benin, Nigeria. The artifacts from Benin, Nigeria that are featured in the *In Full View* project series are also part of an exhibition on memory titled, *Memory: Moments of Remembering and Forgetting*. *Memory* asks, “How do people recall memorable moments, individuals, and places?” (*Memory - Moments of Remembering and Forgetting*, n.d.).

In Full View is centered around questioning and discovering. They ask self-reflective questions such as, what is the museum continuing to do after the provenance research takes place, and what other stories lie behind the objects in their collections?

According to the website description, “The MKB seeks transparency in every regard”—hence it’s *In Full View* series (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.). *In Full View* will help visitors see “before their very eyes” the processes that unfolded to reveal a “different view of the MKB’s history” alongside “more recent developments that have left their mark on the institution” (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.). According to the MKB’s director, Anna Schmid:

“We no longer automatically consider objects to be the sole property of the MKB; the prerogative of interpretation no longer lies solely with us either now. More importantly, it’s open to debate whether Western scholarship here takes priority over other forms of knowledge. The MKB’s attitude has been further consolidated through dialogue with other cultures. These have always been taken seriously. It goes without saying that we are open to other worldviews. However, it is now also becoming increasingly self-evident that communities of origin have the prerogative of interpretation over items in our keeping. We can only learn from that.” (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.)

Anna Schmid’s quote is poignant and maybe one of the most important reflexive public statements made by any of the SBI museums. By moving away from considering objects to be the sole property of the museum, the museum is in essence making a shift towards seeing objects as more than just things to be commodified; they are moving away from lifeless objects and moving towards seeing artifacts for their “thingness” (B. Brown, 2001). This signals a fundamental shift in how museums are beginning to conceptualize their role—not as unquestioned, entrenched authorities, but as institutions willing to share power.

The statement from director Anna Schmid challenges long-standing norms around ownership and epistemic authority—particularly the authority museums

have historically granted themselves, which has been reinforced by both the public and the nation-states in which they operate, as well as by the very ideologies they helped produced, that have become adopted, and that they continue to uphold. Director Anna Schmid directly confronts the entrenched authority museums have long claimed over cultural objects and knowledge—an authority that, again, is self-appointed, enforced, and legitimized by nation-states, and sustained by public trust in the very colonial ideologies these institutions helped create and continue to reproduce.

By openly questioning whether Western scholarship should take priority over other forms of knowledge, the museum acknowledges the legitimacy of Indigenous, local, marginal, oppositional, local, and other non-Western elite epistemologies. All of which have been historically excluded, subordinated, discredited, and ignored by museums. Moreover, the language—“we no longer automatically consider” alongside “it’s open to debate”—implies not just a procedural change, but a deep institutional introspection. It suggests a move away from the idea of museums as neutral caretakers of global heritage—a self-given position—and toward a more collaborative, ethically responsive, morally responsible and dialogic model of stewardship. This stance also aligns with broader decolonial efforts across the museum world, particularly in the context of repatriation debates, where power, voice, and knowledge are being re-negotiated.

For the MKB, Questions do Raise Further Questions

In *Openness and Transparency*, a series of questions probe the meaning behind the *In Full View* exhibition: “How did items enter the MKB's collection? In what context? What were they used for before? And today? Who thinks they are important? For whose benefit do they need to be made available?” (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.). The questions reflect the MKB's efforts to recognize the cultural significance of the Benin Bronzes. The exhibition also demonstrates that “that the MKB has taken on board the new definition of a museum, as recently agreed by the International Council of Museums (ICOM)” (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.). As of August 24, 2022, ICOM approved a new definition of museums. The ICOM now defines museums as:

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.” (International Council of Museums, 2022)

The MKB interprets this definition to position museums as caretakers, accepting responsibility for the objects entrusted to them, stating that they “owe a duty of care to the items entrusted to it” (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.). This includes responding to “enquiries about specific items,” addressing “unusual items or archival documents” discovered during research, and managing questions of provenance responsibly (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.). While some items will always remain uncertain, “hazy”

(*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.), or in flux, the MKB hopes that “new avenues will open up, or new contacts will be found with whom the future of objects can be discussed, negotiated and realized: from lending to the circulation of objects to restitution, everything is possible” (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.). By framing themselves as responsible caretakers, the MKB demonstrates how museums can actively engage with the ethical, cultural, and political dimensions of repatriation offering a model for decolonizing institutional practices while addressing the complex legacies of looted artifacts.

MKB makes visitors aware of this haze, signaling an institutional comfort with uncertainty that is also emerging at Museum Rietberg. Both museums are confronting the gaps and ambiguities that inevitably arise in provenance research. The categorization used here by MKB also highlights the discomfort institutions face when confronted with uncertain or contested provenance histories, revealing both a willingness to investigate and an acknowledgment of their current limitations of their knowledge. In addition to highlighting this uncertainty, MKB is “giving [visitors] insights into the sheer variety of the MKB’s research projects” (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.). Providing visitors with insights into the scope and diversity of its research projects, MKB notes that “No two [research projects] are alike; all require different preparations, a different approach, different tasks, and negotiations as well as a different understanding” (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.). Referencing the Benin Bronzes, which are included in the *In Full View* exhibition, MKB explains:

“The “Benin Bronzes” have generated a lot of media attention. They are considered the property of Nigeria, or more exactly the Benin royal family, and quite soon a request for their return might possibly be made. The return of the thulu tree to Australia has now been agreed and approved. As a quid pro quo, the MKB is set to receive a different object from the respective Kamilaroi community.” (*In Full View – Openness and Transparency*, n.d.)

Here, the MKB uses the attention surrounding the Benin Bronzes to address another item it recently repatriated: a thulu tree to Australia. What stands out most is their problematic decision to use the phrase “quid pro quo” to describe receiving a different object from the community which it had just repatriated an item back to—an item that has been rightfully returned home. It remains unclear whether the return of the thulu tree was contingent upon receiving something in exchange. If so, then while the act of repatriation is positive, framing it in terms of reciprocity raises ethical concerns and further calls into question the purely altruistic nature of the SBI. Again, we see an example of Swiss museums prioritizing maintenance of a carefully curated positive public image taking precedent. At the same time, they use the ethical debates around the Benin Bronzes—and the work the SBI is doing—as opportunity for self-promotion.

Despite the ethical concern, as documented above, the MKB’s efforts to repatriate items and put together an exhibition dedicated to these items demonstrates a meaningful commitment to restitution. The inclusion of a separate repatriation case in a blurb about the Benin Bronzes does highlight the value of conducting a nuanced, negotiated reading on institutional texts. Without a close reading, it may be missed that, however subtly, Swiss museums are

using the important provenance work being done by the Swiss Benin Initiative as institutional self-promotion. Recognizing both the progress made and the complexities inherent in addressing colonial harm is essential for fostering thoughtful discussions and driving meaningful change.

The approach taken in the *In Full View* exhibition reflects a broader institutional evolution toward transparency, accountability, and participatory museology. Like the other eight Swiss Benin Initiative museums, the MKB models a path from unexamined authority and uncritical colonial narratives toward shared stewardship and ethical dialogue. By making museum processes visible to the public, MKB invites visitors to become critical participants rather than passive observers. As Scott (2007) notes, only a select few museumgoers (visitors) actively engage with and negotiate the narratives and ideologies presented in museums.

The Museum der Kulturen Basel puts Scott's (2007) observations about visitors negotiated readings into practice by actively encouraging visitors to engage critically with the museum space, including the uncertainties and haze surrounding provenance. This approach to radical transparency transforms visitors from passive spectators into active stakeholders— individuals with a genuine investment in how museum narratives are constructed despite the gaps and ambiguities in knowledge. In turn, it fosters deeper engagement and provokes critical reflection on issues of provenance, institutional authority, and interpretation, inviting museumgoers to confront both what is known and what remains unknown. By embracing these uncertainties, the MKB aligns with

decolonial theory, which emphasizes leaning into the margins by embracing marginal and multiple perspectives and challenging Western assumptions of knowledge as fixed, linear, or complete. This approach encourages visitors to engage with the museum as a space of dialogue and multiplicity rather than finality.

In light of ICOM's new museum definition, *In Full View* exemplifies an international shift toward decolonial and inclusive museum practices. The exhibition demonstrates how museums, governing bodies, and—in the case of the SBI—federal funders are beginning to collaborate and communicate more transparently. Even with transparency, collaboration, visitor engagement, and critical reflection on what it means to be a museum, *In Full View* does not provide all the answers—no single exhibition or institution can. Rather, it is part of a broader series of Swiss exhibitions that provoke inquiry, encourage dialogue about ownership, interpretation, restitution, and the role of museums in society.

The MKB Concluded

Upon closer examination, the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) has brought attention to some often-overlooked aspects of Switzerland's approach to the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes through its research and reparative efforts. However, as with many institutional endeavors, gaps manifest. These gaps further underscore the necessity of repatriation by revealing the historical injustices and imbalances in how the artifacts were acquired, highlighting the importance of returning them to their rightful cultural context. The Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI) exemplifies museums moving forward, opening themselves up for

critique, inquiry, and exposure through public facing discourse, thought-provoking exhibitions, and international research collaboration. As Dr. Uzebu-Imarhiagbe began to “examine the mechanisms of the Nigerian art trade and collecting practices in both colonial and post-colonial times through archival materials and interviews” specifically with the collection of Bronzes at MKB, MKB’s research collaboration is reflective of the entire Swiss Benin Initiative, and all the museums comprised of it.

Moving away from MKB, Museum Rietberg provided a more thorough account of how the Bronzes wound up scattered across Swiss museums. Although the MKB is sharing the progress happening within their particular museums regarding the Benin Bronzes, Museum Rietberg is heading the communication and ongoing progress and efforts of the entire Swiss Benin Initiative. While the SBI consists of eight individual museums across Switzerland, being the most internationally well-known Swiss museum, located in the capital of Switzerland, Museum Rietberg is at the forefront the SBI Initiative. Museum Rietberg, the third largest museum in Zurich and the largest museum in Switzerland focusing on non-European art and artifacts, is responsible for leading public-facing communication efforts about the status of the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes across all the partnering SBI institutions, including Museum Rietberg’s own ongoing research and collaboration with Benin City.

Museum Rietberg

On May 24, 1952, Museum Rietberg officially opened. Museum Rietberg started with the private collections of Eduard von Heyd, when his then private

collection was first exhibited (*About*, n.d.). Museum Rietberg is located in Zurich, Switzerland and is one of the largest art museums in Switzerland. From the beginning, Museum Rietberg “was dedicated to non-Western art” (*About*, n.d.). The museum focuses on “traditional and contemporary arts and cultures of Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Oceania” and has about “32,600 objects and 49,000 photographs in its collections” (*About*, n.d.). Unlike many museums where the majority of the objects are in storage facilities, onsite and offsite, most of Museum Rietberg’s objects are on public display “either in the museum’s galleries or in its open storeroom” (*About*, n.d.). This is in part due to Museum Rietberg’s desire to democratize art and make private collections as accessible to the public as possible. They wanted to “give people the chance to see objects that were previously privately owned” (Eugster, 2023).

While the SBI is comprised of eight distinct museums, Museum Rietberg spearheads communication efforts concerning the status of the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes and the ongoing research and collaboration with Benin City. According to a press release published by Museum Rietberg in 2021, the museum is leading the SBI, which includes seven other Swiss museums (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.). These eight Swiss museums have “come together under the leadership of Museum Rietberg in Zurich” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.). According to the section titled “Research Project Benin Initiative Switzerland 2021-2022 (Phase I)” on the Swiss Benin Initiative webpage “the Benin Collection at the Museum Rietberg comprises sixteen (possibly nineteen)

works acquired from art dealers and private collectors” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.).

Museum Rietberg is continuing efforts to research its acquisition history and collecting practices. As Museum Rietberg continues to look into this, they are asking three guiding questions: “What did people choose to write down? Where do we find reports about looting? Would people talk about stolen art in their diaries or in a letter to a friend?” (Eugster, 2023). While Museum der Kulturen Basel may have not clearly addressed their own provocation into how the Benin artworks arrived in Switzerland, Museum Rietberg does answer the question, “how did the Benin Bronzes get to Switzerland?” in great detail.

Analyzing The Benin Collection Latest Research Categories

In the *Benin Collection: Latest Research* write-up, Museum Rietberg separates the sixteen artifacts from the Kingdom of Benin that are in Museum Rietberg’s collection into three distinct categories: 1. References to the British Military Operation of 1897, 2. Colonial-era Material Unconnected to the Sack of Benin City in 1897, and 3. Objects Requiring More Research. The write-up begins with the following statement about the Benin artifacts in Museum Rietberg’s collection:

“Compared with other former colonial powers, the situation of the Benin collections in Switzerland is particular in that art dealers and private collectors played key roles in their acquisition. The collection of the Museum Rietberg contains sixteen artefacts from the Kingdom of Benin; which can be divided into three categories.” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.)

This categorization reflects the museum's effort to acknowledge the varied and often opaque provenance of the Benin Bronzes, while also pointing to the need for continued transparency and research—particularly in cases where acquisition histories remain unclear. The three categories in the write-up reflect the three distinct ways that Museum Rietberg has set out to organize the Benin Bronzes. This in turn reflects how the Museums thinks the Bronzes should be understood by the public. The categorization reflects an institutional attempt to organize and communicate the complexities of provenance, in a way that aligns with broader trends in museum transparency and provenance research. In doing so, these three distinct categories (that overlap and are not so neatly distinct) reflect how museums increasingly attempt to manage the legacies of colonial collecting by distinguishing between different forms of acquisition. However, this can risk minimizing the broader ethical issues tied to holding looted or contested artifacts. It can also be seen as another attempt by museums to separate, label, and impose Western standards of organizing and categorizing onto non-Western artifacts.

The categorization used by Museum Rietberg also highlights the discomfort institutions face when confronted with uncertain or contested provenance histories, revealing both a willingness to investigate and an acknowledgment of their current limitations of their knowledge. With this in mind, it is worth noting that the knowledge constraints are not necessarily innate but are man-made. Museums have the resources and means to expand their knowledge, fill in the gaps, and not only address contested histories, but provide

answers as well. Lastly, however problematic categories can be, the categorization reflects effort taken to clarify provenance research. It also provides a potential framework for making decisions about repatriation and guiding the research needed to support it, especially as calls for restitution grow louder and stronger.

Analyzing Category 1: A Brass Hip Pendant Mask

In Category 1 of the *Benin Collection: Latest Research* write up, References to the British Military Operation of 1897, there are three items in Museum Rietberg's collection that "show evidence of a direct link with the Benin military operation of 1897" (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). One of these items is the brass hip pendant mask which "bears on its back side the inventory number of William D. Webster, a London dealer in ethnographic antiquities, who was tasked with the sale of the seized Benin artifacts on behalf of the British colonial administration" (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). Here, we see direct acknowledgment that the Benin Bronze was traded between a British art dealer and the British government. Importantly, this incriminates the British government in the illegal trade of looted artifacts and confirms complicity on behalf of the British administration.

The inscription of an inventory number by a colonial art dealer, such as Webster, on a looted African artifact, like the brass hip pendant mask, reflects the commodification of African art during colonialism and the way the commodification of African art has persisted. The etching of the inventory number on the back of this particular Bronze is permanent, becoming part of the life story

of this specific Bronze. While the colonial history of the looted Benin Bronze is well known, there remains a story within it waiting to be rediscovered and shared beyond the colonially tainted narrative.

The inscription on the Bronze is also eerily similar to the skin branding that was done on enslaved African Americans, as a dehumanizing act to show ownership of human beings. The inventory number on the Benin Bronze parallels the inventory lists of enslaved West Africans, taken from the same region, where people were reduced to numbers and forced to adopt names imposed upon them by their captors, leaving their true names behind. This stripping of one's identity as a means to disconnect and dehumanize has infamously been depicted in Alex Haley's book *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) which was quickly adapted into a television miniseries aptly titled *Roots* (1977).

In *Roots*, as an act of resistance against being enslaved Kunta Kinte—forcibly renamed Toby—refuses to accept the slaver's chosen name for him, Toby. As he attempts to preserve his identity by refusing the name Toby, he is brutally whipped. When the enslaver asks him what his name is he defiantly and proudly declares his true name, "Kunta Kinte," refusing to let go of the name given to him in his homeland. Using torture, his enslavers force Kunta Kinte to accept his enslaved name. But, after such brutal lashings, and at his physical and mental limitation, nearing death, he mutters his name is Toby, to save his life.

Kunta Kinte's refusal to let go of his true name emphasizes his deep connection to his homeland, his African roots and family, and his refusal to be

completely stripped of his identity. When colonial explorers, art dealers, and others collecting ethnographic objects inscribed artifacts with inventory numbers or renamed them, as was done with King Ghézo and Kunta Kinte, colonial dealers transformed them from cultural objects and people, with specific histories and spiritual significance, into mere commodities to be organized, traded, and displayed in Western museums, by the naming system enforced by Western standards.

The inventory number also clearly speaks to the worry that looted artifacts are reduced to numbers, void of history, connection, and narrative. This act reinforces the view of African art (and people) as a commodity to be cataloged, traded, and controlled, rather than being an integral part of the identity, heritage, and traditions of the communities from which it originates. The inventory number also dehumanizes the artifact, emphasizing its monetary or possessory value over its cultural and symbolic meaning. This reflects a colonial perspective that views African art not as culturally significant artifacts but as items to be exploited, aligning with Césaire's concept of "thingification" (1950), in which colonial powers objectify, exploit and demoralize people, and their belongings.

Webster's inventory number not only commodifies the Benin Bronze, but it also exemplifies how colonial powers sought to categorize and control African culture—which is both reductive and dehumanizing. The inventory number speaks to the colonial perspective that everything can be systemized, categorized, and catalogued (Anderson, 1991), based on a Western nomenclature. With the presence of the inventory number, the act of cataloging

and labeling ties into Anderson's concept of the "imagined community," where nations are constructed through classificatory systems, mapping, and control, all of which are part of the nation-state building that museums contribute to.

Through cataloging, colonial powers imposed a classificatory grid of cultural value, marking African art, like the Benin Bronzes, with inventory numbers that reduce them, decontextualize them, and disconnect them from their cultural origins and place of provenance. This cataloging process, as seen with brass hip pendant mask, treats the Bronze as merely an object in a system of exchange, rather than recognizing it as a culturally and spiritually significant creation.

In the case of looted African artifacts, the inscription of an inventory number can be seen as part of a broader system of colonial control that redefined African cultural heritage, reducing it to mere objects of fascination for Western collectors and audiences. While the museum's preservation of these artifacts appears protective, in the context of colonial history it reinforces a hierarchy that diminishes, devalues, and decontextualizes African culture. In contrast, Western institutions position themselves as the arbiters of cultural value—and of culture itself—defining and regulating culture according to Western hierarchies and categorical systems. This colonial legacy continues to shape how museums engage with repatriation debates today, as they confront the ethical implications of holding and displaying looted artifacts that continue to symbolize the reduction of African art to a commodity and essentialize it.

This act of reduction is referred to as a commodity fetish (Marx, 1867). Referring to how commodities are perceived in Western capitalist societies, Marx

(1867) explains that a commodity fetish is when the people behind the objects being produced are made invisible, giving the goods a certain type of intrinsic value with power and prestige, independent from the very labor that created them and the culture they belong to. This fetishization of cultural objects is entangled with hegemonic power structures (Gramsci, 1971). This dynamic reflects not only Marx's concept of commodity fetishism but also Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, as museums—by holding and displaying looted artifacts—reinforce bourgeois status culture and institutional authority. By stripping the Bronzes of their cultural origins and recontextualizing them within Western frameworks, museums maintain dominance over cultural narratives and uphold systems of elite power and prestige.

This overriding of authentic names can also be seen with the looted collection of artifacts from the Kingdom of Dahomey, present-day Republic of Benin, in Benin by the French. As shown in the film *Dahomey* (2024), one of the most prized artifacts being repatriated from France to Dahomey is a statue of King Ghézo, who was the King of Dahomey from 1818 until 1858. The King Ghézo statue, alongside 26,000 other looted artifacts, were stolen by the French and held captive for over 160 years, eventually making their way to the Quai Branly Museum in Paris. The artifacts were promptly re-named—including the statue of King Ghézo who was renamed Number 26—using a sequential numbering system, stripping them of their identity, cultural heritage and connection to their homeland of Dahomey. As part of the film's poetic job at reinscribing the true culture of the looted Beninese artifacts, in the film the statue

of King Ghézo is no longer referred to by its inventory number, Number 26, but is instead referred to by the artifact's true name, King Ghézo.

The colonial cataloging of the Benin Bronzes through inscribed inventory numbers reflects an imposed system of value – one where the catalog or naming convention truncates the original (i.e. true) name of the Bronze. Applied to the Benin Bronzes, inventory numbers and Western naming systems, that rewrite or redefine African artifacts, make invisible the history and cultural importance of these Artifacts to their homeland of Nigeria. As seen with King Ghézo (formerly Number 26) and the brass hip pendant mask inscribed with an inventory number, colonial systems of cataloging and renaming disregard the original cultural contexts and meanings, stripping artifacts from their origins and rendering them history-less.

Analyzing Category 1: Ivory Tusk and Ivory Armlet

Returning to the analysis of the three items in Category 1 that “show evidence of a direct link with the Benin military operation of 1897,” the second item in Museum Rietberg’s collection to “show evidence of a direct link with the Benin military operation of 1897” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.) is a carved ivory tusk. The ivory tusk was “part of an ancestral altar” and “is believed to have been taken to London by a British doctor early in the twentieth century” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). It was later acquired by a Zurich art dealer who “noted ‘from the time of 1897’ on his invoice” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.).

The Zurich art dealer noting that the carved ivory tusk is “from the time of 1897” on his invoice is a direct “reference to the violent appropriation of the item”

and serves as “evidence of its [the ivory tusk] great age and authenticity” (Benin Collection Latest Research, n.d.). Additionally, a close looking of the ivory tusk reveals burn marks “on the tusk’s broken tip” serving as a “further clue to the destruction of the royal palace in Benin City” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). The burn marks serve as a reminder of the enduring scars left by colonial violence.

The third item in Category 1 that reveals a direct link between the Benin Bronzes in Museum Rietberg’s collection with the Benin military operation of 1897 is an ivory armlet. Felix von Luschan wrote about this particular ivory armlet in his book *Altertümer von Benin (Antiquities of Benin)*, published in 1919. In *Antiquities of Benin*, “the book gives the owner’s name as “General Harry von Rawson”, the man who is widely held responsible for the sacking of Benin City in 1897” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.).

Here, we see a self-imposed colonial entitlement of British soldiers to seize total possession of objects that did not belong to them. General Rawson’s claim of ownership over looted artifacts, and Felix von Luschan’s acknowledgement of this ownership in 1919, exemplifies the recurring colonial practice of looting and asserting possession that is seldom contested. Colonialism was not only merely about claiming land and people but about being perceived as the unquestioned, rightful owner of everything seized, reasserting a colonial paternalistic ideology. The armlet’s association with a British colonial general underscores the systemic appropriation, ownership, and trade of African objects, land, resources, and people by colonizing forces for centuries.

The two ivory Benin Bronzes in Museum Rietberg's collection—the ivory tusk and the ivory armlet—highlight the direct connection between the Benin Bronzes held by Swiss museums and the pillaging of Benin City, which led to the mass looting and precarious trading of these artifacts. While the brass hip pendant mask bears an inscribed inventory number, symbolizing the erasure of African art's meaning and the reduction of these precious cultural artifacts to mere commodities, disconnected from their culture, the two ivory pieces reveal additional colonial traces of the Bronzes. Like the mask, the history of the ivory tusk and the ivory armlet are also deeply intertwined with colonialism, as both ivory Bronzes were looted during the punitive British expedition in 1897, and the ivory armlet was owned by the British General who is responsible for the sacking of Benin City.

All three of these objects—the brass hip pendant mask, the ivory tusk, and the ivory armlet—show the deeply embedded colonial history of the Benin Bronzes in Museum Rietberg's collection, an aspect that is crucial to retain and include in the full story of the Bronzes. In retaining the colonial traces present in the Bronzes, a stronger sense of connection and history can be evoked. The cultural and historical significance of each Bronze needs to be retained, including how colonialism continues to impact the art and artifacts in museum collections. By directly engaging with colonial history, the uniqueness of each Benin Bronze is also highlighted, moving the Bronzes away from a colonialist grouping that conflates objects as one and towards a more nuanced and holistic viewing of each Bronze as individual, unique relics with their own dynamic story and history.

As was portrayed in *Dahomey* (2024) with the statue of King Ghézo, these artifacts have personalities and names, with rich stories to be told. Alongside their cultural importance to the Kingdom of Benin, including the colonial history enriches our understanding of these objects as not only symbols of Nigerian ingenuity and artistry but it also serves as a reminder of the broader historical context of exploitation, reduction, conflation, and cultural appropriation that permeates museum collections and our interpretations, experiences and understanding of the very objects on display.

The colonial impact behind each Bronze is part of the history of the Benin Bronzes. The etched inventory number on the pendant mask, the Zurich art dealer's "from the time of 1897" (*Benin Collection*, n.d.) invoice note on the ivory tusk, and acknowledgement that the Bronze was owned by General Harry von Rawson all speak to the journey each Benin Bronze has taken. These records help trace the journey of the Bronzes from the Kingdom of Benin to Switzerland, helping to answer the question, how did the Benin Bronzes end up in Swiss museums? Instead of omitting these important details in the *Benin Collection Latest Research* write-up Museum Rietberg places them at the forefront of the objects' descriptions.

Colonial details like these deepen our understanding of the journey of the Benin Bronzes, revealing how their story is intrinsically linked to the actions and enduring legacies of colonialism. By tracing these three colonial markers, we can map the journey of the Benin Bronzes, enriching the narrative of their presence in the collection. Referring back to Museum der Kulturen Basel's stated goal of

tracing the migratory routes of the Bronzes to support repatriation claims, Museum Rietberg's engagement with the colonial history of its own Bronzes affirms the idea that "reconstructing routes" can demystify the contended narratives and confirm the looting and illicit circulation of these artifacts. Recognizing the colonial origins of these objects underscores the deep, complex meanings embedded in museum collections and the fraught colonial histories they carry.

Closely reading how these three key Benin Bronzes in Museum Rietberg's collection are directly tied to the British military operation of 1897 reveals how meaning is embedded, produced, and interpreted—shaping not only institutional ideologies but also public understanding of cultural heritage. While Category 1 in the *Benin Collection Latest Research* publication demonstrates that Museum Rietberg has started necessary provenance research, it also makes clear that much work remains to be done to fully trace the acquisition history of objects in its collection. Ultimately, this deeper historical and colonial research supports not only more accurate provenance efforts but also strengthens the ethical and institutional case for repatriation. As global calls for repatriation continue, it is vital that museums confront and disclose the colonial foundations of their collections in order to justify and accelerate the process of repatriation.

Analyzing Category 2: Colonial Era Material

While a direct colonial connection is revealed in the three objects in Category 1, answering some of the Swiss Benin Initiative's questions about the colonial origins of the Benin Bronzes, not all of the Bronzes in Museum

Rietberg's collection are as traceable. In the other two categories in the *Benin Collection: Latest Research* text—Category 2: *Colonial-Era Material Unconnected to the Sack of Benin City in 1897* and Category 3: *Objects Requiring More Research*—there are other artifacts held in the Museum Rietberg's collection that do not appear to have as clear of a connection to the punitive Benin Expedition of 1897, which led to the sacking of Benin City and the looting of the Benin Bronzes (*Benin Collection*, n.d.).

Focusing on Category 2: *Colonial-Era Material Unconnected to the Sack of Benin City in 1897*, Museum Rietberg goes on to explain, “the Museum holds another two (possibly four) items from the colonial era, but they have no connection with the punitive Benin Expedition of 1897” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). One of these items is a terracotta leopards head purchased by Eckart von Sydow during his travels to Benin City in 1836, almost six decades prior to the punitive expedition, meaning that it is in fact unconnected to the sack of Benin City in 1897. By the time of the British invasion of Benin City in 1897, the terracotta leopards head would have already been in Europe.

Museum Rietberg also states that “another item with no known connection to the events of 1897 is a small ivory triad sculpture of a king flanked by two dignitaries. Iconographically, this item clearly pre-dates 1897” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). The ivory triad sculpture arrived in Switzerland in 1965, after Nigeria's Independence was established on October 1, 1960. Its arrival in Switzerland in 1965 does not automatically mean that it is disconnected to the punitive expedition. Rather, this object's recorded trade history is used by Museum

Rietberg as support that it is disconnected from the colonial looting and trading like other Benin Bronzes. According to Museum Rietberg's records, this sculpture was sold by a Nigerian trader "to a Swiss woman at an African stand in the Globus department store. The buyer later gifted it to the Museum Rietberg" (*Benin Collection*, n.d.).

The final two objects that Museum Rietberg claims are unconnected to the sack of Benin City in 1897 are two brass bracelets. According to Museum Rietberg, these two brass bracelets "can probably only be dated to the time after 1897" (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). Because they are likely to have been created after 1897—after the punitive expedition—Museum Rietberg says they are "not connected with the aforementioned military conflicts" (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). However, since the dating is uncertain, we cannot be sure that they are in fact unconnected with the punitive expedition or that they were not also looted.

The Possibilities of African Agency

The sale of the small ivory triad sculpture is as an example of the important role of 'African agency' in the art trade of the post-colonial era" (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). African agency is important to consider given that in pre-colonial contexts countries across the continent of Africa had bargaining power and were involved in elaborate and mutually beneficial systems of trade, from material goods and natural resources to people and art. According to Esther Tisa, curator and the director of provenance research at the Museum Rietberg in Zurich:

"Even though there was a power imbalance in colonial times, we can't assume that everything was stolen. There are different acquisition contexts and backgrounds. Pieces of art were used for bartering, sold and given as diplomatic gifts. We have to remember

that it was not only colonial regimes that had bargaining power.” (Eugster, 2023)

Tisa goes on to explain that “art objects were often given away in their countries of origin [which] is part of the reason why Zurich became an important trading hub for African art in the 1950s” (Eugster, 2023). But, as the Scramble for Africa ramped up and Europeans began invading and colonizing countries across Africa, the power dynamic between these former independent nations with bargaining powers quickly changed. The “former rulers in [newly] colonized countries tried to establish alliances through gifts; this was their strategy to form a good relationship with the new leaders” (Eugster, 2023). Although some of the objects in museums collections are gifts, it is important to remember that these gifts, “donations or sales were made under [intense] pressure” (Eugster, 2023).

Many of these “transactions” were not well documented in writing, therefore the conditions of these sales remain unclear. Some transactions were not well documented because, realistically, if any illegal excavating and theft took place, it is unlikely that those involved “in an illegal excavation would indicate the exact site where the excavation took place” (Eugster, 2023) or self-incriminate by documenting other specifics relating to theft and excavation. Transactions were also not well documented because many “African societies were oral societies” and transactions “were not documented in writing” (Eugster, 2023).

Museum Rietberg has made an effort to reconstruct oral African history by collaborating with Oral History Association (OHA), “the principal membership organization for people committed to the value of oral history” (*Who We Are -*

Oral History Association, n.d.). OHA is an international organization that “engages with policy makers, educators, and others to help foster best practices and encourage support for oral history and oral historians” (*Who We Are - Oral History Association*, n.d.). OHA prioritizes “fostering communication among its members and encourages standards of excellence in the collection, preservation, dissemination and uses of oral testimony” (*Who We Are - Oral History Association*, n.d.).

Even with their collaborative work with OHA, Museum Rietberg’s efforts to reconstruct African history orally have not been as successful as their other areas of provenance research since “most of the [oral] reports were compiled by colonial officials or Western collectors” meaning “they can be very biased” (Eugster, 2023). While some sales can “serve as an example of the important role of ‘African agency’ in the art trade of the post-colonial era” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.), there are many factors as to why these assumingly legal, autonomous sales may have still been performed as a result of colonial pressures and under extreme circumstances as a means for survival and desperate cooperativity.

Questioning the Gift from a Swiss Woman

Also interesting about the ivory triad sculpture are the missing details about this transaction. First, unlike the earlier examples of Rietberg’s objects that have direct ties to the punitive exhibition, specifically the brass hip pendant mask which “bears on its back side the inventory number of William D. Webster, a London dealer in ethnographic antiquities, and the ivory tusk, believed to have been taken to London by a British doctor early in the twentieth century” and later

acquired by a Zurich art dealer who “noted ‘from the time of 1897’ on his invoice” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.), the ivory triad sculpture’s details are less clear. For both the brass hip pendant mask and the ivory tusk, details about the art trader and information from invoice records are identified and disclosed. However, with the ivory triad sculpture, which arrived at Museum Rietberg in 1965, the identities of both the Nigerian trader and the Swiss art buyer, as well as information from invoice or gift records, are not disclosed. Since the object arrived in Switzerland in 1965, well within modern times, I find the gaps regarding the identities of the trader and buyer precarious.

Second, the location where the transaction occurred is also precarious. Museum Rietberg states the ivory triad sculpture was “sold from a Nigerian trader to a Swiss woman at an African stand in the Globus Department store” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). First, there is no name provided or any other descriptive details about this so-called “African stand.” Second, it is unclear whether the Globus department store, referenced as the location where the ivory triad sculpture was sold, is located in Nigeria or Switzerland. There is a Globus store in Lagos, Nigeria that is called Globus Supermarket. To use the name verbatim as Museum Rietberg does, the “Globus department store” is Switzerland’s leading department store, which opened in 1892 and has stores across the country, including in Bellevue, Zurich, Berne, Basel and Lucerne.

So, was the object sold at a local supermarket in Lagos or was it sold at a high-end department store chain in Switzerland? Where it was sold—locally at a market or internationally at a luxury European store—brings into question the

level of “African agency” involved in the trade of this sculpture, since these are two very different settings for buying and selling African art, with two very different consumer audiences, and two very different sets of buying power, on both the vendor and consumer end.

Lastly, since this Benin Bronze sculpture was gifted to Museum Rietberg in 1965, I wonder if the gifter’s name was recorded in the Museum’s records and simply not publicly disclosed. This leads me to speculate whether the Nigerian trader or the Swiss woman were aware that this small ivory triad sculpture, depicting a king flanked by two dignitaries, iconographically pre-dates the punitive expedition of Benin City of 1897 and may possibly be a prized Benin Bronze that was looted. I also wonder if the Swiss woman gifted this to Museum Rietberg because she was aware of the artifact’s history and the urgency for a prized artifact like this to held in the safe keeping of a museum. As Esther Tisa, curator and the director of provenance research at the Museum Rietberg in Zurich, explains:

“In colonial times, museums gained popularity and reflected the imbalance of power between imperialism and colonialism – even though the collections had different backgrounds, for example they were sometimes used in diplomacy, sometimes for research and sometimes they were sold on arts markets in their countries of origin.” (Eugster, 2023)

Although it can be very difficult to find precise transactional records from collectors and traders, the traces that do exist are essential to uncover as they help complete the story of how the Benin Bronzes ended up in Switzerland. As SBI museums continue to look into acquisition histories, they are asking three

guiding questions: “What did people choose to write down? Where do we find reports about looting? Would people talk about stolen art in their diaries or in a letter to a friend?” (Eugster, 2023).

These records provide clarity to the unanswered questions about their trade routes and the level of agency regarding involvement by people from Benin City. Collector and trader records can help explain how the broader networks of colonial exploitation that facilitated their removal has led to further cultural displacement and a loss of heritage and history. Understanding the acquisition contexts and backgrounds sheds light on how dynamics of power have shifted, how ownership has transferred, and how the value attributed to these artifacts has changed over time, offering critical insights into the historical and ethical dimensions of their repatriation.

This again raises the discussion of reconstructing trade routes that Museum de Kulturen Basel (MKB) brought up because, even if the Bronze was not gifted to Museum Rietberg until 1965, the object pre-dates 1897. While it could have been a family heirloom or traded by Nigerian art dealers over the years, it is possible that it was one of the Bronzes looted in 1897, only arriving in Switzerland in 1965. This is especially true given that the Benin Bronzes were made as early as the 13th century and into the 16th century, meaning the looted Bronzes were created well before their theft in 1897 and arrival in Museum Rietberg a century later. The fact that it was not gifted to Museum Rietberg until 1965 does not mean it is disconnected from the punitive expedition of Benin City in 1897 or that it is not one of the looted Benin Bronzes.

The objects addressed only represent two to four items that Museum Rietberg claims have no connection to the Punitive Benin Expedition, out of the total 18 Benin Bronzes that Museum Rietberg possess in their collections. Although they are categorized as being colonial-era material unconnected to the sack of Benin City in 1897, there are only two items with any evidence to support that it is possible they did not end up in Switzerland as a direct result of the looting that took place after the sacking of Benin City.

A question worth asking now is, is it possible for any “colonial-era material” to truly be disconnected from colonialism? The terracotta head that was acquired in 1836—decades before the punitive expedition of Benin City in 1897—also brings in additional questions regarding what should be done with other objects that are also from colonized places but were not directly acquired in the same illegal ways. Should these objects also be repatriated back to their place of provenance alongside the other looted and colonial goods? Additionally, it is worth asking, is it possible to fully understand the extent of autonomy or agency that traders and buyers from colonized regions had over the objects they traded and sold?

Analyzing Category 3: What Remains is Uncertain

The third and final category, *Objects Requiring More Research*, in the *Benin Collection Latest Research* text “concerns nine objects whose provenance is uncertain” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.), which Museum Rietberg states “is where the greatest need for research exists” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). The nine objects in question in this category were “acquired via the Western art market and passed

through the hands of various European collectors (Han Coray, Eduard von der Heydt, Paul and Maria Wyss), and art dealers (Paul Guillaume, Emil Storrer)” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). At the moment, Museum Rietberg is uncertain if these nine items “belong to the loot taken by British forces in 1897” and they are investigating this further.

One of these European collectors in question, Eduard von der Heydt, was a “German banker and the founding benefactor of the Museum Rietberg” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). A brass commemorative head and three other objects from Benin City belonged to Heydt. Heydt “acquired his extensive collection on the art market during the 1920s and 1930s” (Benin Collection Latest Research, n.d.). As part of their ongoing research, Museum Rietberg “seeks to reconstruct how this object made its way from Nigeria via the art trade into the hands of Eduard von der Heydt” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.).

Another example of an artifact requiring more research is the cast brass plaque depicting a warrior. This artifact “once belonged to the collection of Han Coray” who “in the late 1920s and early 1930s was one of the leading collectors of African art in Switzerland” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). Coray eventually went bankrupt and “large sections of his collection entered a number of Swiss museums” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). As Museum Rietberg states, “Besides the Museum Rietberg, items from his Benin collection are to be found in the Historical and Ethnographic Museum in St. Gallen as well as the Ethnographic Museum of Zurich University. There are still large gaps in our knowledge about the provenance of many of Coray’s pieces” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.).

The third object that requires more research is a terracotta commemorative head, which was purchased by Museum Rietberg in 1961 from Emil Storrer. Storrer was “closely connected to Museum Rietberg” being one of the “most important art dealers in Switzerland” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). Museum Rietberg explains the close connection between Storrer and the museum stating:

“Together with the then director Elsy Leuzinger, he [Storrer] travelled to West Africa in the early 1950s and sat on the Museum Rietberg's acquisition committee from 1958 to 1988. Time and again he sold objects to the museum. How and where Storrer acquired this Benin memorial head will be investigated in our new research project.” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.)

The *Objects Requiring More Research* category focuses on nine additional Benin Bronzes in Museum Rietberg's collection that the museum is investigating “whether these items belong to the loot taken by British forces in 1897” (*Benin Collection*, n.d.). As discussed in Category 2, details pertaining to the two brass bracelets with uncertain dating and the small ivory triad sculpture gifted to Museum Rietberg in 1965 are uncertain as well. Therefore, both the nine objects identified in Category 3 and the three objects from Category 2 are all uncertain and require more research to ascertain whether or not they were looted and how they journeyed from Nigeria to the Western world. The two brass bracelets and the ivory triad sculpture fit better under the *Objects Requiring More Research* category, than in the *Colonial-Era Material Unconnected to the Sack of Benin City* in 1897.

This erasure of provenance resonates with the gaps in what we know about the art collectors who facilitated the arrival of the Benin Bronzes at

Museum Rietberg. While the museum provides some sufficient information about these dealers—identifying them by name and noting elements of their relationship with the institutions—it also acknowledges that this relationship (between dealer and museum) is an area requiring further research.

Documenting and sharing the histories of acquisition and exchange with these collectors is crucial, as it stitches back together the fractured story of the Benin Bronzes and resists the silences that colonialism worked so hard to preserve.

Addressing its acquisition history through these three categories highlights the reflexivity and accountability that Museum Rietberg is taking in addressing colonial histories. It also shows how Museum Rietberg is making a shift toward more reflexive, research-driven stewardship of cultural property. This shift reflects comments made by MKB’s director, Ann Schmid, regarding the use of the exhibition as an avenue to reveal a different side of the museum’s history, reconsider ownership of artifacts in museums, and debate whether Western scholarship should continue to take precedence

Exhibiting In Dialogue with Benin Art Colonialism Restitution

Continuing with their efforts to “democratize art and make private collections as accessible to the public as possible” (Eugster, 2023), Museum Rietberg opened an exhibition, *In Dialogue with Benin. Art, Colonialism and Restitution*. Opening August 23, 2024, and running through February 16, 2025, *In Dialogue with Benin* “presents the past present and future cultural heritage of the Kingdom of Benin in present-day Nigeria” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). The exhibition was “developed in close cooperation with representatives from Nigeria

and the pan-African diaspora” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). Featuring roughly “forty works of art from Benin and its neighboring art regions” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.), according to Museum Rietberg’s media release from August 1, 2024, they detail the exhibition, stating:

“The exhibition is the first ever to present a historic and culturally comparative overview of Benin’s art history and emphasize the significance of these pieces for Benin. At the same time, it explores the question of restitution in light of how these works were plundered by British colonial forces and sold as looted cultural goods on the international art market.” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.)

Alongside the 40 works of art are “their backstories highlighting the art trade and the reception of the works” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). The exhibition “sheds light on the past, present and future of collections from a colonial context” through the incorporation of “historic documents, photographs and multimedia stations to provide visitors with a deeper understanding of the subject matter” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). Some of these historical documents are located on the exterior venue of the exhibition and feature “the backstories of Beninese objects, details of their origin and where they are located in Europe today” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). Included are “maps and archival documents [that] illustrate the journeys these objects have taken” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). These historical documents provide backstories of the artifacts, shedding “light on political and economic relations, the consequences of the colonial era, commerce on the global trade market, and the lives and times of the collectors” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.).

Notably, this is a permanent exhibition and “for the first time Benin’s artistic legacy from a historical and comparative cultural perspective” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.) is presented. While some conversations about the Benin Bronzes focus on the plunder of Benin City by the British, others focus on debates surrounding whether to repatriate the Bronzes, fully, partially or not at all. Museum Rietberg brings these conversations together, and moves the conversation forward, beyond Benin City’s known colonial past. This permanent exhibition also highlights Benin City’s shared and “long history with Europe” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.) as well as the city’s renowned “production of high-quality brass, ivory, terracotta and wooden objects – an industry which continues to thrive today” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). The permanence of this exhibition reflects Museum Rietberg’s commitment to confronting the history of the Benin Bronzes with its visitors. By making *In Dialogue With Benin* a permanent feature rather than treating them as a temporary issue to be resolved and forgotten, the museum acknowledges an enduring responsibility to address the violence of their looting and the ongoing demands for justice.

To further present the story of Benin from a contemporary and historical perspective, “Museum Rietberg has teamed up with partners from Nigeria and its diaspora in Switzerland” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). With this exhibition, Museum Rietberg is taking a collaborative approach that does not rely on a single perspective and includes a more expansive diasporic vision and voice. As explained by Museum Rietberg:

“This collaborative approach not only involves studying the objects themselves, but also researching their respective provenances and

curating the exhibition. The challenge for all participants – both in Switzerland and Nigeria – was deciding how to handle questions regarding colonial injustice and restitution, knowledge archival and identity, and remembrance and healing.” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.)

Featuring pieces by contemporary artists alongside historical pieces, Museum Rietberg goes on to provide a brief, but substantial, background about what happened to the Benin Bronzes. In the corresponding media release for the *In Dialogue With Benin* exhibition, Museum Rietberg summarizes the sacking of Benin City in the following paragraph:

“The Greatest rupture in Benin’s long history occurred in 1897 when the British army conquered the kingdom and razed its palace to the ground. The then King Oba Ovonramwen was deposed and forced into exile. The British looted thousands of exquisitely crafted works and sold them on the art market. Finely carved ivories, commemorative sculptures and brass relief plaques were seized from their original contexts. Soon thereafter these spoils of war were traded as commercial goods and eventually became exhibition pieces in European museums. A number of looted cultural assets from that era can also be found in the Museum Rietberg collection.” (*In Dialogue With Benin Art, Colonialism and Restitution*, 2024)

The above description does not shy away from detailing the pillaging that led to Benin City being “conquered” and “razed to the ground” (*In Dialogue With Benin Art, Colonialism and Restitution*, 2024). What is striking about the exhibition’s media release is that it is no longer accessible online—at least not anywhere I have been able to locate it. When I began my collection process over a year ago, I saved every document I analyzed as a PDF, precisely because websites change and pages disappear. This is one such case. One of the most direct and honest accounts of the sacking of Benin City—including how it was

“the greatest rupture” in its history and how the Kingdom was “razed to the ground”—has now vanished. It is possible that the media release is no longer prominently accessible on the website, as media releases are primarily intended to announce news to the public. While the release served its purpose when the exhibition first opened, its removal limits access to information about the exhibition's origins and framing, which has ongoing relevance given the permanent nature of the exhibit.

As already mentioned, a crucial aspect of repatriation and restitution is acknowledgement of colonial acts that led to human trauma. Acknowledgement leads towards a path where the cultural survivance of both artifacts and provenance are preserved. And here lies the contradiction: can institutions claim to acknowledge this violent history when the very texts that most directly confront it are the ones removed? If reconciliation through repatriation is the goal, the first step must be a full and public acknowledgment of what happened—and a commitment to ensuring these words remain accessible, not quietly erased and buried all over again. Without sustained acknowledgement, a cycle of disavowal, color-blindness, and empty social and historical memory will continue.

As Museum Rietberg states, “provenance research is the first step to rectifying past injustices as it serves to uncover hidden or suppressed histories” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). To continue with the Swiss Benin’s Initiative to “intensively address a number of pressing questions” about the Benin Bronzes and provenance, Museum Rietberg is addressing the colonial forces that led to

the sacking of Benin City and looting of the Benin Bronzes by answering the following questions:

“How does one responsibly investigate colonial injustice? What does a museum do with collections which were acquired through violence in times of colonialism? When works are returned, what issues arise concerning loss, ownership and remembrance? How can we integrate the perspectives of the collecting society and the diaspora into an exhibition? Why is equitable cooperation so important?” (*In Dialogue With Benin Art, Colonialism and Restitution*, 2024)

To answer these questions, Museum Rietberg and all other SBI museums must continue to “clearly present the history of colonialism and acknowledge the injustices suffered” (*In Dialogue With Benin Art, Colonialism and Restitution*, 2024). To continue engaging with the history of colonialism, specifically regarding its ties to the museum, Museum Rietberg is investigating the provenance of the items in their collections, focusing on documenting the history of their origin and how they ended up in the museum’s collections.

Beyond their extensive write-up on the exhibition, Museum Rietberg published a book, *Mobilizing. Benin Heritage in Swiss Museums* (2024), which “explores the cultural heritage of the pre-colonial Kingdom of Benin, in the territory of what today is Nigeria” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). This publication has been made publicly accessible via PDF in both English and German free of charge, and it is available for purchase in the museum’s online shop for those wishing to purchase the text. All texts from the exhibition have also been archived and made into an online tour, which can also be found on Museum Rietberg’s website. Additional texts written by Museum Rietberg’s Nigerian

partners on the Benin Bronzes, including metadata on materials and craftsmanship, are also made accessible online for those interested in reading more about the Bronzes from Nigerian researchers and curators themselves.

The documentation that Museum Rietberg is doing, alongside Museum der Kulturen Basel and the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum, has provided the documents I needed to critically analyze, making my dissertation research possible. Making their documents publicly accessible underscores a commitment to acknowledgment as an ongoing, outward-facing practice—one that extends beyond internal discussions among museum staff and into the public sphere, where it can be continuously engaged with rather than treated as an insular or one-time gesture.

Multi-perspectivity and Scenography

In Dialogue with Benin Art, Colonialism and Restitution “not only sheds light on the conflict-ridden history of the Benin works, but it also highlights paths for future cooperation developed together with Nigeria related to issues even beyond restitution” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). While I critiqued Museum der Kulturen Basel as relying too heavily on a single Nigerian perspective, Museum Rietberg’s exhibition, *In Dialogue with Benin*, was assembled by four curators: Josephine Ebiuwa Abbe, Solange Mbanefo Michaela Oberhofer and Esther Tisa Francini, hailing from both Nigeria and Switzerland, moving beyond a singular voice and incorporating multiple perspectives. Collectively they represent an interdisciplinary perspective, bringing together expertise in the fields of diasporic studies, history, art ethnology, theatre studies and architecture as they came

together to collaboratively curate *In Dialogue with Benin*. By bringing together multiple experts, “the exhibition presents new paths on the road to restitution and underscores how important it is to collaborate with representatives from the countries of origin and the pan-African diaspora” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.).

Bringing together curators with a range of expertise created a much needed “multi-perspectivity” to the exhibition, putting into practice how multiple perspectives should not be an aside, but the center of provenance work and a guiding principle in how it should be done. Together, the four curators, Josephine Ebiuwa Abbe, Solange Mbanefo Michaela Oberhofer and Esther Tisa Francini, “developed the exhibition content, texts, designs, and accompanying program” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). They also included various “films and interviews with experts from museums, higher education, the Royal Palace of the Oba of Benin and various artists” to highlight the depth and range of “the Nigerian perspective on their native cultural heritage” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.).

As will be discussed in the subsequent section, *Repatriation on Screen*, repatriation means much more than sending an artifact back to its home; it is a spiritual reuniting between object, place, and life. We see both a reunion and varying perspectives about cultural heritage in the film *Dahomey*, which includes an open debate by a mixture of local Beninese residents and Beninese curators who helped facilitate the repatriation about what it means to have their artifacts repatriated back to the country of Benin.

Ancestral Awareness and Architectural Homage

As noted by Museum Rietberg, “visitors can look forward to the first-ever collaboration with the Swiss-Nigerian architect Solange Mbanefo whose concept for the exhibition’s design was inspired by Benin’s global perspective” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). Mbanefo’s interior is “designed to resemble the light-infused inner courtyards of the Palace of Benin” to portray “how the objects were originally arranged on the palace columns and in the holy ancestral shrines” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). Additionally, “the exterior areas highlighting the backstories of the objects and timelines are presented in blue-green” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). Blue-green is the “color of water, and by extension, the ocean deity Olokun” making the “water motif also refer to the trade between the Kingdom of Benin and the Portuguese starting in the 15th century and Benin’s foreign ties via its river harbors” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.).

The exhibition design choice led by architect Solange Mbanefo plays a crucial role in symbolically restoring life to the Benin Bronzes, which were stolen from their homeland over four centuries ago. Mbanefo’s design choices reconnect the Bronzes with their original cultural context and provenance. By modeling the exhibition space after the light filled inner courtyards of the Palace of Benin, the design not only evokes the architectural and spiritual environment where these objects once resided but also reanimates their intended spatial and ritual function. Tapping into the careful work of ancestry, Mbanefo’s design choices are a sort of architectural homage—combining the highly skilled intellectual, craftsmanship, and spatial awareness necessary in any successful

architectural design with an innate sense of cultural connectedness, shared identity, and ancestral awareness. In doing so, Mbanefo's architectural homage brings visitors into a reconstructed version of the Bronzes' original home, counteracting the dislocation and lostness caused by colonial looting. Mbanefo's architectural choices speak to Paul Gilroy's (1993) concept of Black identity as being formed through transnational, transatlantic movement, or the "routes" of diaspora, highlighting the ancestral connection behind Mbanefo's architectural choices to use blue and green to connect to the Atlantic Ocean.

Mbanefo's choice to use blue-green throughout the exhibit to symbolize water and the ocean deity Olokun creates a spiritual and historical link to Benin's maritime history and early trade relationships. Use of blue-green as a symbolism to water and the ocean also establishes a diasporic tie and an additional ancestral connection linking the Benin Bronzes and the *In Dialogue with Benin* art exhibition to the transatlantic slave trade where many formerly enslaved peoples were stolen from Western Africa, including from various parts of Nigeria. Mbanefo's architectural design choices connect to the contemporary artworks featured in the exhibition, namely Caribbean artist Cherry-Ann Morgan's installation, *'It is complicated.'* In her installation, she "examines slavery and her African roots" alongside the installation *'Nipadu'* by Ghanaian artist, Kwaku Dapaah Opoku, who "artistically examines the pillaging of Benin and questions the role of museums as burial sites" (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.).

Solange Mbanefo's architectural consideration also brings in reflection on the Kingdom of Benin's role in the transatlantic slave trade, where they worked

with Europeans to capture and sell neighboring people, in addition to their commercial relationships initially with Portugal, a country notorious for its deep cultural connections to the ocean and maritime life, as well as with the British before their mutually beneficial working-commercial relationship (including human trafficking and enslavement) went sour, ending in the British Royal Navy invading Benin City. The blue-green color choice speaks directly to the very invasion pillaging and sacking of Benin that ultimately led to the Bronzes being stolen, winding up in Switzerland, and now re-exhibited in Museum Rietberg to open a discussion about their theft, from the perspective of Nigerian curators, researchers, artists, and architects.

The ways that Mbanefo's design choices reflect trauma, are also reflected in the Ghanaian-made film, *You Hide Me*, —another central piece to the entire exhibition, and one of the five films featured in the University of Zurich's film series. This three-part short film series, *In Dialogue with Benin – Making Of* is about the making of the *In Dialogue with Benin. Art, Colonialism and Restitution* exhibition. The film series “introduces viewers to the traumatic events of 1897 when the British conquered and plundered Benin” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). Also directly engaging with the pain of the sacking of Benin City and the loss of cultural heritage, is “a new brass sculpture and dirges by Josephine Ebiuwa Abbe express[ing] the enduring pain of the Edo community” (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.).

There is also both an ancient and contemporary connection to the chosen journey across the Atlantic Ocean that many Nigerians take to access other parts

of the world for exploration, curiosity, careers and education. Bringing in another ancestral thread we can turn to Ellen Gallagher's paintings, where enslaved Africans who leapt into the sea to claim freedom in death—choosing sea over slavery—are reborn as mermaids in an imagined world. Mbanefo's blue-green, oceanic echoes resonate in this same current, conjuring the Bronzes—forever lost, yet perhaps joyfully adrift—swimming in vast, enduring waters of memory and possibility. This color choice embeds the Bronzes within a broader narrative of Benin's global interconnectedness, emphasizing both their sacred origins and their role in historical exchange networks.

Solange Mbanefo's choice to arrange the Benin Bronzes within the exhibition is equally as important. By positioning the Benin Bronzes in ways that echo their original placement on palace columns and within ancestral shrines, Mbanefo's recreation display restores a sense of ceremonial order and spiritual intention to the objects. This deliberate arrangement challenges the ahistorical and decontextualized ways in which such artifacts have long been displayed in Western museums as isolated aesthetic objects, whose sole purpose is to be both consumed while being passively unconsidered as little more than a thing on display in a case. Rather, Mbanefo's arrangement displays the Bronzes appropriately as they once were and still are—as sacred objects embedded in an entangled cultural, religious and political system of Benin City.

Solange Mbanefo architectural choices also stands in stark opposition to Vilensky's (2012) use of the word "deity." Vilensky's use of the term functions critically and ironically, highlighting how Western aesthetic frameworks in

museums elevate and reclassify African artifacts as art, often commodifying and fetishizing both the objects and the cultures from which they originate. The “white deity of Art” stands in for the colonial and racialized framework through which African material culture is validated—only once it is removed from its original community and recoded for Western consumption. Vilensky’s (2012) framing reinforces the notion that museums serve as spaces where non-Western artifacts are stripped of their original vitality, existing primarily to affirm Western authority and taste.

In contrast, for Mbanefo, in *In Dialogue with Benin Art, Colonialism and Restitution* she pays homage to the African deity Olokun. Her reference to the ocean deity Olokun is an act of reclamation. Rather than further strip the objects of their spiritual origin, as done by museums, Mbanefo's architectural choices re-root the Benin Bronzes in their belief systems and spiritual practices from which they were taken from. Solange Mbanefo’s homage to Olokun is deliberately used, culturally grounded, spiritually resonant, and affirmatively African—all without worrying about appeasing an Anglo audience or conforming to binding spiritual and religious frameworks. Through her design choices, Mbanefo rejects Anglo aesthetic culture and respectability politics.

In honoring Olokun, Mbanefo restores symbolic and spiritual agency to the objects, challenging the decontextualizing tendencies of traditional museological practices. Thus, where Vilensky (2012) critiques the imposed worship of Western Art as a colonial logic that kills the spiritual life of African objects, Mbanefo restores spiritual connection by centering an actual African deity, reanimating the

objects in a space shaped by African cosmology. Vilensky's use of "deity" exposes how colonialism deifies whiteness and aesthetic authority; Mbanefo's deity connection reclaims Indigenous spirituality and cosmological meaning as integral to how these artifacts should be experienced.

Solange Mbanefo's spatial awareness reasserts the relationship between the Bronzes and their original function as active participants in ritual and ancestral remembrance. Rather than simply presenting the objects as obsolete relics of a distant, disconnected past, Mbanefo's design brings them back into dialogue with the cultural logic that produced them and with their continuous presence and importance. In doing so, the exhibition encourages viewers not only to appreciate the artistic mastery of the Bronzes, but also to engage with their histories of displacement and the significance of their return to a context that honors their provenance. This act of architectural and curatorial care is, in itself, a form of reparation—a restorative justice where dignity is restored, narratives become more coherent, life is brought back to the objects, and the communities they represent are centered. Together, these design choices do more than beautify the space—they revitalize the Bronzes as living cultural artifacts, affirming their homeland and the ancestral practices from which they were taken. Mbanefo's architectural homage is a cultural reckoning.

Overall, Museum Rietberg's exhibition *In Dialogue with Benin. Art, Colonialism and Restitution* presents the history of colonialism, the provenance research conducted to date, and emphasizes what Museum Rietberg refers to as "multiple-perspectivity as a principle" (In Dialogue With Benin, n.d.). Here, African

history is not only presented solely from a Western perspective. Instead, Museum Rietberg's "multiple-perspectivity" incorporates perspectives from across the continent, adopting a pan-African approach. This approach is well suited for use in other areas of Benin Bronzes research, including future provenance research.

The University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum

The University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum is a "social anthropology science museum and the third oldest ethnographic museum in Switzerland" (*Ethnographic Museum*, n.d.). The museum focuses on what they call "Human Skill" by showing "the full range and diversity of human competences" (*Ethnographic Museum*, n.d.). The University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum prides itself on its compelling exchanges "with members or descendants of those communities of origin who once invented, produced and used" the objects in their collections, all of which are "explored under topical questions and, if possible, researched collaboratively" (*Ethnographic Museum*, n.d.). Through continuous provocation and collaborative research into the objects' provenance, the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum research addresses "the origin of these objects and the circumstances of their acquisition, as well as the colonial past of collections" (*Ethnographic Museum*, n.d.). The museum asks what they call "(self-) critical questions" about "who actually talks about cultures and societies and how they are represented" explaining that the museum is transformed into a "place of dialogue" that "encourages reflection on what it means to be human" (*Ethnographic Museum*, n.d.).

Including Museum Rietberg, The University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum is one of over a dozen museums located in Zurich that are part of The Zurich Museums Association. According to the About Us page on their website, “The Zurich Museums Association represents the interests of all participating museums in Zurich, comprised of professionally run museums open to the public that have regular opening hours and contribute relevant cultural information to the Zurich public” (*About Us*, n.d.-b). They state that their purpose “is the joint advertising and public relations outreach” (*About Us*, n.d.-b) of the participating museums in Zurich. Additionally, the Zurich Museums Association “provides a platform for regular exchange among affiliated institutions” and “organizes coordinated activities and public events” (*About Us*, n.d.-b).

The Zurich Museums Association’s coordinated and integrated, cross-promotional, and cross-communicative efforts among partnering institutions closely mirror the Swiss Benin Initiative's transparent and cooperative approach to repatriation. The Zurich Museums Association, Museum Rietberg, and the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum exemplify Switzerland’s broader cultural commitment to ethics, inclusion, and a collective, dialogic model of museum practices. Yet, these values are also carefully packaged as part of strategic public relations, underscoring how much both institutions are invested in cultivating and managing their public image. This suggests that institutional image-making can sometimes overshadow genuine ethical commitments. Their investment in public relations highlights how ethical values and public persona are deeply intertwined.

On The University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum's website, they explain in detail the museum's participation with the Swiss Benin Initiative, and they offer their own summary of the history of the Benin Bronzes. In the opening statement, they state that "the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich is investigating the provenance of its collections from the Benin Kingdom in Nigeria" (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.). They reiterate that "the aim of the Benin Initiative Switzerland is to research the provenance and object biographies of objects from Benin and make them transparent" (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.). Importantly, they note that the Swiss Benin Initiative is funded by the Federal Office of Culture, making it clear that the SBI is funded and supported by the Swiss government. With funding and support from the FOC, the SBI is able to embark on this important decolonial work.

The FOC's financial support and support to conduct provenance research has enabled a network of Swiss museums to work in collaboration with Nigeria on research and repatriation. The University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum states that "exchange and dialogue with Nigeria are at the forefront" (*About Us*, n.d.-b) of the SBI and the Museum's involvement. Including the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum, the other SBI museums are "working with the Nigerian historian Enibokun Uzébu-Imarhiagbe at the University of Benin" and "on the Swiss side, Alice Hertzog is involved as a project researcher who has been employed as a provenance researcher at the Ethnographic Museum UZH since spring 2023" (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With*

Nigeria, n.d.). The SBI museums implore numerous methodologies including, “research in European and African archives, interviews about Western collecting and commercial practices, and collecting oral histories transmitted by the craftsmen’s guilds and palace societies of Benin City” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.). Overall, “the aim is to reconstruct the biographies of objects and their sales routes from both Swiss and Nigerian perspectives” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.). Reconstructing lost, stolen and forgotten histories is a central aim of the Swiss Benin Initiative. As discussed in previous sections, Museum der Kulturen Basel has a detailed report about reconstructing trade routes and Museum Rietberg has spent resources investigating collecting and sales routes of some of the Benin Bronzes in their collection.

Continuing with their goal of transparency and engaging in colonial histories, the following paragraph is the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum’s explanation of the history of the Benin Bronzes:

“The Kingdom of Benin in what is current-day Nigeria had a long history of exchange and trade with the global North from the 15th century onwards. During the colonial era, British troops in 1897 launched an assault on its capital, Benin City during which the Royal Palace was plundered and burned to the ground. Between 3,000 and 5,000 objects were looted from the palace. These so-called “Benin Bronzes” subsequently passed through the hands of art dealers into private and public collections around the world. In Europe, these objects were admired early on as works of art because of their naturalistic aesthetics and ornate manner of production. Today they are some 100 items in the Swiss museums that are assumed to have originated in the Kingdom of Benin. The Benin Collection of the Ethnographic Museum comprises 18 objects, whose provenance is being researched.” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.)

What stands out in the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum's background on the Benin Bronzes is that they mention the early history of Benin City, specifically how The Kingdom of Benin engaged in "trade with the Global North." Similar to joint media release, there is no mention of the slave trade specifically. This is not a detail about the history of the Kingdom of Benin that the museums involved with the SBI mention on their websites or in any of their public facing documents.

Detailing the fraught history of Nigeria is on par with the anthropological roots of the Ethnographic Museum and their commitment to rigorously ask, what they refer to as, self-critical questions. Here, the questions are not directly about 'the self' of the Ethnographic Museum, but about the 'self' of the subject at hand, which is the colonial history of The Kingdom of Benin. However, they also fail to critically engage with the reflective backstory of The Kingdom of Benin—one that is not often discussed. This is a missed opportunity for not only the museum itself to do self-reflective work, but encouraging the countries, artifacts, and histories in other museums to also do self-reflective work, instead of shying away from the complex colonial ties that many countries and communities have. Focusing on what they call "Human Skill" engaging with Nigeria's contentious involvement with Western forces during the transatlantic slave trade, would have allowed the University of Zurich to truly engage with "the full range and diversity of human competences" (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.), of the human condition, and of human history, that they claim to do.

Most notable about this write-up is the final sentence, concluding the Museum's public statement about the Swiss Benin Initiative:

“As of yet, no restitution claims have been presented to Swiss museums, it is nonetheless a matter of concern to them that they act responsibly by instigating research and discussing the sensitive issues surrounded Benin's cultural heritage.” (*Benin Initiative Switzerland: Research and Dialogue With Nigeria*, n.d.)

Both the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum and the Museum der Kulturen Basel acknowledge on their websites that no formal restitution claims have been made by Nigeria to Switzerland regarding the Benin Bronzes. This transparency is important, but it is also notable that neither museum leads with this information. Rather than positioning the absence of claims as a point of institutional pride or defense, the museums present it as a factual note embedded within broader discussions of provenance and colonial history. This approach may reflect prevailing cultural attitudes in Switzerland toward colonial legacies and repatriation—particularly in light of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture's (FOC) support for provenance research and public engagement with colonialism. By not foregrounding the absence of restitution claims, the museums may be signaling a commitment to ethical reflection and responsibility, rather than self-congratulation.

However, it is also particularly interesting that although Switzerland is in possession of a significant amount of looted Benin Bronzes, scattered across eight museums, Nigeria has not made any formal restitution claims. It is not exactly clear why Nigeria has not made any formal requests to Switzerland though. Is it possible that in lieu of making formal restitution requests, Nigeria is

quietly requesting something else or seeking a different kind of restitution altogether? Or, is it possible that Switzerland anticipated Nigeria's demands, jumped into action and launched the Swiss Benin Initiative before any formal requests could arrive? This raises questions about Switzerland's approach: its initiative could reflect a proactive, bottom-up strategy to handling looted artifacts, acknowledgement of colonial residue, and a heightened-action oriented sense of ethical responsibility—all ideologically and financially supported by its Federal Office of Culture which supports provenance research. At the same time, this approach reinforces Switzerland's carefully curated reputation for neutrality, self-preservation, and peace that Switzerland ensures is maintained.

By contrast, Nigeria has made formal restitution claims to the Netherlands, Germany, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom, all of which have entered into some sort of repatriation agreement, except for England. Despite holding the largest number of looted Benin Bronzes, England has continued resisting repatriation, highlighting the uneven global politics of restitution. The SBI therefore offers a unique case for understanding how museums, national identity, ethics, and diplomacy intersect in the ongoing politics of repatriation in the 21st century.

Benin Dues Exhibition

Through September 2025, the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum is featuring an exhibition titled, *Benin Dues. Dealing with Looted Royal Treasure*. Being one of the eight institutions comprising the Swiss Benin Initiative, University of Zurich's exhibition *Benin Dues* incorporated research findings from

the SBI and “developed [this exhibition] with Nigerian experts from Benin City and diaspora groups in Zurich” (*Benin Dues. Dealing With Looted Royal Treasures*, n.d.). Opening on August 24, 2024 and running through September 14, 2025, *Benin Dues* opens their exhibition description with background on the British invasion of Benin City, stating:

“In 1897, British troops attacked the kingdom of Benin in present-day Nigeria. They ousted the king, burned down the capital and looted thousands of royal artefacts from the palace. In Europe, the objects were sold on the art market as “Benin Bronzes”. In 1940, Benin artefacts also entered the collection of the Ethnographic Museum. Today, these objects oblige us as a museum to engage with Nigerian communities, enable their access to their cultural heritage and acknowledge their claims to ownership.” (*Afro-Swiss Perspectives on African Heritage . . .*, n.d.)

Alongside photographs of ongoing research and photos that document the history of Benin City, ‘*Benin Dues*’ has some of the Benin Bronzes in their collection on display alongside accompanying text offering provenance details and other background information on the Bronzes.

The exhibition also features video and audio components to allow visitors to engage with the journey of the looted Benin Bronzes through visual and sound/audio sensory experiences. *Benin Dues* features three tours to invite visitors to learn more about the Benin Bronzes in the University of Zurich’s collection through guided tours with curator Alice Hertzog and members of the African Students Association of Zurich (ASAZ): Does the head belong to the rider?, How do people in Nigeria and in the Swiss diaspora view the Benin Bronzes?, Afro-Swiss Perspectives on African Heritage, in a Swiss Museum, and How Did That Get Here?, which is a provenance research workshop.

Repatriation on Screen

In addition to the three previously discussed components of the exhibition, the University Museum of Zurich Ethnographic Museum also featured a film series titled, '*A Case for Restitution in 5 Films*' curated by Nigerian filmmaker and independent film curator, Tobi Akinde. The five part film screening began with the screening of *Statues Also Die* (1950) on January 5, 2025, followed by *You Hide Me* (1970) on February 5, 2025, *Dahomey* (2024) on March 4, 2025, *Restitution? Africa's Fight for its Art* (2022) on May 8, 2025, and culminated with *Black Girl* (1966) on June 5, 2025.

Taking slightly different approaches, the five films were selected since they all engage with themes surrounding repatriation and looted African art and artifacts. Each film engages with the prevailing issues of looting, depicting the different ways that looted art has impacted people from their places of provenance and the actions some have taken to bring their precious cultural artifacts back home. From gaining access to the basement of the British Museum to take back what was looted by the English, to the deep intellectual and spiritual ties embedded in a mask to help navigate society as a recently colonized Black woman, the films shown by the University of Zurich all use the screen to encapsulate just how connected—what are too often regarded as seemingly lifeless objects—people are with the artifacts from their homelands.

The first film screened in the film series, *Statues Also Die*, was commissioned by *Présence Africain* (1947-present), a Paris based pan-African, anti-colonialist quarterly magazine founded by Alioune Diop—uncle to Mati Diop,

the filmmaker of *Dahomey*—in 1947 (*Statues Also Die*, n.d.). According to the University of Zurich’s website:

“*Statues Also Die* is an early critique of the devastating impact of French colonialism and commodification of African art. In a powerful introductory scene, a woman of African descent stands face to face with locked up African masks and figural sculptures in a museum in Paris, mirroring broader pattern of colonial dislocation and dehumanization. Using witty poetry, formal yet visceral imagery, *Statues Also Die* remains a powerful commentary to the fate of potent arts reduced to a museum object, and projections of power and conquest.” (*Statues Also Die*, n.d.)

Statues Also Die counteracts the ways African artifacts are, in essence, destroyed once they are housed and displayed in Western museums. The African artifacts portrayed on screen are gifted back their voice and therefore their history, identity, and autonomy. *Statues Also Die* humanizes African artifacts, “focusing on the emotional qualities of the objects, and discussing the perception of these works of art, craft, and utility from a historical and contemporary European perspective” (*Statues Also Die*, n.d.).

The second film screened, *You Hide Me*, is a documentary about its filmmaker, Nii Kwate-Owoo, “a student at the London Film School, [who] managed to outsmart the directors of the British Museum and its security system to gain access to the museum’s secret underground vaults to film valuable African artifacts stowed away there” (*Statues Also Die (1950) | You Hide Me (1970)*, n.d.). In *You Hide Me*, Owoo, exposes the extreme extent of the theft and concealment of ancient and rare African artifacts “stashed away in plastic bags and wooden crates” 1-2) in the basement of the British Museum. In revealing the extent of the looting and concealment, Owoo is making a case for the artworks to

be returned to their place of provenance. (Wikipedia, 2024). Even in recently liberated Ghana, *You Hide Me*, was initially rejected by the Ghanaian film society, labeled as being anti-British, and ultimately banned. in the basement of the British Museum. In revealing the extent of the looting and concealment, Owoo is making a case for the artworks to be returned to their place of provenance (Wagne, 2024). Even in recently liberated Ghana, *You Hide Me*, was initially rejected by the Ghanaian film society, labeled as being anti-British, and ultimately banned (*Statues Also Die (1950) | You Hide Me (1970)*, n.d.-b).

In *You Hide Me* we see clearly how the artifacts are haphazardly stowed away in the museum's basement, bringing forth rightful provocations and criticisms about museums that harbor looted artifacts. Given that the artifacts are not even on display or being properly stored dispels claims made by museums that they are encyclopedic institutions, bestowed with the duty to both display the artifacts in their collection to the world and to safely preserve and maintain these rare and fragile pieces. Through a "radical show-and-tell" *You Hide Me* unambiguously calls for immediate restitution by casting "essential light on African art's histories of circulation and exhibition, illuminating the myriad hypocrisies of colonial forces" (*Watch You Hide Me (1970) on MUBI*, n.d.). In *You Hide Me* we see how claims that artifacts are being safely preserved actually rests on the colonialist assumption that the artifacts belonging to colonized subjects are safer in the hands of the colonized nations, instilling a sense of hierarchical paternalistic sentiment.

The third film in the series, *Dahomey* (2024), screened on March 4, 2025, “presents a rare 21st century occurrence of a case of restitution” (*Dahomey* (2024), n.d.). *Dahomey* focuses on the journey of twenty-six out of thousands of royal treasures plundered by French colonial troops as they are “returned to Benin Republic after over a century in French museums” (*Dahomey* (2024), n.d.). As of May 2025, Marie-Cécile Zinsou discovered that there were 27 objects looted from Benin by France (Firtion, 2025). This 27th object was traced to Finland and has been returned to Benin. *Dahomey*’s filmmaker, Mati Diop, accompanies these artifacts on their journey home in a fascinating documentary that blurs the line between life and death, dislocation and return” (*Dahomey* (2024), n.d.).

Dahomey tackles the ways that the institutional mechanisms of museologies kill African artifacts. *Dahomey* incorporates a narrative technique that reimagines how African artifacts are portrayed on screen. In a similar fashion as *Statues Also Die*, *Dahomey* restores the voice of precious African artifacts that were looted by the French and wound up in Musee d’ Orsay. “Told from the perspective of “Number 26” (*Dahomey* (2024), n.d.), one of the prized artifacts looted from Benin, the film explores the restlessness of the ancestral spirit returning to a homeland that has forged ahead in their absence.

Dahomey culminates with a debate among museum staff, local residents, and students at the University of Abomey-Calavi, “reflecting on the artifacts’ meaning, restitution, and the nation’s evolving identity” (*Dahomey* (2024), n.d.). As discussed in the film, many Beninese people were unaware that their cultural

objects had ever been looted and were being held overseas. Until the reckoning that was cracked open by Mati Diop in *Dahomey*, many Beninese people were only taught about European art and history. One student who participated in the debate explained that he grew up with American media and did not know their artifacts had been “deported” (Diop, 2024) and held overseas. The student went on to say he was completely ignorant about his own heritage and culture, and that “a lot of things were stolen from us” (Diop, 2024)—emphasizing that beyond the material treasures that were stolen, a sense of one's own identity, history, culture, and pride were both denied and stolen.

Given the opportunity to lead the post-screening discussion of *Dahomey* (2024) to inaugurate its U.S. premiere at the Glimmerglass Film Festival, I learned that the film was intentionally left somewhat vague to draw out the shared nature of repatriation struggles across countries. The narrative points to the common—yet too familiar—patterns of European pillaging, looting, and the continued housing of cultural artifacts abroad, alongside a persistent reluctance to return them. At the same time, Diop’s directorial choices expose how African nations are often collapsed into a single category, with Africa treated as a country, rather than a continent of over 50 diverse states (Faloyin, 2022).

Completely organic, the debate shows the diversity in perspectives about repatriation and the complexity that each looted artifact has to the people of Benin. Even as artifacts are repatriated back to their place of provenance there is a struggle between residents about where the artifacts should now live, whether that be outside for anyone to visit, in an outdoor setting that allows the artifacts to

reconnect with their Voodoo origins, or inside a local museum. This speaks to the growing sense of urgency and the reclamation process that looted artifacts have to contend with once they arrive home.

The fourth film, *Restitution? Africa's Fight for its Art* (2021), which was screened on May 8, 2025, “addresses the separation of artworks from their communities of origin” (*Restitution? Africa’s Fight for Its Art* (2021), n.d.).

Restitution? is a documentary by French filmmaker Nora Phillipe following “the emotional journey of several objects, exploring their deep significance to the communities they left behind” (*Restitution? Africa’s Fight for Its Art* (2021), n.d.).

Phillipe tells the story “through voices of activists, artists, and scholars”

(*Restitution? Africa’s Fight for Its Art* (2021), n.d.), offering a “polyvocal perspective on thousands of African artworks that were looted during colonial times and that remain in Western museums” (*Restitution? Africa’s Fight for Its Art* (2021), n.d.). *Restitution?* “combines a pedagogical and advocative approach to the urgency of decolonizing Western museums while reflecting on the broader implications of colonial legacies and cultural sovereignty” (*Restitution? Africa’s Fight for Its Art* (2021), n.d.).

The fifth and final screening, *Black Girl* (1966), screened on June 5, 2025, “highlights the deep emotional entanglement between people, things and cultural heritage” (*Black Girl*, n.d.). The debut feature film by famed African filmmaker, Ousmane Sembène, *Black Girl* “offers a nuanced perspective on objectification and restitution through the journey of an African maid and an African mask in France” (*Black Girl*, n.d.).

Black Girl symbolizes the relationship between physical masks, the figurative masks worn by Black women, and the how masks become an essential part of one's identity to survive. To Sembene the masks both depict how intricately linked people are to their artifacts—in this case, a mask—and how masks are used to disguise. Reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), the mask that Diouana brings to France is a physical representation of the immaterial mask she must wear to cope with her new life in colonist France, living with colonialist descendants, being reduced to a colonized subject, far from home on foreign land.

As Fanon (1952) explains, Black people are forced to live with a metaphorical white mask placed over their Blackness. This white mask represents the white gaze that Black people (formerly colonized or enslaved subjects) are forced to adopt to cope with living in a white society. The mask articulates Black people's experience of self-alienation and self-perception as objects, or as being reduced to colonized subjects. This is strongly felt throughout the film as Diouana wanders the streets of France alone, but hyper-conscious and hyper-aware of her surroundings, her duality—her Blackness and womanness—and her physical presence in France, living among Anglo-French people and working in the home of a French family.

In *Black Girl*, Sembène parallels the African mask's trajectory from Senegal to France with the symbolic mask worn by the protagonist, Diouana, as she navigates life in France as a maid" (*Black Girl*, n.d.). In doing so, Sembène "crafts a synchronous dialogue between the people in exile and their material

artifacts” (*Black Girl*, n.d.) in a layered metaphorical sense. Sembène’s “dual narrative intertwines life force and objectification, displacement and restitution, emphasizing the process of return as both a physical and symbolic act” (*Black Girl*, n.d.). Known as the father of African cinema, due to his dreamlike way of weaving fiction and reality, *Black Girl* is prime example of an African film—one that is made for Africans, is about Africans, and made by an African (a Senegalese) filmmaker.

Movement and Synergy in Black Girl and Dahomey

Placing *Black Girl* (1966) into conversation with *Dahomey* (2024) reveals a powerful reversal in how cultural objects are perceived and valued. In *Dahomey*, towards the end of film, there is a scene at the unveiling of the returned artifacts that are now on display in Benin. In this pivotal scene that culminates the return of the stolen artifacts, Beninese locals gaze with longing and reverence at the returned artifacts that were once taken from Benin to France but have now been returned and are on display in their home of Benin. These moments of reconnection symbolize a reclaiming of cultural heritage and meaning that had long been severed through colonial looting.

In contrast *Black Girl* presents a different kind of journey: Diouana brings a mask from her home in Senegal with her to France. Unlike looted objects, the mask retains its spiritual and cultural significance because its movement is self-determined and rooted in love, not exploitation. For Diouana, the mask provides a sense of continuity and belonging that transcends geography. Its meaning remains intact because it is imposed and preserved by Diouana herself. The

enduring significance comes from her; she projects her own cultural and emotional connection onto the mask, which is so essential to her identity that she cannot imagine migrating without it. Diouana cannot bear to leave her mask behind, leaving it alone in Senegal; she must bring it with her to France.

In this context, the physical location of the mask—whether in Diouana’s home country of Senegal or in France is ultimately secondary, because its meaning is preserved through her emotional and cultural attachment to it. The mask’s significance is not diminished by displacement; rather, it is sustained and redefined through Diouana’s agency. She embeds the mask with personal and ancestral meaning, transforming it into a symbol of homecoming, memory, resistance, diaspora, and quiet refusal. Her inability to part with the mask reveals its function not merely as a decorative object—as objects become once they are housed in museums—but as a vessel of selfhood and cultural belonging. The mask becomes a portable archive of her identity— an anchor amidst the alienation and erasure she experiences in France.

This distinction—between an object moved out of personal connection and one taken for greed and domination—is crucial. Typically, when cultural artifacts are looted, stolen, or even loaned their meanings are stripped and redefined through a Western lens; artifacts become polluted and exploited for greed, reduced to symbols of power, prestige, and wealth, and only valued based off what can be extracted from the object and beneficial to thief. But Diouana’s mask is not seized; it is carried with intention. The motivations behind its movement of love versus greed, agency versus force, shape the mask’s ongoing significance.

Furthermore, the act of carrying the mask across borders echoes key ideas in postcolonial theory, particularly those related to diaspora and cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994). Scholars such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy have argued that diasporic identities are shaped through routes rather than roots. To Hall (1990) cultural identity is not a fixed essence rooted in the past; rather, it is constructed through memory, narrative, and positionality. Hall (1990) sees “identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (p. 222). Similarly, Gilroy sees Black identity as formed not through rootedness in a single nation or origin, but through movement—what he calls the “routes” of diaspora. Gilroy (1993) emphasizes how memory, culture, and resistance travel and transform across borders, challenging Eurocentric notions of identity of the territorial, the fixed, and of borders. Gilroy’s theory of how Black identity is connected to movement speaks to the calls for repatriation in that it highlights how routes are essential as well as ongoing.

Hall’s (1990) analysis that diasporic subjects both maintain and reshape their cultural identity through displacement speaks to how Diouana’s mask retains its meaning from her move from Senegal to France, how Beninese people are considering the lost meanings to their cultural artifacts now that some of them have been returned home, and how the Benin Bronzes are grappling with their meaning that was once stolen and are now being given the opportunity to be regained and reconfigured.

While roots are connected to ancestral ties and connections to one's homeland or ethnic origin, routes encompass much more. As Stuart Hall (1990) states, roots are simply an “origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return” (p. 226). Rather, routes are more than a distant tie; they encompass real, material, and symbolic histories. Routes bring about both former patterns taken either by an individual or their family, as well as ongoing patterns of forced and chosen migration and movement. Routes encompass the continuity of identity formation and the many factors that collide and impact it in a continuous manner. Whereas roots are a past that continues “to speak to us” (Hall, 1990, p. 226), routes are layered. They are constructed “through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (Hall, 1990, p. 226). They are points of suture that are continuously made and remade through history, culture, and repositioning. Through this analysis, we can understand how cultural memory and belonging are not fixed in a place but are carried and reimagined through movement. In Diouana’s case, the mask travels with her, resisting colonial logic that seeks to strip such objects of their context, reduce them to exotic curiosities, or repurpose them as symbols of Western possession, colonial power, and wealth.

Black Girl, specifically Diouana’s connection to her mask, stands in stark contrast to the history of looted artifacts, like the Benin Bronzes, whose removal from their original contexts was not driven by love or personal connection, but by violence, a desire rooted in domination and exploration, insatiable greed, and imperial power. When British colonial forces looted the Benin Bronzes, they severed the cultural and spiritual ties that imbued them with meaning in their

communities of origin, as discussed in the 'always dead' Schrödinger's cat analysis.

To parallel *Black Girl* and *Dahomey* even further, in *Dahomey*, the emotional reactions of Beninese viewers encountering the returned artifacts highlight the damage inflicted by this displacement, the reparative potential of return, and the disheartened potential that even after return, repair may not be possible. In reference to the vast number of artifacts currently held by France and the miniscule amount being sent back, "restituting 26 works out of 7,000 is an insult" (Diop, 2024). The juxtaposition between Diouana's choice to bring her mask with her and the extraction from forced migration of the Benin Bronzes highlights the importance of intention, consent, and agency in shaping how cultural objects retain or lose their meaning.

This speaks to Robinson's (2020) analysis that artifacts possess life. The mask's presence offers Diouana a sustained or everlasting aura of self, grounding her identity and maintaining a tangible link and a sense of connection to her homeland. It serves as a layered symbol of who she once was and who she is becoming in France. In this way, her mask transcends its materiality and echoes Frantz Fanon's symbolism in "*Black Skin, White Mask*" (1952)—becoming not just a physical object, but a symbolic cloak of protection and of remembrance, a forever connection to home and selfhood, and an act of resistance in the face of displacement and of place in foreign land.

Repatriation is not only about physically returning objects. It is most importantly about restoring relationships between ancestors, with place, and with

memory. It is about repairing the loss of identity and cultural heritage. Unlike artifacts that 'go to die' in museums, Diouana's mask never loses its power because it remains entangled with *her*—her story, both past and present. On the other hand, the Benin Bronzes have had to be spiritually and politically reconnected to their communities through acts of return, and even then, the loss and erasure as a result of artifacts being forcibly removed from their homes is sometimes unable to be repaired. For both Diouana's mask and the looted Bronzes, the movement of objects across borders reflects deeper struggles over identity, recognition, and the ongoing legacies and pain of colonialism. Whereas Diouana asserts her right to carry her culture with her, reparation asserts the right of communities globally to reclaim what was taken from them and to decide what those objects mean on their own terms. This is what remains gained from all acts of repatriation—autonomy reinstated and the ability to make decisions about one's own culture. This is what was exhibited in the debate in *Dahomey*—the ability to discuss, decide, and *disagree* on one's own terms about their own culture.

By placing these two films into conversation with one another a strong conceptual sense is made aware, raising important questions and nuanced points about cultural objects, agency, displacement, space and movement, and meaning. Putting *Black Girl*, created in 1966 by Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene, in dialogue with *Dahomey*, released in 2024 by Senegalese-French filmmaker Mati Diop, rich threads of diaspora, material culture, and colonial critique emerge. In the film *Dahomey* (2024), filmmaker Mati Diop gives voice to

the looted artifacts from Benin. In doing so, the artifacts are brought to life, given the rare opportunity to tell their story. Using voiceovers for each artifact on their journey from France back home to Benin, the cultural heritage that was once drained from these looted artifacts is brought back. Through deliberate, and often creative, decision making when telling stories and conducting research, meaning that was lost or gone absent can be restored. By contrasting looting with personal migration, the different meanings that objects can carry, depending on how and why they are moved, are highlighted and tied to ideas of selfhood, memory, and colonial power.

Like many artifacts looted from Benin by the French and from Nigeria by the British, the objects undergo a symbolic transformation. Once removed from their places of origin, these objects (masks and artifacts alike) are transfigured and stripped of their original meanings and recast through a colonial gaze. Yet, in returning them home, the layers of colonial disconnection and the 'cloak of whiteness' that once obscured their significance begins to dissolve, allowing their cultural and spiritual value to reemerge.

All five films connect with the *Benin Dues* exhibition and its topics of looted African artifacts, lost narratives, provenance and restitution. Each film uniquely "presents the argument that the call for restitution is not a 21st century occurrence" (*Benin Dues. Dealing With Looted Royal Treasures*, n.d.) in different contexts, time periods, and across different countries from artifacts looted by the British to artifacts that were looted by the French being returned. Rather than being seen as solely a 21st century problem, repatriation is an issue that has

been going on for decades well before the “UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property” was adopted in 1970, and likely even further than Nigeria’s first restitution claim to the British during the 1930s colonial era. Nigeria’s restitution claims in the 1930s, which were made while they were still under British colonial rule, “show that this trend started long before the African independent movements in the 1960s” (Eugster, 2023).

Important and timeless, films give a unique lens to engage with the topics of repatriation and restitution of looted art and artifacts that many communities around the world are grappling with. By bringing these films, along with others that tackle the issue of looting and repatriation, these films place the material and proactive work being done by the Swiss government into conversation with colonial critiques and other artistic forms of expression about reparation of looted African artifacts. By doing so, the University of Zurich’s Ethnographic Museum acknowledges the pervasive issue of repatriating looted art and highlights the powerful role that storytelling, through mediums such as film and interactive exhibition displays, can play in ongoing debates. This also underscores the influence museums have in challenging colonial narratives and bringing issues that may seem outdated or convoluted to some into contemporary discourse and cultural consciousness.

Where Artifacts Go to Die

In the film *Statues Also Die* (1953) writer and director Chris Marker believed that African artifacts should be removed from museums. Described as

being “a comprehensive analysis of the institutional mechanisms of museologics,” *Statues Also Die* took up “the mission to challenge the prevailing gaze on African artifacts” (Vilensky, 2012). While *Statues Also Die* was not the first anti-colonial film, it poetically used the screen to critique how African artifacts in museums are trapped in a paradox—simultaneously preserved yet rendered lifeless, like a museological version of Schrödinger's Cat. Applied to a reading of the *Statues Also Die*, the Schrödinger's Cat analogy suggests that African artifacts exist in a kind of suspended state when removed from their provenance.

Vilensky's (2012) metaphor that *Statues Also Die* embodies an always-dead Schrödinger's Cat is both striking and comforting. As *Statues Also Die* suggests, once placed in the museum, these objects become like corpses—existing only as dead relics and permanently severed from their living cultural context. Vilensky's (2012) analysis of *Statues Also Die* highlights the parallels between museums' acquisition processes and colonial violence.

On screen, the debate of looted artifacts and repatriation are communicated visually, drawing on the ways that film can be used to convey difficult, immaterial topics such as colonialism and colonial ideologies, international art theft, material survivance, and cultural meaning. As explored, film serves as a powerful medium for examining repatriation. From classic films like *Black Girl* and *Statues Also Die* to contemporary works like *Dahomey*, cinema helps translate the abstract and often overwhelming topic of colonialism into accessible narrative—revealing not only the political tensions surrounding

repatriation, but also the spiritual, cultural, and emotional significance that returned cultural artifacts hold for the communities to which they belong.

The University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum has shown how films serve as an invaluable tool to visually communicate the nuances of repatriation across different regions, cultures and decades. Tapping into the universality of film and the ability for film to dive deeper, well beyond the written text, and translate complex histories, tell enriching stories, and convert emotion and sentiment in a manner that most other forms of communication can do, the *Restitution in Five Films* film series encapsulates the complexities stored in repatriation cases. Alongside other museums in the Swiss Benin Initiative, the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum is engaging with repatriation in a distinct way—relying heavily on film as a medium to frame its approach and open up conversation.

Colonial—Traces in the Swiss National Museum

Like many institutions, the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum has faced an identity crisis and has adapted to the current cultural zeitgeist by more directly confronting its colonial legacy. Ethnographic museums, such as the University of Zurich's Ethnographic Museum, have come under increasing public scrutiny for their often unethical and contested collecting practices, the long-term storage of never-before-seen objects that “fill museums storage rooms and display cases” (Robinson, 2020, p. 154), and the continued possession of looted artifacts and human remains. The University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum explains that “questions around their objects’ provenance, of decolonizing the

collections, of interpretative predominance and the right to representation, are omnipresent” (*About Us*, n.d.-c). They state that they are “actively tackling such questions through our collecting, research, teaching and dissemination” (*About Us*, n.d.-c). Regarding object diasporas in their collections, they are working “in close collaboration with their originator communities and the descendants of those who made and used these objects” (*About Us*, n.d.-c).

But the critiques do not stop with ethnographic museums. As many museum scholars have engaged in provocations about, museums of all types are in need of ongoing investigation and reimagining. From their inception on to today's landscape, museums have been critiqued from the outside in. Specifically in the 19th century, “regarded as the century of nations and nation states” (*History - National Museum Zurich*, n.d.), many Western countries were “busily erecting memorials, monuments and institutions” (*History - National Museum Zurich*, n.d.), establishing their statehood, power, and presence through these grandiose institutions and their spectacular displays and collections. However, “the young federal state of Switzerland was struggling with the idea of setting up a national museum” and “plans to create one were met with widespread skepticism” (*History - National Museum Zurich*, n.d.). Following encouragement “by the popularity of the national art exhibition organized as part of the Swiss national exhibition in Zurich, in 1883 National Council member Salomon Vögelin of Zurich launched the discussion on the founding of a national museum” (*History - National Museum Zurich*, n.d.). Enter the Landesmuseum Zurich—the establishment of the national museum of Switzerland.

Most commonly referred to in English as the Swiss National Museum, the museum is “Switzerland’s most visited museum of cultural history” (*Zurich’s Museums*, n.d.). The Swiss National Museum “presents history from the earliest times to the present day, exploring the country’s historical complexity and cultural variety and showcasing what it means to be Swiss” (*Zurich’s Museums*, n.d.).

The Swiss National Museum has undergone many reconstructions, extensions, and additions to its identity over the years, both architecturally and ideologically. The Museum “complex is an ensemble consisting of an elegant historic building dating from 1898 and an adjoining sculptural wing built in 2016, allowing visitors to walk through the old and the new” (*History - National Museum Zurich*, n.d.). This architectural merging of old and new serves as a powerful metaphor for the museum’s entanglement with colonialism—both as a historical fact and a contemporary reality being grappled with. The historic building, established at the height of European imperialism, reflects the era’s desire to collect, categorize, and display cultures often through a colonial lens. The new wing, while modern in form, exists alongside this legacy, reminding us that colonial histories are not confined to the past. Rather, they are ever present.

Exhibitions that engage with Switzerland’s colonial entanglements—including those on empire and ethnographic collecting—demonstrate how the structures and ideologies of colonialism remain embedded in institutional spaces. Visitors, therefore, are not just walking between two buildings but traversing the temporal layers of colonial impact—an impact that continues to shape global inequalities, cultural narratives, and museum practices today. A nod to the

entangled history of colonialism is the Swiss National Museum's latest exhibition, *colonial – Switzerland's Global Entanglements*. The Swiss National Museum has begun a serious and intensive examination of Switzerland's colonial history, culminating in the *colonial* exhibition and accompanying book of the same name.

The Swiss National Museum Zurich presented its “first ever comprehensive and multi-perspectival overview of Switzerland's colonial past” (*Colonial – Switzerland's Global Entanglements*, n.d.) in their exhibition, *colonial - Switzerland's Global Entanglements* which ran from September 13, 2024 – January 19, 2025. Incorporating the latest research findings, *colonial* used “concrete examples, illustrated with objects, works of art, photographs and documents, to present the first-ever comprehensive overview of Switzerland's history of colonial entanglement” (*Colonial – Switzerland's Global Entanglements*, n.d.). The exhibition also drew “parallels to contemporary issues” and explored “the question of what this colonial heritage means for present-day Switzerland” (*Colonial – Switzerland's Global Entanglements*, n.d.).

colonial – Switzerland's Global Entanglements confronts Switzerland's complex colonial history head-on. The exhibition website offers the following description:

“Ever since the 16th century, Swiss society has been increasingly globally intertwined. In eleven chapters, the exhibition revealed colonial fields of action in which Swiss men and women were involved. They range from involvement in the slave trade to mercenary service in the colonies to scientific research as a form of exploiting of both humans and natural environments. On the tour through the exhibition, visitors encountered not only Swiss protagonists and institutions based in present-day Switzerland, but also enslaved and colonized people, who put up resistance but whose traces have almost been lost today. The legacy of European

colonialism still shapes the world today. The exhibition called on visitors to engage in the ongoing debates.” (*Colonial – Switzerland’s Global Entanglements*, n.d.)

colonial – Switzerland’s Global Entanglements critically examines Swiss participation in colonial networks, sheds light on ethnographic collecting practices and explores how colonial power dynamics continue to shape global relations today. The eleven chapters covered by the exhibition are: enslavement, trade, mercenaries, settler colonies, the missions, experts, science, exploiting nature, racism, and colonial continuities. Through these eleven chapters—spanning historical connections to present day traces of racism—the exhibition underscores that colonialism is not merely a relic of the past, but a force that continues to influence contemporary identity, inequalities, and cultural memory.

The new and old juxtaposition in both architecture and the curatorial choices in *colonial – Switzerland’s Global Entanglements* invites visitors to move physically and mentally between eras: past and present, and two forces: extraction and reparation. *colonial* also invites visitors to consider the historical and cultural consequences of two legacies: the origins of colonialism and the residues of colonialism. The exhibition invokes a collision between colonial ideologies of the past and the persistent legacies of colonial identity in the present, immersing visitors in the understanding that colonialism is not simply a historical relic but an ongoing reality. Rather than existing as separate phenomena, the past and present are deeply interconnected. Instead of treating colonial exhibitions as historical footnotes, the museum deliberately places them within modern contexts—as living legacies affecting our world today. *colonial* encourages visitors to traverse not just two buildings, but two temporalities, and

to question how the legacies of colonialism persist within institutional frameworks, public discourse, and collective memory. These trajectories in two highlight the shift or continuum from past to present, helping visitors feel and comprehend that there is no true sense of disconnectedness between colonialism of the past, of the present, and likely in the future.

Accompanying the exhibition was the publication of the book, *colonial – Switzerland’s Global Entanglements* (2025), serving as “both an invitation and a stimulus to explore and to engage critically with Switzerland’s history of global interdependence” (Amstad et al., 2024). *colonial* (2025) unpacks Switzerland’s global colonial history stating:

“Switzerland has been globally connected and entangled with colonies established by the seafaring European nations in Africa, the Americas, and Asia since the 16th century. *colonial—Switzerland’s Global Entanglements* offers a timely overview of this highly topical matter, placing a wide range of aspects in historical context and addressing as well questions of colonial continuities. Contributions by distinguished scholars and experts from various disciplines investigate questions such as the involvement of Swiss companies in the trade with enslaved people, Swiss mercenaries in the service of colonial powers, the colonial legacy of the country’s missionary societies, and the research and collection of artefacts by Swiss scientists in former colonies. Light is shed also on the involvement of anthropological institutes at the universities of Zurich and Geneva in scientific racism.” (*Colonial – Switzerland’s Global Entanglements*, n.d.)

The exhibition *colonial - Switzerland’s Global Entanglements*, and the accompanying book, exemplify how museums can engage with their colonial past through thought provoking exhibitions and texts. Similar to the eight museums comprising the Swiss Benin Initiative, the National Museum is also directly engaging with Switzerland’s colonial entanglements, and drawing

connections between Switzerland's colonial past, the ongoing colonial legacies still present in Switzerland culture, and the colonial traces still present in Swiss museums.

Like Museum the University of Zurich Ethnographic Museum, the Swiss National Museum is also part of The Zurich Museums Association. However, the Swiss National Museum is not part of the Swiss Benin Initiative since they are not in possession of any looted Benin Bronzes. Although they are not part of the SBI, the Swiss National Museum is directly engaging with the legacies of colonialism in Switzerland. Although not one of the SBI museums, Museum Rietberg directs those reading the *In Dialogue with Benin. Art, Colonialism and Restitution* write up on the museum's website to the Swiss National Museum's *colonial* exhibition to learn more about Switzerland's colonial history.

Museums that are not directly involved in the SBI are still contributing to the broader conversation around Swiss colonial history, undertaking research and restitution efforts, including the Benin Bronzes and other colonial-tied objects in their collections, and working toward the decolonization of their spaces. This reflects a wider culture of collaboration among Swiss museums. The Swiss National Museum serves as an example of how a museum can work towards decolonizing its space through thoughtful, engaged dialogue about colonial history.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Facing Up: A Recap of the Swiss Benin Initiative

The eight Swiss museums talk at length about their research collaborations, the history and provenance of the Bronzes, and the ongoing plans of the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI). Switzerland has exemplified how museums can approach the issue of repatriating looted artifacts by taking a proactive, communicative approach—one where the museum essentially gets ahead of the problem. Overall, the SBI has shown that museums can reckon with their colonial past, address their ongoing colonial struggles, and respond to decolonial calls, by choice. However, there are certain cultural and financial factors at play that enable Switzerland to proactively do this work. My analysis revealed that there are three unique political, cultural, and institutional conditions that enable Switzerland to embark on this work: one, its perceived distance from colonialism, two, its carefully maintained peace-first national reputation, and three, its government-backed funding structure.

My analysis spans a wide range of texts—from media releases to research reports to exhibition write-ups. In doing so, I have examined the different types of public facing materials produced by Swiss Benin Initiative museums. There are countless more texts to analyze, especially as this process—and history itself—continues to unfold in real time. The texts I analyzed highlight the goals of the SBI, the various ways museums—both SBI museums and museums more generally—communicate with the public, and how decolonial museum work can be put into practice. My analysis also reveals that much work

remains to be done if museums truly aim to decolonize their spaces and grapple with their colonial legacies. As the Swiss Benin Initiative evolves, it is essential to consider newly produced activities and texts, and to undertake further analysis on their content, framing, and implications.

Decolonial work is a praxis: always in flux, adaptive, and ongoing. We see multiple examples of decolonizing efforts in action, alongside clear areas for growth. A duality is unfolding where progress and limitation exist side by side. This duality underscores the urgent need for museums to move beyond symbolic gestures and commit to sustained structural change in how they reckon with their colonial legacies. There is always room for improvement, and this dissertation exists in dialogue with both prior scholarship and current efforts still underway.

While Switzerland has demonstrated a willingness to confront repatriation directly, significant gaps remain. Namely, is the failure to grapple with their own colonial past and the failure to address the complex colonial past of Nigeria—both of which require explicit engagement. Repatriation is ultimately a decolonial act; it demands reckoning with colonial histories that made their displacement possible. Although the texts acknowledge the violent destruction of Benin City and the looting carried out by the British, they avoid Switzerland's own entangled colonial history. The British are easily condemned—they burned Benin City to the ground and stole its treasures. Yet, while naming England's colonial violence, Swiss museums remain silent about their own role in holding looted Benin Bronzes. This selective framing is a glaring omission, one that appears deliberate when paired with the absence of Nigeria's colonial context and the pr-heavy

sentiment of the overall Initiative. For the Swiss Benin Initiative to truly fulfill the promise of being a transparent, collaborative, decolonial endeavor they must engage with their own colonial past and complicity in looted cultural artifacts. So far, the museum most considerably engaging with Switzerland's colonial past is the Swiss National Museum—a museum not in possession of looted Benin Bronzes and not part of the Swiss Benin Initiative.

Another major shortcoming is the inconsistency in reported numbers of Benin Bronzes held by SBI museums. A February 2021 media release, issued when the Swiss Benin Initiative was first launched, presented conflicting inventory figures: some museum holdings differed by one object compared to the spreadsheet on Museum Rietberg's website. The same media release stated that the SBI museums "are in possession of over a hundred objects from Benin," yet later noted "we have in Switzerland 97 objects that can be allocated to the Nigerian Kingdom of Benin" (*The Swiss Benin Initiative: Research and Dialogue*, 2021).

As noted in *The Benin Collection* write-up, the SBI distinguishes the Bronzes directly tied to the looting of the Kingdom of Benin and those that are not. This distinction likely explains some of the discrepancies, as some texts account for all artifacts from Benin City, while others count only those linked to the looting. Nonetheless, consistent and clear reporting of inventory numbers is crucial for transparency and public trust—and for the SBI to remain in line with their goal of openness in transparency. Even minor variations make it difficult to ascertain exact holdings and may undermine the Initiative's stated goal of

openness. This also underscores the overwhelming sentiment that the Swiss Benin Initiative is most concerned with projecting a positive image of Switzerland and the Initiative, raising questions about the underlying motivations behind launching the SBI.

The last concern to review is the SBI's overreliance on a single Nigerian researcher. While it is important that Nigerian voices are being included in provenance research, relying on only one creates a narrow perspective and risks tokenism. This investment will remain incomplete without broader and more sustained collaboration with Nigerian scholars, both from within academia and outside. In order to continue the epistemological work they are doing, which breaks away from traditional Western thought, they need to incorporate more perspectives and expertise from those closely tied to the Benin Bronzes from local and lived experiences and knowledges.

In comparison, the *Exhibiting In Dialogue with Benin* exhibition at Museum Rietberg did expand participation by featuring Nigerian artists, architects and filmmakers. *In Dialogue With Benin* was "developed in close cooperation with representatives from Nigeria and the pan-African diaspora" (*In Dialogue With Benin*, n.d.). Additionally, its permanent installation signals the SBI's commitment to sharing the story of the Bronzes with visitors. Rather than treating the Bronzes as ephemeral objects, the Initiative emphasizes that cultural artifacts are enduring, deserving ongoing attention, discussion, and critical engagement.

Beyond the success highlighted in the *In Dialogue With Benin* exhibition, the dedicated efforts of the Swiss Benin Initiative are also evident in *The Benin*

Collection Latest Research write-up and through the five-part film series, *Restitution in Five Films. The Benin Collection Latest Research* write-up demonstrates a strong start in provenance research, tracing acquisition records to clarify how the Bronzes entered Swiss collections. The film series—both surprising and delightful—further showcases the Initiative’s innovative approach. By featuring five African films of diverse genres, rather than relying on Western perspectives, the series highlights the connections between people, place, and artifacts while engaging deeply with themes of repatriation and colonialism.

While the decolonial work being carried out by the Swiss Benin Initiative is undoubtedly important, necessary, and timely, it is crucial to acknowledge that scholars, activists, and communities have been calling for the decolonization of museums for decades. Communities have been making claims to have their cultural artifacts and descendants’ remains returned home. Only recently have many institutions begun to listen. The efforts underway in Switzerland deserve recognition and praise, but they must also be viewed in light of how long it has taken for museums to respond meaningfully to these longstanding demands.

As of now, Nigeria has not made any formal restitution claims to Switzerland. However, Nigeria first started to “demand the return of these looted artifacts” from various countries in the 1930s, but, as the University of Bern states, “to no avail” (Spycher, 2024). Over the last few years countries such as Ireland, Germany, and the Netherlands have begun to return the looted Bronzes back to Nigeria. Other countries like the United States have “signaled their willingness to do so” (Spycher, 2024) but are making slow progress.

Bringing in France, a country with deep colonial ties to numerous countries in Africa, President Emmanuel Macron announced efforts to return all looted African artifacts back to their home countries. While he has made some progress on his word, the tiny number of artifacts repatriated back is both humiliating and insulting, especially given that there are roughly “90,000 African works in French museums, 70,000 of them at the Quai Branly alone” (Al Jazeera, 2021). To exemplify this, France has returned 26 artifacts to Benin out of the 7,000 they are in possession of (Oltermann, 2024), amounting to only 0.37%—an abysmal number. Unlike most of the Western countries who are little-by-little repatriating the Bronzes, or not repatriating any of the Bronzes like England, Switzerland stands out as taking the necessary steps to engage in informed dialogue about the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes.

Not only is Switzerland taking “the steps necessary for the return” of the Benin Bronzes, in February of 2023 Switzerland “announced that more than half of the 96 Benin artifacts in Swiss collections had been stolen or were likely to have been stolen – and that the museums were prepared to transfer their property rights to Nigeria” (Spycher, 2024). Taking part in a one-year research fellowship at the University of Bern in Bern, Switzerland, historian Lucky Igohosa Ugbudian compared the restitution debate in Switzerland with other countries stating, “The Swiss example is unique in the world: After all, it’s the only one that came from the bottom-up” (Spycher, 2024).

Using Switzerland as a case study for managing repatriation efforts shows that a proactive approach can lead to meaningful progress. The Swiss model is

marked by early engagement, transparency, and an explicit commitment to ethical responsibility in addressing colonial-era collections. Swiss museums are confronting their responsibilities as global institutions that hold power and influence, demonstrating how museums can preserve their prestige while adapting to the changing ethical dilemmas of the 21st century.

Part of what makes this possible is Switzerland's cultural context: national values of peace, neutrality, and inclusion create a social and political climate that encourages institutions to undertake this complex and morally significant work. Nation-specific factors such as the Law of Neutrality, the Office of Culture's support of provenance research, and a nationally funded museum structure have shaped the success of the Swiss Benin Initiative. Importantly, Switzerland's unique museum structure—federally organized and supported by a well-established Office of Culture that provides both funding and policy direction—gives the SBI a foundation that many countries lack. While the integration of museums into nation-state building is common in Europe, where many institutions are federally funded—as seen with France's Ministry of Culture and Communication and the Netherland's Information and Heritage Inspectorate, which monitors compliance with the Heritage Act of 2016—this structure is largely obsolete in the United States.

The Difference: National Values and Privatized Funding

As part of database research on the Benin Bronzes, that I conducted during my fellowship in the Loretta C. Duckworth Scholars Studio in Temple University Library, I tracked all Western countries holding looted Benin Bronzes,

including the specific museums and quantities of looted Bronzes in their collection, as well as maritime records about the British Royal Navy. In doing so, I also compiled data on how these museums are funded. I found a clear divide: most American museums are privately funded, while in Europe many are supported by national government. This structural difference is not trivial—it directly shapes how museums approach repatriation.

In contrast, the privatized U.S. museum model, driven by donors and market forces, creates barriers to comparable SBI work. The leadership of the Swiss National Museum in confronting colonial history shows how public accountability can push institutions toward ethical responsibility, while the U.S. highlights how privatization can delay resistance and exacerbate silences. For U.S. museums, reimagining accountability, whether through new funding models, stronger federal guidance, or public pressure, may feel like a distant goal, but without structural change genuine repatriation efforts will remain more of a dream than a reality. U.S. museums will continue to lag behind their European counterparts—who, even with the progress they have made, still have a long way to go—leaving repatriation stalled as little more than symbolic rhetoric. This may mean that meaningful repatriation remains less a practical reality and more an aspirational ideal in America.

In Europe, museums are more directly tied to the nation, illustrating the nation-state building role they play. In the United States, this direct line is largely absent—most museums are privately owned, operated and funded—but that does not mean that privately funded museums are fully autonomous from

government influence or detached from the politics of nation-building. Nor does privatization guarantee that museums are more ethical or insulated from the *messiness* of policy and power. In fact, the American model complicates the very idea of privatization.

On one hand, many U.S. museums operate outside federal control, yet this separation is never absolute. For example, university museums such as the Yale Peabody Museum and the Penn Museum have long histories of unethical acquisition, collecting, and curatorial practices. Others, such as the RISD Museum, are part of a university system but have taken more inclusive and ethically conscious approaches. The Smithsonian represents a separate hybrid model: partially funded by the federal government and private donors, but not under full government control. Beyond these, countless art, history, natural history, and cultural museums operate privately, each shaped by their own funding structures, missions, and political entanglements. While European museums may exhibit a more direct nation-state tie, museums in America are more fragmented and hybrid. Whether they are private, public or hybrid institutions does not mean they are independent or ethical.

Switzerland's federally funded museums reflect the country's recent shift towards a colonial-first mindset, with decolonial work at the forefront. For them, this structure aligns with their national ideology of peace, and their ongoing priority to conduct provenance research and engage with their colonial entanglements. The United States, however, operates differently. If American museums were placed under federal control, they would risk becoming subject to

the shifting agendas of each new administration—and even without direct control, we already see museums leveraged to promote white nationalist narratives. Serving on the Mütter Museum’s YouTube ethics review committee, I witnessed how the pressures of private museum structures, contemporary ethical concerns over human remains, the demands of public visibility, and the issues with online display collide in messy, often problematic ways. This perspective carried over to my visit to the National WWII Museum in New Orleans, which revealed itself less as a museum of World War II and more as a glorified platform for American military propaganda, celebrating U.S. battlefield prowess while sidelining broader historical truths.

In other words, not only does the U.S. lack the European model of museums as extensions of the nation, but adopting such a model would likely be harmful in the American context. While federal funding could, in theory, alleviate financial pressures, some degree of separation from government influence is preferable. With federal funding comes the risk that museums become pawns in political agendas, with funding withheld or withdrawn at the whim of elected officials who disapprove of their work and who see museums as a space to put forth their own skewed narratives and view museums as no more than tools for their own personal gain. Funding carries pressure to conform to prevailing ideologies—too often to racist, hateful, and distorted ideologies.

Still, privatization brings its own challenges: institutions like the Penn Museum—which has retained remains of children murdered during the MOVE bombing (Conde, 2021)—reveal how secrecy, unethical practices, and the

mishandling of human remains can flourish outside of direct state oversight. The mishandling of human remains has been an issue for centuries across numerous Western countries, most notably with Saartjie Baartman (Sarah Baartman, Hottentot Venus) whose genitals were dissected, pickled, and displayed at the French National Museum of Natural History in Paris from approximately the mid 1800s through 1985 (Ewen & Ewen, 2006) (Renold et al., 2013) (*Race Science Exhibitions (1830-1890) - Understanding RACE*, n.d.).

America's highly privatized museum system driven by individual and corporate donors and shaped by changing societal norms, creates significant barriers to undertaking similar work to the work being done in Switzerland—or the repatriation work being done in other European countries. Ultimately, whether museums are state-funded or privately funded, the structure is never neutral—funding always reflects power, ideology, and control. Museums can never disentangle themselves from colonial and political power, regardless of funding structures.

However progressive and transparent they are, the SBI's success reflects Switzerland's broader cultural mandate to acknowledge its entanglement in colonial histories and to act in ways that are politically advantageous, ethically responsible, and symbolically powerful on the global stage. This is exemplified in the Swiss National Museum's leadership in addressing Switzerland's colonial history, which demonstrates how a publicly accountable system can advance repatriation in ways that private institutions cannot always do. With this in mind, the museum structure in Switzerland that connects to the federal government is

useful and advantageous—but only in application to Switzerland and other European countries. It allows Swiss museums to be funded, while demonstrating that the nation ideologically and culturally supports their work. In doing so, it reinforces the importance of museums to the public, communities, and visitors—showing that, from a national perspective, arts and culture are essential, even dire.

Specifically in the case of the Swiss National Museum and the eight Swiss Benin Initiative museums, their support from the Swiss government reinforces Switzerland's priority to engage in dialogue about Switzerland's lesser known and lesser discussed colonial history. This model enables Swiss museums to carry out important work without constantly worrying about funding and moral support from the government. However, such a structure would not work in America, where changes in presidential administrations bring about drastic shifts in the role or necessity of museums and public sentiment around history, art, and culture. As has been occurring in American since early 2025, administration changes have led to attacks on history and intellectual freedom, with museums losing funding or being pressured to distort the truth—going so far as attacking the history and livelihoods of Black Americans with attempts to further whitewash the brutal history of slavery and remove artifacts from display in the National Museum of African American History and Culture (Wainwright, 2025).

With the privilege to do so, Switzerland is leveraging its funding structure and national values to confront colonial wrongdoings. My hope is that other countries and museums are able to do so as well. However, repatriation of the

Benin Bronzes—or any other cultural artifacts—is unlikely to be a priority for American museums in the near future as they are primarily focused on survival and preserving their collections. Given the ongoing battle for American museums, repatriation understandably remains a secondary concern. First, American museums must fight to keep their doors open and lights on.

The Difference: Direct and Indirect Colonial Involvement

While England allocates a portion of public funds to the arts—similar to other countries in the United Kingdom and Europe, where art and culture are considered integral to national identity—its limited financial commitment and political priorities reflect a lack of will to pursue repatriation with the same rigor as Switzerland (“What Did the 2025 Spending Review Mean for the Arts? | Campaign for the Arts,” 2025). This difference is rooted in each country's colonial legacy and national self-image. Unlike England, which was a direct colonizer and continues to frame its imperial history as a source of pride and global influence, Switzerland maintains a more ambiguous relationship to colonialism. Although Swiss institutions were involved in the circulation and display of colonial-era artifacts, the country itself was not a colonial power in the traditional sense, nor does it house large populations from formerly colonized nations. Because of this, Switzerland is able to engage in tough colonial discussions without doing so in mixed company.

Whereas Switzerland can address the Benin Bronzes and its colonial history largely within institutional and governmental frameworks, i.e. with support from the FOC, England faces a different dynamic. Conversations about colonial

wrongdoings in England occur alongside large communities of formerly colonized citizens currently living in the country. For Switzerland, the discussion can happen about these issues, but not necessarily directly *with* the affected communities—again bringing in the issue with appointing a single Nigerian researcher to work with. Although both countries should have conversations alongside affected communities—not just talk to them, but with them—in England the stakes are even higher, given large population of formerly colonized people living there, which fundamentally shapes how discussions about colonialism take place.

For both Switzerland and England, conversations must occur both with and to affected communities. As a result, Switzerland can pursue repatriation without the political risk of undermining its national identity. In fact, repatriation aligns with its broader cultural values of neutrality, peace, and inclusion. Regardless, true decolonial work requires having tough conversations and deprioritizing the comfort of the colonizing nation. Decolonial work recognizes that the discomfort of relinquishing power is most important. In fact, decolonial work entails exactly this—relinquishing power and decentering the West—putting into practice what Ousmane Sembene once famously said, “Europe is not my center.”

For England, however, repatriating the Benin Bronzes poses a threat to its imperial narrative and symbolic power. Returning looted objects risks damaging the image of Britain as a dominant, civilizing empire— a reputation it has long used to justify its global influence. Acknowledging responsibility for the looting of

the Benin Bronzes would require Britain to confront the violent realities of the 1897 Punitive Expedition, which led to the sacking and burning of Benin City, the desecration of sacred spaces, and acts of looting, murder, and cultural destruction carried out by British forces. While the British museum does reference the looting that took place on its website, this acknowledgement is limited and fails to fully grapple with the moral and political weight of the events. The ramifications of a more honest reckoning are significant for England, making their inaction even louder.

For England, meaningful repatriation of the Benin Bronzes would not only implicate the nation in historical atrocities but also risk undermining its carefully curated image as a benevolent world power. Their image as a symbol of high society—a guardian of culture and class, as so often portrayed in British television shows like *Downton Abbey*—would also be jeopardized. The carefully crafted image Britain projects to the world would come under scrutiny. At its core, British identity depends on maintaining cultural power, prestige, and the very Enlightenment ethos it helped to shape. Without these pillars, fundamental questions begin to emerge—the very questions that underpin the undergraduate and graduate course I assisted in teaching titled, “Representation of the ‘Other’ in British Media,” alongside LiRon Anderson-Bell, in London, England. The questions we felt most compelled to ask were: What does it *mean to be* British? More importantly, who *gets to be* British and what image of ‘the Brit’ is exported to the world?

While distinctions between direct and indirect colonial involvement are not always central, in this case, the difference is crucial—especially when comparatively analyzing and critiquing the approaches of England and Switzerland. As a former direct colonizer, Britain occupies a fundamentally different position than Switzerland. To reiterate, Switzerland maintains a peripheral role in colonialism, enabling them to engage in repatriation efforts without facing the same level of imperial accountability. As discussed earlier, Switzerland's engagement with their colonial history did not even begin until very recently. In this context, the political stakes of repatriation are significantly higher for England, making the process more contentious and symbolically charged. However, this distinction in no way excuses Britain's inaction. It does not absolve England of its continued possession of the looted Benin Bronzes or its failure to meaningfully engage with their repatriation. Britain's lack of accountability remains a pressing issue that demands ethical and political responsibility. Given their direct role in the looting of the Benin Bronzes —being at fault for all of this— it is imperative that England repatriate the Benin Bronzes. They are, in fact, to blame for the pillaging and sacking of Benin City and at fault for the looted Bronzes scattered dispersal.

Opportunity for U.S. Intervention?

The United States has been at the center of repatriation debates since America has the most institutions in the world in possession of looted Benin Bronzes, and many other looted artifacts, Indigenous artifacts, and human remains (including Egyptian tomb stones) from across the world. The U.S. also

finds itself central to repatriation calls since many institutions in the U.S. have not been proactive about repatriating the Benin Bronzes or other art, artifacts, and human remains that were acquired through unethical means. The abundance of looted Bronzes in museum collections and the high volume of institutions in the United States makes it an important country to study in regard to future repatriation efforts, or lack thereof.

Recent administration changes have heightened anxieties about progress that museums have made concerning colonial histories, race and gender, and truth and reconciliation. The current presidential administration has prioritized revising accurate narrative in museums and rewriting history to scrub away truths. The current administration is trying to overhaul American museums, primarily the Smithsonian Museums, to ensure that they are in synch with the administration's white-nationalist ideologies and false interpretation of history. Already, the attempt to rewrite a false history includes pulling funding from museums and removing artifacts from museums exhibitions. Significantly, there have been attempts to remove art from the Smithsonian American Art Museum's exhibit *The Shape of Power* (Crenshaw & Stanley, 2025) and to defund the Institute of Museum and Library Services (American Library Association, 2025).

All of this has resurfaced how repatriation lies firmly in the immaterial ethical space, with little legal backing or legislature mandating how the handling of looted artifacts should be done. Even with legislature in place, as the current presidential administration has shown, with each new administration changes to art and culture sectors occur as well. Will there ever be opportunity for American

museums to even begin engaging in the level of reparative work that is taking place in Switzerland? If Switzerland serves as a model, will American museums exist in the future to even begin applying the Swiss model to the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes? Should American museums even prioritize decolonial efforts, given that they may not exist at all in the future?

A Forward Look at Repatriation: An Immaterial Ethical Space

Despite the uncertain futures for American museums, at least over the next few years, there are other decolonial projects to look forward to that offer hope. Databases are being used for international, collaborative provenance research and for tracking looted artifacts. Most notably, is Digital Benin—a digital platform that “brings together all objects, historical photographs and rich documentation material from collections worldwide to provide a long-requested overview of the royal artifacts from Benin Kingdom looted in the late nineteenth century” (*Digital Benin*, n.d.). Digital Benin’s project team is a mixture of principle investigators, researchers, consultants, and designers from Benin City, Europe and America. Connecting “data from 5,288 objects across 138 institutions,” their scope “focuses on objects looted by British forces from the Kingdom of Benin (now Edo State, Nigeria) in February 1897 and distributed in its immediate aftermath” (*Digital Benin*, n.d.).

Another database project sharing the history of looted artifacts is the Museum of Looted Antiquities (MOLA). After engaging in discussions on potential collaboration, I found that MOLA operates as a collaborative-first effort. There are numerous ways to get involved with MOLA including as a contributor, visiting

scholar, or curator. MOLA uses a peer review process, where they check for accuracy, attribution, credit, privacy and libel, and data integrity. They “collect data on all antiquities repatriated globally since 1950” (*About · Museum of Looted Antiquities*, n.d.), including “collecting unique data about the illicit antiquities trade that is essential to understanding a black market that the United Nations recently recognized as a global security issue” (*About · Museum of Looted Antiquities*, n.d.). MOLA preserves, studies and displays this information in a virtual, open access museum. To date, MOLA has “collected preliminary information on more than 860 cases involving nearly 1 million artifacts that were trafficked around the globe” (*About · Museum of Looted Antiquities*, n.d.). Incorporating an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach, MOLA is “building a unique dataset on the global illicit antiquities trade” (*About · Museum of Looted Antiquities*, n.d.).

Both Digital Benin and the Museum of Looted Antiquities (MOLA) make their research free to access. Both databases are publicly sharing information on lesser-known issues with broad audiences in mind, challenging the secrecy surrounding the looted art trade. Digital Benin and MOLA are two examples of how databases are enacting a form of digital decolonization by using virtual tools to expose and challenge institutional opacity. They intentionally design their platforms to be user friendly and make their findings comprehensible. In doing so, MOLA and Digital Benin are decolonizing the otherwise opaque, insular and highly unethical black market of illicit antiquities trading and trafficking.

Art looting, illicit exporting of art treasures, and art smuggling is a risky, deadly business (Adam, 2014). According to Adam (2014), “by the start of the

21st Century, the trade in illicit antiquities had become so huge it was worth billions of dollars each year and was the biggest international crime outside drug and arms trafficking.” Art looting is such a pervasive issue that the Manhattan DA’s office created the Antiquities Trafficking Unit (ATU)—a crime division focused solely on this very problem.

The ATU focuses exclusively on looted art and artifacts. Launched by Manhattan District Attorney Alvin L. Bragg, Jr., the ATU works alongside investigative analysts, cultural heritage partners, and Homeland Security Investigations to recover and repatriate looted antiquities. So far, the ATU has “recovered the antiquities pursuant to multiple ongoing criminal investigations led by the unit” and returned them back to their home countries in Cambodia, Italy, Indonesia, Hungary, Spain and Greece, to name a few. According to The Antiquities Coalition:

“The United States is the largest market for art—both licit, and unfortunately, illicit—in the world. The Manhattan DA’s office, alongside Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), continues to combat the illicit antiquities trade, protecting American consumers from financing criminal networks. Since its founding, the ATU has recovered almost 6,000 antiquities valued at over \$460 million and has returned nearly 5,400 of them so far to 29 countries.”
(Manhattan DA Announces Return of Over 100 Antiquities to Italy - Antiquities Coalition, 2025)

The Antiquities Coalition aims to “protect our shared heritage and global security” and are championing for “better law and policy and fostering diplomatic cooperation” (*Protecting Shared Heritage and Global Security | the Antiquities Coalition*, n.d.) in regard to looted antiquities. According to the About Us page on their website, they are “leading the international campaign against cultural

racketeering, the illicit trade in ancient art and artifacts” (*Protecting Shared Heritage and Global Security | the Antiquities Coalition*, n.d.). The Antiquities Coalition have been closely following the work being done by the ATU, with the aim of “working towards a future when the past is preserved for the next generation, not looted, smuggled, and sold to finance crime, conflict, and terror” (*Protecting Shared Heritage and Global Security | the Antiquities Coalition*, n.d.).

The ATU has seized numerous artifacts from prominent New York art collectors. Most notably, they seized over \$69 million dollars' worth of looted artifacts from the home of Shelby White—an art collector and an emeritus trustee for the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met). White was “forced to turn over nearly 90 historical art pieces after investigators determined they were looted from the origin countries (Griffin, 2023)”. “One of the most valuable historical art pieces reportedly looted before being purchased by White is worth a whopping \$15 million alone” (Griffin, 2023). Some of the pieces confiscated from her home include rare Roman and Greek antiquities, which have now been repatriated to Italy and Turkey (Woodman, 2022). Importantly, “the majority of the items taken from White’s massive collection were on display inside her swanky Sutton Place apartment, but some 17 antiquities were removed from the Met itself as White had loaned them to the prestigious museum” (Griffin, 2023).

The looted artifacts displayed in White’s home exemplify how museums, collectors and traders have not moved far beyond their origins as curiosity cabinets. In these early spaces, artifacts and even human remains were exhibited for spectacle, entertainment, and as a display of aristocratic wealth—

rooted in a fascination with the ‘Other’ and a desire to use stolen artifacts to “understand people who were different from them” (Wiener, 2023, p. 29). Such displays transform looting into spectacle—blurring the line between scientific explorer and media entertainer—turning colonial violence into objects of fascination rather than acknowledging them as evidence of criminal activity, and as evidence of dispossession and of harm. Their complicity in the theft exhibits negligence on behalf of these so-called art-minded folks and institutions supporting them. Illicit trading and black-market transactions of looted antiquities stand in direct opposition to the supposed values of museums, which is to preserve, study and ethically share cultural heritage in ways that honor the communities from which it originates.

Ironically, White “sits on its acquisitions, buildings and finance committees” and was “appointed to a 12-member task force that will advise on the museum’s collecting practices in an effort to create stricter guidelines” (Griffin, 2023). White and her late husband, “legendary financier Leon Levy,” donated \$20 million to The Met, which subsequently “opened the Leon Levy and Shelby White Court, a large gallery featuring Greek and Roman art” (Griffin, 2023). White’s appointment is alarming, as the role was meant to help address these very issues. Instead, it stands as a glaring, humiliating, and mocking affront to all those harmed by the plundering and illicit trafficking of their cultural heritage. Alongside her appointment to a 12-member task force, White’s position as an emeritus trustee and the dedication of a gallery in her honor at The Met underscores how museums remain entangled with histories of colonialism,

slavery, and illegal international art trafficking. These activities are recognized as part of organized crime networks, highlighting the darker legacies embedded in cultural institutions and the art world.

The story of White—art collector, museum trustee, art criminal—echoes the actions of British Royal Naval Officer James Robert Phillips. Phillips' unauthorized mission led to the looting of the Bronzes—an act that epitomizes the officer's and illicit art collectors' arrogance and entitlement. Both White and Phillips illustrate how wealth and status not only enable them to commit such crimes in the first place but shields individuals from the consequences of their actions, at least temporarily. At its core, this story—the story of the Benin Bronzes and looted artifacts generally—is about the absence of consent and the arrogance to take. White is one of many collectors who embody the colonial origins of museums that persist today, revealing the direct link between personal wealth and institutional power—both embodying how white-collar crime is ignored and allowed to continue.

While it is positive that Manhattan recognizes the trafficking of looted antiquities as a pressing issue and has dedicated time, resources, and money to combat it, there are two considerations I want to address. First, it is ironic that two of New York City's main powerhouses—the Manhattan DA's office and the city's wealthy elite—are effectively at odds, fighting against each other, or, perhaps, that one is finally standing up to the other. Secondly, this raises further questions about the role of policing and whether law enforcement—a contemporary colonial extension—should be tasked with what is essentially

decolonial work. However this unfolds in the future, ATU is doing substantive work. While much remains to be done, approaching the looting and trafficking of cultural heritage as a criminal enterprise represents a meaningful step forward in acknowledging the severity of antiquities looting and the importance of repatriation.

The ATU and The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are formally recognizing and addressing the illicit trafficking of cultural goods—with UNESCO and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Mexico now seeing this as a global security threat, launching the campaign: *Protege tu legado (Protect your legacy) (The Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Goods Shall Be Recognized as a Security Issue, 2023)*. Since repatriation often falls into the ambiguous grey area of ethics—where there is frequently little legal mandate to return artifacts and minimal legal consequence for failing to do so—having stronger, formal international legal support would be helpful in advancing repatriation efforts worldwide. With this in mind, I wonder how England will continue to withhold repatriating the looted Benin Bronzes when they are the most criminally liable.

Considering the film *Two Laws*, directed by Alessandro Cavadini and Carolyn Strachan—a former film professor of mine at Hunter College—which explores how Australian Indigenous law and Western Australian law operate simultaneously, it is important to recognize that laws are not the same as ethics. Laws are, and have historically been, colonial instruments that often enforce the priorities and power structures of settler societies rather than notions of justice

rooted in Indigenous worldviews. This raises critical questions about the fairness of relying solely on law—and on whose law—to determine what is just. While legal frameworks may provide structure and enforceability, they do not necessarily reflect ethical responsibility, cultural knowledge, or historical accountability, particularly in contexts shaped by colonialism.

The Last Chapter: Our Present Under Construction

As I complete my critical discourse analysis of the Swiss Benin Initiative, I began looking closer at the institutions in the United States that are in possession of looted Benin Bronzes. What became clear rather quickly is that many of the museums that are holding looted Bronzes lack any information regarding the repatriation of looted Benin Bronzes on their websites, despite being identified as possessing looted Bronzes. For many American museums, repatriation efforts solely concern the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), Indigenous artifacts belonging to Native American communities that are being returned, or Nazi-stolen artifacts. While there are many underlying reasons behind this disparity, particularly the differences between ethics, federal policies, and state or local laws, the legal mandates make it obvious why these specific initiatives are prioritized over the looted Benin Bronzes.

Both NAGPRA and Nazi-stolen artifacts have legal protections. Numerous countries have their own form of NAGPRA, which enforces the repatriation of Indigenous artifacts and human remains, and their own mandate regarding the return of art looted during the Jewish Holocaust to descendants. Even Harvard's Peabody Museum has taken steps toward dismantling its colonial history through

repatriation—and Harvard has a *very long* colonial history linked directly to the transatlantic slave trade. In line with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which works on the repatriation of “Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and other objects of cultural importance to lineal descendants, the tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations” (Rura, 2023), the Peabody Museum is returning the Native American artifacts in its collection.

It is clear how legal intervention can help progress with international repatriation efforts. The presence of repatriation pertaining to Nazi-stolen artifacts and NAGPRA bring ethics and federal or state legislature into conversation with curatorial practices and the evolving, sliding scale of ethical repatriation. While there is an absence of discussion on the Benin Bronzes in the United States, some museums do engage with other topics related to repatriation and restitution, ethical curation practices, and provenance.

There is a long-standing tradition of interrogating museums and challenging the ideologies embedded within these institutions. Ultimately, my research contributes to this critical lineage, alongside the work of scholars such as Dan Hicks, Alice Procter, Françoise Vergès, Amy Lonetree, Eunsong Kim, Mike Murawski, and Monique Scott, among many others. It also adds to the growing body of scholarship on the Benin Bronzes by pulling at threads that examine the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI) closely.

Film is part of the intellectual heritage I was first bought into as a media scholar at Hunter College, where critical film studies is the heart of their Media

Studies department. Film is a natural medium to tackle repatriation within museums. In film, the 'Other' is constructed as foreign and exotic. We turn to film to travel, to escape; going to the cinema was, until recently, an experience that took place entirely outside the home. Because of this, film serves as the perfect vehicle for presenting alternative or dissident ideas. Film stands apart from other media formats like television or radio because it is not bound to the same rigid structures, formats, or reporting conventions. Unlike television—which has always existed 'in the home' and was formatted for the tastes of suburban, middle-class audiences—and radio, which delivers content in rigid, time-bound structures, and has auditory and language restrictions, film is meant to be *experienced*—to be felt. Film is experimental, fluid, and expansive—familiar and provocative at once. This freedom makes it uniquely suited to explore complex ideological terrain, challenge perceptions, and unsettle viewers. Film allows audiences to confront the familiar versus the foreign, to grapple with concepts of us versus them and the comfortable versus the unsettling. Film allows us to question binaries and disrupt normative narratives, favoring the provocative, the niche, and the intermediary.

Because film provides an avenue to present the complex, uncomfortable, and sometimes even the grotesque and carnivalesque entangled nature of humanity (queue Tod Browning's *Freaks* and the adaptations of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* throughout the years), in ways other media formats cannot, it is an ideal space to engage audiences with ethical, political, and the very emotional dimensions of colonial histories and the reparation of looted cultural artifacts—

and of looted identity. Throughout my dissertation, the film *Dahomey* recurs as a parallel to Nigeria's Benin Bronzes. Neighboring West African kingdoms, both Dahomey, Benin and Benin City, Nigeria were colonized—Dahomey by France, Benin City by Britain—and their cultural treasures looted. Both Benin and Nigeria have had their looted artifacts partially repatriated, forcing me to consider the mental sentiment that goes into having to – quite literally – beg to have what is rightly yours returned by the very people who desecrated your humanity. As the conversations around repatriation continue to evolve, an urgent question is raised: do museums still need foreign objects?

With so many of the countries whose artifacts are on display in museums ravaged by European imperial powers, their histories compel more critical questions about the role of museums in the future: if museums hold these objects, what ideological and material purpose do they truly serve? Do museums preserve history, or do they perpetuate colonial authority under the guise of care? Whose narratives do museums ultimately uphold? A love letter to her home and a call to bring home her country's cultural heritage, Mati Diop poetically tells the story of Dahomey, a country trying to reclaim its identity, like so many other countries who have been colonized and depleted. Diop's *Dahomey* (2024) and Marker's *Statues Also Die* (1950) —in line with *Black Girl* (1966), *You Hide Me* (1970), and *Restitution? Africa's Fight for its Art* (2022)—underscores the ongoing tension between place and time, restitution and institutional control, and autonomy and collaboration.

These are tensions that I have discussed in relation to the Swiss Benin Initiative; these tensions are something I will continue to pay close attention to in the future. I began this research with a set of specific questions, confident that I would uncover clearly defined answers. As with any research, I have found some answers—but the process has revealed even more questions, highlighting the complexity of the topic and the ongoing need for iterative critical inquiry into this topic. While the Swiss Benin Initiative’s approach is novel and they are making significant strides to tackle the vast topic of decolonizing through repatriation, colonial histories in museums, and the legacy of the looted Benin Bronzes, my analysis highlights important gaps and inconsistencies that demand further attention. As with any ongoing project, this dissertation not only identifies areas for improvement but also positions itself as part of the evolving conversation—pushing the critique of museums, colonial legacies, and repatriation work forward, as the topic of repatriating the looted Benin Bronzes continues to write itself in real time.

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